

Vegetable Discourses in the 1950s US Science Fiction Film

Adam Knee

The 1950s cycle of US science fiction films is known for its often outlandish representations of all manner of nonhuman others, which provide a means, in turn, for articulating a broad range of Cold War fears over the threats posed by “them” versus “us”—fears of national border incursion, of brainwashing or alien mind control, of violence or mass destruction perpetrated, for example, by space aliens, by mutated earth creatures, by prehistoric earth creatures, or even by robots, minerals, or plants, as genre filmmakers explored a whole range of possibilities. This chapter will argue that these films develop a distinctive and largely negative discourse about the vegetative over the course of the decade and into the early 1960s (as the initial Cold War wave of US science fiction subsided). Of ongoing significance to the genre, this discourse locates in the botanical a particularly threatening form of otherness, characterized by a disposition toward and means for rapid invasion and, sometimes, actual physical attack, combined with a chilling lack of emotion.

This characterization of vegetal otherness does not imply a total absence of positive counter-discourses about the plant realm. Plants are, for example, sometimes depicted as naturally occurring and life-supporting organisms.

A. Knee (✉)

Ningbo, Zhejiang, China

e-mail: Adam.Knee@nottingham.edu.cn

Such discourses are, however, the exception in 1950s US science fiction and are often implicit rather than explicit, suggested through absence, in scenarios where a lack of plant life renders existence oppressive. This absence conveys thematic information, as in, for example, one of the very first films in the science fiction cycle of the 1950s, *Rocketship X-M* (1950). In this film, astronauts who alight on Mars find a landscape with minimal vegetation, a state caused by a nuclear explosion that laid waste to the planet many years before. Mutated (and aggressive) humanoid Martians soon arrive to liven the generic plot and further underscore the film's warning about terrestrial nuclear dangers in the Cold War: "What a lesson here for our world," the commander intones. Thus, these nascent moments of 1950s cinematic science fiction associate the absence of plant life with technologically driven destruction, mutation, danger (in particular from scientific progress), and death. Plants, in implicit contrast, are here associated with peace, things in their natural state, safety, and life.

Such associations continue to crop up in the genre during the 1950s (as well as subsequently), particularly in relation to such vegetation-barren landscapes as deserts and polar regions. Vivian Sobchack (1987) has noted the prevalence and significance of such settings (as well as beaches) across much of low-budget science fiction, with the familiar terrestrial landscapes figured as vast, hostile realms that overwhelm the human protagonists and, sometimes, harbor aliens (pp. 110–118). These landscapes also have strong contemporary Cold War resonances, not only because they visually evoke postnuclear ruin, but also because they were often actual sites of nuclear and rocket tests. *Rocketship X-M*, for example, opens at the US Government Proving Grounds in White Sands, New Mexico—at once the real-world site of the first nuclear weapons test in 1945 and the launching point of the film's space rocket. *Them!* (1954) also opens in the desert surroundings of White Sands, and that film even explicitly narrativizes the connection between the locale and nuclear dangers: the giant ants that are threatening the region are atomic mutations created through White Sands nuclear testing. Cyndy Hendershot (1999) has argued that the American Southwest more broadly "serves as an appropriate site for troping the invisible danger of radiation" (p. 43) in science fiction films of the era because of the bomb testing that occurred there. Among the many other 1950s science fiction films in which desert or other vegetation-sparse landscapes serve as a cipher for the potential for modern atomic destruction (and in which plant life, arguably, has positive associations in implicit contrast) are *The Beast from 20,000*

Fathoms (1953), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957), and *The Monolith Monsters* (1957).

The contrast between the science fictive desert and plant life as a positive and nourishing force perhaps becomes clearest in *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Although the film's setting of the remote planet Altair at first appears entirely barren, desolate, and foreboding, a visiting crew from Earth is soon relieved to find that earlier human settlers created their own lush, paradisiacal garden in a protected enclosure. One final, interesting example of positive plant discourse can be found in *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), a film that at first figures the desert landscape as deadly (in keeping with the examples above), but that also renders plant life itself a source of fear (more in keeping with the dominant science fiction discourse to be discussed below). Images of desert vegetation in the film appear ominous, even predatory, and in one instance the female lead lets out a blood-curdling scream when the protagonist, searching in the night with his car's electric lamp, unexpectedly shines it upon the protruding limb of a Joshua tree, an effect amplified in the film's original 3-D format. This is a red herring, however, which renders ominous something that turns out to be benign—and this false impression aligns with the film's attitude toward its alien visitors, who initially seem threatening but ultimately are revealed to harbor no malevolent intentions toward Earth or humankind.

