

## Strange and Sessile Liveliness: Vegetal Possibility in Art, Speculative Fiction and Philosophy

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### Abstract

Though vegetal structures and processes profoundly inform the deep history of our planet, including its current capacity for life, vegetal being remains to us wildly unthinkable. This discomfort generated by the vegetal realm attests to the philosophical richness of the vegetal mode, especially in the threat it poses to extant schemes of knowledge and the spotlighting of human limitations (to thought, to empathy, to sensation). This discomfort in fact illuminates the vegetal world's potential as a tool for thinking-with, its capacity to reconfigure the very ideas we have about ourselves as individuals, as a species and our relations to other creatures. Fueled largely by the arguments of philosopher Michael Marder, and intrigued by plants as quintessentially embodied, undeniably lively and intelligent in most unfamiliar ways, I seek to explore vegetal being as a site for productive reckoning – for entwining, grafting and cross-pollinating along artistic, philosophical and affective lines.

Keywords: botany; Chthulucene; grotesque; non-human turn; speculative fiction; vegetal-weird

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Before we consume, burn, decorate and pay tributes with, or contemplate them, plants irradiate a meaning of their own. Each branch, shoot, and leaf located in a particular portion of a geranium, or of any other plant, is the outcome of a lived vegetal interpretation of the environment: the direction and intensity of sunlight, the amount of moisture in the air, and so forth. Plants' living forms are their semantic structures [...] (2016: 20).

– Michael Marder, *The Chernobyl Herbarium*

Plants are chthonic ones – embedded in the earth (earth's soil, earth's deep history), tendrilled and outreaching, delightfully abundant and in possession of dispersed, alien intelligences. Faceless, they resist our gaze; their bodies bend toward the light. They do not speak to us, though they respond to sounds, acoustic signals (Marder 2012: 4). We encounter them in pharmaceuticals, in fuels (byproducts of ancient, fossilised plants), as food – they fragrance us, spice our meals and agitate our flesh with irritant oils, poison

us with deadly toxins. We owe our planet's oxygenation to plants and their distant relatives, cyanobacteria, who still infuse the structures of Plantae – 2.5 billion years ago, these Proterozoic phototrophic ones 'alter[ed] the chemistry of Earth's atmosphere and hydrosphere to an extent unparalleled even by humans' (Mix 2018: 221), oxygenating and thus poisoning countless aquatic, anaerobic organisms, clearing ground for novel multicellular organisms (Mix 2009: 175). Yet, the flowering plants to which we are now so accustomed and with which we are so deeply engrossed did not in fact 'become truly common until after 65 million years ago' (Mix 2009: 177).

In this paper, I seek to explore vegetal being as a site for productive reckoning – for entwining, grafting and cross-pollinating along artistic, philosophical and affective lines. I am interested in how the 'vegetal' might be engaged as a theoretical tool for the thinking and making of possible worlds, the tilling and seeding of speculative, more-than-human futures. In a moment of marked ecological precarity – climatological shifts, increased toxicity, widespread habitat loss and species death, looming questions of survival – futures in general may seem unthinkable, unimaginable. How can we, as humans, realign our perspectives so as to not only envisage possibilities for continued survival on this planet, but also to more carefully, more attentively, move through and operate within the world as it currently stands? Plants may prove uniquely helpful in sprouting chutes toward the possible futures at stake: securely rooted in our planetary past, but always characterised by extension and growth, they induce us (as artists, scholars or viewers) to rethink anthropocentric notions of intelligence, vitality and agency, and to gaze more deeply into non-human spheres of being. By investigating works of literature and visual art (including my own) that engage vegetal components and imageries, I will argue for the philosophical richness of what I refer to as a 'vegetal-weird' modality. Specifically, I will bring into conversation the categories of the weird (as narrative mode), the grotesque (as concept and visual mode), and even the seemingly weeded and well-tended terrain of Italian Renaissance painting to investigate the many ways in which plants not only challenge and disturb us, philosophically, but also enthrall us, imaginatively.

## I. VEGETAL INTELLIGENCE

Vegetal structures and processes profoundly inform the deep history of our planet, including its current capacity for life, especially mammalian life (like us). Our terrestrial species is surrounded by plants all the time – trees, mosses, fruits, grasses, vines, cacti – throughout all seasons, in all regions and climates. Humans have long engaged in the manipulation, nurturing and consumption of plants and plant systems at various scales – whether through the cultivation of crops for food, the felling of forests for lumber or, more recently, the manicuring of lawns, the tending of parks, gardens and cemeteries.

Undeniably, humans and plants possess a marked proximity. Human-plant relations can be articulated as one aspect of 'naturecultures', a concept developed by interdisciplinary thinker Donna J. Haraway, which seeks to disrupt the so-called 'nature-culture divide' that can be 'attributed to the movement of rationalist thinking in the late seventeenth century, spurred by the scientific revolution and the work of Enlightenment thinkers' (Clary-Lemon 2019: 26). In resistance to such bifurcations, the notion of 'naturecultures' implodes the 'discursive realms of nature and culture', instead reimagining human and non-human relations as a co-constituting continuum (Haraway 2000: 105).

However, it is precisely the separation of the human from a non-human ‘nature’ that has structured human-plant relations since the Enlightenment, and scholar Jennifer Clary-Lemon reminds us that ‘Western industry [...] remain[s] firmly rooted in notions of management, control, and progress’ over an othered ‘wilderness’, a separate ‘nature’, particularly where plants are concerned (Clary-Lemon 2019: 28–29). The notion of the ‘Plantationocene’ has been proposed by Haraway to historically situate the Anthropocene [1], and further contextualise human-plant relations, within the legacy of slave agriculture; she outlines the term as follows in a footnote from her 2015 essay ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin’:

[...] the name Plantationocene [stands] for the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor (162; see also Haraway et al. 2016: 557).

Humans and plants have, thus, long possessed – and surely still do – entwining legacies, thickly tangled relations, histories of both intimacy and estrangement, of both care and violence.

Nevertheless, as Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari write in their introductory chapter to *Radical Botany*, despite our human species’ proximity to plants, it is still ‘difficult for us to experience plants as fully alive’ (2019: 2). Their ‘apparent lack of interiority’, their lack of ‘a point of view or a consciousness that we recognise and that recognises us in return’ creates an ‘epistemological impasse’ for the human that thus renders the plant unthinkable, resistant to comprehension, even as we acknowledge (and exploit) their indisputably lively capacities for nourishment, growth, replication, signalling, etc. (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 9). This impasse may result, at least in part, from the imposition of such divisions between human and non-human, or human and plant, inherited from the Enlightenment and the violent dynamics of the Plantationocene. Plants disturbingly, at times frustratingly, ‘withdraw from a human economy of desire’ and ‘hover at the limits of our affective identification’ because they act and exist at least within a radically different temporal framework than we do (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 15) – a temporal discrepancy grounded in the behavioural and morphological differences between humans and plants and further reinforced by modern, western emphases upon speed and efficiency. Indeed, as humans, we are more inclined to be attentive to events, interactions and processes that transpire in the range of seconds, minutes or hours, whereas plants tend to operate on the scale of days, weeks and months – though both plants and humans are sensitive to circadian clocks (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 15; Marder 2012: 3).

