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Representations of Plants in *The Day of the Triffids* from a Posthumanist Perspective

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Abstract

The story of *The Day of the Triffids* is set against the backdrop of the apocalypse and unfolds the struggle between humans and mutated plants—the triffids. This study applies Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory and Michael Marder's plant thinking to examine how, in the context of posthumanism, the triffids enact their own modes of inhabitation, develop their own survival strategies, and redefine time through the very rhythm of vegetal life. The study shows that the triffids in the novel are not merely background or symbols, but core actors same as humans. The study aims to encourage humans to reflect on their relationship with themselves and the "otherness" of triffids in the posthuman era.

Keywords: *The Day of the Triffids*; posthumanism; plants.

1. Introduction

John Wyndham (1903-1969) is one of the most profound sci-fiction writers in England, and is regarded as one of the Big Three of British Science Fiction, alongside Arthur C. Clarke and Eric Frank Russell. His novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Novel, and *The Chrysalids* received a nomination for the Canadian Aurora Award (formerly the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Award) for Best International Novel in 1981.

When technology becomes a tool for human's unchecked desires, its potential risks are dramatically amplified. Humans will ultimately be consumed by the technological power they have created if they fail to deeply reflect on their own desires. The thematic purpose of apocalyptic science fiction is to urge such reflection. *The Day of the Triffids* was published in the immediate aftermath of World War II when the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 served as symbolic events of technologically driven devastation, prompting profound societal reflection on the implications of technological advancement. *The Day of the Triffids* stands as a critical reflection and warning about technology.

The Day of the Triffids tells the story of humanity being struck blind after witnessing a brilliant light from a comet. Only a small number of people who, for various reasons, did not observe the comet are spared. To make matters worse, the triffids—plants previously cultivated by humans for their nutritional value and oil—escape en masse from their farms and begin attacking people on a large scale. As one of the few survivors with sight, Bill is forced to flee constantly in search of a shelter. He struggles fiercely to fend off the triffids, yet is never able to eradicate them entirely. By the end of the novel, humanity has not yet found a way to coexist with the triffids. They ultimately retreat to an island, using the ocean as a natural barrier to hold their last remaining stronghold.

Stock explores the liberal politics of Wyndham's postapocalyptic landscape (2015). Katriona examines and elucidates the principle of plant mobility in *The Day of the Triffids* from an interdisciplinary perspective (2007). Miller points out that the monster plant in the novel challenges the zoocentrism (2012). Manlove observes the dissolution of the concept of self and civilized behavior in it (1991).

While existing scholarships have extensively analyzed *The Day of the Triffids* through different perspectives, few have studied it through the lens of posthumanism so far. By adopting a posthumanist perspective, this paper explores the subjectivity and agency of plants in the context of posthuman era, thereby providing a new angle on the reflection of the relationship between human and nature.

2. Posthumanism and plant philosophy

The term "posthuman" can be traced back to the 1960s-70s. The Egyptian-American literary critic Ihab Hassan, in his 1977 essay "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?", prophesied the advent of a "posthuman age." He wrote:

The human form—including human desire and all its external manifestations—may be changing radically, and thus must be rethought... Five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms into something we must reluctantly call posthumanism. (212)

The emergence of posthumanism constitutes a critique of classical humanism dating back to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Humanism constructs its image of the human according to a single standard: European, white, and male, which reveals that the essence of humanism is actually the anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism. Braidotti reveals that "Eurocentrism contains a dialectic of self and other, and a logic of binary oppositions between identity and otherness that functions as the cultural logic and driving force of universal humanism" (15). Thus, Braidotti proposes that posthumanism be employed to dismantle the anthropocentrism inherent in humanism.

The posthuman condition has been defined by Braidotti as the convergence of posthumanism on the one hand and post anthropocentrism on the other, within an economy of advanced capitalism. Braidotti argues that the nature culture continuum serves as a foundational premise for posthumanist inquiry. The boundary between natural objects and cultural artifacts has been substantially blurred, if not effaced, by the consequences of scientific and technological advancement.

Braidotti emphasizes establishing an ethics across life-death boundaries through the concept of zoe, or universal vitality. This vitalism stresses activating the positivity of the posthuman subject: it does not deny horrific realities, but reprocesses them to affirm the actual powers of compassion and healing (195). The focus on life itself may encourage a sort of biocentered egalitarianism, forcing a reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity in terms of "life-forces." She notes that the egalitarianism centered on universal vitality constitutes a shift toward posthumanism (204). Zoe's force is a trans-species vital force that decenters the human order of life.

Posthuman theory, Braidotti argues, should assist us in rethinking globally the fundamental tenets we ought to follow when communicating with non-human animals and plants. Plant philosopher Michael Marder proposes "plant philosophy," which aims to emphasize letting go of existing human

logic and cognition, allowing one to think like a plant and share an equal mode and content of thinking with plants. Marder defines the philosophy of plants as follows:

“Plant thinking” refers, in the same breath, to (1) the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants (what

I later call “thinking without the head”); (2) the human thinking about plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants. (10)

In Marder’s opinion, plants shift from being merely a background in philosophy to becoming its main protagonists. Based on the plant philosophy outlined above, he assimilates and further elaborates Deleuze’s rhizome theory, supplanting prior traditional modes of thought by proposing that the plant itself is a rhizome and that its connections with other entities are multiple and decentralized. Furthermore, he introduces the concept of plant temporality, truly achieving a mode of “thinking like a plant.”

