

Natural Othering of Plants: Human and Non-Human Decoupling in Artistic Research

Prof. Ian Brown

University of Staffordshire

2026

Abstract

The paper considers "natural othering" as a potential tool in mitigating anthropocentric views of nature. Rather than a human-centric view that exploits resources, it will consider the importance of othering as a recognition of the necessary separation to provide vegetal agency. Questioning the depiction of plants, via filmic technologies and its depiction on screen (from fiction to natural history documentaries), where time lapse photography grants access to the non-human temporal state of plant activity for human consumption, the paper

discusses the role of the 'electric plant' in terms of plant agency or otherwise. The paper considers the frameworks we can develop to mitigate anthropomorphisation through ethical othering and the role speculative fiction could play in revealing these potentials.

The paper contextualises artistic practice as a means to explore plant/human relations, between scientific study and popular culture, allowing for a consideration of the different forms of the othering of nature in documentary and fictional storytelling. The text/image work *Orchid Unknown* (2016) weaves factual accounts and fictional speculation to connect a group of detailed orchid models to a collection of miscellaneous reports related to economic botany and global colonial networks. The use of models allows for a focus on nature's aesthetic value as an anthropocentric trait, embedded in the orchid's commodified social and cultural value. Transformative acts, within the narrative, aim to address broader implications of the distinction between 'artificial' and 'natural' and complications arising from separating human and non-human activity.

The paper considers the conventions of speculative fiction in both establishing of nature as instrumentalised anthropocentrism and as a space to recognise plants outside of an anthropocentric view. This investigation takes place in relation to the discourses of Marder, Määttä, Meeker and Szabari.

Keywords: Artistic research methods, speculative fiction, weird plants, vegetality, natural othering, anthropocentrism

Introduction

The paper considers "natural othering" as a potential tool in mitigating anthropocentric views of nature. Rather than a human-centric view, it will consider the possibility of othering as a recognition of a necessary separation that provides vegetal agency. Considering the depiction of plants through forms of popular culture, on screen and in literature, the paper discusses the 'electric plant' and 'weird fiction' to frame this discussion. It considers which artistic research frameworks can be developed to mitigate anthropomorphisation through ethical othering, and what role speculative fiction could play in revealing these potentials.

The paper contextualises artistic practice as a means to explore plant/human relations, between scientific study and popular culture, allowing for a consideration of the different forms of the othering of nature in, and through, documentary and fictional storytelling. The text/image work *Orchid Unknown* (2026) weaves accounts of archival research and taxonomy with fictional speculation, in connecting a group of detailed orchid models to a collection of miscellaneous reports related to economic botany and global colonial networks. The moving image artwork *The Longest Living* (2025), which draws on the same sources, utilises cinematic and televisual languages within the contexts of fiction and documentary, and will be screened at the end of this presentation.

The story centres on a protagonist who, after setting up lights and cameras to film orchid models made by renowned model maker Edith Blackman, is called back to a herbarium, where those models now appear to have been replaced by real plants that seem to levitate and emit different sonic tones.

Weird Fiction and Colonial Entanglement

As Jessica George discusses in *Weird Flora: Life in the Classic Weird Tale* (2020) (in relation to Fisher, Luckhurst and others), the 'weird tale' (which is more elusive to categorise, and can be considered a method more than a genre), leads to defamiliarisation and a questioning of our reality as we perceive it. George argues that recent readings of weird fiction are productive, in the context of plants, but ignore how the weird tale fundamentally returns to considerations of humanness. And in doing so is entangled with western imperialist, and therefore colonialist, attitudes, in relation to race and species, in its unrealised attempts to challenge anthropocentrism (p.12, 2020) She states "The demolishing of anthropocentrism can only function as a source of horror from a human point of view – and it is usually a very particular, very Western point of view that is disoriented by the weirdness of plant alterity." (p.13, 2020).

