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**"Vegetal Visions. Ecocritical Encounters with Plant Kin in Transmediated Fairy Tales" by Anna Kérchy**

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**1. Wishing Trees. Vegetal Visions and/in Fairy Tales**

Iconographically speaking, there is always more to the enchanting, abundantly visual imagery of fairy tales and fantastic children's/YA fiction than meets the eye. A mirror does much more than mirroring, an apple is never just an apple, and the forest means more than just a bunch of trees. Sticking with plant parallels, the Giving Tree in Shel Silverstein's picturebook teaching a boy a lesson about the abusability of selfless love (1964), the giant peach inside which orphaned James embarks on a cross-world adventure accompanied by anthropomorphic talking bugs in Roald Dahl's novel (1962), or the monstrous yew tree helping the teenager protagonist to cope with his mother's terminal cancer in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011) spring from the same root as the magic beanstalk that allows poor Jack to ascend to the skies to steal the ogre's treasure, the briar rose protecting the rest of spellbound Sleeping Beauty, the rapunzel that costs a craving pregnant mother her beautiful baby daughter named after the plant by the sorceress abducting her, or the apple poisoning Snow White... These simple things – like a poisoned apple, a single rose, a handful of beans (like a red hood or a glass slipper) – gain an emblematic significance as elementary motifs from a “collective cultural imagination's archive” (Warner xxiv), formal components, minimal narrative codes (see Propp, Tiffin) which comprise “the hard logic” of the wonder tale (Calvino in Bernheimer) and excite human fantasists of all ages and eras.

Forests, mirror, and apples in children's/YA tales and fairy tales for crossover audiences are both familiar and unfamiliar, and hence can become emblematic constituents of an enchanted elsewhere. That elsewhere might suspend the natural physical laws and rational logic of our ordinary world but can nevertheless provide us assistance in understanding the perplexing complexity of human existence, the diversity of thought systems attempting to make sense thereof, and the capacity of non-human

organisms, of matter, even of inanimate things to make a difference in the world, to shape the web of interrelationships of which they are a part by acting as animate agents of their own right. Vegetal metaphors play a fundamental role in a fairy-tale philosophy Chesterton calls “the ethics of Elfland” and describes – in terms very similar to critical human-animal/ plants studies – as an interpretive attitude applicable to our startling world rich with unfulfilled possibilities lurking beneath actualized realities, which warn us to relate compassionately and solidarily towards any forms of non-normative alterities as potential sources of unpredictable magic. Chesterton invites us to explore as “fairy tale philosophers” the non-utilitarian, speculative, ‘other side’ of things independent of common intellectual standards, customary trivial definitions, or ideological interests. He urges us to evoke early memories of a genuine amazement felt upon the most minor mundane encounters deemed exceptional because of their unprecedented ‘firstness’ (and blurred into oblivion ever since due to socialization’s anesthetization of senses and the numbness of habit), to recall the wonder a simple tree can ignite, provided “we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular” and not as food “for the giraffe to eat” (45). Similarly, C.S. Lewis illustrates the beneficial use of fantastic imagination in a metaphysical quest for meaning by evoking how one “does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted” (29-30). Again, the empowering empathic effect of imagination is illustrated through humans’ relationship with non-human flora and fauna. These literary critical claims are invested with philosophical, identity-political and socio/eco-critical stakes. It is remarkable to note just how perfectly Chesterton’s and Lewis’ ideas resonate with contemporary Object-Oriented philosopher Timothy Morton’s agenda to “negotiate the politics of humanity” and “become human” by creating a “network of kindness and solidarity with non-human beings, in the name of a broader understanding of reality that both includes and overcomes the notion of species” and may help us reach upper scales of ecological coexistence (see Morton 2017).

Other stories force us to climb to the top of a tree and refuse to come down until we find arguments against the meaninglessness of human life, like a character in Danish Janne Teller’s *Nothing* (2011). This controversial young adult novel certainly has some parallels with postmodern novelist Italo Calvino’s classic *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), a philosophical tale that tells the adventures of a boy who – succeeding to his rejection of a dinner of sails, and hence of carnivorous being – rebelliously decides to climb a tree and exchange earthly existence for spending the rest of his life, disrespectful of social decorum, in the arboreal realm, that comes to represent independence. As Giulia Pacini convincingly argued, Calvino’s text can be read as an ecological-ethically informed parable commemorating the deforestation and excessive urban development that deformed the Italian Riviera in the late eighteenth century, and a celebration of Enlightenment’s philosophical campaign to protect wildlife and recast human relationships with the natural world. (57) In an exciting postmillennial parallel with Calvino, Teller’s book was dubbed by critics a haunting “existential fairy tale,” “a fantastic parable about human instability” that recycles *the wondrous-rational (il)logic of the fairy tale – in which incomprehensible happiness always rests upon incomprehensible conditions* (“You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, if you do not say the word ‘cow.’” as Chesterton put it (48)) – and locates a sudden human-plant symbiosis (a boy deciding to live in a treetop) as a starting point of the trickster figure’s provocative endeavor forcing all to reconsider standards of humanness and humanity.