According to Braidotti’s posthumanist theory and Marder’s plant philosophy, this paper analyzes the plant image of *The Day of the Triffids* from three perspectives, the dwelling mode of plants, the survival mode of plants, and the temporality of plants to deeply explore how the plant exerts the subjectivity as the independent identity in posthuman era.

3.1 The Dwelling Modes of plants

Drawing on Deleuze’s theory, Marder proposes the rhizomatic thought of plants: the rhizome can connect any point to any other point, including multi-dimensional connections with animals, plants, and the world. This mode of thought emphasizes the potential for generating new connections brought about by difference, which also manifests the decentralized character of plant.

The spatial practice of the triffids embodies this rhizomatic thinking. The triffids can retract their roots from the soil, move elsewhere, and re-extend them under suitable conditions. This behavior demonstrates that they are not constrained by fixed boundaries or territories; instead, they can mobilize their own capacities to adapt to spatial environments. Their roots serve only as temporary anchors, which means they can break away at any time and seek new ground to take root, survive, and grow. Yet this does not mean the triffids are entirely independent and detached from the surrounding space, for it reveals an ongoing process of adapting to and merging with their environment.

The triffids’ motile inhabitation is simultaneously determined by their distributed mode of existence. Triffids appear either in groups or as isolated individuals, with no unified leadership. For the triffids, the death of an individual does not signify the demise of the collective. For these acentric, non-hierarchical organisms, there exists no territorial consciousness. Spatial exploration for the triffids is simply a process of becoming. Triffids and space exist in seamless integration, functioning as mutually connected nodes within an ongoing generative network.

Human technologies violently intrude upon the triffids’ spatial practice, blocking their rhizomatic becoming. Various means are forcibly employed to confine the triffids within limited spaces, depriving them of their capacity for movement. This hegemony is manifested in severing the triffids’ natural connections with their surroundings, replacing these with a singular, technologically mediated relation that fixes them within specific boundaries. The triffids’ originally acentric, borderless mode of flowing inhabitation was violently transformed into a centralized, territorially bounded existence.

Other plants also enact rhizomatic spatial exploration. When the technological infrastructure of human spatial dominance collapses, plants redefine their relational field with the environment. What

humans constructed as monuments to civilization, plants engage as surfaces for growth and corridors for rhizomatic expansion. Concrete buildings may appear solid to human bodies, but they are penetrable to plants. It does not signify retaliation against humans or territorial appropriation; instead, it manifests the vegetal instinct to continuously have connections with and reciprocal influence on the surrounding environment.

3.2 The Survival Mode of Plants

Braidotti defines zoe as the impersonal, non-human, and pre-individual force of life that traverses all living matter. She posits zoe as a generative force capable of resisting the violent dimensions of posthuman convergence. This concept advances a geologically and technologically grounded egalitarianism, one that decentralizes cognition and knowledge-production from human exclusivity to encompass all living systems and self-organizing technological networks. Life, in this framework, emerges as a complex interrelation of zoe/geo/techno-systems (64). Zoe embodies the dissolution of boundaries between human life and the lives of other species in the posthuman era, representing a fluid, universal life force.

The force of zoe in the triffids manifests through their remarkable capability for survival. The traits of being able to uproot and move, being aggressive, and having carnivorous habits are not what humans envisioned when cultivating them. Instead, they are inherent to the triffid as a living being, driven by the force of zoe in its survival instincts. The triffids are not engaged in acts of aggression, but merely attempting to obtain nutrients. Their tracking of humans is not conscious revenge or hunting; instead, it is a form of distributed collective coordination. Such behavior stems from the unique perceptual abilities of the plants, as they respond to thermal signals.

The remarkable adaptability demonstrated by the triffids in the struggle for existence also shows the generative characteristics in the concept of zoe. They can rapidly adjust their modes of survival in diverse environments. For instance, they possess a certain capacity for learning, enabling them to acquire and detect human offensive strategies and thus survive successfully. Humans deliberately set traps to ambush the triffids, but after falling into them a few times, the triffids were able to recognize the traps and automatically avoid them. These survival strategies indicate that the triffids are not merely passive entities, but agents capable of self-sustenance and development through dynamic life processes. Such behaviors of the triffids represent concrete manifestations of vital force from the aspect of zoe. They respond to complex existential challenges through constant becoming and transformation, thereby highlighting the vitality of life.

Humans' plight after losing their sight also stems from their neglect of the power of zoe. Humans regard the triffids merely as tools for profit, brutally damaging their stinging tendrils while ignoring their status as living beings. After humans lost their sight, the triffids were finally able to break through the spatial confines imposed by humans, driven by their inherent will to survive. All the difficulties humans currently face—loss of vision and displacement—are essentially not caused by the triffid's aggressive nature. Rather, they are the result of humans' own arrogance and disregard for zoe, which led to the loss of the ability to coexist with other life forms, ultimately being eliminated by a life order that is not human-centered.