While true that plants may possess an ‘apparent lack of interiority’ – and indeed, they even physiologically lack a brain and nervous system – it is not quite accurate to say that plants lack intelligence. That said, grasping the particularities of a vegetal intelligence undoubtedly entails a rethinking of how ‘intelligence’ might manifest, and what it might mean for organisms whose phenomenologies diverge so drastically from the rather imperfect baseline of the human. Even within the disciplines of botany and plant biology, debates surrounding the nature of plant intelligence and complexity abound. Indeed, as prominent plant biologist Anthony Trewavas explains in a rebuttal to colleague Richard Firn, regarding such debates:

The difference between us, which Firn has expressed before, is his objection to the idea that plants have any sort of brain. True, they have no anatomical structure that can be recognized as such, but they can with great sensitivity compute complex aspects of their environment and change behaviour to optimize fitness within their local environment. Brains (or nerve cells)

developed in animals initially as a conduit through which information could simply be more rapidly conveyed from sensory system to muscle to improve speed of movement. Given the importance of movement to the animal life-style, learning and memory [...] then became more recognizably incorporated into nervous responses. Sessile organisms do not require a brain since movement is obviously absent, but that does not preclude computational capacity dependent on communication of a remarkable order (2004: 353, emphasis added).

As Trewavas argues, the presence of a brain or neurological organ is not actually a prerequisite for 'intelligence' but merely a mechanism or 'conduit' for increased efficiency in particular kinds of creatures for whom speed is a critical factor. For other organisms like plants, for whom speed and movement are less explicitly critical faculties, vegetal thriving can occur without a centralised brain structure. Other kinds of 'sensitivity' and 'complex computations' take precedence, sparking meaningful behavioural responses, navigations of the environment and intelligent activity. And while Trewavas draws a distinction between the movement of animals and the seeming lack of movement in 'sessile organisms', further consideration of the term, and what precisely plant 'movement' as opposed to 'sessility' means – for, undeniably, plants move, *spread and grow* – might prove helpful.

To that end, philosopher Michael Marder, in his article on 'Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence', offers a useful definition: 'One of the most obvious features of plant life is the fact that plants are sessile. All too often, sessility has been mistaken for the plants' immobility and impassiveness [...] This is a quintessentially modern prejudice, resulting from the exclusive identification of movement with locomotion' (Marder 2012: 3). Locomotion, however, even as described by Aristotle, represents merely one form of movement – 'growth, decay, and change of state (metamorphosis)' exist as other possibilities (Marder 2012: 3). Marder's perspective on the phenomenology of plant life (which he terms *phytophenomenology*) is in fact crucially informed by the capacities of vegetation to engage in motion and exploration, perpetually sensing and responding to the particularities of the matter that surrounds them and in which they are entrenched:

It is evident that the fixedness of plants is an *impressionistic* mistake, given their lateral and vertical extensions both above and below ground level. Although they appear to be anchored in a place, plants incessantly explore their environments, [...] *monitoring and responding* to changing environmental conditions (Marder 2012: 3, emphasis added).

Indeed, plants are not only 'incessantly exploring' their environments in order to strategically maximise nutrient intake via soil and sunlight, but they are actively constructing and *interpreting* their environment, materialising those interpretations in their own morphing, swelling, outstretched bodies:

The places occupied by organisms are not objectively fixed; they are *inhabited, differentiated and constructed* in the course of organismic life and development [...] In other words, the place dynamically emerges from the plant's *living interpretation* of and interaction with its environment (Marder 2012: 3, emphasis added).

Plants possess intention, bio-attention, memory, discernment and anticipation, continually parsing

environmental stimuli – for instance, moisture levels in soil, light and thermal fluctuations, the presence of ethylene in the air, even sound – but these qualities never gel into a centralised whole, some totality in which we might comfortably locate ‘intelligence’ (Marder 2012: 4; Mix 2018: 219). Venus flytraps are among those most explicitly ‘lively’ plants, in that they exhibit a kind of familiar ‘carnivorous’ behaviour, more accessible to the human imagination than photosynthetic nourishment. However, these intriguing plants also display a high degree of discernment in their capacities for touch-sensitivity, as Lucas John Mix illustrates in his description of the plant’s behaviour:

Growing in nitrogen-poor soils, [the Venus Flytrap] captures insects as a nutritional supplement. Two strong leaves lie flat, connected by a hinge. A fly stepping onto the leaves triggers a response. The leaves snap closed, trapping the fly. The plant then dissolves it and absorbs the material. Wind and water do not trigger the trap. Venus Flytraps achieve this specificity with sensory hairs on the leaves. Pressure on the hairs produces an electrical potential, but only certain combinations of pressure spring the trap (2018: 218, emphasis added).

Several other plant varieties also possess touch and pressure sensitivity; for instance, plants like the cocklebur ‘change their growth pattern if their leaves are touched’ and ‘Oak, beech, and spruce leaves all produce both electrical and chemical signals when eaten by insects’ (Mix 2018: 218). Wilder still, some plants even ‘smell their neighbors’, as Zurich-based biologist Consuela De Moraes has studied in the parasitic five-angled dodder and its response to ‘olfactory cues’ in identifying host plants (Mix 2018: 218). Plants, as such, possess both internal and external communication channels, including ‘kin recognition’, in which they can acknowledge and respond to stimuli in both their own ‘life-worlds’ and clashes with other ‘life-worlds’ (Marder 2016: 6) [2] – we can observe this phenomenon in so-called ‘crown shyness’, wherein the crowns of trees of certain species do not actually collide in the canopy, but instead, circuitously grow around one another, at a buffered distance (Marder 2012: 6). As Marder explains, we might better ultimately understand plant intelligence in a dispersed, rather than centralised, sense:

[Plant] bio-attention is what we may call ‘hyper-attention,’ as every vertical shoot, leaf and rootlet monitors the minutest environmental variations proximate to it. Far from a redundancy, the plant’s non-totalized intelligence is explicable, in cognitive terms, as a paralleling processing model, with every organ of intentionality playing the role of a parallel processor (2012: 6).

Vegetal intelligence is multiple, simultaneous, ongoing – a convergence of paths that, though distinct, ultimately generate growth and meaning in the ever-evolving, sensitive body of the plant.