The lesson the youngsters learn by the end of *Nothing* – as they gradually sacrifice everything that is meaningful and important to them in order to refute the potential meaninglessness of life – is their co-dependent connectivity. The tree functions, yet again, as a “sense making framework of knowledge” (see tree diagrams in Popova 2014) and communicates an arboreal message on the importance of relationality (particularly significant from the perspective of interspecies contacts), on being a social being, on trees being only as strong as the forest that surrounds them, to borrow Peter Wohlleben’s expression. As Wohlleben’s research has shown in *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) – by means of a feat of non-human consciousness exemplary for humans – neighboring trees of a forest environment help each other through their root systems by intertwining roots or by growing fungal networks that function as an extended nervous system connecting separate trees. In Wohlleben’s poetic words, reminiscent of a fairy-tale narrative:

Why are trees such social beings? Why do they share food with their own species and sometimes even go so far as to nourish their competitors? The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. A tree is not a forest. On its own, a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. It is at the mercy of wind and weather. But together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old. To get to this point, the community must remain intact no matter what. If every tree were looking out only for itself, then quite a few of them would never reach old age. Regular fatalities would result in many large gaps in the tree canopy, which would make it easier for storms to get inside the forest and uproot more trees. The heat of summer would reach the forest floor and dry it out. Every tree would suffer. Every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible. And that is why even sick individuals are supported and nourished until they recover. Next time, perhaps it will be the other way round, and the supporting tree might be the one in need of assistance. [...] A tree can be only as strong as the forest that surrounds it. (3-4, 17)

In fact the contemporary artistic and cultural uses of fairy tales characterized by an explosive spread of transmedia storytelling practices adopt a 'plant logic' that was coined by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's botanical metaphor "rhizomatic," or root-system-like, with reference to a non-hierarchical way of thinking apprehending multiplicities. Postmillennial repurposings of fairy tales make use of the extraordinary "elasticity" of the genre that "even when recited verbatim from a book, rarely turns repetitive, since every new voice puts a new inflection on each episode" (Tatar in Kérchy 2016, 14). Throughout an expansive range and imaginative play of adaptations, whereby old and new media interact with one another communally extending an increasingly elaborate fantasy realm, each new revision of the fairy-tale "seems to recharge its power, making it crackle and hiss with renewed narrative energy" (Greenhill and Matrix 2). Greenhill and Matrix's description of "crackling" and "hissing" network of fairy-tale retellings and Cristina Bacchilega describing "a fairy-tale web" employ non-human, non-anthropocentric, vegetal or animalistic figures of speech to describe the functioning of transmediation of storytelling where "*integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*" (see Jenkins 2007). It is easy to relate the process of the proliferation of equally significant interrelated transtexts to the rhizomatic conception of knowledge, which allows for multiple entries into a fictional universe – unlike the arborescent (hierarchical, tree-like) meaning-formation functioning with binary categories – , much like the continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals. Deleuze and Guattari's further examples for rhizome evoke the biological phenomena of mutualism, mimicry, hybridization, or the trans-species connection of the orchid and the wasp that can be put in parallel how fairy tales' untrackable originals and adaptations across a variety of media interact together to form a multiplicity, a unity that is multiple in itself.

## **2. Plant Children in Fairy-Tale Films. Self-Consumption and Cannibalization<sup>1</sup>**

The two films I analyse here, Jan Švankmajer's *Little Otik* (2000) and Peter Hedges' *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* (2012), tell stories about plant children raised by human foster parents and evoke hybrid vegetal intertexts: the ancient myth of the humanoid mandragora root<sup>2</sup>, plant creatures with magical, healing powers such as Tolkien's ents, Collodi's cautionary tale about the wicked wooden puppet Pinocchio, Mowgli-like feral children's interspecies adoption accounts, or fables about political oppression with anthropomorphic vegetal protagonists like Gianni Rodari's Cipollino, the Little Onion Boy popular in Soviet animations.

However, most importantly, both works revive the early modern theory about the horrific creative powers of "maternal imagination," widespread in Europe during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, when the disordered emotional impressions of pregnant women were held responsible for the prevalence of "monstrous births," based on the assumption that maternal thoughts could directly affect foetal development, possibly resulting in congenital defects of their bodily organism. Infants born with

spectacular physical anomalies were coined ominous wonders or freaks of nature (*lusus naturae*) and catalogued in wonder books such as French physician Ambroise Paré's legendary *On Monsters and Marvels* (*Des monstres et prodiges*, 1573) that provided medical, judicial, religious, and supernatural explanations for malformations. The most famous cases were those of Agnes Bowker (1569), who gave birth to a black cat presumably fathered by a diabolical shape-shifting beast who paid nightly visits to her in her sleep, and Mary Toft (1726), who birthed a litter of rabbits after she chased a hare she yearned to eat during her pregnancy. Monstrous nonhuman birthings could have been hoaxes, tricks performed by beggars to gain royal support assigned for the disabled, covers for infanticide, or on the contrary a means to prevent the murdering of bastard offspring (Cressy 76-92), and an opportunity for women to elude public disapproval when producing "paternally non-mimetic" offspring. (see Snyder 2013) (However, contemporary layman never doubted the veracity of these monstrosities, and opinions differed only insofar as whether these great curiosities would be fit to be presented to the Royal Society or whether a veil should be thrown over them as imperfections in human nature, signs of the culpability of the community or harbingers of natural catastrophes or God's wrath. (see *Mist's Weekly Journal* 19 November 1726 in Norton 2016))



Figure 1

Vulnerable maternal corporeality – problematizing the boundaries of self-same and other – has always represented the “best hopes and worst fears of societies faced with an intuitive sense of their own instabilities” (Shildrick 30). The theory of monstrous maternal imagination remains related to anxieties concerning human creativity and procreativity. It is especially interesting to consider how the theory is recycled in postmillennial popular culture to fictionalize the dread of infertility and/or the insatiable hunger of consumption, surfacing on psychological, political, and ecocritical planes. And the most peculiar forms of infantile anatomical anomalies produced by the monstrous maternal imagination are embodied by cannibalistic and/or self-consuming vegetal children represented as both products and ecoterrorist agents of Mother Earth.