The same cannot be said of the murderous alien visitor in *The Thing from Another World* (1951), arguably the first major alien invasion film of the 1950s, and one of two key films about monstrous vegetation in US science fiction. Most of the film's plot unfolds at an Arctic US monitoring station, staffed by military personnel and scientists. When an alien craft crash-lands nearby, members of the group dig out and return with the frozen alien, who soon thaws out and lays siege to the station. Part of what makes this highly evolved and intelligent alien so fearsome and other (that is, what makes it a "thing") are its distinctively plant-based characteristics—as the station's chief scientist Dr. Carrington explains, the alien's kind emerged as plant life and evolved along the same lines as animal life had done on Earth. ("An intellectual carrot," a reporter exclaims in one of the film's most quoted lines, "the mind boggles.") Biologically, what marks it as plant and other is, as one of the scientists describes, its "porous unconnected cellular growth," which allows, for example, bullets to pass through it without killing it. In addition, the alien lacks arterial structures, nerve endings, and blood, exhibiting instead a sap-like green fluid, thorns,

and seed pods. The seed pods point, in turn, to an alien system of species propagation—as Dr. Carrington admiringly explains, “The neat and unconfused reproductive technique of vegetation. No pain or pleasure as we know it. No emotions. No heart. Our superior. Our superior in every way.” These characteristics end up posing multiple narrative dangers. The being has the ability to start a colony of its own kind in the station greenhouse—possibly, it would seem, with the aim of taking over the Earth—while its lack of emotion allows it to kill members of the staff without compunction in order to feed its young, which require not water and sunlight, but animal blood. This vegetable emotionlessness paradoxically manifests as a kind of bestial savagery, despite the alien’s intelligence and evolutionary superiority to humans—a savagery displayed most strongly in a climactic moment when Dr. Carrington attempts to reason with the creature, explaining that humans are friends who want to learn from it, before the alien dispatches him with a bone-breaking swipe and an animalistic snarl.¹

A number of other details in the characterization of the alien give clues to its contemporary thematic resonance. The alien is supposedly vegetable, but the overall design of its physical form clearly appears human; it is also presumably bigendered or nongendered, though its appearance is more that of a male (it is, after all, portrayed by one), and members of the crew consistently refer to it as male. These features allow the alien to function as an emblem of the film’s various narrative subtexts—in particular, those of Cold War geopolitics and sexual politics. Dialogue even makes explicit reference to Cold War fears of national border incursion (a general makes mention of Russians “buzzing around the North Pole like flies”), and the imagery of an alien’s breaching of the base’s defenses and starting to propagate its young seems to allude to such fears. At the same time, the heavy emphasis on the alien’s reproductive (if putatively asexual) activities allows one to see this as a corollary of a more conventional war between the sexes that the film presents in tandem: an ongoing tumultuous courtship between a playboy Air Force captain and an independent-minded female worker at the base, each at times attempting to “invade” the other’s space, while harboring an interest in the propagation of its own kind—much as the alien does in other contexts. Their interplay indexes certain gender role expectations that were emphasized in American culture in the immediate postwar years and even more so through the 1950s. Adult males were strongly pressured to take on the role of husband and breadwinner, females that of child-bearer and homemaking consumer, and

those who did not take on these roles ran the risk of being looked on with suspicion (in a paranoid age), as potentially morally and/or politically deviant.² *The Thing* makes clear enough that the playboy captain and the independent woman are, in fact, quite amenable to effecting a socially acceptable 1950s romantic closure to their still freewheeling ways—yet, at a more subterranean level, the plant-alien's vampiric and rapid-fire reproductive processes suggest a dramatization of residual anxieties about fully embracing a (human) existence focused upon child-rearing.

The Thing, then, designates several key traits of the alien protagonist as functions of its being a form of plant life: an otherness to animal biology; a strong reproductive disposition and rapid reproductive abilities connected, in turn, to invasive tendencies; an emotional coldness and even violence, particularly in ensuring the propagation of its kind; and an imperviousness to various physical conditions (such as freezing temperatures) and injuries (such as shooting or dismemberment) that would be debilitating, if not fatal, to most animals. When situated within the 1950s context, these traits resonate with contemporary US anxieties about political and national encroachment and about the nature and status of postwar gender roles.

