

# Mysteries of Plants: A Post-Humanist Reading

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## The Mind of Plants: Understanding Non-Human Intelligence

For seven months, Liu Wa and Yang Bao traveled in the western United States and Gansu, China—an 11,000-mile journey resembling Odysseus's epic tales and an adventure of mutual discovery and co-existence with plants. Inspired by the light and shadow of day and night in nature, the two artists simultaneously used hypnotizing colors and rhythms in video, painting, music and installation to explore the subjectivity of plants from multiple perspectives.

To view plants as *others* rather than *objects* means that we must treat various non-human entities as our equal. As Liu said in an interview, “The intent of these works is not to anthropomorphize the plants, but to ‘vegetalize’ our human perceptions.” Philosopher Michael Marder argues that the etymology of vegetation originated from the medieval Latin word *vegetabilis*, which means “to grow” or “to flourish.” It challenges our stereotypical misunderstanding of plants being static; on the contrary, plants should symbolize the abundance and exuberance of life. The artists’ exhibition *Late Night Savage* presents us the dramatic and nuanced poetry of moving image with an ever-evolving audio-visual experience, in which three plants—sunflower, camel grass and tumbleweed—weave together variable perspectives in a sweeping landscape charged with wild and ferocious energy burst between sky and earth. The plants represented in the exhibition neither participate in human-centric narratives nor exist as objects for the production of human knowledge. Instead, they call attention to the subjectivity of plants. The plants’ growth, breathing, and movement constitute a non-animal form of biopolitics that challenges our deep-rooted understanding of plants, which requires us to liberate ourselves from the epistemological tradition of rationalism and to expand our sensibilities. Jeffrey Nealon (2015) calls on us to consider plants as the key for biopolitics. Critical theories in humanism often take animal life as the main biopolitical paradigm, while plants have hitherto been neglected.

It is worth noting that these impressive botanic subjects in *Late Night Savage* are not only different from the flowers, vegetables and fruits commonly seen in still life paintings, but also different from the highly objectified flora in the scientific study of botany. Such visualization and objectification of plants represent two mainstream research paradigms closely associated with taxonomy. As a result, plants have often been reduced to epistemic and aesthetic objects that are static and inert. This long-standing anthropocentric epistemological model has finally been criticized in the fields of art, humanities, and social sciences in recent years, thanks to contemporary academic works on post-humanism and new materialism that have creatively contributed to plant-focused theories. The practice of Bao and Liu integrates this transformative post-human perspective to push the limits of plant perception. To some extent, their endeavor also touches on the metaphysics of consciousness and the nature of the self.

The artists regard plants as intelligent beings or agents, urging us to recognize the limitations of human perception and knowledge.

### **Becoming Weeds: the Biopolitics of Plants**

Sunflower, camel-grass and tumbleweed are all drought-tolerant and saline-alkali-resistant plants. Behind their perseverance is the military history of nuclear sites and geopolitics. Sunflowers—as a cheap corrective method—were once planted in Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union to clean up nuclear contamination. Camel grass is found growing around the nuclear base in the Gobi Desert in Gansu, China. As an invasive species whose seeds are easily dispersed in the wind, tumbleweeds exacerbate the spread of nuclear pollution in Washington State in the United States. Initially, the artists were interested in the plants as iconic symbols of the history of the Cold War, but they gradually deviated from the human-centric narrative, because they no longer regarded plants as mere specimens of localized geographical archives. As they were chasing after tumbleweeds, the artists witnessed the tremendous vitality of plants that traveled and thrived regardless of man-made boundaries. In the end, the artists chose to represent the narratives and memories of plants on their own terms.

Historical context is not directly introduced in the exhibition with writings; it is a haunting ghost lurking in the background, conjuring a certain tension in contrast to the vibrant and sensuous artwork. While the threat of nuclear bomb foreshadows death at the end of human history, plants continue to flourish and expand their territories regardless. This tension between the finite and the infinite as well as death and life conjures up a dark yet sublime post-humanistic spectacle for us, signifying that the cosmic order is quietly undergoing transitions in the Anthropocene epoch. Plants too have agency, and they participate in the making of the complex multi-species universe. As active agents in the power structure, plants have equal ontological status as humans.