### *Timothy Green, a good natured child*

*The Odd Life of Timothy Green*, directed by Peter Hedges, tells the story of an impossibly perfect child. After a childless couple learns about the medical decision to the termination of their unsuccessful fertility treatments, they perform a private mourning ritual: they write an inventory of the ideal features of the infant they could never have, and say farewell to their dreams by burying the paper slips in a wooden box in their backyard. During a night thunderstorm that affects only their land, a boy child crawls out of the muddy soil, creeps into their bedroom and with his strange ways changes the life of his foster parents for good. However, the dream child's earthly stay is ephemeral; his vegetal being makes him all too otherworldly, vulnerable and "withering."

Timothy has tiny tree leaves sprouting from his ankles, which he loses one by one each time he fulfils one of the qualities his adoptive parents wished for – hence condemning himself to slow decay. As he proves to be honest, optimistic, funny and resilient, his simple altruistic acts of kindness manage to contact and console isolated fellow human beings: he makes an uncle laugh on his deathbed, befriends a girl with an ugly birthmark and teaches his family to gain confidence in their parenting skills and to accept life's imperfections, including passing. With all his leaves fallen he disappears to leave a better world behind.

The vegetal child with a penchant for photosynthesis and self-consuming altruism lives in perfect symbiosis with nature and humanity, a union that has been lost to contemporary society. In a posthuman era he is more humane than humans.<sup>3</sup> His radical difference does not have spectacular physical markers but is due to the hyper-empathy, sacrificial tenderness, and the moral values projected on him by parental imagination. As a result, Timothy verges on a stock character type, the TV trope of "the child too good for this world", a plot device that only exists to provide the protagonist and the spectators an important life lesson while being deprived of a discernible inner life of his own or the possibility of character development. The film fails to fully realize interspecies equality: since the plant-boy's major mission is to assist humans' moral maturation, he is either a subservient helper or a superior role-model. As his coming of age story remains incomplete, gone so young, in the memory of his family he stays an eternal child and a harbinger of death, a melancholic *memento mori*, emblematised by the film's lush autumn imagery, and the melancholic mood of the season of decay. Timothy's story (presented in flashback by the parents) serves to convince an adoption counsellor and helps them acquire a real child, a flesh and blood little girl, Lily – via an odd metaphor of recycling (changing the old into new).



Figure 2

The film holds eco-critical implications. The private trauma of the couple's infertility is reflected on a public level by the economical crisis affecting the local community's declining pencil-making industry and on a macrocosmic scale by the barrenness of the land, which we learn about from the drought warning poster featured among the first shots of the film. The lack of procreative potentials is compensated for by the gift of creativity, the fecundity of fantasy: Timothy's marvellous-monstrous birth from garden dirt and parental dreams is already a representation of the recycling process whereby waste material is made useful, put into new use without the elimination of its essential qualities. The Greens' imaginings make the wind change, bring rain, hope and regeneration. As their name suggests, they are environmentalists seeking to improve the health of their natural environment, incorporating the concerns of non-human elements. Inspired by their plant child, they invent a new technology to make pencils from fallen leaves and thus save the town's pencil factory, the lone business guaranteeing the livelihood of local citizens. The pencil certainly symbolizes the capacity to write a new story, too. If the time together with Timothy affirms the Greens' nurturing skills (Short 13) besides their capacity to raise a child, they are also validated in their ability to caringly relate to their organic environment and to narrate this mutually enriching relationality in an educative tale of their biophilia. The film is an illustration of the "biophilia hypothesis" (Wilson 1984) arguing for human beings' instinctive bond and urge to affiliate with other living systems. While storytelling provides a compensatory means to ward off the frustration caused by the human awareness of mortality as a common destiny of all forms of life, the contact with the natural (plant) world also brings consolation through reminding its audience of the possibly symbiotic union of everything alive and the promise of rebirth implied in decay and death – as demonstrated by the cyclicity of seasons. As Autumn is followed by Spring, the passing of Timothy (the name also means an Eurasian grass naturalized in North America (see Spira 2011)) is followed by the arrival of a new child (whose name, Lily, refers to the flowering of the land and the blooming of new hope), as well as by the revival of the pencil factory and the affirmation of the Greens' empowered self-identity as greens.

Timothy Green is literally a good natured child and hence a highly idealized embodiment of Nature pictured as benign, sacrificial and resilient, able to survive the abuses of an undeserving humanity it subserviently nurtures. The film's ecocritical implications, bordering on wishful thinking, deal with the iconic image of the gentle Mother Earth. The tagline of the movie, "He's a force of nature," equates the title-character's vulnerability with force to reinforce his connection with the monstrous maternal imagination. On the one hand, as a plant child he springs from the very "flesh" of Earth Mother whose qualities he overidentifies with by embracing a relentless caretaking conventionally coded as maternal. On the other hand he is the product of a human mother who can transform weakness into strength by sublimating the trauma of her infertility into creative imagination that eventually manages to bring to life an organic child whose main goal will be to support others with his docile ways.<sup>4</sup> Despite the occasionally saccharine storyline, the film treats serious social problems – infertility, adoption, physical alterity labelled disadvantageous disability and environmental pollution – in a fairy-tale-like tone, that is worthy of its producer the Walt Disney Company.