The next major plant-themed science fiction film of the 1950s, also one of the best-known and most widely analyzed of all science fiction films, is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). That film's vegetable antagonists are not clearly identified until well into the narrative; however, right from the film's start, the anxieties that they create for the citizens of a small California town are evident, and we are thus invited to read these anxieties (a belief that people are not really who they appear to be) as symptomatic of the emotional difficulties of life in Cold War America. Indeed, a psychiatrist in the film even explicitly makes that diagnosis, saying that the fears come from "worry about what's going on in the world, probably." It transpires, however, that, as claimed, people are not who they appear to be, and that the culprit is a vegetable life form that stealthily takes on the likenesses of humans as they sleep.

These particular plants function more like typical vegetation than those in most of the other films discussed here: the seeds take root on Earth after floating through space for years, and more complex invasion activities are handled when the plants are in the form of the people they've imitated, rather than when they're in their own native giant pod form. The filmmakers do not resort to images of a veggie-humanoid (as in *The Thing*) or of self-propelling trees (as in quite a few other films), and the film does not

require the kind of suspension of disbelief called for in films where large vegetables are shown moving around and/or attacking humans. Still, there remains a high level of continuity with *The Thing* in terms of *Invasion*'s characterization of its vegetable antagonist. There is, first, the organism's strong reproductive and invasive drives, which motivate its actions once it alights on Earth and constitute its threat. The main protagonist, Miles Bennell, discovers that not only have the aliens taken over his own town, but they are starting to distribute their pods throughout the region (as he declares, "It's a malignant disease spreading through the whole country"). Michael Rogin (1987) notes how, in both *The Thing* and *Invasion*, "Promiscuous, undifferentiated, vegetable reproduction threatens family bonds" (p. 264) and, in turn, threatens broader destruction. *Invasion*, like *The Thing*, also appears to index contemporary gender anxieties; Rogin, for example, argues that "reproduction dispenses with the father" in both films (p. 264), and he is not alone in noting the ovarian qualities of the alien pods.

Invasion's aliens also can be likened to the creature from *The Thing* in their lack of emotions; as Bennell tells one of them who has taken the form of the aforementioned psychiatrist, "You have no feelings, only the instinct to survive." The alien's calm response asserts the superiority of such a disposition: "Love, desire, ambition, faith. Without them life is so simple, believe me." This complacent—and, indeed, conformist—attitude on the part of the aliens is something that *Invasion* contributes to the vegetable discourse, a conceptualization that crystallizes in the film's representation of humanoid beings as, in essence, undifferentiated pods—one of the concepts for which the film is best-known (see Samuels 1979).³ Many commentators have written on the contemporary political resonance of these vegetable antagonists (though not, in general, focusing on their vegetable nature), suggesting alternately right-wing allegory (fear of communist invasion) or left-wing allegory (fear of anti-communist hysteria) or, perhaps most convincingly, a likely presence of elements of both, reflecting the varied political frameworks of the film and leanings of its makers (see LaValley 1989). What I would stress here is that key among the characteristics that provide these resonances are those that are understood as botanical: the aliens in both *Invasion* and *The Thing* are fear-inspiring as invasive, rapidly (and identically) reproductive, seemingly amoral vegetable beings. Because these films are the forerunners of, and models for, many alien invasion films to follow, it is not surprising that quite a few of these alien characteristics echo through genre films of the later 1950s and

beyond. What is interesting to note, however, is that these initial films situate these traits largely as plant characteristics, even though that is not a dominant theme in later films; one could, indeed, argue that there is an unacknowledged vegetable subtext in much of Cold War science fiction, a vegetable unconscious as it were, that underpins the conceptualization of the “little green men” of the genre as, for example, invasive, lacking emotion, and/or lacking individual dexterity (and therefore sometimes turning to others to do their bidding). Two obvious examples of vegetable-like aliens, following directly in the botanical wake of *Invasion*’s pods, are the tuber-like Venusian of *It Conquered the World* (1956) (a film that also riffs *Invasion*’s key plot element of conformism in a California town) and the cabbage-head aliens of the semi-comic *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (1957).

Several low-budget vehicles aiming to exploit the gimmick of horrific plant antagonists followed quickly after *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Released early in 1957, the Boris Karloff vehicle *Voodoo Island*, about a party of travelers surveying a South Seas island for possible hotel development, has more of the trappings of a horror film than a science fiction film—and, indeed, the forces of voodoo with which the travelers are confronted on the island are given a supernatural appearance.⁴ Not so, however, the plants that attack them on the island, which are figured as a natural (that is, science fictive) phenomenon. Different from the other dangerous vegetation surveyed here, these diverse and carnivorous plants are presented as opportunistic predators by necessity, since they are rooted where they have grown. They do not have the invasive agendas of the plant life in *The Thing* and *Invasion*: they seem to be found only on the single island and merely feed on what passes by for sustenance. The protagonist (a well-known debunker of hoaxes) characterizes them as prehistoric (much as the plant form in *Invasion* is, as well as those in some other films discussed here), which provides a partial explanation for their unusual qualities. These plants also operate by stealth, at least initially: they feed by capturing their victims unawares, just as the aliens in *Invasion* depend upon their initial invisibility to allow their spread.