Numerous fictions have featured plants, and indeed *Orchid Unknown* explicitly references one example: John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). The narrative of which was written in a cold war context and in relation to Trofim Lysenko's claims for new agricultural techniques in the Soviet Union. The 'alienness' of plants in this example was utilised as a conduit for the perceived threat posed by different social and political orders. The plant is othered not only in its monstrous difference to human animals but also as a substitute for a different ideological nationhood. As Määttä argues, the triffid is symbolic of Britain's colonial attitude, post world war 2, and discusses the extent to which these aspects of the novel are built on a tradition dating back to the 1870s of the monstrous plant being associated with indigenous peoples (p.38, 2019)

The relationship between anthropocentric views and imperialism is explored in my research through an engagement with a collection of materials related to economic botany in a colonial context held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, entitled the Miscellaneous Reports Collection. One volume of this large collection Gold Coast Volume 1 contains a variety of communications and reports. Three of which are weaved into the fictional narrative of '*Orchid Unknown*' including communications from, to and about the botanist, linguist and anti-colonialist Gotlob Krause. He had contacted the director of Kew to offer the collection of peanut samples from what was, at that time, German Colonial territory in Africa. For me, this was a way to frame the horror of the weird tale in this context. Further, the work implicitly fractures the fictional as it includes accounts of real conversations, actions, and other archival research undertaken at the different herbaria buildings, and the protagonist, along with fictionalised versions of a taxonomist, archivists, and a botanical illustrator, relates much of this detail interspersed within the fictional narrative.

Weird fiction as a mode towards positive otherness

As George states, "The 'weird' in weird fiction stems from how it recognises this resistance of objects to human attempts to know them. Plants, occupying their marginalised zone, make visible, if not comprehensible, the Other which resists." (p.15, 2020) and discusses "...the radically closed-off (and thus inaccessible to humans) but radically open (to violations of known natural law) world of the plant." (p.14, 2020)

The separation of human and non-human is first manifested in the orchid model as an unnatural artefact, yet one that resembles a natural one. Secondly, as the suggestion is that the model has somehow changed or been replaced by its equivalent plant species, this separation is more clearly defined as human and non-human natural Other. We don't

know for sure that what we are encountering is human-made or a natural plant. The distinction is therefore questionable. Anthropocentric separation is distinct once the natural order is suspended, through a gravitational anomaly, and when sound is emitted. The plants exist between a known human reality and an unknown one – the text presents an alternative world in which plants exist. The plant movement – outside of its technological renderings, as is the case here – is frightening in a human understanding of the world.

Plant animation towards the cinematic vegetal monster

Time-lapse photography and the temporal shift it provides have been a constant presence throughout my lifetime in the mediation of plant behaviour in natural history programmes. The BBC has produced a series of such documentaries; *The Private Life of Plants* (1995), *The Kingdom of Plants* (2012) and *The Green Planet* (2002). But as Meeker and Szabari detail in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) the origins of time-lapse photography, in relation to the moving image, begin in the scientific domain and fundamentally influence experimental cinema in the 1920s and 1930s. The presence of plants in cinema and literature then continues into plant horror as the global political sphere shifts into colonial and post-colonial contexts and cold war politics.

Meeker and Szabari focus on three key figures (Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette) to discuss the experimental cinema that emerged from the culture of scientific observational studies, using time-lapse photography, and how this technology reframed our understanding of vegetality. Epstein considered the camera's viewpoint non-human, the discontinuity of cinematic images a "ghost of mechanical intelligence," and the audience adds a "ghost of human intelligence" at the point of viewing (p.124, 2019). Colette was concerned with how, for her, time-lapse technological processes denaturalise the plant towards a world of a disfigured and monstrous vegetality – one constructed through the camera. (p.139, 2019) Despite her enjoyment and engagement with time-lapse science films of plants "she is suspicious of the alienating or dehumanising effects of this cinematic turn on the profound affective relationship that humans have with plants, and with flowers in particular. And she tends to stress the monstrous nature of the cinematic plant... an emphasis that moves the blooming flower closer and closer to an animal, rather than preserving its vegetality." (p.141, 2019)

So, we have a fundamental discussion here about the consequences of the 'electric plant'. Does this temporal shift towards a human temporal plane, that time-lapse photography allows, create the conditions for us to understand vegetality? Or does it move us away from an understanding of the vegetal? "Colette renders the manipulation of the plant's

temporality as ultimately an exploitation (and denaturalisation) of its being, rather than a way into its world." (p.143, 2019)

For the most part, in *Orchid Unknown* and *The Longest Living*, the plants are not technologically animated in the tradition of the 'electric plant'. They resist this; the plants remain, as expected, immobile.

