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DARK MATTER

An Ecopsychological Approach to the Ontology of Plant Expression in Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* and Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*

ABSTRACT

Taking up Michael Marder's "object of psychoanalysis, wherein we might detect a vegetal approach to the psyche,"² and Timothy Morton's dark ecology, which traces the twisted loops of agrilogistics, this article proposes an ecopsychological approach to the expression of plant soul as the very constitution of human subjectivity. Examining Richard Linklater's adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*, which demonstrates the pretty blue Mors ontologica's insidious plant agency

to cleave the somatic human spirit, and Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*, wherein cinematic plant-thinking demands temporal distortions that render the human uncanny, this article positions the plant as the primary mover, the animating force and manifestation of human desire and its expression.

KEY WORDS: plant studies, film studies, ecopsychology, agrilogistics, Charlie Kaufman, Philip K. Dick

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² Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 44.

[I]f we are to ‘think the plants,’ we must not shy away from darkness
and obscurity, even as we let them appear in their own light,
the one emanating from their own kind of being.

—Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking*

There’s a monster in the dark mirror and you are a cone in one of its eyes.
When you are sufficiently creeped out by the human species you see something even
bigger than the Anthropocene looming in the background, hiding in plain sight. . . .
It is the machine *that is agriculture as such*, a machine that predates Industrial Age
machinery. Before the web of fate began to be woven on a power loom,
machinery was already whirring away.

—Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology*

These are dark days, indeed. Amidst the Sixth Mass Extinction event, with one million species, ours perhaps among them, presently at risk of irreversible annihilation³ and half of the Earth’s wildlife having been eradicated in the past 40 years;⁴ during the rapid disintegration of polar ice-caps, with projections of an iceless Arctic by mid-century;⁵ when one quarter of all once-arable land is already degraded;⁶ and global temperatures and ocean levels continue to rise,⁷ so too does the darkness, as our collective hopes are swept away. While the number of displaced climate refugees is forecast to reach more than 143 million by 2050⁸ unless the world takes significant and immediate action to curtail anthropogenic warming to within 2 degrees Celsius of the pre-industrial average—an already overly-optimistic target that the planet, on its current course, is due to overshoot in excess of 1 degree by mid-century—it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a bright vision of our collective future in this, perhaps our darkest hour.

³ “Media Release: Nature’s Dangerous Decline ‘Unprecedented,’ Species Extinction Rates ‘Accelerating,’” *IPBES: Science and Policy for People and Nature*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment>.

⁴ Damian Carrington, “Earth Has Lost Half of Its Wildlife in the Past 40 Years, says WWF,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf/print>, quoted in Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 30.

⁵ “The Effects of Climate Change,” *NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://climate.nasa.gov/effects>.

⁶ “World food security increasingly at risk due to ‘unprecedented’ climate change impact, new UN report warns,” *UN News*, August 8, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1043921>.

⁷ “Sea Level,” *NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://climate.nasa.gov/sea-level/>.

⁸ Kanta Kumari Rigaud et al., “Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration,” *World Bank Group: Open Knowledge Repository*, March 19, 2018, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29461>.

And, yet, it is not by averting our collective gaze from this darkness, its monsters and its horror, but by entering into it with our full and collective being, that we might discover there the source of our blindness, an over-brimming effulgence, and begin to correct this fated course, learning to “stay with the trouble,” as Donna Haraway encourages,⁹ by entering into companionate relationships with our plant and animal kin, at last beginning to see such *things* in their own light.

This study, however, takes as its subject matter the exploration of but an edge of this darkness, albeit one crucial to an understanding of the source of the impairment of human judgment in an age of ecological catastrophe: *plant blindness*—the term devised by biologists James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler to describe

the inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment—leading to: (a) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs; (b) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the lifeforms that belong to the Plant Kingdom; and (c) the misguided, anthropocentric rankings of plants as inferior to animals, leading to the erroneous conclusion that they are unworthy of human consideration.¹⁰

With such blindness—the cognitive bias that relegates the very vegetal foundation of our biosphere to little more than the “backdrop of our [human] lives”¹¹—in mind, “Dark Matter” accepts the invitations of formative plant-thinkers Michael Marder and Timothy Morton, along with the literary and cinematic aspirations of Charlie Kaufman, and Philip K. Dick and Richard Linklater, that we enter into the darkness—whether that of the cool shade of Plato’s *platanos*,¹² the bittersweet cocoa richness of a *Dark Ecology*,¹³ the murky self-image reflected in the holo-scanner, or the pregnant dim of the empty movie theatre—that we might see the brightness there: not, however, the pale, flickering, spent neon of bright-green solutions, their nauseating lens-flare and dusty red planets, but the darkening of this green earth, a thin edge of life whet by the leaf, the eye, and the imagination.