Another earlier theme on which this film seems to draw—and also to develop in a new and lurid way—is that of parallels between human reproductive biology and plant reproductive biology. In *Voodoo Island*, the emphasis is not on showing how plants propagate themselves, but on implicitly sexualizing the predation of the plants. For example, the first victim of the plants is a woman who has been characterized as somewhat older and sexually experienced. When she strips down to enjoy a

dip under a waterfall, she is attacked by a water-dwelling plant with long and tentacled (and apparently inflatable) limbs, which wrap around her and conveniently cover up the parts of her body that could not be shown in 1950s cinema. Fellow travelers hear her screams and hack at the roots of the plant, but the sacrificial non-virgin's death comes quickly nevertheless, in what could be read as a narrative retribution for her sexual independence. Subsequently, the hoax-buster's young, attractive, and virginal assistant is attacked by a plant that resembles nothing so much as a giant penis, with a throbbing shaft and head that spring to interest in her presence—though unlike her more sexualized counterpart, she is rescued when the base of the shaft is hacked (an obvious castration image). It speaks to the exploitive bent of this production that, unlike in *The Thing* and *Invasion*, there is no strongly developed social or marital metaphor to work in tandem with its sexualized imagery, but the plants here, even more clearly than elsewhere, stand in general terms for sexuality and potentially dangerous sexual drives, while also emblemizing the dangers of human (in particular, American) exploitive or neo-colonialist aspirations (an undercurrent that starts to emerge only later in the 1950s).

Quite a few of the same plant-connected discourses are evident (if briefly) in *The Land Unknown*, released in August of the same year. In this film, a party of explorers ends up trapped in a surprisingly temperate deep crater in the Antarctic region, where they encounter a range of prehistoric fauna and flora, including a carnivorous plant. Again, this ancient life form is rooted in one place and must wait for its potential food to pass by, and again its only "motivation" appears to be sustenance—though the fact that the only member of the party who is attacked (and saved) is the one female traveler (in whom all show a sexual interest) again suggests a sexual association for the plant predation. Also present once more is the implicit warning about the perils of American neo-colonial interests (the explorers being mostly military).

These shifts in emphasis continue along the same lines and are even more pronounced in the same month's release of *From Hell It Came*. This film, too, features a predatory plant (a tree) on a South Seas island, but with the significant difference that this plant is not seeking to consume its victims for nourishment but, rather, simply to kill them in vengeance. Such human-like drives are possible as this "*tabonga*" (as the natives call it) is not a regularly occurring part of the island's flora but, rather, a manifestation of the local spirit of revenge and a botanical resurrection of a deceased person in search of retribution—in this case, a villager who has been betrayed

by his wife in collusion with the village chief and witch doctor. Still present is the generic subtext of sexual motivations, found most directly in the love triangle that leads to the initial betrayal, but also strongly suggested by the tree monster's behavior: once it has dispatched those who have wronged it, it proceeds to stalk the attractive blonde American scientist whom the film's protagonist (another American scientist) has been trying to woo (generic requirement, as it were, trumping narrative logic). Also still present are undertones of concern that the USA is meddling in realms where it does not belong. Indeed, the villagers are openly hostile about the presence of American scientists, who are on the island to investigate the after-effects of atomic fallout from American bomb tests. On the surface, the film paints Americans as benign in their motivations—the fallout, it is explained, was very minor and had drifted only because of a freak typhoon, and the caring scientists are working not only to investigate possible impacts, but also to help eradicate a growing problem of plague. That said, the film plainly implies that, although the *tabonga* is an indigenous (and, like the dangerous plants in the other films, ancient) phenomenon, its running amok when it does is largely a result of US meddling: the scientists have unwittingly freed it by digging it up to examine it more closely, and when it initially expires, they re-resurrect it in more virulent form by applying an experimental formula that has unexpected effects because of the presence of (American) atomic radiation. The strange mixing of the supernatural and the scientific in the explanation of the *tabonga* phenomenon is typical of the intermingling of horror and science fictive elements in late 1950s genre films—but it also speaks again to the presence of Western science on the island as an incursion of alien regimes of knowledge.