### ***Little Otík: Greedy Guts***

If Timothy Green is the sentimentally ideal embodiment of the marvellous 'monstrous plant child,' "a literal dream come true" (Short 13), *Little Otík* is a nightmarish, worst-conceivable version of the same fantasy of a child created from parental wishes. Czech surrealists Jan Švankmajer and Eva Švankmajerová's *Little Otík (Otesánek, 2000)* is a live-action grotesque horror movie featuring stop-motion and puppet animation about a childless couple who dig up a tree stump to clean it, trim it and nurture it as a real baby (changing its nappies, powdering its bottom, cutting its nails, singing it lullabies, etc) until their vegetal offspring develops an insatiable appetite and devours everybody in sight, consuming his mother's hair, the family cat, the postman and a social worker, too. Locked away in the basement by his father to prevent tragedy, *Little Otík* is taken care of by a little girl, Alžbětka, who feeds him an old paedophile harassing her then accidentally *Otík's* own loving foster parents. The root baby meets his end when, disregarding his child friend's warnings, he turns against the plant world he originates from and gorges himself on the cabbage patch of the neighbour lady, who serves justice by killing him, splitting his guts with a garden hoe.

The film's alternative English title, *Greedy Guts*, tellingly associates with the story childish voraciousness and unruly appetites. However, the “bottomless hunger” does not only belong to the monstrous plant infant but also to the infertile couple tormented by their all-consuming yearning for a child, a dangerous, obsessive desire of an “auto-cannibalistic nature” that holds the “potentially horrific consequences of wish-fulfilment” thematised by the film. (Gross 2014). *Little Otik*, a tale of “a tree-root brought to life by maternal desire and paternal woodwork” (Imre 2008), offers a sinister reading of the myth of the monstrous maternal imagination, while paying homage to those classics of “maternal,” “reproductive” or “fertility” horror – including Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, David Lynch's *Eraserhead* or David Cronenberg's *The Brood*– which portray babies both as ruthless consumers fatally “eating up” parental lives deprived of freedoms and as objects of consumption inescapably distorted by passive aggressive expectations disguised as parental loving.



Figure 3

Although the film can also be interpreted as a black humorous rendering of Pinocchio's metamorphosis from wooden puppet into real boy, it is even more explicitly based on the grim Czech fairy tale *Otesánek*, "The Wooden Child," by Karel Jaromír Erben. In this source text an elderly couple's wish is granted as a long-awaited child is born from a log of wood sung to life with a lullaby, yet the creature wreaks havoc, feeding on neighbours and destroying its family. In the end, when the parents are freed from the belly of their monstrous wooden son – ripped open by the patriarchal hoe, as in Švankmajer's film adaptation – they never wish for a child again. As Short points out, this ending implies a "rare admission of the hardships of parenthood" and suggests that childlessness, or rather with the contemporary politically correct term "childfreeness," contrary to folk wisdom or consensual social standards, might eventually be "a blessing" instead of a curse.<sup>5</sup>

The disturbing latent adult content of presumably innocent children's literature like fairy tales is illustrated by the preteen Alžbětka reading a medical textbook entitled *Sexual Dysfunction and Sterility* hidden under the dust jacket of Erben's fairy stories. Alžbětka acts as a detective figure who cleverly notices similarities between the real-life events next door and the classic tale of *Otesánek* she is reading. A precocious, knowing child, fully conscious of and ready to direct the horrific happenings more than any adult characters around her, she embodies a double of Little Otík, who is a mindless infant with the base instinctual urge of hunger, preceding and preventing any human intellectual activity. The child with a bestial lack of human cognition and the child with a superfluency of rational thoughts are equally qualified monstrous.

The media shift representing Little Otík's cannibalism in two-dimensional cartoon animation holds various exciting implications. It might refer to the necessary "fantastification of the traumatic real" described by philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a phenomenon when in times of terror one is faced with the ultimate horror, the Unimaginable Impossible itself – such as a meaningless act of terrorism, or an innocent infant ruthlessly murdering its parents or benevolent nature turning against the humans inhabiting it. The threat (of carnivorous vegetal horror) is so inappropriate to be integrated into our experience of reality that it must necessarily become fictionalized as traumatic "reality transfunctionalized through fantasy" (18-20). These horrific scenes might also be interpreted as the projections of the aggressive fantasies of a child frustrated by parental discipline disguised as nurturing. As the iconography of many fairy tales attest, symbolically speaking parents cannibalistically devour children by socialization, silencing them, controlling their appetites. With a grotesque twist, here, the eaten turns against the eater, while the child takes revenge on the parent. *Little Otík* offers a monstrous subversion of "the food trope in children's literature that traditionally teaches children how to be human through the imperative to eat 'good' food in a 'proper' controlled manner" (Daniel 3). No wonder Alžbětka over-identifies with Little Otík.

Ironically, the film's finale seems to suggest that all children must either mature or perish. Alžbětka transforms into a little mother figure who feeds, protects and sheds tears for the monstrous baby Otík when its original foster mother gives up on it. Still the plant child cannot win over the human adults, whom it can absorb only temporarily before being consumed by them, like the babies in the surrealist scenes of this movie who are trapped in watermelon or are caught in a net and "wrapped up in newspaper like carp for a Christmas meal" (Hames 26).

The act of cannibalistic, carnivorous devouring can be symbolically associated with the threat represented by any totalitarian regime that puts all individual on the verge of becoming faceless meat. Instead of the escapism too often associated with the fantasy genre, surrealist dream imagery has frequently been put in the service of militant critical investigations of reality, touching upon inevitable yet insupportable socio-political issues like ideological engulfment, a perverse hunger degrading humanity. Since the Švankmajers started to work on the story of *Otesánek* back in the 1970s, their adaptation of *Little Otík* can easily be related to a major leitmotif of the oeuvre: a satirical commentary on repressive technologies of truth-production and ideological incorporation practiced by Stalinist

communism and bourgeois realism alike (which the artists had to suffer from throughout long decades of their career) and a subversive project to challenge the resulting tyranny of reason that has delimited genuinely kaleidoscopic, fantasmatic representations of reality.