In addition to the text and photographic images, botanical illustrations are included toward the end of the story, when the protagonists find a set of drawings in the herbarium left for one of them to look at. These botanical illustrations included as part of the work, along with the photographs, and in collaboration with botanical artist Lucy T. Smith, also refer to the mechanics of stop-frame animation as a mechanical/technological relationship to time-lapse. This also includes another form of speculative fiction. The drawings reconstruct a broken orchid model into a complete plant image. It is a form of reanimation with the animate. The model is held in Kew's collection, but it lacks a base plate and an inflorescence, so the species is unknown. Through the act of completing its form through speculative drawing and the rendering of the model in the conventions of botanical illustration the model is not only transformed into a complete state but also into the vegetal.

However, within the *Orchid Unknown* narrative this technological temporal shift is, at one stage, more relative. The conditions within the herbarium's environment create a temporal shift for both parties: humans and plants. As the plant slowly moves, the human activity becomes problematically fast - we 'see' the human action from a plant perspective. As the protagonist attempts to, or indeed films, the plant/model throughout the narrative, this shift aims to allow us to reflect on this movement in the context of the electric plant's conventions, where the plant would usually have an isolated temporal displacement.

Who's story is it?

One aspect of the research considers the differences between the perspectives at the centre of the narrative and who's stories are being told. The human protagonists report on the unfolding of a vegetal story, one that is mysterious, confusing or even frightening from a human position. The section in the narrative where the humans share joy in their altered temporal state is intended to reveal difference as a positive experience. This experience is shared (between plant and human). However, it differentiates between the two and finds a way to understand vegetal beings through an experiential understanding subverting the 'unnatural' temporal technological shift. In *A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell* (2023), Marder explores ways we can understand vegetal storytelling. In relating the speculative

fictions of European historical cultures, with fantastical creatures and spirits, living in, or protecting, the forest, Marder says "They were not the stories plants or plant communities told; instead, they were the alarmed and hasty constructions of fledgling cultures on edge, anxious and located at the edge of immense forests as of that which did not fit the narrow constraints of domineering reason." (p.198, 2023). In contrast, he discusses the legacy of how forest-dwellers of ancient India engaged with plants and their stories, "The storytelling of the forest is the account that ātman or brahman, the breath of being or the soul of the world, gives of itself to itself. It is the exhalation and inhalation prior to any utterance, which may or may not ensue. We, too, can be privy to the story of the forest, provided that through, in, or with it we abide in the heart of all beings, in the middle unconcerned with beginnings and ends, in the ultimacy of the middle." (p.198, 2023)

The work leans into the traditions of the 'weird' whereby plants 'body snatch' their replica models and confront the idea of the 'electric plant' in terms of a screen presence whilst denying the cinematic animation that Colette found so problematic in its denaturing.

The 'body snatch' here does not function with the same horror and context as the *Body Snatchers* novel or the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* films. There is no human-to-plant transformation; the plant is transforming its lifeless human-made imitator into a living vegetal state.

In the 1963 version of the film of *The Day of the Triffids*, a scene is set in the palm house at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. And for me the setting of the work is confined within anthropocentric places, herbaria, where dried samples of various plant species are stored to assist the taxonomic process of plant categorisation. Surrounding the plants in my work are samples of various dead plants, hidden within folders in green boxes. As if the fact that the plants/models come 'alive' within these spaces, in their acts of sound emission and levitation, is not 'weird' enough, they are surrounded by deceased ancestors. Perhaps it is human activity in this space that is deemed questionable.

George, J. (2020). *Weird Flora: Life in the Classic Weird Tale*. In K. E. Bishop, D. Higgins, & J. Määttä (Eds.), *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (1st ed., pp. 11–31). University of Wales Press.

Marder, Michael (2023) "A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell," *Narrative Culture: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 3*.

Meeker, N. and Antónia Szabari (2019). *Radical Botany*. Fordham University Press.

Määttä, J. (2020). 'Bloody unnatural brutes': Anthropomorphism, Colonialism and the Return of the Repressed in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. In J. Määttä, K. E. Bishop, & D. Higgins (Eds.), *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (1st ed., pp. 32–55). University of Wales Press.