From Hell distinguishes itself from the films discussed above in an important way: unlike the plants in the earlier predatory vegetable films (with the exception of *The Thing*), this tree can walk on its own in pursuit of its victims. A walking, aggressive tree, however, is hard to depict convincingly, and the effort to do so is part of what has earned this film notoriety as a “bad” and unintentionally risible B-film. The filmmakers repeatedly resort to having the *tabonga* come upon its victims unawares, as there is no way that the shuffling man in the tree costume could overtake anyone in terms of speed. Direct interactions with victims are also filmed with numerous cutaways to elide the difficulties of imbuing a tree with the dexterity required to hit people or lift them up.

The logistical issues of figuring predatory plant life are again highlighted, this time with intentional humor, in the now-celebrated low-budget horror

comedy *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960)—a logical outgrowth of the outlandish tendencies of late 1950s genre films. In this case, the carnivorous plant, situated in a small flower shop in Los Angeles's skid row, cannot get around on its own, but is able to talk and to hypnotize people in order to get them to feed it. Here again, the plant is represented not as supernatural but, rather, as the result of a Venus fly trap cross-breeding effort carried out by a working-class amateur botanist employed as a florist's assistant. The plant is (humorously) characterized by its insatiable appetite, which parallels the working-class character's appetite for financial success and social mobility; moreover, people are prepared to let the human-eating plant thrive because it is to their economic benefit. Specifically, the plant's unusual appearance attracts people to the shop where it is displayed and therefore increases the owner's income; its exceptional qualities also hold the promise of bringing recognition to the impoverished botanist's research and, thus, the opportunity to marry the fellow shop assistant whom he loves. While this plant does not seem to have the reproductive impulses of other plants in the decade's science fiction and horror, it does dramatize, once again, the voracious appetites of plant life (even if lacking in native physical means to satiate that appetite).

One thing that is new in *Little Shop* is the image of consumption as part of a tongue-in-cheek critique of capitalism. The plant's exploitive, insatiable, and ultimately deadly appetite resonates with similar (if not as obvious) appetites of the human characters, in a skid row setting that is emblematic of the dark side of the American economic system. Another new theme that gets bound up with the figuration of monstrous vegetation here is that of unfamiliar, and even monstrous, hybridity. This is seen most literally and grotesquely in the plant's sprouting of blossoms with victims' faces at the film's close, but is also expressed through the novel social mixing that is represented (sometimes to humorous effect) throughout the film—for example, in images of perky upper-class California cheerleaders coming to purchase floral arrangements from a working-class Eastern European Jewish florist in a dodgy part of town.

One further low-budget film that appeared after the 1950s cycle had all but played out which presents *The Thing*'s subtexts in particularly vivid fashion is an unacknowledged reworking of that earlier film—worth briefly discussing here for the ways in which it highlights some of the submerged discourses of the original. *The Navy vs. the Night Monsters* (1966) hews to numerous details of the earlier film in its parallel narrative of a polar military-scientific expedition beset by alien vegetable forces. In the later

film, Antarctica is substituted for the Arctic, Navy for Air Force, and the alien vegetable is now linked to antiquity rather than futurity (it is an Earth creature from an earlier stage of evolution, rather than an extraterrestrial from an advanced stage). But the plant creature still engenders fear and poses narrative problems, for both reproductive and alimentary reasons: it generates offspring rapidly and asexually (in the form of juvenile creatures which ripen and fall off the parental creature), and it nourishes itself by attacking and digesting with acid anything within its reach. This characteristic of ardent, all-encompassing appetite seemingly parallels the ongoing (and semi-comic) amorous pursuits of multiple characters (the focus of much of the plotting); just as in *The Thing*, the creature's machinations parallel the main characters' romantic jockeying.

For the sake of completeness, I would also mention that themes and tropes related to those in the late 1950s US tree and plant horror films are taken up in a couple of contemporaneous sci-fi/horror vehicles with fungal themes.⁵ The B-movie adventure *The Unknown Terror* (1957), which concerns a party of Americans who set out in search of an explorer who has gone missing while caving in Latin America, features a mad scientist who experiments on a fast-spreading fungus that somehow transforms its human victims. In order to prevent a possible global spread of the soap-sud-like fungus, the scientist's cave-lab is dynamited shut. The likewise low-budget *Space Master X-7* (1958), despite a title evocative of a space travel narrative, is soon revealed to have its generic lineage more in documentary noir and the police procedural. A carnivorous fungus is brought to Earth in the form of dust in a returned satellite. By a pathology not made completely clear, this fungus grows by feeding upon the flesh of those with whom it comes in contact, which causes it to develop into a (only briefly seen) pulsating rubbery blob. A woman whose belongings are tainted with the dust unknowingly poses a national danger, and the film details the efforts of two police-like agents of the US "Office of Internal Security" to track her down before the contamination spreads. The film evokes 1950's *The Killer That Stalked New York*, about an effort to capture a woman posing a threat of a small pox epidemic, more than any science fiction film—even in the detail of its documentary-style urban location shooting (with Los Angeles now replacing New York). Lastly, in a genuine space travel film very late in the cycle, *Mutiny in Outer Space* (1965), a fast-growing lunar fungus which (again) can attach itself to humans (and which kills living cells upon contact) overruns an entire space station and poses the threat of contaminating the Earth should the station