However, the story might also comment upon contemporary obsessive-compulsive needs driving global culture. According to Anikó Imre, *Little Otík*, a cautionary tale of consumption and an allegory of obsessive eating and cannibalism, meditates on the “global crisis in appetite” characterising the specific historical conditions of post-communist Central Eastern European society’s late capitalist consumer cultural greed gone out of control. (200) The film is an “agit scare” (Wells 2002) piece that makes a political argument in fictional terms about a “civilization [that] eats everything. It eats nature, whole cultures, but also love, liberty and poetry and it changes these into the odious excrement of the society of consumption and mass culture” (Imre 208).

Moreover, Švankmajer regards the Walt Disney Company and the art products it designs specifically for child consumers as “one of the leading destroyers of European culture” insofar as it strategically “tames children’s soul,” deprives underage audience of critical creative consciousness and aesthetic sensibility in order to raise new generations of “idiotic” consumers of mass culture. Considering the above, *Little Otík* may enter into dialogue with *Timothy Green*, allowing the food (art) to take revenge on the cannibal (popular film industry) to prevent the emergence of new consumers who eat (interpret cultural products) because of mindless hunger instead of sophisticated good taste.

As Zoe Gross convincingly points out, *Little Otík* thematizes monstrous ambivalence itself by blurring boundaries through building on a “perpetual confusion or interchange between otherwise oppositional or divergent states” such as the horrific and the hilarious, the consumer and the consumed, subject and object, interior and exterior, food and eater, food and waste, food and body, animated and inert matter, infants and monsters, ingestion and pregnancy. The human and plant transspecies blurring is another aspect of this disorienting interchange. The confusion between the contradictory yet complementary acts of the rebellion against nature and the rebellion of nature could be added to this list, too.

In Švankmajer’s view, *Otesánek*’s “drastic fairy tale” is “a topical version of the Faust myth” tackling “the tragic dimension of a rebellion against nature” that is doomed to fail yet still constitutes the token of human freedom. Otík’s parents are overreaching characters who revolt against their biological destiny (infertility) and usurp the divine privilege of creation by making up a child of their own, who is not the product of a human fleshly intercourse but the result of the exploitation of the vegetal environment, the digging up of a tree root from mother Earth. The couple’s very name refers to their passionate relationship with nature: Horák is a topographic name for ‘people of the mountains’ but it also denotes ‘people of the heat.’ Their passionate desire for a child takes perverse forms: Mrs Horák(ová) fakes pregnancy to deceive neighbours (while her imitation is imitated by Alžbětka’s hiding a basketball under her shirt) and stubbornly pretends that a tree stump – that shares no likeness whatsoever with a human baby – is their child. In one of the most disturbing scenes, the Virgin Mary-like mother breastfeeds the dirty, mutilated, dead root she mistakes for her infant son. Her enthusiasm is contrasted by the spectators’ repulsion as the sacred meets the profane. This is a case of failed recycling bordering on a perverse recursivity: humans rebel against nature (invent an unnatural child) that rebels against them (naturally eating its inventors). The complexity of this dynamics and the tragi-comical consequences of maternal imagination abusing nature are illustrated by Otík’s end. His final meal is a cabbage patch he destroys as a site connected to the “folkloric, infantile fantasy about baby-making which disavows natural sexual and biological activity” (Gross 7) and is chopped up by a postmenopausal grandmother figure who turns ravenous Otík into manure, an organic fertilizer for Mother Earth, and further food for thought for spectators hungry for intellectual pleasures.

### **3. Bioethical Dilemmas and Posthuman Plant Philosophy in Postmillennial Children’s Literature**

In the case of early modern monstrous births, the infant’s corporeal strangeness supposedly communicated to the mother a ‘lesson’ concerning her own dreads and desires spectacularly and

undeniably imprinted onto the body of her offspring. Similarly, collective anxieties surface in contemporary cultural fantasies about plant children brought to life by parental imagination. Rosi Braidotti reads major scientific achievements of posthuman embodiment, like new reproductive technologies, as feats of human imagination, claiming that today's test-tube babies conceived by in vitro fertilization signal "the long-term triumph of the alchemist's dream of dominating nature through masturbatory practices of self-insemination (89)

Although the two films analysed above might mark a chapter in the long history of the fantasy of self-generation, their triumphant message is tinted with self-ironic doubt, too. Timothy, the ideal child, embodies the positive features his parents desired but lends a tragicomic twist to them: for example, he scores the winning goal but helps the other team to victory because he accidentally kicks the football into the net of his own team. Otík's filial love takes extreme form, peaking in cannibalism and self-annihilation. These grotesque fictional episodes are indeed charged with real social dilemmas.

The photosynthesising relatives test the limits of human empathy for different life forms and point towards bioethical debates, which prevail in the era of compulsory prenatal care and concern parental and medical rights to decide who deserves to live (and who is rather recommended to be aborted) (Sabatello 208) or might even evoke bioconservative anxieties concerning posthuman enhancement technologies' dehumanizing effect (Bostrom 202). The modern medicalization of bodies has resulted in the perfectibility of living organisms and the gradual abolition of physical anomalies. Yet this "denial of the sense of wonder" (Braidotti 89) in our scientifically measurable, lived realities does not deprive us of the fascination felt for the mysteries of nature, a need for the amazement by the fantastic diversity of being that is fulfilled by popular cultural imaginings about monstrous vegetal children and their kin.