That speaking about plants is difficult goes without saying: it has gone without saying in the Western philosophical tradition, testifies Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking* (2013), to such an extent that much of what has been the focus of Continental thinking on plants can be summarized and augmented in a small but excellent

⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, “Preventing Plant Blindness,” *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82-86. Michael Marder, in *Plant-Thinking* (2013), prefers the concept of the *inconspicuousness* of plants to describe this vegetal invisibility, suggesting such camouflage as a property proper to plants by emphasizing their rich subterranean activity, rather than a human deficiency or oversight.

¹¹ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 3-4.

¹² Michael Marder, “The Philosopher’s Plant 1.0: Plato’s Plane Tree,” *Project Syndicate*, November 26, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/blog/plato-s-plane-tree>.

¹³ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

historical narrative, one that acknowledges the foundation of plants to human thought and understanding while underscoring their reduction to, what poet and critic Don McKay would denounce as, mere *materiel*: “wilderness . . . relieved of its anonymity, its autonomy, and made ours”¹⁴—evacuated of its darkness.

Making a film about plants, one that “let[s] them appear in their own light[,]”¹⁵ is, one can grasp, ever so much more difficult. Charlie Kaufman’s meta-theatrical *Adaptation* (2002), a self-reflexively failed cinematic adaptation of Susan Orlean’s non-fiction novel *The Orchid Thief* (1998)—is as much, and more interestingly, a film about an author’s struggles to produce such an adaptation as it is an attempt to make a film “about flowers. No one’s ever done a movie about flowers before”¹⁶—elucidates the great difficulty of approaching an accurate representation of plants in film. In the comically-climactic dialogue between screenwriter-character Charlie Kaufman, played by Nicholas Cage, and film scholar Robert McKee, played by Brian Cox, during one of McKee’s notorious Story Seminars, character-Kaufman describes this “movie about flowers” in-the-making as “a story where nothing much happens, where people don’t change, they don’t have any epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated and nothing is resolved. More *a reflection of the real world*,”¹⁷ to which McKee gives a blustering retort condemning Kaufman’s aesthetic vision and redefining *the world* for the screenwriter as an exaggeratedly romantic place, defined by intense conflict and eventual resolution. Ultimately, it is McKee’s campy, clichéd vision that the screenwriter-character produces: a steamy, fraught, drug-addled romance between investigative journalist Susan Orlean, played by Meryl Streep, and orchid-poacher John Laroche, played by Chris Cooper, rife with gunplay, car crashes, and a man-eating alligator. There is, however—at the periphery of the intermingling metadiegetic storyworlds of *Adaptation* and despite the film’s metatheatrical concession of the near-impossibility of establishing a cinematography of plant life—*another* film: the one “about flowers,” the “reflection of the real world:” a real, posthuman world, in which “nothing much happens.”¹⁸ *Adaptation*’s nod, the *clind’oeil* to Kaufman’s *bona fide* expression of plant life, and the corrective lens to McKee’s romantic, anthropocentric stylization of film and to plant blindness itself, consists of the film’s final shot, during which audiences follow character-Kaufman driving out of a parking garage and down a busy Hollywood Boulevard, while a planter of daisies, *Osteospermum* of the variety Amelia, sharing the name of the filmmaker-character’s beloved, rises into view in an accelerating time-lapse sequence that distills seven days and nights into the span of one minute. Traffic flits past while the flowers open and close with the rise and set of the sun, perhaps in applause, beginning as a slow clap and erupting into ovation, to the ecstatic chorus of The Turtles’ “Happy Together.”

¹⁴ Don McKay, “The Appropriate Gesture,” in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, ed. Brian Bartlett (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 2006), 175.

¹⁵ Marder, *Thinking*, 30.

¹⁶ *Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2002), DVD.

¹⁷ *Adaptation* (emphasis added).

¹⁸ *Adaptation*.

Incidentally, this closing scene of the final cut of *Adaptation* replaces the following, darkened scene, scripted in the second draft of Kaufman's screenplay, but lost to the cutting-room floor:

EXT. SPACE – NIGHT

SUBTITLE: HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA, FIVE BILLION AND FORTY YEARS LATER

An enormous chunk of rock dimly lit by faraway stars, floats by. Silence.