Crucially, vegetal intelligence, as ‘a property of the entire living being’ rather than ‘concentrated in a single organ’, as inherently ‘context-dependent’ rather than disembodied or free-floating, troubles many traditional western assumptions regarding life, intelligence and subsequently imposed ontological hierarchies (Marder 2012: 6). For instance, though Aristotle ascribed to plants a kind of soul, a lively force capable of both ‘nourishment and reproduction’, the so-called ‘father of biology’ nonetheless considered the vegetal soul ‘inferior to human and animal capacities’, viewing plants as ‘deficient animals’ that possessed no ‘higher’ ability to reason (Marder 2012: 2). As Marder contends, though, extrapolating upon the research of

contemporary botanists like František Baluška, Stefano Mancuso and others [3], even the presumably inferior, vegetal processes of

nourishment and reproduction entail complex decisions related to the availability of resources. For example, root foraging for rich soil patches, kin recognition... or rapid morphological changes in response to environmental alterations (e.g. adjustment to drought by shedding leaves) [...] Hence, the lines of demarcation between the 'higher' and the 'lower' capacities, between consciousness and non-consciousness and, by implication, between biological regna are not as rigid as classical thinkers believed (Marder 2012: 2).

Plants acutely trouble the firmly held definitions of intelligence, agency and liveliness that remain, at least within the West, so deeply rooted in an anthropocentric bias – centred around the very specifically human capacities for cognition, movement and will. Yet plants dominate our ecosystems, engage in processes of ceaseless, restless becoming, of perpetual negotiation, that we, as humans, can only ever partially perceive. Plants possess a simultaneously *weird* and *eerie* agency – overwhelming us with verdant abundance, while simultaneously chilling us with (apparent) stillness, silence.

## II. THE VEGETAL-WEIRD

I pivot here to more expressly consider the ways in which plants themselves are weird ones; to analyse the capacities in which their forms and characteristics may be leveraged to weird effect; and to plumb the rich depths of what we might tentatively term the 'vegetal-weird' – a more focused vein of the 'weird' as a much broader aesthetic, philosophical and narrative framework. Theorist Mark Fisher, in *The Weird and the Eerie*, characterises the 'weird' as 'a particular kind of perturbation' that 'involves a sensation of wrongness' continuing,

a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate (2016: 15, emphasis added).

Inadequacy, wrongness, perturbation: the weird crucially renders the human, and any aspirations towards anthropocentrism, inconsequential – overwhelmed by a vast spectrum of phenomena to which humans, through our thoughts or senses, do not have access. Conventional methods of understanding the world around us are intrinsically challenged by the weird encounter, shown to be incomplete, if not utterly inadequate, by 'exorbitant presences' that we can never fully account for, or eerie absences that fail to remain *wholly* absent (Fisher 2016: 61). Spaces teem with faceless, untraceable intent – agencies at work beyond our purview; and something extra resounds within in the hollow, encrusted, altogether eerie cry [4]. These are the disturbances brought to bear by alien agencies at work, non-human presences made suddenly sensible to the human (often through feelings and intuitions) and yet difficult to trace, place or concretely capture. Worlds bleed in and out of one another, and yet we can never quite place the breach or grasp it, or whatsoever contend with it. We cannot, truly, 'know' it or 'capture' it, at least not through typical

logics, nor conventional vocabularies. The weird, as such, inevitably shocks us into ‘frozen thought’, philosopher Eugene Thacker’s shorthand for ‘the enigmatic stillness of everything except the furtive, lurking revelation of a limit’ (2015: 111).

To our horror, we cannot trace the full extent of vegetal activity – visible, invisible, subterranean, chemical or otherwise. We cannot perceive the many ways in which plants are intelligently at work, nor grasp their inhuman purpose. I engage ‘horror’ here less as an acute sense of panic or fear and more as a sensation of bewilderment, a sheer failure of reason in confrontation with the alien or unknown – a horror that blends both ‘fascination’ and ‘trepidation’ in strange measure, as Fisher describes in relation to the work of H. P. Lovecraft, famed writer of so-called ‘weird horror’ (2016: 16–17) [5]. Indeed, the ‘horror’ to be located in plants is a horror immanent to our human sensorial limitations and imaginative inadequacies, a horror tethered to the resulting insecurity we may feel as we confront a world that doesn’t exist for us, a vegetal world that doesn’t look back at us, a world within which we are so greatly outnumbered. If plants disturb us, it is perhaps, as Meeker and Szabari argue, ‘because of our enmeshment with them and because they block our attempts to render them analogous to us, [plants] call into question our assertions of our own autonomy and priority’ (2019: 23). We cannot ‘presume [vegetal] affinity with our own [human] interests or concerns’, and yet we cannot deny plants’ ‘active presences in the worlds that we seem to make for ourselves’ (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 23).

For the western imagination (at least), still so rooted in the Enlightenment values of rationalism and order, plants may evince horror in their ceaseless complication of insides and outsides, their rupturing of boundaries and containments, especially those boundaries between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’, or between seemingly distinctive states such as life and death. Despite efforts to control and subdue vegetal overabundance, especially by humans of the Plantationocene, plants creep, ceaselessly threatening to overwhelm well-defined structures, both those naturally occurring and human-made. Blasting through pavements, engulfing facades, seeding far and wide, vegetation must be constantly weeded, raked, edged and cropped to sustain culturally imposed human standards of order, status, safety and efficiency. And yet, plants, too, manipulate us from without and within – with poisonous oils, fragrances, barbs and thorns, as drugs and hallucinogens. They do not merely exist ‘outside’, and there is surely no escaping their reach.

We might consider the vegetal ‘weirdness’ of Georges Didi-Huberman’s 1989 essay ‘The Paradox of the Phasmid’, a reflection upon ‘dissemblance’ – or, the potential falsity of appearances, the ability to conceal something contrary to what is outwardly displayed – and its capacity to inspire both horror and epiphany. In ‘Paradox’, Didi-Huberman describes an excursion to a Parisian vivarium, a venture riddled with apparitions and uncertainty. This uncertainty, or discomfort, is most directly tethered to the strange presence of the phasmid [6] (or leaf-bug), a paradoxical creature that mimics that which it consumes and the environment in which it lives, opening itself up, as a form, to the system of which it is a part and whose parts it ingests (1989: 4) [7]. Indeed, as Didi-Huberman describes, gazing through the vivarium glass to view the insects scattered amongst the rusted, disintegrating foliage, ‘I quickly realized that the rotten leaves turning brown in the second case were also living phasmids. Because all of it, all over, was quivering very slowly, as in a bad dream’ (1989: 3, emphasis in original). The leaf-bug moves, and wiggles, and so do the leaves, but who can tell where one ends and the next begins; who can differentiate between vegetation and insect, and life and non-life? Such is the threshold, dreadfully overgrown. In the final lines of his brief essay, Didi-Huberman traces this inevitable dissolution of boundaries, underscoring the failure of the vivarium glass and the security it had once represented:

Such is the demon of dissemblance [...] which consummates the incontestable feeling of a nightmare. For this it is enough to abstract or break the glass of the vivarium: then you will understand that the tropical forest where, until now, you avoided the mygale or the tree viper – you will understand that the forest you are strolling through is the animal that will soon devour you [...] All that appears to you proves to be a power of the dissimilar, and all that dissembles proves to be, at heart, no more than the menacing quality of place – a place in which, that day, you should not indeed have set foot (1989: 4, original emphasis).