crash. In this particular instance, the fungus has a clearer visible form, reaching around the station with vine-like arms, which themselves have the multi-threaded texture of an algae. The theme of dangerous appetite is shared with other hungry-vegetable films—but that of dangerous contamination would appear specific to the fungus-themed films (with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* being a singular, if highly significant, exception among non-fungal films).⁶

A brief comparison with plant-themed international co-productions and non-US films around the time of the early-to-mid-1960s decline of the US science fiction cycle suggests some relevant continuities, but also interesting differences. The Philippine-American co-production *Brides of Blood* (1968) seems to take a leaf right out of *From Hell It Came*'s book with its narrative of an American scientific party's encounter with threats brought about (with some postcolonial poetic justice) by US atomic testing on a South Seas island. Trees turned predatory are among a range of alterations in fauna and flora precipitated by the testing, shifts which appear to take place on a diurnal basis. The most dangerous of these is a monster that feeds on young women, created through the nightly transformation of a human inhabitant of the island—but the altered trees also pose a danger, attacking passersby for purposes not completely clear. While space precludes more detailed analysis here, it should suffice to say that the film's repeated references to former colonial powers—not to mention its real-world co-financing and distribution by one—readily resonate with its images of predatory creatures brought into being by US scientific experimentation for military purposes (see Capino, especially pp. 18–24, for further discussion of some of the film's postcolonial overtones).

The UK released its own low-budget tree horror film, *Woman eater*, in April 1958 (just eight months after *The Land Unknown* and *From Hell it Came*), and, like other British science fiction of the time, it is arguably more direct in referencing the social and political issues with which it is concerned than are its American counterparts—though the particular issues of interest only partially overlap. In this instance, the sexual dimensions of the monster tree's devouring of humans and its parallel to predatory human male heterosexual desire are evident.⁷ These messages are conveyed not only through the ludicrous physical design of the monster (with two flailing phalli emerging from what appear to be eye sockets, as well as multiple other phallic limbs) and in its consumption solely of women, but also in the clear arousal of the male protagonist when he witnesses such consumption (while at the same time losing all interest in his erstwhile lover).

The film's allegories of consumption have clear dimensions of colonialism and class as well—the latter not particularly characteristic of the US examples of botanical horror. The plot commences with two well-to-do gentlemen from the London Explorers Club with a taste for adventure (and, evidently, the time and means to support it) heading into the jungles of the Amazon in search of a way to raise the dead. It is there that the “mad scientist” protagonist witnesses the tree-feeding ritual that he finds so exciting, and he opts to bring this jungle excitement back to England with him, in the form of the tree itself and a native assistant. The scientist has the rituals performed for his benefit (and, he rationalizes, the benefit of his experiments on the tree's supposedly life-giving sap) in the basement of his small-town manor. The new victims are young local women who are apparently unfortunate enough in their social and economic status that they have fallen in with the scientist (who, in turn, has little worry that they might be missed). The scientist eventually gets his comeuppance, however, when he discovers that the natives did not completely divulge their secrets to the European interloper.

A higher-budget, more sober UK production is 1962's *The Day of the Triffids*, about tree-like aliens whose seeds arrive on Earth via meteors and whose spread accelerates catastrophically after a meteor shower, which also happens to blind most humans. Rather than intelligent beings with malevolent aims, these (perhaps accidental) invaders are presented more as fellow biological organisms instinctively searching for (animal) food, although with various deadly self-defense mechanisms. We learn that they can regenerate when damaged, much as terrestrial plants do, and have no central nervous system or circulatory system. However, they do have the ability to uproot themselves and move around (by pulling themselves forward with thick tendrils) in pursuit of food, and, by way of deft editing and special effects, the filmmakers suggest such mobility in a less risible fashion than in earlier examples. Unlike in the American films, though, there hardly seems a focus here on Cold War political allegory, although there is a backdrop of nuclear-like global holocaust. The key interest, rather, seems in exploring quite literally universal instincts to survive, and dramatizing how these drives play out in socially varied contexts.