FADE TO BLACK.¹⁹

That “a movie about flowers” should forego conventional narratological timescapes, however playfully and disruptively, its setting spanning the course of some nine billion and eighty years on either side of the filmmaker's midlife crisis, reducing the significance of individuated human existence to something fragile and beautiful, fleeting and brilliant, broken and yet diminutively resilient, seems appropriate, if not necessary, to a cinematic study of the human entanglement with plant life: detailing “a certain pace and rhythm of movement, which we customarily disregard, since it is too subtle for our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses to register in an everyday setting, and with which the tempo of our own lives is usually out of sync.”²⁰ As does the soundtrack of “Happy Together,” recalling the moment of Charlie-character's brother's passing, such aesthetic distillations, distortions, and dilations of time, and the green noise they produce in us, summon the reminder of the imminence of death, a *memento mori* for the species as much as for the individual, belonging as much to Godfrey Reggio and Philip Glass as to Charlie Kaufman and the Turtles.

Such strange temporal loops, *weirdly weird*, as Timothy Morton might call them, shift the human focus away from the relative trifles of the mythoi of our individuated lives, the plant taking center stage while the human is then relegated to the backdrop of *their* lives: lives that, both collectively and individually, precede and succeed us. There is, however, something disingenuous to Kaufman's claim that “[n]o one's ever done a movie about flowers before;”²¹ films about plants, or wherein plants figure prominently, proliferate on the big screen. Kaufman's plant vision, however, distinguishes itself from most other popular plant films as an attempt to reproduce the plant *qua* plant in his cinematic representation: the staging of Amelias set against the failed, romanticized adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* to which the film's title refers.

If the reminder of one's own imminent demise—the indelible truth, granted us by reflection on vegetal life, that, one way or another, we become plant food—is the source of some fear and discomfort, it is no great wonder, then, that so many

¹⁹ Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman, *Adaptation*, Indieground Films, September 24, 1999, 117, <https://indiegroundfilms.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/adaptation-sept24-99-2nd.pdf>.

²⁰ Marder, *Thinking*, 21.

²¹ *Adaptation*.

contemporary films that take the vegetal as their subject participate in the genre of horror: so many so that scholars Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga have identified an entire subgenre of film, *plant horror*, in their edited collection of the same name,²² as the predominant mode of cinematic plant-thinking.

When thinking through plants, one begins to feel not quite one's self. In fact, so often, one begins to feel beside one's self. That *Adaptation*, which prides itself on its inclusion of a cast of characters who, with one exception, are non-fictional, anomalously conjures from thin air a double—Charlie's fictional twin, Donald Kaufman²³—serves a greater function in the film than simply a makeshift device to avoid the tacky convention of voiceover. Such uncanny doubling is a *topos*, however enigmatic, properly belonging to plant cinema.

A cursory survey of popular plant cinema recalls a number of films that include a likewise uncanny doubling of their characters: *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby 1951),²⁴ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956; Philip Kaufman 1978),²⁵ and *Annihilation* (Garland 2018) all spring immediately to mind. And, were one to extend this criteria to include plant films that, although not properly twinning or cloning their characters, nevertheless produce the same uncanny effect of doubling, producing people not quite themselves, through the strategy of the evacuation of individual human autonomy by plant *inspiratio*—*The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973),²⁶ *The Children of the Corn* (Kiersch 1989),²⁷ *The Happening* (Shyamalan 2008),²⁸ *Midsommar* (Aster 2019), *In the Tall Grass* (Natali 2019), and *Little Joe* (Hausner 2019)—the list itself grows and a picture of plant-thinking through film, not unlike the animated corpse brandished about by these plant horrors, begins to emerge.

Although the items listed here are among some of the most obvious and sensationalistic spectacles of the production of the *doppelgänger* in plant film—an aggrandizement of the knee-jerk recoil at the plant-thought that “the grave covered by a flowerbed is always already opened, exceeding the domain of the earth and blurring the boundaries between life and death”²⁹ so that these plant horrors might

²² Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, ed. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²³ Comically granted a co-writing credit to the film, Donald is identical to Charlie in every regard but two: lacking neuroses but unsuccessful at screenwriting.

²⁴ Randy Laist, “Sartre and the Roots of Plant Horror,” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 170. Laist identifies *the thing* as a plant-thing only in Charles Lederer's film adaptation, and not in J. W. Campbell's original novella, *Who Goes There?*

²⁵ Laist, 172-73.

²⁶ Angela Tenga, “Seeds of Horror: Sacrifice and Supremacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wicker Man*, and *Children of the Corn*,” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 55-72.

²⁷ Tenga, “Seeds,” in *Plant Horror*, 55-72.

²⁸ Jericho Williams, “An Inscrutable Malice: The Silencing of Humanity in *The Ruins* and *The Happening*,” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 227-41.