Indeed, the place in which we should not have set foot is not merely the vivarium, but ultimately the place that everywhere surrounds us, the place that restlessly entwines us and renders us, too, phasmids. Here, the forest is the animal, and the horror is the place. Indeed, the demarcations (between human/nature, inside/outside) are already too thickly overrun. The plants are living and decaying matter alike, simultaneously devourers and the devoured, at once the harmless leaf-bug, the soft grasses upon which we tread, the treacherous vines over which we stumble, and the 'menacing' forest mass looming overhead. The fluidity, the dissemblance, of the plant indeed gestures toward an even more distributed liveliness of matter, a categorical openness that thus reimagines plant, human and material systems in general as assemblages – always already part living, part dead, full of nested operations, microbiomes, smaller worlds within and grander worlds without.

Of course, just as in the case of Fisher's weird mode and Didi-Huberman's unsettling vivarium, it is precisely the discomfort generated by the vegetal realm that attests to its philosophical richness, especially in the threat the vegetal realm poses to extant schemes of knowledge and the spotlighting of human limitations (to thought, to empathy, to sensation). This discomfort in fact illuminates the vegetal world's potential as a tool for thinking-with, its capacity to reconfigure the very ideas we have about ourselves as individuals, as a species, our relations to other creatures and our relation to scales of deep time – geologic time, planetary time, temporal scopes even more bewildering than that. And yet, when we recall the Hadean origins of our now blue and oxygenated planet, our vegetal companions might not appear so alien after all.

Ultimately, something about the vegetal realm allures and entwines us imaginatively, offering up fertile soils for world-building, thinking futures and aesthetic exploration of the strange or unknown. The tradition of engaging vegetal forms and imageries within the genre of speculative fiction is, of course, hardly new. It is this history that Meeker and Szabari specifically trace throughout their 2019 book *Radical Botany*, which explores works of speculative fiction ranging everywhere from those by Cyrano de Bergerac and Edgar Allen Poe to the various twentieth-century instantiations of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or the more contemporary writings of Ursula K. LeGuin and Jeff VanderMeer (2019). Meeker and Szabari note: 'Plants regularly exceed and challenge the selves and the worlds we construct... and in doing so propel us toward speculative futures' (2019: 23). In *Radical Botany*, the rich alignment of the vegetal imaginary (and materiality) with the speculative tradition in literature and, importantly, film (as a visual medium), generates fruitful pathways for my own investigations into the non-human world and its complex bearing upon more-than-human pasts, presents and possible futures.

Indeed, in my own visual artwork, including both oil-on-canvas paintings and charcoal drawings, I seek to foreground material hybridities, the blending and fusion of a variety of forms – plant, insect, technological, mineral, biomorphic – placing special emphasis upon the fusion of mechanical (tubular, cable-like forms) and

vegetal elements. Out of interlacing cables, which might also read as tangled stalks or vines, emerge rippled, leafy-forms, branch-like offshoots or coiling tendrils. In some cases, explicit references to seed pods or floral structures (e.g. the lotus pods in *Ocellyx*) anchor otherwise ambiguous, vaguely alien forms in more locatable, though still unnerving, references to the extant world. Often, I seek out structures from the vegetal, mycological, and even arthropoid realms that possess overlapping resonances, flickering in and out of plant, animal and fungal possibility. Some examples include my use of the thread-waisted wasp abdomen as a form that simultaneously echoes and resonates with floral buds, or my attempt to render forms that at once resemble the bulb-tipped tentacles of sea anemones, snail antennae, leaf galls and the finger-like adhesive pads on many species of climbing plants, like ivy and other creepers (Discovery 2010). On a more holistic level, the tube-like forms that function as the core compositional elements within my work – structuring the pieces with central knots and tangles, or looser, more rhythmically flowing lines – echo the vegetal configurations of dense root-webs or protracted, creeping vines.



Figure 1: Ana V. Fleming, *Ocellyx*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 30 inches x 30 inches.

The elements I use within my work stem from a general interest in the non-human world and its intricacy, but plants, in particular, serve as key referents, anchoring the compositions visually and conceptually. Indeed, vegetal imageries flexibly operate as familiar but undeniably alien presences, intermediaries between what might be disputed as living and non-living, thoughtless or intelligent matter within the context of speculative, vaguely futuristic worlds – worlds in which the human, importantly, is no longer present (at least not in any recognisable capacity). The temporal ambiguity and non-human emphasis of the worlds I depict in my paintings and drawings is largely inspired by the genres of the ‘weird’, as discussed, and philosophical considerations of the vegetal posited by thinkers like Michael Marder. However, the work also emerges from a specific engagement with another idea: Donna J. Haraway’s concept of the *Chthulucene* – a capacious formulation that warrants further explanation.

In her 2016 book entitled *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway offers a critical reconceptualisation of our world, its times and the complexity of its constitutive processes, reframing our earth and its many struggling, tinkering participants – human, non-human and more-than-human – through her core theorisation of the *Chthulucene*. An alternative to both ‘Anthropocene’ and ‘Plantationocene’ (terms discussed earlier), Haraway describes the *Chthulucene* as a ‘timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth’ (2016: 2). However, resisting a Lovecraftian conceptualisation of the term, in its potential linkages to H. P. Lovecraft’s famed, cosmic monster Cthulhu (note the spelling difference, 2016: 101), Haraway instead excavates the term’s Greek origins, writing:

*Chthulucene* is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthon* and *kainos*) [...] *Kainos* means now, a time of beginnings, a time for ongoing, for freshness. [...] *Kainos* can be full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be. I hear *kainos* in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities (2016: 2).

Invoking complex temporal modalities – ongoingness, the ‘now’, but also inheritances and nurturings, consciousness of not-quite-yet pasts and still embryonic futures – as well as a kind of terrestrial monstrosity – Haraway culls the vast potential resonances of the *Chthulucene* as a space for history, for action, for being and, indeed, for *showing*. Monsters ‘demonstrate and perform’ just as they unsettle, unnerving us with slick caresses as they simultaneously reveal and warn, illuminating and foretelling the potentialities of our Terran systems (Haraway 2016: 2).

This notion of the *Chthulucene*, as a world-space of monsters, of entanglements, of futures, has served as a guiding concept within my current work, which is characterised by its non-human, hybrid subjects, speculative settings and interlacing compositions:

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails [...] Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters (Haraway 2016: 2).