Two further British examples from 1965 show interesting thematic continuity with the other UK films. The brief plant horror segment in the omnibus film *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* also focuses on survival instincts, as that narrative's killer plant—a mutated vine—seems ready to stop at nothing in order to protect itself. The film suggests that this

vine, aside from being lethal, also possesses analytical skills, representing a next-higher evolutionary step in the plant kingdom (which ranges, as an authority in the film explains, from lichens to fungi and all the way up to carnivorous plants). Significantly, however, the target of its attack is the British middle-class household: it has grown up around the protagonist's house while he was away on vacation, kills the family dog when it appears a threat, and later traps the protagonist with his wife and daughter inside their house as a government official inspecting the situation manages to get away to summon help. In the gothic thriller *Die Monster Die!* (a UK-USA co-production), another human-attacking vine appears, and it is again suggested that it is a mutation of an ordinary terrestrial vine—here, because of radiation from a meteor that lands on an estate at the outskirts of an English country town. In this case, the plant battle is again (if tangentially) linked to class concerns, as the residents of the estate, who are estranged from the less affluent townspeople, have fostered the radiation's effects in the mistaken belief that it is a mysterious and positive force that they can use to help the townspeople and thereby regain their favor.

A final example, from Japan, is replete with its own distinctive social allegories for botanical predation, allegories that it lays out very clearly (arguably, even artlessly in its bluntness)—but, again, these are in large measure not those of the US films. In *Matango* (1963), the vegetable threat is posed by mushrooms on a remote island. A group of Japanese leisure travelers on a weekend yacht trip gets stranded on the island, and, in need of food, some travelers begin eating the unfamiliar fungi despite warnings to avoid them (at the same time as fungal growths start to invade the abandoned ship in which they have set up camp). The addictive mushrooms have strange psychotropic and physical effects on those who eat them, and eventually only one member of the party is able to retain the will to escape—a character who in a coda is also revealed to have begun to transform into one of the “mushroom people.” The loss of human qualities (and the development of fungal ones) on the island is here clearly paralleled with the loss of humanity in contemporary (and increasingly affluent and modernized) Japanese society, as represented in the party of Tokyoites on the boat, who are variously characterized as fame-seeking, self-absorbed, insincere, uncaring, and promiscuous.

As this brief overview of the representation of plant life—and, in particular, of monstrous vegetation—in Cold War US science fiction films has indicated, while plants do, as might be expected, hold some positive associations with nourishment, nature, and peace, their monstrous

manifestations in the genre tend to characterize the botanical as invasive (often in a stealthy fashion), rapidly reproductive, devoid of human emotions and morals, and lacking in free mobility and dexterity, though able to withstand harsh conditions (being, in quite a few instances, survivors from prehistoric times). These characteristics are often deployed, moreover, in ways that reflect contemporary US anxieties about foreign border encroachments (or concern about the dangers of America's own exploits abroad) and also, in some instances, about human marital relations and gender roles. Lastly, the case for the national specificity of some of these tendencies is further supported in a comparison of the US examples presented here with some non-US films. This comparison marks some continuity in terms of botanical discourses, but also suggests that plants figure contemporary concerns in other countries that differ from those of US films—for example, a focus on shifts in class relations and/or social values, rather than on threats of border incursion.

NOTES

1. Biskind (1983, pp. 134–135) while arguing that the vegetable alien's emotionlessness makes it tantamount to a robot, acknowledges that this interpretation is inconsistent with its display of raging emotions; Jancovich's reading (1996, esp. p. 27), on the other hand, sees the alien's emotionlessness as more consistently embodying a Fordist efficiency.
2. See, for example, the discussions offered by May (1988) and Ehrenreich (1983).
3. The motif of alien mind control *had* appeared earlier, but in nonvegetable contexts, in *It Came from Outer Space* and *Invaders from Mars* (both from 1953).
4. Most accounts of science fiction (and of its distinction from horror) note the genre's rootedness in extrapolations from known scientific fact, while horror, in contrast, tends to allow for supernatural frameworks. See, for example, the discussion in Langford (2005), especially pp. 158–166 and pp. 182–188.
5. While fungi are technically not part of the plant kingdom, they are certainly linked with plants in common understandings (as another kind of “vegetable”—likewise not sentient, not animal), as well as in the botanical discourses of popular cinema.
6. Fungi are more positively portrayed in a handful of other genre films—as a valuable food source in, for example, *The Mole People* (1956) and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1959).