The "monstrous is intrinsically opposed to the familiar course of nature as an affront to the expected, and thus throws doubt on life's ability to teach us order," (Canguillhem 29) revealing disorder at its core inviting "to think differently about difference" (Braidotti 78). This message is much in line with critical plant studies' insistence on the vital role of vegetal life in rethinking the past, present, and future of human subjectivity and survival. As Michael Marder argued in his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), plants' unique material knowledge, freedom and temporality – which resist the logic of totalization and exclusion – may bring human thought "back to its roots" and perform a deconstruction of human metaphysics by undoing binary oppositions such as self and other, body and soul, life and death, surface and depth, or the one and the many. Dawn Keetley and Rita Kurtz's essay collection *Plant Horror. The Monstrous Vegetal* suggests that plants' "implacability and impersonality, their rooted unfreedom, their unintentionality, and their prolific and non-teleological 'wild' growth" have rendered them monstrous in numerous cultural narratives; nevertheless, their vegetal threat to the boundaries of humanity might ultimately provide educative critique to abuses emerging on environmental, ethical, and identity-political planes.

In the above films, human imagination projected meanings on vegetal children, and this assumption of a hierarchical relationship took its toll on the humans, who were assured of the supremacy of their rational cognitive capacities: nature taught them a lesson about the powers of non-human consciousness. Hence, transmediated fairy-tales got saturated with eco-horror implications. However, plant studies goes beyond binary logic and invites us to revisit the ecological implications of ethical conundrums, like George Berkeley's famous philosophical thought experiment asking "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" This dilemma challenges the significance of human sensorial observation and interpretive consciousness in creating an anthropocentric notion of a reality that is conventionally assumed to become meaningful through the ultimate agency of human perception, cognition and knowledge-construction.

Jane Bennett's notion of "thing power" suggests that matter is always already pulsing with life, objects are alive because of their capacities to "produce effects dramatic and subtle," to make a difference in the world, to shape the web of interrelationships of which they are a part by acting as animate agents of their own right. Object-oriented ontology (OOO) – immediately intertwined with the most significant

epistemological shift of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the “speculative turn” – attributes to objects a proactive existence of their own, independent of meanings projected on them by human cognition and embarks to show how a toy doll, a dead rat or a gunshot residue sample can all be self-contained “actants” (see Bennett 2010). It studies the “psychic reality of things like earthworms, dust, armies, chalk, stone” or wood, seeking to map intimate correspondences and conversations between human and non-human entities, (Bryant 2011). The idea is that persons can animate objects via adequate arrangements driven by interpretive consciousness, but objects are not dead artefacts either. If the avant-garde analysed how reimagined objects can contribute to the liberation of humans, thing studies aims to free objects from functional or fetishistic roles assigned to them by consumerism. Scrutinizing the relationship between things can even eliminate humans from the equation, as Zimoun’s posthuman artwork *25 woodworms, wood, microphone, sound system* (2010), an installation made for the *And Another Thing* exhibition, attests.

The performative power of plants, which ‘do things back’ to refute their decorative or utilitarian servitude and to foreground their agency as storehouses of memory, witnesses participating in history and material essences shaping whoever touches them, is wonderfully illustrated by fantastic proto-posthumanist artworks which aim at extending the notion of subjectivities beyond the human species. Examples include George O’Keefe’s gigantic flower paintings; the artist constantly refused to interpret along the lines of Freudian vaginal symbolism, claiming that she painted close-ups of blooms and petals because “nobody sees a flower — really — it is so small — we haven’t time — and to see takes time, *like to have a friend takes time...*” (in Benke 30, emphasis mine) – highlighting interspecies interconnectedness instead of exploitation in the service of anthropocentric metaphorization. In Ildikó Enyedi’s spellbinding surrealist murder mystery story, *Simon, the Magician* (1999), the French police seek the help of Simon, a visionary living in Budapest, to solve a crime case where the only witness proves to be a plant the psychic detective can converse with while dreaming.



Figure 4

Some recent picture books have truly exciting potential from the perspective of critical plant studies. Italian **Alessandro Sanna** spotted from a moving train's window a most unusual tree branch whose "body language" reminded him of a sensitive human silhouette, a small, delicate, terminally-ill child, mid-fall or mid-embrace. Starting out from this transspecies common ground of tender fragility, he embarked on reimagining "a foundational myth of his nation's storytelling", the children's classic on the wooden puppet Pinocchio magically transformed, after a series of mischievous adventures, into a flesh-and-blood human boy. His *Pinocchio: The Origin Story* (2016) is an alternative prequel to the familiar story, "a wordless genesis myth of the wood that became Pinocchio, radiating a larger cosmogony of life, death, and the transcendent continuity between the two" (Popova). Sanna's once upon a time goes back to cosmic origins: "once upon a time there was the universe," a meteor crashed to Earth, a tree grew from the crater, and a thunderbolt broke off a branch with limb-like appendages that came to a life of its own, as the book's protagonist, a more vegetal than human proto-Pinocchio. As the book blurb suggests, this wordless picturebook is "about the formative energy and magic that reside in the wood that becomes the boy,[...]. about life on the molecular level and what it means to think about our composition as human beings from the point of view of energy and cosmic matter" (Sanna).



Figure 5

Julia Donaldson's *Stick Man* (2009) on the other hand tells the picaresque journey of a piece of wood, a branch, who seeks his way back home to his family while repeatedly insisting that he is not just an object – a toy to play fetch with the dog or firewood – but he is Stick Man. Although Stick Man recalls children playing with sticks and stones and the plotline of existential crises about being lost and found, he resists anthropomorphization and remains an animate plant as he moves ahead to find his way back to his family tree. The identity attributed to the mundane object of the stick, primarily marked with family love, resonates particularly well with Wohlleben's recent discoveries on the caring social lives of trees. The idea of an interspecies relationship based on kindness – and a play destabilizing verbal language, which is conventionally considered to be a token of humanity – is further enhanced in the 2015 animation in which Stick Man helps Stuck Man, that is Santa Claus stuck in chimney, to distribute Christmas presents and make everyone happy, before being brought back to his home on Santa's sleigh to reunite with his family. The finale of the animation, which premiered on BBC One on Christmas day, a traditional family festivity, resonates with philosopher Timothy Morton's anarchist-communist message about "mutual aid" and "kindness" being "the zero-degree cheapest coexistence mode" between species; he describes – based on Peter Kropkin's findings on the kinship between how ants bury their dead and how working class Russians co-operated – as a most basic gut reaction preceding the human notion of empathy, "something you rely on when all else fails" (Morton 2017, Jeffries 2017).