One of the shared impetuses within both my own paintings and Haraway's chthonic theorisations is a desire to foreground the non-human world and, indeed, to weird (or at least disturb) the anthropocentric systems that still so powerfully subtend contemporary western thought. In resistance to any such notion of a self-made (hu)man, Haraway's *Chthulucene* emphasises multispecies interactions – or perhaps, rather, 'intra-actions', the 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (an idea theorised by Karen Barad 2007: 33) [8], a kind of 'symchthonic sympoiesis', 'partnered all the way down', that thus calls into question the dominance of anthropocentric thinking and 'autopoietic' strivings as we confront the uncertain prospects of survival on our planet (Haraway 2016: 33). Can we really do it alone? Has a species ever really accomplished anything alone? In stark negation of such inquiries and their flawed assumptions, Haraway offers one strategy for reinscribing the human within a far broader, more deeply integrated web – physical, ecological, technological, philosophical – of agents, processes and systems within which the human species is inextricably networked.

The *Chthulucene* is thus a posthuman world-space, one that gazes far more deeply into the soil, into geologic time, into our own microbiome, calling attention to life and non-life at a range of possible physical and temporal scales, both those comprehensible to the human and those that exceed our capacity for understanding (Haraway 2016: 55) [9]. The *Chthulucene*, as I strive to engage it, is posthuman insofar as the human no longer exists at the centre of all thought or action, displaced as the sole origin of all meaningful possibility or creative capacity, especially as the question of human survival remains urgent (and contingent upon countless more-than-human collaborators). The chthonic posthuman paradigm dislodges the project of western humanism and modernity in favour of a more ecologically informed, at times inhuman vantage point, supplanting the bounded, hierarchically situated, liberal humanist subject with the far stickier, hybridised notion of the human-as-assemblage, a porous 'human' subject, weird and full of holes, fluctuating in its limits and unstable in its theorisation.

The kinship between Haraway's notion of the *Chthulucene* and a vegetal-weird modality rests not only in the shared emphasis upon more-than-human agencies and multispecies entanglements, which may serve as a source of both hope and horror, but also within Haraway's emphasis upon tentacles, feelers, knottings and 'string-figures' (2016: 10, 32). Often, her descriptions cannot help but evoke the vegetal: tangled vines that engulf facades; outreaching branches that snag clothes and hair; slimy seaweeds that wash ashore, alarming us as wet tendrils brush against bare skin; or webbed hyphae, densely permeating the garden patch. The plant is characteristically tentacular – branching, rooted, as much a multiplicity as it is a discrete unit. The plant is also, like the *Chthulucene*, temporally complex, operating with a kind of slowness (at least from a mammalian perspective) that is both perceptible (seasonally) and imperceptible (instantaneously); crucially anchored in the present, always sensitive to its immediate surroundings; and yet ever-engaged in the kind of world-building and outward extension that cannot help but conjure thoughts of futures and beyonds.

As such, inspired by the ceaseless engagements and becomings of Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene*, I am also compelled by the particular tendency of plants, as chthonic ones, to engage in perpetual worlding and self-and-system fashioning [10], and the thematic potential therein. Plants assiduously explore, compute and construct their environment through concurrent, parallel processes (to engage Marder's description), and I strive to reflect this simultaneity in my own works. For instance, within my compositions, I make a point to articulate moments of seemingly isolated, independent activity (sprouting, latching, exploration, decay), moments easily missed upon first glance but which reveal themselves upon closer looking – a tube

sprouting a leaflet, a tendril pulled in an unexpected direction, liquid droplets concentrated around a bulge, a crack forming along an otherwise sleek surface. Often disrupting larger symmetries and complicating overarching flows in the work, these instances of isolated activity are inconsistent and incongruous enough to unsettle any sense of homeostasis or established order – often denying viewers any sense of surety in relation to the depicted worlds, their laws and the behaviours of the strange organisms therein. And yet, these independent, seemingly disconnected moments inevitably and significantly contribute to the larger ‘system’ – the composition of the piece as a whole, the experience of viewing and probing the picture plane for nuanced interactions (or, rather, intra-actions). Such moments are crucial in their implications for the complexity of the depicted world, its sense of ongoingness, its narrative potentiality, even if there appears to be no singular, locatable logic governing the pictured environments, their forms and relationships. Instead, like plants, the paintings (in their vegetal slowness and stillness) operate both as discrete units and as multiplicities, filled with numerous ‘paralleled’ processes, moments of activity and sensitivity that fail to reveal a ‘deeper logic’ or end goal, even as they contribute to an overarching aesthetic experience and generate affective responses in the viewer.



Figure 2: Ana V. Fleming, *Spiral; splinter*, 2021. Charcoal on paper. 17 inches x 11 inches.

Indeed, the question of ‘end goals’ is a slippery one for both plants and paintings. If, as Aristotle contends, the ‘purpose, or entelechy, [of plants] is growth, which is limitless and lacks aim or telos’ (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 13), perhaps it is ultimately a misinterpretation of vegetal agency, which might not, in fact, ‘lack aim or telos’ so much as reflect the pursuit of *multiple* aims at once, such that the diversity of aims pursued render any attempt to reconcile them insufficient and bewildering. The simultaneous, dispersed and localised intelligences of plants are thus echoed in the seemingly nonsensical or at times directionless formations of the wandering lines or self-consuming coils that I employ within my creative work.

While there are, of course, epistemological limits and emotional tensions in any attempt to think along non-human lines from a human vantage point, the creative process (itself open-ended and dynamic) affords the productive exploration of ambiguous or seemingly opposed states, such as those indicated by the distinction between human and non-human. Keeping the mutable nature of creative production itself in mind, we might more usefully reframe any such oppositions as *circuits* or *continuums* rather than binaries, just as Haraway does with her influential concept of ‘naturecultures’, an idea introduced earlier in the paper. Indeed, Haraway specifically disavows the ‘notion of the brain in a vat [of nutrient fluids]’ and its insistence upon separation between ‘man and the world’; instead, she posits ‘an act of faith in worldliness where the fleshy body and the human histories are always and everywhere enmeshed in the tissue of interrelationship where all the relators aren’t human’ (2000: 106). If there is no clear cut-off between ‘man and world’ – all interpenetrated by connective tissues – then perhaps we might draw upon Haraway’s ‘naturecultures’ to reimagine the ambiguous gulf separating ‘human’ and ‘plant’ as a knotted, tangled, but fruitful field within which creative expression and aesthetic potential might be enriched, contaminated and hybridised in all the best ways. Cultural artefacts like paintings, however potently associated with human cognition and experience, are still, ultimately, informed by and part of the fleshy continuum we call ‘nature’, or rather, ‘natureculture’, which includes non-humans – plants, rocks, cells, spores and countless kin – and their expressions.