7. Although heterosexual drives dominate within the film's textual system, there is a distinct homosexual dimension in its thematics. Indeed, the basic narrative scenario suggests the protagonist's pursuit of a queer desire that replaces his former relationship with a female lover and that exceeds what is acceptable in British mores and laws, and the film reaches its climax in his hand-to-hand grappling with his bare-chested Amazonian male assistant (who has facilitated his queer arboreal encounters throughout the film).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Biskind, P. (1983). *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Capino, J. B. (2010). *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. (1983). *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hendershot, C. (1999). *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Jancovich, M. (1996). *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Langford, B. (2005). *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- LaValley, A. (1989). *Invasion of the Body Snatchers: Politics, Psychology, Sociology*. In A. LaValley (Ed.), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Rutgers Films in Print. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- May, E. T. (1988). *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rogin, M. (1987). *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Samuels, S. (1979). The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In J. E. O'Connor & M. A. Jackson (Eds.), *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*. New York: Fredrick Ungar.
- Sobchack, V. (1987). *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (2nd ed.). New York: Frederick Ungar.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Brides of Blood*. (1968). Film. Directed by Gerardo de Leon and Eddie Romero. [DVD] USA-Philippines: Hemisphere Pictures.
- Die Monster Die!* (1965). Film. Directed by Daniel Haller. [DVD] UK-USA: AIP.
- Dr. Terror's House of Horrors*. (1965). Film. Directed by Freddie Francis. [DVD] UK: Regal Films.

- Forbidden Planet*. (1956). Film. Directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox. [DVD] USA: MGM.
- From Hell It Came*. (1957). Film. Directed by Dan Milner. [DVD] USA: Allied Artists.
- Invasion from Mars*. (1953). Film. Directed by William Cameron Menzies. [DVD] USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. (1956). Film. Directed by Don Siegel. [DVD] USA: Allied Artists.
- Invasion of the Saucer Men*. (1957). Film. Directed by Edward L. Cahn. [DVD] USA: AIP.
- It Came from Outer Space*. (1953). Film. Directed by Jack Arnold. [DVD] USA: Universal Pictures.
- It Conquered the World*. (1956). Film. Directed by Roger Corman. [DVD] USA: AIP.
- Journey to the Center of the Earth*. (1959). Film. Directed by Henry Levin. [DVD] USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Matango*. (1963). Film. Directed by Ishirô Honda. [DVD] Japan: Toho Company.
- Mutiny in Outer Space*. (1965). Film. Directed by Hugo Grimaldi. [DVD] USA: Woolner Brothers Pictures.
- Rocketship X-M*. (1950). Film. Directed by Kurt Neumann. [DVD] USA: Lippert Pictures.
- Space Master X-7*. (1958). Film. Directed by Edward Bernds. [DVD] USA: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Tarantula*. (1955). Film. Directed by Jack Arnold. [DVD] US: Universal Pictures.
- The Amazing Colossal Man*. (1957). Film. Directed by Bert I. Gordon. [DVD] USA: AIP.
- The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. (1953). Film. Directed by Eugène Lourié. [DVD] USA: Warner Bros.
- The Day of the Triffids*. (1962). Film. Directed by Steve Sekely. [DVD] UK: J. Arthur Rank.
- The Killer That Stalked New York*. (1950). Film. Directed by Earl McEvoy. [DVD] USA: Columbia Pictures.
- The Land Unknown*. (1957). Film. Directed by Virgil Vogel. [DVD] USA: Universal Pictures.
- The Little Shop of Horrors*. (1960). Film. Directed by Roger Corman. [DVD] USA: The Filmgroup.
- The Mole People*. (1956). Film. Directed by Virgil Vogel. [DVD] USA: Universal Pictures.
- The Monolith Monsters*. (1957). Film. Directed by John Sherwood. [DVD] USA: Universal Pictures.
- The Navy vs. the Night Monsters*. (1966). Film. Directed by Michael A. Hoey. [DVD] USA: Realart Pictures.

The Thing from Another World. (1951). Film. Directed by Christian Nyby. [DVD] USA: RKO Radio Pictures.

The Unknown Terror. (1957). Film. Directed by Charles Marquis Warren. [DVD] USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

Them! (1954). Film. Directed by Gordon Douglas. [DVD] USA: Warner Bros.

Voodoo Island. (1957). Film. Directed by Reginald LeBorg. [DVD] USA: United Artists.

Womaneater. (1958). Film. Directed by Charles Saunders. [DVD] UK: Eros Films.