²⁹ Marder, *Thinking*, 67.

re-encrypt such a dangerous idea—it is yet another film, Richard Linklater’s film adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* (2006; 1977), and the representation of the plant it illuminates, *Mors ontologica*—“such lovely little blue flowers”³⁰—that perhaps best approaches the type of plant-realism that Kaufman envisions. That Kaufman drafted his own screenplay adaptation (1997) of *A Scanner Darkly* (1977) attests to these writers’ shared plant vision.

While the provisional terms *doubling* and *twinning*, even *splitting*, might serve to describe this phenomenon, one’s estrangement from one’s self emerging in film thinking through plants, it accounts only for one side of this simulative equation. *To cleave*, with its double meaning—both to rend asunder³¹ and to bind;³² to graft and to clone—best expresses this power of plants, both to put us together, in their nutritive capacity, and to tear us apart, in their own search for the same. It is this selfsame plant power, *to cleave*, that is the source of such horror in plant cinema, making monsters of us all: the double reminds spectators not only that we are built and broken by plants, in a *material* sense, but of the abject reality that the vegetal comprises the very fabric of our *psychic* being—of the *non ego sum*, Morton’s *strange stranger*.

Michael Marder reminds us that Freud’s contribution, in the context of plant-thinking, to the destruction of metaphysics is to matte the sheen off an otherwise immaculate, immaterial, indelible, and especially anthropocentric soul:

The object of *psycho*-analysis, wherein we might detect a vegetal approach to the psyche, is no longer ‘a soul of another genus’ but an extended psychic thing entwined with the body itself—a somatic, and thus divisible, soul akin to that of a plant. Post-meta-physical thought, such as that of psychoanalysis, no longer believes in the fiction of the indivisible and immortal soul ‘of another genus.’ Psychic divisibility becomes the destiny of humanity that, perhaps without knowing it, sets for itself an infinite task: that of recovering its vegetal heritage.³³

Such a somatic soul, newly cleaved to the body and itself cloven, materializes as the prominent subject matter of Linklater’s *A Scanner Darkly*. This plant-film interrogates, focalized through the lens of a cinematic object-oriented ontology³⁴ of its plant being, the extent to which the human being, its identity, its consciousness, its

³⁰ *A Scanner Darkly*, directed by Richard Linklater (Burbank: Warner Independent Pictures, 2006).

³¹ *OED Online*, 3rd ed (2010), s.v. “cleave.”

³² *OED Online*, 3rd ed (2010), s.v. “cleave.”

³³ Marder, *Thinking*, 44.

³⁴ Timothy Morton describes the philosophical discipline: “Object-oriented ontology holds that things exist in a profoundly ‘withdrawn’ way: they cannot be splayed open and totally grasped by anything whatsoever, including themselves. . . . This means that the way things affect one another (causality) cannot be direct (mechanical), but rather indirect or vicarious: causality is aesthetic. . . . In a way that profoundly differs from the demystification most popular in humanistic accounts of culture, politics, and philosophy (and so on), OOO believes that reality is *mysterious* and *magical*, because beings withdraw and because beings influence each other aesthetically, which is to say at a distance.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 16-17.

desires and behaviours, belongs to itself, and how much to ulterior alterities.

A Scanner Darkly, by tracing the complex agrilogistical loops³⁵—the self-replicating algorithm of agriculture *for its own sake*³⁶—of its respective plant matter, reveals a plant agency that corrects for the limitations of the Freudian *psyche* due to the traditional misconception of an immaterial soul’s confinement within the body—the analogy of “digestive assimilation”³⁷ that reduces consciousness to a mere “sublimated stomach”³⁸—by positing an ecopsychological subjectivity belonging paratactically to plant and animal actors in equal measure. To discover the limitation of such a conception of the spirit encrypted in a meat-locker, one need only peer at the seam at the edge of Freud’s darkness, the *Id* and its cleavage to the corpse:

It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality . . . and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations. . . . It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle.³⁹

Such a schismatic zoocentric fiction—the relation between the *Id* and the *ego*, the thing and its self, described by Freud elsewhere as the subject-object relation between a horse and its rider⁴⁰—dependent upon infinitesimally recessive darkness before resting on an absolute yet indistinct *instinct* that demarcates the bottom of the wellspring of human experience, the body, fails precisely because it imagines life as a closed system. The very *lack* on which such a system resides, in light of an ecopsychological approach to subjectivity, is a lack of imagination: the segregation from *the real* that would destroy *I*, the body and the story *I* tells about itself uprooted from *the world* that sustains it, the human cleft from the *humus*. Those versed in plant-thinking already understand that the “cauldron full of seething excitations” is a plant cauldron and it already runneth over. One should be critical of first principles, and plant-thinker Michael Pollan, in *The Botany of Desire* (2001), already acknowledges