Inspired by such possibilities, such ‘tissue[s] of interrelationship’, my own work represents an attempt at a kind of speculative, philosophical ‘grafting’ – yet another instance of human intervention in plant systems and, perhaps, vegetal infiltration of a human-oriented system, through art. Indeed, my artworks are a partial fusion of a human thought-world (which is itself a multiplicity shaped by embodied experience, cultural inheritances and aesthetic sensibilities) with plant-inspired philosophy, sensory inspection and study of plant bodies, and *phytophenomenological* considerations, including a heightened awareness for non-human (and specifically plant-based) forms of morphology, communication, intelligence and community. In attempting to craft visual worlds filled with fluid, mutating, non-human bodies and co-constituting, distributed agencies, I look to plants for moments of localised budding, branching, entwining and other such interactions to inject into my imageries. The plant, in its fullest complexity and most pronounced in-humanness, will always exceed what is possible to capture visually, aesthetically, on a painted surface. Nevertheless, through the intermingling of human and plant intelligences and the striving toward a kind of vegetal ‘thinking-with’, it is my hope that my artworks might yet yield their own productive shades of weirdness, their own fertile, more-than-human logics. Of course, such strategies are not unique to my paintings, and we might also consider the work of contemporary artists such as Inka Essenhigh, Hannah Yata or Mevlana Lipp, each of whom I consider influences and each of whom legibly engages a kind of vegetal linearity and, indeed, vegetal weirding within their artwork.

To this point, Meeker and Szabari note the significance of the ‘arabesque or vegetal line’ (2019: 96) in works of Gothic and speculative fiction ranging from Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ to Jeff VanderMeer’s alien but ecologically sumptuous novel, *Annihilation* (of the 2014 *Southern Reach* trilogy) [11]. In both works, meandering, irregular contours serve as visual cues for the reader, gesturing toward and ultimately marking the strangeness of the environments into which the characters journey – whether the grotesque, tomb-like mansion of ‘Usher’, or the flourishing, alien wilderness of *Annihilation*’s Area X (a rapidly evolving ecology that seemingly absorbs all it comes into contact with, threatening to humanistic notions of individuality, but undeniably fruitful, ever proliferating). We might recall the ‘zig-zag shaped “fissure” that marks the house’s façade’ (2019: 103) in ‘Usher’; or the ‘fascinating fungal scrawl in the shape of vines’

(2019: 198) – handiwork of the mysterious Crawler – in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. In either case, these sites, garlanded by coiling contours, represent spaces where the category of the human begins to break down, where life and death begin to meld, where the comforts of reason all too quickly dissolve. The winding, vegetal line thus attests to a more-than-human logic, one resistant to telos, one resistant to Neoclassical order or rationalism that nevertheless entwines us and enthralls us, materially, imaginatively.

### III. THE RENAISSANCE AND THE VEGETAL IMAGINARY

In the western canon, and specifically within a visual rather than a literary paradigm, we can trace this disruptive vegetal through-line all the way back to those art historical pinnacles considered most rational, most idealised: ancient Rome and the Italian Renaissance. These periods are entwined, not merely by the overt resuscitation of Classical principles during the High Renaissance, but, more fortuitously, by the creeping coils of the earthy, chimeric, vegetal 'grotesque', an aesthetic mode and art historical concept resistant to stable definition, but ultimately typified by fluidity, hybridity and metamorphosis. Grotesque imageries may be characterised by their capacities for playfulness, humour, strangeness or horror, flickering in and out of the macabre and absurd, the monstrous and whimsical.

Due to its etymological origins, the 'grotto-esque', or grotesque, cannot help but invoke the chthonic, dredging up the many resonances of the earthly, the subterranean, the hellish or underworldly. And yet, in its mutability and tendency toward 'play' (Connelly 2012: 5), the grotesque also evokes the tendrilled 'chthonic' of Haraway's theorisation: ecologically invested, materially active, tentacular, engaging in the complex 'string-figurings' of survival and 'partial recuperation' (Haraway 2016: 10). When considering the grotesque, we call to the fore abyssal ocean trenches, thirsting sinkholes, winding caverns, or perhaps monstrous sites like the gaping Hell Mouth of the Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo (notably, a garden site) – an earthly threshold that both beckons and threatens to ingest its visitors. Chthon is inevitably linked, as is the ominous Hell Mouth, to the garden and the grotto (a kind of abyss, or void). The grotesque is a territory, as art historian Frances S. Connelly describes it, of 'boundary creatures', of 'monsters and marvels', of 'borderlands':

Much like the weird, the grotesque 'pulls us beyond the boundaries of the world we know' while simultaneously 'remind[ing] us of our limits', engaging both speculative possibility and incomprehensibility as tools for thinking- and visualising-with.

In her introductory chapter to *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Connelly further outlines the grotesque in several capacities relevant to our own considerations of the weird and the vegetal-weird mode, including the grotesque's emphasis upon processes of simultaneous destruction and construction: 'Images gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform, or de-compose things; and those that are metamorphic' (2003: 2). The grotesque attributes Connelly cites here – namely, the ambiguity between destructive and constructive acts; the emphasis upon hybridity ('combining unlike things') and world-building ('constructing new [realities]'); and the foregrounding of process rather than permanence, metamorphosis rather than stasis – resonate with the weird and the vegetal-weird, at least in their shared capacities to challenge biases toward order and reason, to trouble taxonomies and disrupt too-stringent divisions. Like weird entities, and

much like plants, grotesque ones exist at limits and are ‘defined by what [they] do to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them’ (Connelly 2003: 4). Indeed, the grotesque reveals and embraces the interpenetration of all things – at times, to our amusement and, at others, to our discomfort.

Historically, the term itself can be traced to the curious discovery of Nero’s Golden Palace (the *Domus Aurea*) in fifteenth-century Rome, ‘revealing wall decorations with whimsical combinations of plants, figures, mythical creatures, and architectural elements’ in the ‘below ground level’, ‘grotto-like’ series of rooms that subsequently inspired the ornamentations for the Vatican Loggia (Connelly 2012: 3). However, the grotesque has since taken on a wide breadth of possible meanings, expanding to include notions like Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque or the Freudian *unheimlich* (uncanny). Even in its originally ornamental instantiations, as we might observe within the frescoed, coiling motifs of the Renaissance Vatican Loggia as painted by Raphael and Giovanni da Udine, or Stefano della Bella’s ‘Five Grotesque Heads’ (1642–43), the grotesque crucially emphasises chimeric being – showcasing mermaids, satyrs, griffins and transformative myths of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Morgan 2016: 50) – while also embracing the vegetal line: swirling tendrils and frilled acanthus.