For a long time, binary thinking has been deeply ingrained in our consciousness, giving rise to a wide range of dichotomies: subject vs. object, body vs. mind, material vs. spiritual, human vs. nature, etc. Such an epistemological model is not only overly simplified but also based on the exploitative relationship between humans and other species in the environment. “Usefulness” is one of the key words closely related to human-centrism. For example, the value of plants is usually measured by its utility: cherry trees provide food, and oak trees provide wood. In contrast, tumbleweed, as a “weed” that savagely invades human habitats, draws the difference between plant productivity and plant growth. Scrutinizing this demarcation helps us envision a less exploitative relationship between humans and plants. It also guides us to distance ourselves from the logic of utilitarianism by revealing the limitations of human ethics. Indeed, to disrupt the narrative of progressivism since the Enlightenment does not mean that we should give up everything and unequivocally embrace the aesthetics of disaster. Plants do not provide solutions to crises. They only force us to face the consequences of ecological, social, political and intellectual progression, to face our own vulnerability and to critically re-examine modernity itself.

In contrast to weeds—the undisciplined, marginalized plants—horticultural plants are often employed as a metaphor for the planning of nation state. It reflects control, order, and a specific type of governance. For example, Zygmunt Bauman compares the development of modernity to the transition from "wild culture" to "garden culture" (Zygmunt Bauman, 1989). He uses the term "gardening state" to allude to the modernist biopolitical model of rational governance that imposes violence through eugenics. As we have observed, tumbleweeds are like nomads in the wilderness. Their migrations are contingent and uncertain. They have no practical value and cannot be controlled by territorial sovereignties. The biopolitics embodied in weeds frustrates humans' attempt at assigning it a particular place in the hierarchy of existence. Tumbleweeds put down their roots in undesirable places and extend their reach by reproducing themselves in different locales around the world (Marder, 2012). Perhaps plants have perceived a world that has hitherto been overlooked and neglected by humans, in which the hierarchy of the "higher" and the "lower" species has fallen apart.

### **Lending the Body to the Cosmos**

By learning how the artists have changed course in their creative thinking, we witness a plant-like process of growth—Liu and Bao started from a knowledge-oriented anthropological approach and subsequently shifted to a phenomenological study of the inner life and rhythm of plants. Plants are constantly adapting and adjusting their relationship with the external world. To think like plants is to not confine oneself, but to immerse oneself in symbiosis with other species and to continuously learn from the stimuli in the environment. During the process of filming tumbleweeds, because the sightings were highly uncertain, the artists had to throw themselves into one unpredictable expedition after another. They accepted contingency and disorder of the world in chaos, and availed themselves of spontaneity. Like plants, they embraced the vast and boundless universe and immersed themselves in plant consciousness.

The second room of the exhibition presents four pieces of paintings and sound installation by the two artists. On each of Liu paintings, Bao introduces a black geometric shape—a symbolic black hole—from which his minimalist chance music composition emanates and mutates. The ever-evolving soundscape composed of infinite combination of sounds is complemented by the hallucinating visual impressions of the plants, altogether generating an emotional power in pure forms. Heraclitus stated, one cannot step into the same river twice. Likewise, the viewer cannot have the same sensory experience twice in this holistic space. The sense of time is expanded, when the viewer listens to the mesmerizing sound in flux. As one's body moves in space, the soundscape changes, and a phantasmagoric spectacle cascades from the depths of darkness. Human subjectivity is then on the verge of dissolving, while the spiritual universe of plants arises.

On the one hand, global warming, accelerated extinction of wild lives, and collapse of ecosystems in the Anthropocene force us to recognize the fact that our future lies in the deep and complex interconnection with other living beings; on the other hand, this interspecies

alliance based on survival needs is not only political but also affective. It calls to mind the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which provides an inseparable and indivisible structure of the mind, body and the cosmos. He believes that "to lend the body to the world" is the only way for humans to be part of the cosmos and to represent it. In this sense, the encounter between humans and plants is also the interface between different bodily entities in a holistic cosmos; when we move around in the exhibition space, our bodies interact with painting, music and the entire environment. Merleau-Ponty's favorite painter, Cézanne, once said, "The landscape contemplates itself within me, and I am its consciousness." Being in this emotionally-charged space, I become aware of the plants and the cosmos; at the same time, the plants and the cosmos are silently and affectionately meditating on themselves within me.

1. Marder, M. (2011). Plant-Soul: The Elusive Meanings of Vegetative Life. *Environmental Philosophy*, 8(1): 83-100.
2. Nealon, J. (2015). *Plant Theory: Biopower & Vegetable Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
3. Marder, M. (2012). "Resist like a Plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements". *Peace Studies Journal* 5 (1): 24-32.
4. Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cornell University Press.
5. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *L'œil et l'esprit*. Gallimard, Paris.
6. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). *Sens et non-sens*. Gallimard, Paris.