³⁵ Morton describes the “twelve-thousand-year machination [of agriculture as] *agrilogistics*. The term names a specific logistics of agriculture that arose in the Fertile Crescent and that is still plowing ahead. Logistics, because it is a technical, planned, and perfectly logical approach to built space. Logistics, because it proceeds without stepping back and rethinking the logic. A viral logistics, eventually requiring steam engines and industry to feed its proliferation” (Morton, 41). He identifies this addictive cycle as an “algorithm consist[ing] of numerous subroutines: eliminate contradiction and anomaly, establish boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, maximize existence over and above any quality of existing.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 46.

³⁶ Morton, 44-45.

³⁷ Marder, *Thinking*, 171.

³⁸ Marder, *Thinking*, 171.

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), 73.

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, volume XIX (1923-1926): The Ego and the Id and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 19.

that desire is a properly botanical property, the production of such seething excitations, both in us and others, mutually-occurring in an ongoing evolutionary negotiation that we might call heirlooming, gardening; the *entanglement* that Charles Darwin calls “curious contrivances”⁴¹ and Donna Haraway, borrowing from microbiologist Lynn Margulis, “the long-lasting intimacy of strangers”⁴²—*sympoiesis*.⁴³ Freud’s psychoanalytical model, although cleaving the spirit to resemble something more *akin* to plant-soul, neglects, because of its imagined containment, to recognize that the body too extends, and so, therefore, the recesses of the *Id* and the source of desire into this, the material world. The dark wellspring of desire belongs not only to the body, but is co-constitutive, hybridized, forms strange loops with the biotic environment, with the *instincts* arising as much from their plant origins as from some sub-internal murky depth of spirit.

Linklater’s plant film conveys this ecopsychological subject through its tracing of strange agrilogistical loops. For *A Scanner Darkly*, this narrative loop is only revealed at the novel’s twist:⁴⁴ when the “burned-out poisoned husk,”⁴⁵ Bruce, a body cleft of its spirit—whom Timothy Morton identifies as an example of Giorgio Agamben’s “[b]lare life harvesting ontological death, just executing an algorithm without a head”⁴⁶—awakens, however briefly, from the anthropocentric dream, temporarily cured of his plant blindness, to allow audiences to *see* the evasive species responsible for the production of “the drug of meta:”⁴⁷ *Mors ontologica* or “Death of the spirit. The identity. The essential nature,”⁴⁸ represented in Linklater’s adaptation by the (misspelled) *Clerodendrum ugandense*, the pretty little Blue Butterfly Bush.

It is at this moment in the narrative, the film’s reveal, that audiences comprehend the full scope of Dick’s paranoid, conspiratorial storyworld and the beginning and end of the strange, twisted loop that comprises the film’s agrilogistic program. Plant agency spiraling out from and back into *Mors ontologica*, the plant through its botanical desire produces users of the Slow Death, who are then convicted for their seething excitations by the SDA, or Slow Death Agency, which then recruits the Death-heads as informants, or “plants.”⁴⁹ The SDA’s “plants” then sell Substance D, while surveilling themselves and their friends for the Agency. Because of the addictive property of the drug and the demands of their occupations as agents, these

⁴¹ Jim Endersby, *Orchid: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 91.

⁴² Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 60.

⁴³ Haraway, 33. Borrowing from M. Beth Dempster, Haraway defines this term as “collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change.”

⁴⁴ Incidentally, Linklater reveals the *Mors ontologica* not only at the film’s conclusion, but also at its introduction, depending on audiences’ own amnesia to re-reveal the mysterious origins of the Slow Death at the film’s conclusion (*Scanner*).

⁴⁵ Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (Boston: Mariner Editions, 2011), 65.

⁴⁶ Morton, 54.

⁴⁷ Morton, 55.

⁴⁸ Dick, 264.

⁴⁹ Dick, 58.

meta-users eventually suffer paranoia and collapse, becoming “vegetables,”⁵⁰ and are then admitted to the New-Path rehabilitation facility, which assigns the in-patients to work-farms, where they unwittingly produce *Mors ontologica*. And so the *weird* agrilogistic loop, the viral algorithm of the addiction to agriculture (and so to oil, exclaims Michael Pollan, in *You Are What You Eat*), reproduces its programming. Such a twist in the ironic loop that is the plotline of *A Scanner Darkly*, in “this flowers-all-the-way-down reading,”⁵¹ illustrates the foundational role of plants not only to the formation of human social structures, but also their counterstructures, and the peoplings that comprise the two. Emerging from the pretty blue flower is both the drug culture *and* the repressive state apparatus, as well as the harm-reduction protocols and dissonant ideological apparatuses that mediate the two—each as blind to the operations of one another as are the three characters, Bob-Fred-Bruce, to his selves.