Figure 3: Stefano della Bella, Italian, Plate 4: Five Grotesque Heads, from ‘Friezes, Foliage, and Grotesques’ (Frises, feuillages et grotesques), ca. 1642–43. Etching. Sheet: 2 3/16 inches x 4 1/8 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

We can thus locate the plant as a force for weirding, for speculation and imagination, even amidst those most rigid, most rational, most impregnable art historical corridors. Indeed, perhaps a kind of vegetal modality lies behind the Renaissance’s uncanny successor, its uncomfortable progeny: Mannerism. Mannerism, sometimes referred to in the Italian *maniera* (meaning ‘style’), first emerged in Italy around 1520, after the death of Raphael – generally considered the end of the High Renaissance. Stylistically, Mannerism is marked by its extreme and almost otherworldly elegance, often featuring stretched and

sinuous bodies, unusual proportions and uncomfortable asymmetries. As a transitional period between the High Renaissance and Baroque periods, Mannerism has its origins in the innovations of both Michelangelo and Raphael, whose works increasingly began to showcase complicated torsions of form, or *figura serpentinata*; idealised beauty within their figures; elaborate, decorative flourishes; and difficult figural postures achieved without strain – all qualities which younger artists strove to emulate and expand upon in displays of artistic virtuosity and conquest, rather than for narrative or thematic ends (Shearman 1967: 8, 52–53, 59–60). And yet, much like the grotesque, perhaps the ‘decorative’ nature of Mannerism, with its imaginative elaborations and swirling forms – at least the Mannerist painting we might locate in the works of El Greco, Parmigianino, Pontormo, and certainly Arcimboldo – visualises a kind of vegetalisation, a twisting, grafting and othering of the human form, that, undeniably, persistently, challenges us. Perhaps these works tap into an uncomfortable, more-than-human logic that – rather than devoid of ‘theme’ or ‘narrative’ – in fact strains and fractures understandings of what it means to be ‘human’; where such boundaries exist between humans and their surroundings; and in what capacities we as viewers can identify (psychologically, affectively) with such heightened, extravagant, almost unearthly gestures and bodies in art. What indeed happens when the beautiful becomes too beautiful; becomes monstrous; becomes *plant*?



Figure 4: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Four Seasons in One Head*, ca. 1590. Oil on panel. The National Gallery of Art,

Washington, D.C.



Figure 5: El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1605–10. Oil on canvas. 56 7/8 inches x 39 7/8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

#### IV. THE OVERGROWTH

Plants thus complicate – not merely questions of intelligence and agency, or the category of the ‘human’ as imagined in fiction, film and art – but seemingly all thresholds between inside and outside, life and death, generation and decay, worlding operations at play both above and below the Terran surface. Marder evocatively describes such breaches in *The Chernobyl Herbarium*:

Plants, for their part, break through concrete, growing in its cracks and upturning massive slabs with their roots. They open everything and everyone to the outside. As I noted in *Plant-Thinking*, ‘Unlike a crypt, supposed to keep (though it never lives up to its mission) its inhabitant in place, surrounded by inorganic matter, the grave covered by a flowerbed is always already opened, exceeding the domain of the earth and blurring the boundaries between life and death’ (2016: 50).

Neither the organic or inorganic matter of Marder’s description can keep the teeming vegetal world at bay – neither the stiff concrete nor the graven soil can fend off the inevitabilities of vegetal penetration, infiltration and blasting. Corpses meld with grasses, roots and blossoms, transformed into fruiting bodies, alive once again; and living bodies infused with plant-based potions – in Juliet’s infamous case, perhaps derived from *Sleeping Nightshade* (*Atropa Belladonna*), or the ‘soporiferous’ seed of the Bull rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) – might assume the languid, vegetal, ‘borrowed likeness of shrunk death’ (Tabor 1970: 86) [12]. Indeed, the becoming-plant of the poisoned Juliet, in her stillness, her slowness, and her imperceptible liveliness, may once more evoke the vegetalised bodies of, say, El Greco’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*, with their strange, weightless postures, liquid limbs, and their breaching of states, both metaphorical and visual (human/more-than-human; earthly/heavenly). The painting’s individual figures (clustered into two groupings, one aerial, one grounded) melt, visually, into one another, tethered by inky shadows and rhythmic brushwork, operating both as distinct units and collective groupings. Furthermore, their bodies bleed into and out of the murky, surrounding landscape, as patterns of bulging muscle and sinuous flesh echo the swirl of cloud and dark, earthen pulses of rock; distinctions between ‘human’ and ‘nature’ blur out of focus. In *Adoration*, the human is not only at once mortal and divine (suspended between the dark shadows of material decay and a silvery, immortal light), but also both body and landscape – flesh, earth and air all buzz with the same unusual energy, the same strange tempo. Bodies read almost as flowers, branching outward, stretching long and upward, twisting toward a brilliant glow – dynamic, but motionless, upon the painted surface. In other words, we might observe here the becoming-vegetal, the becoming-other-than-human, of apparently human figures within the depicted scene – indeed, there is a *dissemblance* (to revisit Didi-Huberman’s phasmid) at play. El Greco’s *Adoration* not only challenges the viewer’s grasp of the material boundaries of the human body (thus complicating any expectations of the human as a self-contained subject), but injects the human, as agent, as idea, into a more distributed system of relations, fluidly outstretched between simultaneous worlds and states, part of a porous system, an intra-acting ecology.



Figure 6: Walther Otto Müller, *Atropa Belladonna* L., Köhler's *Medizinal-Pflanzen*, 1887. The Biodiversity Heritage Library.

The linearity of the vegetal-grotesque, in its disruption of expected logics and invocations of hybridity and metamorphosis, seems especially well-suited to the practices of drawing and painting, where any and all transgressions of physical reality, distinctive categories or states of being are possible within the apparently static picture plane. Indeed, even the experience of *looking* at (and, often, producing) a painting or drawing is in many ways parallel to plant-being: necessarily localised and simultaneous (demanding both close and holistic looking), highly sensitive (involving inspection of the picture plane's every square inch), engendering a kind of slowness and sessility within – and perhaps imposing a kind of unwitting vegetalisation upon – its viewer (or maker). Speed so critically influences our perceptions of liveliness; the slow and sessile nature of plants challenges our sense of action, of transformation, of vitality. And yet, neither the 'slowness' of plants nor the 'stillness' of paintings precludes the possibility for rich stimulation and engagement – visual, intellectual, philosophical. Indeed, the thickness, the breadth, of a decelerated pacing encourages particular kinds of thinking and looking, fostering reflection upon and attentiveness to details, to phenomena, that might otherwise go unheeded. Of course, even beyond painting, the vegetal-weird – as theoretical mode, visual strategy or both – has the potential to prove fruitful to any creative practice in which the construction of worlds, the positing of precarious, speculative futures, is involved. Moreover, the simultaneous rootedness, immediate presence and forward-thrusting, outward extension of plants makes them particularly well-suited to the chthonic engagements of artists, writers or philosophers with concern for more-than-human worlds, both as they currently exist and as they *could* exist, beneath and beyond our familiar human scale. It is at this tangled nexus – the coincidence of plant intelligence, indifference, creativity, ceaseless growth and expansion, illegible vegetal arabesques, the 'openness' of the vegetal realm, and the intimacy of *Plantae* (and its resonant kin) with processes so critical to both life and death – that I seek to engage the vegetal as a tool for speculative visualisation, for worlding, for thinking- and making-with.