A recent filmic adaptation (Bayona 2016) of *A Monster Calls*, a children's/YA fantasy novel written by Patrick Ness from an original idea by Siobhan Dowd, illustrated by Jim Kay – awarded with the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medals –, pays simultaneous homage to the therapeutic potential of fairy tales and the beneficial effects of interspecies and intergenerational connections. The fact that the monster is a yew tree below the boy protagonist's bedroom window illustrates how anxious human imagination projects dark fantasies upon the unknown other, which often gets demonized because of its presumably unfathomable difference. The tagline of the movie, "Find hope in the wild," already suggests that the dangerous-looking, untamed, uncivilized non-human might eventually turn out to have beneficial effects on the human.

The monstrous yew tree assists teenage Connor O'Malley in dealing with unspeakable traumas – including school bullying, his father abandoning the family, the terminal illness of the mother and his transition from boyhood to adulthood. The tree tells three stories with a rather ambiguous moral characteristic of postmodern twisted fairy tales: its human listener learns that sometimes witches deserve to be saved, charming princes may not always be good but will still rule the people who love them and have their share of happily ever after, and truth has various different sides to it, depending on the storyteller's viewpoint. The fourth and final story must be told by Connor himself, who must come to terms with a terrible truth: he must admit that he wants his mother to die because he cannot take any more of the suffering and wants "the pain to be all over".

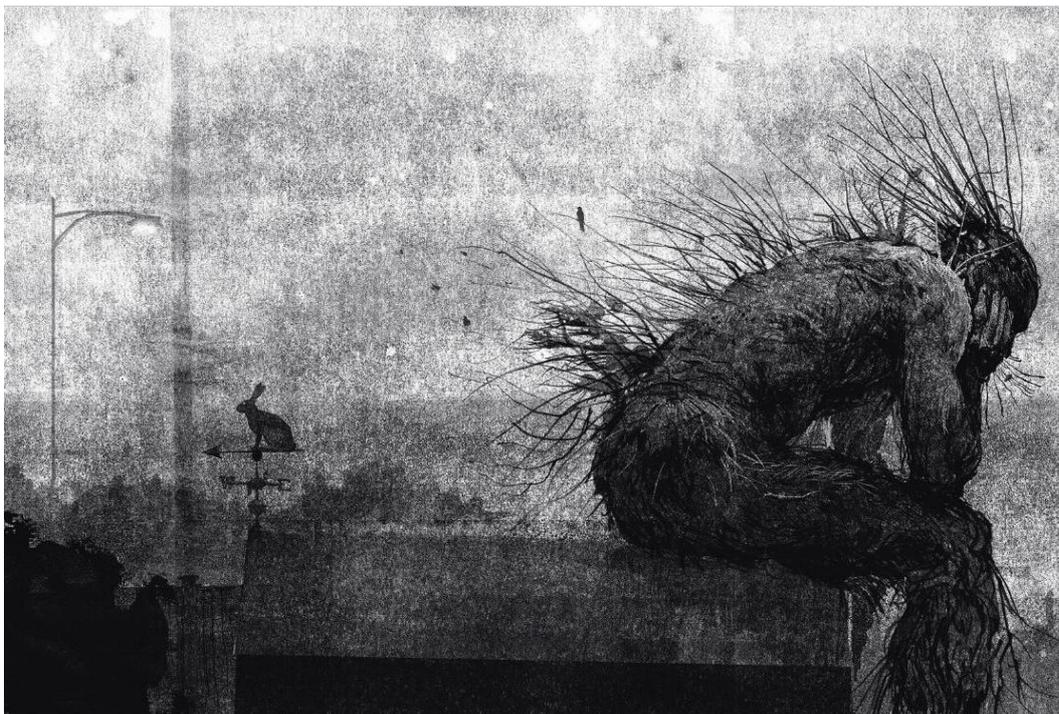


Figure 6

The film systematically challenges the "happily ever after scenario": the medicine made from yew tree bark cannot cure leukaemia, the mother must die, and the son must live on, heartbroken, but relieved that the psychic and physical torments concomitant with human mortal being and decay have ended. The boy's confession can be interpreted as a manifestation of the Freudian death drive that results from his over-identification with the decaying/lost beloved, as well as a surfacing of his rage repressed during the pre-grieving process. But he might have also learnt something from the tree's tales, which transmit a peculiar plant-perspective, an ancient wisdom rooted in a different, vegetal conception of temporality.

Stories regarded by humans as fairy tales belong to the historical past of the tree whose animated reminiscences (of the tales) show how the tree has come to be aware of the transient nature of truth/reality, and the illusoriness of the anthropocentric pride in human knowledge.