Most interesting, perhaps, in the claustrophobic (an impulse contrary to encryption) purview of *A Scanner Darkly*'s glimpse into the agrilogistic program is its potential for a reading wherein the Agency is the *only* distributor of Substance D and *all* consumers become agents before eventually yielding to the direction of the New-Path: three branches of the same trunk. Under such plant tyranny, in which subjects are punished for their subjugation to their sovereign, a damning picture of the ecopsychological subject emerges: the automaton or zombie.⁵² One risks reciting, as does Dick's novel and its film adaptation, in an understanding of desire arising *strictly* from the outside of the body, a fatalistic naturalism, wherein the human, along with everything else, is reduced to *mere* matter: the somnambulant simulacra of a lifeform rather than an active agent itself. While such are the subjects under the oppression of the agrilogistic algorithm—“people who can't tell whether or not they are people working on objects they can't tell are objects”⁵³—which *A Scanner Darkly* thrice conveys within the character of Bob-Fred-Bruce, it is the hopelessness of such a vision, incapable of imagining alternatives to such a bleak agrilogistic nightmare, that defines the insidious plant-horror of *A Scanner Darkly*.

Although one might mistake a dim flicker of hope in the darkened screen of the omniscient scanner—that the hybrid human plant-animal might exercise free will, breaking the chains of its vegetal slavery to intervene in and overthrow the agrilogistic short-circuit of industrial monoculture (or, technically, biculture, but

⁵⁰ Dick, 283.

⁵¹ David M. J. Carruthers, “*Mors ontologica*: Death of the Spirit,” in *becoming*-Botanical, ed. Josh Armstrong and Alexandra Lakind (Glasgow: Objet-a Creative Studio, 2019), 61.

⁵² Interestingly, cultural anthropologist and environmental activist Wade Davis, in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), identifies the popular topos of the zombie as a plant *thing*, originating in the Haitian *voudoun* tradition and its experiential knowledge of the psychotropic effects of the nightshade *Datura*. For further reading on the ontological dilemma produced between opposing phenomenological experiences of the effects of *Datura* in various historical reports, see David M. J. Carruthers, “Lines of Flight of the Deadly Nightshade: an Enquiry into the Properties of the Magical Plant, Its Literature and History,” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48, no. 2 (June 2015): 119-32.

⁵³ Morton, 56.

nevertheless a bad polyculture that is only a double-vision of unimaginative monoculture)—the image of Bruce smuggling a specimen of *Mors ontologica* into his boot with the intent of delivering it to his ‘friends’ at the Agency, thereby revealing New-Path’s illicit activity, suggests not a triumphant override of plant agency nor an intersubjectivity wherein plant and human soul are mutually-beneficial holobionts, but the exchange of one parasitical program for another: that of New Path for that of the Agency.

Such hopelessness arises at the realization that there is virtually no difference between the two crops: “Fields [of *Mors ontologica*] within the taller rows of corn.”⁵⁴ That New-Path’s Executive Director, Donald, vanishes entire fields of the little blue flower, “in an act of vegetal prestidigitation”⁵⁵ that reinstates Bruce’s plant blindness, suggests the organic origins of Substance D as a stand-in: so near to the corn as to cleave the two, the death of the spirit analogy demarcating the shadowy underbelly of industrial agriculture and the global addiction thereto. In such a reading, despite having intercepted the agrilogistic loop, placing a “plant” among the New-Path’s industrial farms, the Agency runs itself up against a paradox: although their ostensible aim is the eradication of *Mors ontologica* and the removal of Substance D from an increasingly drug-addicted America, doing so would result in the very dissolution of the Agency itself. The SDA is, like its agents, addicted to agriculture, to Substance D: on an impossible suicide mission, the deferral of which, trading quality of life for mere existence,⁵⁶ perpetuates the very system it is designed to dismantle.