Ultimately, the vegetal mode requires the acknowledgement of inhuman perspectives, the confrontation of non-human forms of meaning, and an imaginative capacity that again resonates with the weird mode as a simultaneous limit and spur to thought. This vegetal modality, in all its perplexity, is well-suited to speculative projects within art and philosophy, but also a powerful facet of our reality, a potential lens through which we might reconsider, and realign, the nature of our human activities in the world, both as they relate to plant systems and more-than-human ecologies more broadly. Such boundaries (between fact and fiction, or art and life) are often more porous than we acknowledge and, as the weird mode illuminates, there is no plugging the seepage from inhuman worlds – from those many spheres of existence we can only ever incompletely detect – into ours. Indeed, whether through Didi-Huberman's dissembling phasmid at the nightmarish vivarium, Marder's ruptured crypt, or the Mannerists' vegetalised bodies, there is a slow inevitability to the clouding of states and the muddling of borders, a quiet resilience to the creeping of the vines. There is a beckoning glow in the overgrowth.

## ENDNOTES

[1] The 'Anthropocene' refers to the idea that human activity is now detectable in the geologic record of the Earth.

[2] Marder prefers the notion of 'life-worlds' to the categories of 'self' and 'other'.

[3] František Baluška and Stefano Mancuso are two prominent contemporary botanists exploring frameworks of signalling and communication within plants and working in the realm of so-called ‘plant neurobiology’. They serve on the steering committee for the Society of Plant Signalling and Behavior ([www.plantbehavior.org/who-we-are](http://www.plantbehavior.org/who-we-are)). Marder also cites the work of Michael J. Hutchings, Hans de Kroon, Meredith L. Biedrzycki, Harsh P. Bais and Francisco Calvo Garzón in his discussion of the complexity of decision-making in plants.

[4] While this is my writing, I allude here to Mark Fisher’s description of the ‘eerie cry’ in *The Weird and the Eerie*, which he notes is often the first example of the eerie cited in dictionary definitions (2016: 61–62).

[5] There are some cases where plants have associations with more traditional modes of ‘horror’, including both the 1956 and 1978 film adaptations of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which alien plant pods fall to Earth and begin replicating humans. Meeker and Szabari engage in extensive analysis of both films, as well as their source material, Jack Finney’s 1954 novel, in Chapter 6 (‘Plant Horror: Love Your Own Pod’) of *Radical Botany*. They also consider the ‘cinematic plant horror’ genre more broadly, comprised of classic films like *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Swamp Thing* (1982) and *The Happening* (2008).

[6] A ‘phasmid’ is an insect of the order *Phasmatodea*, often resembling a twig or leaf (e.g. a walking stick) (Merriam-Webster Online 2021).

[7] We might locate a parallel here to the paradoxical, grotesque nature of the Hell Mouth at Sacro Bosco (discussed in Section III of the paper) – a garden monument threatening to ingest its viewers, even as the structure is itself consumed, visually and aesthetically, by those it engulfs.

[8] Karen Barad refers to her philosophical paradigm as ‘agential realism’.

[9] Haraway writes that ‘[w]e are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman’; however, I retain the term posthuman as a specific strategy for situating my viewers in a space that relates to but decentres the human.

[10] I engage the term ‘self-and-system fashioning’ at the loose intersection of several ideas, attempting, ultimately, to emphasise the inextricable nature of ‘self’ and ‘system’, and especially the recursive feedback loop of self-and-system operations within plants. ‘Self-fashioning’, specifically, is a notion theorised by Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt (1980), and encompasses the many ways that humans have utilised fashion, speech, manner and art to develop and manipulate a sense of identity within a public – to alter or control the ways that one might interact, perform or otherwise manoeuvre within particular spaces. ‘Self-and-system fashioning’, however, also evokes ‘self-organising systems’, language used within disciplines ranging from the natural sciences (biology, physics, chemistry) to economics, computer science, cybernetics and philosophy, ultimately grounded in studies of networks, relationships between individual and group activity, and emergent complexity. I am interested in the ways plants, as Marder outlines, operate as discrete bodies that literally ‘fashion’ themselves (growing in one direction or another, bending this way or that) in continuous and highly sensitive response to their surrounding contexts, inextricably linked to the broader systems or ‘publics’ (the garden patch, the forest, etc.), of which they are a part. Of course, in their self-fashioning, plants dramatically shape and alter the system itself – its appearance, its equilibrium, its exchange of nutrients – shifts to which they must, inevitably, respond and re-shape themselves. This is, of course, as Marder suggests, a simultaneous process occurring within different parts of the plant at all times.

As such, the plant itself is also both an individual (a unit with its own set of nutrient-needs and ‘body plan’, or physical structure) and a system. To me, plants exemplify the kind of ‘world-building’ happening not only within speculative fictions, but occurring all the time, everywhere around us. For plants, self-fashioning is world-building, and I find this idea both fruitful and important to consider in a moment of ecological precarity and concern regarding which futures we, as humans, are contributing to or, indeed, foreclosing as possibilities.

[11] Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation* also falls into the category of ‘new weird’ literature. As outlined in the introduction to *The New Weird* anthology (2008), the ‘new weird’ genre possesses a particular characteristic that VanderMeer refers to as a ‘surrender to the weird’, which acknowledges weird presences as bleeding into the world at large, rather than ‘hermetically sealed’ in haunted houses or remote, abandoned locations. The weird becomes a pervasive force, entangled with daily life, impossible to cleanly cordon off or seal away. This effect certainly plays a role in the alien wilderness of Area X (featured in *Annihilation*), which seems to genetically absorb and subsume all it comes into contact with, continuously expanding and ‘cross-pollinating’, so to speak, with the earthly environment and the humans who investigate its domain. The vegetal-weird I posit in this paper might thus, indeed, be a vegetal ‘new weird’, insofar as plants, as weird ones, undeniably pervade our ecosystems and cannot in any way be separated from our spheres of existence, our species’ survival, or modernity; we must ‘surrender’ to their weirdness. While I will not fully explore such connections in this essay, I encourage those who are interested in the ‘new weird’ and its development to read the introduction to *The New Weird*, which Jeff VanderMeer has made available on [his website](#).

[12] This line, cited by Tabor, is excerpted from William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.i.104, spoken by Friar Lawrence.

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### **About the author**

Ana V. Fleming (b. 1994) recently completed her MFA in Painting and Drawing at the University of Notre Dame (2021). Previously, she completed her undergraduate degree in English Literature from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (2017). Inspired by the genres of speculative and weird fiction, Ana's visual artwork foregrounds a consideration of the non-human world, often featuring imagined, hybridised forms that fuse mechanical, vegetal, biological and amorphous elements in states of mutation, growth and flux.