A call to a Buddhist-like calm acceptance seems to be lurking in the apparently cruel lesson about how life in nature will go on despite the loss of a single beloved or even the extinction of the entire humanity devastating for the species involved. Despite the recurring fantasy-image of the earthquake shattering the world of Connor as symbolical representation of the other's painful passing, the yew tree remains a fixed point and stays standing. Moreover the monstrous yew tree walking with a tiny human child figure on its shoulders does not only feature in Connor's drawings but it also appears in his mother's sketchbooks, which he finds after her death, and the attentive spectator can realize that the tree speaks in the voice of Connor's grandfather, as actor Liam Neeson, lending his voice to the Monster, features uncredited on a family photo as the boy's deceased grandfather. This is a sophisticated touch that can just as well attest the atavistic powers of fantasy, which allow humans to make both interspecies and intergenerational connections (humans are united because of their sharing the experience of being united with other species), but it also reminds us that the gentle giants of trees growing from human mortal remains can keep the human spirit of our beloved alive, helping us to deal with their loss through their survival. This is again an old fairy-tale topos: in *Aschenputtel*, the Cinderella version published in the Grimm brothers' 1812 fairy-tale compendium, the fairy godmother does not have a humanoid incarnation but is instead represented by a twig Cinderella plants on her mother's grave and waters with her tears until the plant, grown into a tree, helps her in return by making her wishes come true, dressing her in the ball gowns that assist her in ascending from rags to riches.

In Ness' novel, the tree roots grounded in the soil offer both cradle and grave, and hence allow the young boy protagonist to re-connect with mother earth. The Monster's call carries posthumanist messages. Like all the fairy-tale fantasy repurposings discussed in this article, it implicitly shares the insights of contemporary critical humanimal and plant studies, inviting audiences to face the ecological devastation our species has committed in the Anthropocene. Fantasizing clearly has political implications. The valuable lesson we can learn from these fantastical stories is that if humans finally become aware of the immense stakes and consequences of their automatized suppression of other species, the exploitation of their natural environment, and all the "biological annihilation" (Ceballos et al 2017) of wildlife in recent decades – researchers refer to the sixth mass extinction in Earth's history, whereby billions of plants and animals have been lost due to habitat destruction, overhunting, toxic pollution, invasion by alien species, climate change and the ultimate cause, human overpopulation and overconsumption by the rich – we might eventually be capable of bringing about a change: to facilitate the peaceful cohabitation of all species and save life on Earth.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of Chapter 2 with more on monstrous maternal imagination was published under the title “Perverted Postmodern Pinocchios: Cannibalistic Vegetal-children as Ecoterrorist Agents of Maternal Imagination.” in *Little Horrors: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Anomalous Children and the Construction of Monstrosity*. 2016. eds. Simon Bacon and Leo Ruickbie. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press. 195-215. ↵

<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous figure of the frightening, fascinating plant baby resonates with the myth of the mysterious mandrake plant root, the mandragora or the nightshade invested with a special significance in occult lore for various reasons. Besides its anaesthetic, narcotic and hallucinogenic effects applicable for medical and magical purposes, according to folk wisdom (and the Bible calling it a “love plant”) the mandragora provides protection, fertility, and prosperity as a remedy to help barren women conceive a child and a phallic charm curing male sterility. It occupies an interstitial “*point on earth where the vegetable and animal kingdoms meet*” but its anthropomorphic shape also makes it akin with the alchemical homunculus it can be turned into with the adequate ritualistic practices (buried in a human grave and watered for thirty nights with milk in which three bats have been drown). (Hall 250, Christian 403) The mandrake root, believed to grow by gallows from the sperm of hanged men, is a humanoid plant that embodies anxieties and fantasies related to sexuality, in/fertility, and degenerate rebirth from death – as illustrated by recent fantasy film *Pan’s Labyrinth* in which a little girl attempts to cure her pregnant mother by placing a mandragora baby she raises under her marital bed. Legend says that when the mandrake root is dug up, it screams to kill all who hear it. The vegetal children I analyse here also communicate a message in a provocative manner. ↵

<sup>3</sup> In this respect he reminds of another fantasy figure, Spielberg’s gentle herbatologist extra-terrestrial E.T. conceived by the director as a genderless “plant-like creature” consistently shot from the eye-level of a child as a double of protagonist Elliot. (The scenes where Timothy is riding behind the basket of

his girlfriend's bicycle can be regarded as explicit tributes to the visual iconography of E.T.) The physical marks of Timothy's otherness are minimal – his leaves can be easily covered [↵](#)

<sup>4</sup> The title character's ecocritical message is encapsulated in the ambiguous implications of his name. "Timothy" denotes the infinite grass field that arouses awe, fantasies of fertility, of liberation and engulfment, and hence symbolizes the Great Mother archetype in the collective unconscious described by Jungian psychology as a figure revered for its positive side (solicitude, wisdom, growth) and feared for its negative side (the world of the dead, darkness, seduction, secrets) – both aspects commonly associated with Nature, which we equally dread and admire. The final component of the name signifies God (*theos*), whereas the first comes from the verb to honour, also used as a legal term that means to estimate the amount of punishment due to criminals (*time*). This reflects human beings' double bind to our earthly existence both burdened and blessed by the awareness of mortality. Timothy, the monstrous vegetal boy, embodies "Little Father Time." Biologically a child but spiritually an old carrier of ancient wisdom about the vulnerable way of all mortal flesh, he also reveals beneath our child-loving a dark sense of necrophilia that uncannily holds the promise of regenerative recycling, too. [↵](#)

<sup>5</sup> Hence infantile consumption and the hunger for maternal nurturing signal the dysfunctionality, disintegration and decay of the traditional nuclear family. *Little Otik*'s advertising material built on the warning "Be careful what you wish for" is much in line with another popular piece of the emerging genre of children's gothic, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* adapted to the screen by Henry Selick where a family member's desperate attempts at amending a dysfunctional family turn awry, make matters worse and result in the horrific dehumanization of a beloved – in *Coraline*'s case a monstrous mother, in *Otík*'s a monstrous son – just like in many a specimen of the cautionary fairy tale tradition both texts draw upon. [↵](#)



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