Here, in the shadow of the corn and the strange loop of Philip K. Dick’s metafictional plant-world, *plant blindness* begins to take on a more nuanced significance. That is, it is the very nearness of the subject matter—that the plant resides both *over there*, anonymous within an inaccessible *wilderness*,⁵⁷ and *in here*, comprising the very fabric of human being, its body and the psyche to which it is bound—that renders it invisible to the naked eye. We are blinded *to* plants, because we are blinded *by* them; the human fails to see plants, because it uses them to *see*. Clarifying this point, Marder describes the plant, not dissimilar to Lacan’s “purloined letter” of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story of that title, as hidden in plain sight:

What is hidden and distant from us is the most obvious, that which is taken for granted and unnoticed because of its intimate familiarity; it is being itself. Instead of concealing a deeply buried secret, the encryption of vegetal life refers to this life’s unquestioned obviousness, to the soul of plants that is so close to us that it to a large extent and unbeknownst to us constitutes human beings.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Dick, 284.

⁵⁵ Carruthers, “Spirit,” 61.

⁵⁶ Morton calls this trade-off of quality of life for quantity of life the third axiom of agrilogistics: “(3) Existing is always better than any quality of existing.” The other two are “(1) The Law of Noncontradiction is inviolable [and] (2) Existing means being constantly present.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*; 47.

⁵⁷ Morton, 56.

⁵⁸ Marder, *Thinking*; 32.

In a scene to which audiences of Linklater's adaptation of *A Scanner Darkly* are blind, but to which readers of Dick's novel are privy, set after Bruce's admittance to the New-Path facility, the vegetative character overhears other in-patients' pseudo-philosophical speculations on the nature of death:

If you could see out from inside a dead person you could still see, but you couldn't operate the eye muscles, so you couldn't focus. You couldn't turn your head or your eyeballs. All you could do would be wait until some object passed by. You'd be frozen. Just wait and wait. It'd be a terrible scene. . . . You could see somebody when they passed by directly in front of you, and only then. Or whichever way you were looking, no other. If a leaf or something floated over your eye, that would be it, forever. Only the leaf. Nothing more; you couldn't turn.⁵⁹

Such an image of plant blindness demonstrates its very nature: the leaf so close to the eye that its own light appears as darkness. Nearer, still, than demonstrated in this passage, the leaf perhaps better constitutes the very musculature of the eye itself: the oculus rift or *blind spot* that forms the foundation of the animal sense of sight. For Cary Wolfe, in *What is Posthumanism?*, this *blind spot* is the feature definitive of a dynamic system, of life:

That relation [between the system/environment] is not 'an ontological pretention of an *is*' but a *functional* distinction, a temporally dynamic, recursive loop of systemic code and environmental complexity that is itself infected by the virus of paradoxical self-reference, a 'thetic *in*' . . . that will always constitute a 'blind spot' and generate an 'outside' for its own (or any) observation.⁶⁰

Be it the 'computer virus' of agrilogistics, mathematical formulae, human sight and insight, consciousness, language, bacterium, rainforests, plants, corpses, corporations, ideology, and the rest, blindness is the constitutive feature, the colour and the texture, of life as one can know it: "reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it."⁶¹

Such an image of the human seen through the film of the leaf over the eye, here as throughout *A Scanner Darkly*, demonstrates an uncanny rendering of the human animal stripped of its animating impetus, the anthropocentric soul. By thinking through plants, the human, as seen through *A Scanner Darkly*, begins to resemble its plant symbiont, in its representation as the living-dead, occupying the thin green edge between dead matter and animated life: the posthuman human is, paradoxically, a posthumous one. The plant, lacking interiority and embodying a material soul, however, does not lack *animation*, the Classical requisite of *anima*, but is, in fact, in this

⁵⁹ Dick, 251-52.

⁶⁰ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xix.

⁶¹ Niklas Luhmann in Wolfe, xix.

cinematic plant-fiction, the animator itself. Although plants appear in the brief flicker of the human eye to lack the quality of *mobility* that animals enjoy, they do, however, *move*, albeit rooted in place, plants, in the transitive sense of the verb, *move* us.⁶²

And so, also, do we move plants through agricultural practice and ‘artificial’ selection, pollution and environmental degradation. The plant and the human embrace each other—seducing us with promises of sustenance, flavour, beauty, and altered states,⁶³ for which we offer the advantage of ongoing succession through propagation at unprecedented scale—engaged in the terrestrial *chorea* of “the long-lasting intimacy of strangers”⁶⁴ resulting in Darwin’s *curious contrivances*.⁶⁵