The divergent survival states of the plants also demonstrate the discourse on biological diversity in zoe force. For triffids, the death of an individual does not mean the extinction of the whole. For other ordinary plants, temporary withering does not represent the end of life. In the plant world, there is no concept of competition or plunder; every individual is a node in the web of life. The plants exist as channel of zoe, revealing the very qualities inherent in this universal life force.

The multimodal perceptual mode of the triffids demonstrates the adaptability of their vitality. The triffids' perception of temperature, light, and sound allows them to adapt flexibly to their

surroundings. In the novel, it is mentioned that the triffids will avoid high-temperature objects and have an “uncanny sensitivity to sounds” (83). In contrast, when humans lose their sight, despite their possession of other sensory capacities, the social order collapses into chaos. “In no direction was there any traffic, nor any sound of it. The only signs of life were a few people here and there cautiously groping their way along the shop fronts” (24). Human blindness exposes the limitations of human cognition, forcing humans to enter a non-anthropocentric world.

Furthermore, the triffids communicate through the beating of their branches, indicating that they are engaged in self-adjustment via multiple nodes. Through their multiple perceptual mode, the triffids achieve real-time responsiveness and autonomous adaptation to the environment, breaking the traditional mode of cognition. Rather than excessively relying on a single sensory modality for information, the triffids embed themselves within the entire ecological network through a holistic, distributed perceptual system. Ironically, humans also possess the ability to communicate, and some of them still keep their eyesight, yet they become internally divided due to competition for interests and resources, manipulating one another while monopolizing resources. In the novel, the organization that possesses power and resources attempts to conquer all the people by force, aiming to establish a post-disaster state. However, this state is not a democratic one, but one that seeks to restore a “serfdom system” (151). Vulnerable groups are forced to submit to the powerful and stripped of any human rights. As the leader of this organization said, “It’s up to them to do what we tell them, take what we give them, and be thankful for whatever they get. If they like to refuse what we offer – well, that’s their own funeral” (149). Unlike the triffids, which share information resources, humans in times of disaster turn against one another in the novel.

3.3 The temporality of plants

A genuinely vegetal thinking requires the deconstruction of anthropocentric temporality and the redefinition of the plant from the rhythm of plant life itself. Marder distills three key interpretations concerning vegetal temporality – the vegetal heterotemporality of seasonal changes, the infinite temporality of growth and the cyclical temporality of iteration, repetition, and reproduction (97). Through comprehending the temporality of the vegetal world, humanity is possible to truly understand plants and enter the posthuman condition.

The temporality of the triffids is one of the core characteristics of their vegetal ontology. Different from human “action-oriented time,” their temporal model presents as “growth-oriented time,” accomplishing life cycles and spatial expansion through slow, continuous, and decentralized rhythms. This temporality is not only an essential attribute of plants, but also a key factor that causes human panic in the post-apocalyptic world.

The growth of plants in the novel embodies a temporality in which they follow the laws of nature and integrate with their surrounding environment. For plants, time unfolds slowly, marked by each flowering and fruiting as its nodal points. In a world after a disaster, humans are desperate to flee, while plants grow slowly. On country paths, as long as there is sunlight, plants and crops can continue to grow and ripen. Even if no one comes to harvest them, it will not prevent them from flowering and bearing fruit the following year.

The temporality of plants also presents a characteristic of aimlessness. Unlike the animal life, which moves from birth to death, the plant growth takes an endless form. This feature exhibited by the triffids is reflected in their continuous diffusivity: without an end or a purpose, they generate infinitely. In the novel, after humans move away from towns, moss and vines quietly occupy the urban growth space. And this aimless overgrowth is precisely the takeover of human time by plant time.

Plants generate new time through cyclical, iterative life cycles. As the novel writes:

Time was on the triffids' side. They had only to go on waiting while we used up our resources. First no more fuel, then no more wire to mend the fences.... And they, or their descendants, would still be waiting there when the wire rusted through. (144)

The temporality of plants is coordinated and adapted to natural cycles, which also manifests a conception of time that is not centered on the human. The triffids' "waiting" thus embodies what Marder identifies as the immanence of vegetal time. It is not a passive suspension of action but the active affirmation of life as ongoing process – without end, only the cyclical present of growth and the patient.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores how plants in *The Day of the Triffids* gradually undermined anthropocentrism from three dimensions. Firstly, drawing on Marder's rhizomatic theory, this paper analyzes how the triffids utilize their inherent capacities to expand their living space. Secondly, employing Braidotti's theory of zoe, it examines how the vitality manifested by plants as a form of universal life disrupts the anthropocentric order of existence and develops its own survival strategies. Finally, this paper analyzes the temporality possessed by plants as entities independent of humans, demonstrating that human ignorance and arrogance toward other species ultimately lead to humans' reaping the consequences of their own actions.

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