Using Susan Orlean’s (and Darwin’s) observation on the curious contrivance of the orchid’s co-evolutionary complexity, film critic Lisa R. Sternlieb analyzes Kaufman’s *Adaptation* through the paradigm of the plant’s ability to lie: the orchid’s masquerading as lover or foe to undiscerning insects who are then deceived into pseudo-copulation or pseudo-antagonism resulting in the inadvertent propagation of the species. Summoning Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *becomings*,⁶⁶ Sternlieb recounts the abundance of symmetrical scenes and relationships in the film, interpreting these doublings as analogous to the co-evolutionary *sympoiesis* of the orchid and its pollinator insect. Addressing the strange cleaving that produces identical twins Charlie and Donald, she asks, “Do we, like pollinating insects, ‘mistake’ Donald and Charlie ‘for kin?’”⁶⁷ The brothers, as distinct from one another, even opposites of character, as Kaufman’s film adaptation is to Orlean’s novel, become, in their ongoing engagement, something new: a cleaving that is, paradoxically, both parasitic *and* symbiotic, exploitative and yet weirdly mutually beneficial, and as much a schism of the spirit of the protagonist as it is the division of the shared material embryo, blurring all easythink boundaries between the *one* and the *other*, as much as Kaufman’s meta-cinema does between fact and fiction. Coincidentally, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, addressing the same uneasiness arising at literature’s adaptation into film that motivates Kaufman’s own meta-theatre, cites Virginia Woolf’s 1926 criticism of “the fledgling art of cinema . . . [as] a ‘parasite’ and literature its ‘prey’ and ‘victim’”⁶⁸—perhaps identifying, in light of the investigation of these two plant films, that film is the medium most appropriate to the contemplation of plants and their relationship to others.

It is through their deep reflection into plant life, or the *lives* of plants, that these

⁶² Carruthers, “Flight,” 120.

⁶³ Michael Pollan, in *The Botany of Desire*, identifies these four provisions as the mechanisms by which plants produce desire in the human species, using the examples of the potato, the apple, the tulip, and cannabis, respectively.

⁶⁴ Biologist Lynn Margulis quoted in Haraway, *Trouble*, 60.

⁶⁵ Jim Endersby, *Orchid: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 91.

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 1987).

⁶⁷ Lisa R. Sternlieb, “‘Happy Together’: The Insect and the Orchid in Kaufman and Jonze’s *Adaptation*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2018).

⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf cited in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

films, and other posthumanist plant films like them, dismember the supposed primacy of an anthropocentric soul, making messy work of the entanglement not only of the material, but also the psychological lives constellated between plant and human actors. The emergence of such plant films written and produced around the turn of the millennium marks a popular transition in Western thought toward a type of ecological thinking that Morton calls *ecognosis*.⁶⁹

Whereas most of the 20th century might be loosely defined by its fascination with *genetics*, its preoccupation with heredity, inherence and inheritance, individuated speciation, ambitions of progress and evolution, the privileging of personal autonomy, the favouring of particular genius, the triumph of the individual will, a common misunderstanding of Darwin's *fitness* as *prescriptive* and the genome mistaken as immutable, and a futile aim to police the non-extant borders between nature and culture;⁷⁰ the 21st century defines itself by *epigenetics*, with a popular appeal to the fluid and recursive dynamics between one's self and her environment, the recognition of a mutualism between lifeforms, material bodies that interpenetrate one another,⁷¹ exchanging organic and inorganic information, and a privileging of mixing, difference, and diversity, whether social, biological, ecological, aesthetic, or otherwise.

It is within this novel tradition that these two adaptations, Linklater's and Kaufman's, operate, demonstrating to popular audiences a posthuman plant-thinking wherein the boundaries surrounding plant and human animals are blurred by an intermingling of agencies that contests anthropocentric primacy, calling into question the existence of an immaterial soul, or at least its locus—belonging both within and without the human animal, becoming an ongoing negotiation of desire without confinement to a particular species, let alone to individual actors. Such insight, however, does not, as a strict materialist in favour of the one-sided plant-soul might suggest, grant absolution to the human for its rapacious pursuit of survival (or self-destruction) under the imminent threat of oncoming night, but instead gives way to an ethics that acknowledges the existence of more-than-human 'others,' promoting, as Morton suggests, *quality* of existing over any *quantity* of existing, thereby leaning toward the correction of our current course, set in motion by the whirring machinery of agrilogistics, by correcting our vision and learning to see plants in their own light. ▣

⁶⁹ "What thinks dark ecology? *Ecognosis*, a riddle. *Ecognosis* is like knowing, but more like letting be known. It is something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation. *Ecognosis* is like a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop—a *weird* knowing." Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

⁷⁰ Cultural critic and systems-thinker Bruno Latour, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, devises the term *natureculture*, later further developed by Donna Haraway, to acknowledge the weird reality of the immanent intermixing of these two arbitrarily defined zones.

⁷¹ Stacy Alaimo, in *Bodily Natures*, calls this mutual material inter-permiability between human bodies and their environments *transcorporeality*.

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