6

Spores from Space: Becoming the Alien

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The masterpiece of pseudo-science, *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973), tells you everything you ever needed to know about plants, but were afraid to ask. Writers Christopher Bird and Peter Tompkins might have had former lives as a science journalist and a war correspondent, respectively, but by the time they publish *The Secret Life* (or *SLOP,* as I shall affectionately refer to it), it is clear they have partaken in some serious communion with the vegetal mind. *SLOP* is filled with telepathy and telekinesis, electric vegetables and flashing flowers, hypersensitive mimosas and undemonstrative radishes. Houseplants can sense their owners' pleasures and pains and, with the right gadgetry, can testify against murderers, or open garage doors. Bird and Tompkins's agenda is clear: to convince humanity it is really plants that are the earth's superbeings. Plants can grow as tall as pyramids, predict cyclones, and, most spectacularly, engage in intergalactic conversation.[1]

1 Over a decade ago, the American artist and writer Frances Stark penned a love letter to *The Secret Life of Plants* in *artext,* but she drew the line at intergalactic communication. While Stark's enthusiastic embrace of the rest of the book leads her to Bach flowers, aura photographs, and biographies of Nicola Tesla and Wilhelm Reich, she says, 'It became too incredible in Chapter 4, "Visitors from Space," so I just skipped that part.' I guess we all have our boundaries. Frances Stark, 'The Secret Life', *artext* 70 (2000): 22–23.

In connecting plants, those most earthbound of life forms, to space, *SLOP* and other contemporaneous instances of popular culture collapse two divergent tendencies of the late 1960s and early 1970s — the 'back to the land' hippie movement with the state controlled Space Race. These dialectically opposed but equally utopian trajectories come together in the trippy philosophies of *SLOP,* not to mention drug gurus such as Timothy Leary (and later Terence McKenna), proposing that certain plants are extra-terrestrial in origin, and thus can provide us with the key to interstellar communication.

One of the key figures in *SLOP* is L. George Lawrence, an electrical engineer who, in the early 1970s, sets up equipment in the Mojave Desert to receive audio signals from space. Lawrence suggests that the seemingly intelligent signals he picks up are not directed at humans, but are 'transmissions between peer groups,' and because we don't know anything about biological communications we are excluded from these conversations.[2] Apparently, these transmissions sound 'unpleasant' to human ears, but if played several times over a period of weeks, can lead to a 'fascinating degree of enchantment.'[3]

Enchanting emissions from space lead Lawrence to speculate that perhaps plants are extraterrestrials and have terraformed planet earth to support life, not least our own.[4] While conven-

2 Christopher Bird and Peter Tompkins, *The Secret Life of Plants* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 54. Lawrence speculates that these may be intergalactic calls for help. In a deadpan manner typical of *SLOP,* we are told a copy of Lawrence's tape and a seven-page report are being held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, 'preserved as a potentially historical scientific document.'

3 Ibid., 55.

4 Ibid., 63. It is worth noting here, however, that it is fungi that are the true 'world makers,' and that plants would not have been able to migrate from the oceans to land if fungi had not first made soil by 'digesting rocks.' While fungi are not plants, they inhabit a deliciously slippery space that is both between, and completely outside of, flora and fauna. In this chapter I elide flora and fungi, both for anthropocentric convenience, and disanthropocentric solidarity, representing utterly entwined, inhuman worlds. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*

tional evolutionary science holds that a peculiar and accidental set of conditions led to the emergence of life on earth, proponents of panspermia argue that everything on earth originated elsewhere, and so we are all, already, aliens. Lawrence suggests that the plant intelligences that incubated Earth are in instant communication across vast distances, and what we need are not spaceships but 'the proper "telephone numbers."'[5] As emissaries from space, plants surely still have intergalactic family ties, and thus the need, and ability, to 'phone home.' Come to think of it, wasn't ET a botanist?[6]

While we can only speculate that plants communicate with space, it is certainly clear we humans often communicate ideas *about* space and all its concomitant strangeness via vegetal motifs. Our imaginings regarding weird worlds and beings are often mediated by what we hold dear and familiar about earth's flora, and what we can hypothesise about their extra-terrestrial counterparts. In dystopian sci-fi, we figure the loss of plants as the end of all hope, and the miraculous growth of plants in hostile environs as hope's beginning.[7] There are many ways in which we think with plants (and, to be fair, plants think with us). In science fiction, fabulated vegetal worlds feature radically inverted colours and scales, signaling the alien; hybrid creatures embody and flout

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 22.

5 Bird and Tompkins, *Secret Life of Plants,* 64.

6 As was Mark Watney (Matt Damon) in *The Martian* (2015), who survives abandonment on Mars by growing potatoes, and Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern) in *Silent Running* (1972), who takes care of a biodome spaceship carrying earth's flora, maintaining the diversity the planet can no longer support. Dern is magnificent as the wild-eyed Lowell who speaks for the trees as his indifferent crewmates laugh, including an impassioned monologue over a cantaloupe he has lovingly grown himself. Lowell's passionate connection to the vegetal world over humans (he even prefers the company of droids to his crew) speaks to a generational disenchantment with earthly politics and a suspicion that true empathy is more likely to be found in Walden-like woods or the wilderness of space, or both.

7 Witness some classic, comedic tales of 'endlings' and new beginnings, from *WALL-E* (2008) to *Idiocracy* (2006), featuring the unbeatable phrase: 'Electrolytes: It's what plants crave!'

anxieties about racial and species boundaries; contagious plants infect their human hosts with alchemical arsenals, leading to death or ecstasy, or both.

Science fictions of plant sentience and human-plant hybridity imagine worlds divested of anthropocentric control, where senses are heightened and interconnectivities flourish, for better or worse. Plants, fungi, and science fiction are mutually compatible vehicles for altered consciousness, and this chapter propounds *vegetalismo* (curing with psychoactive plants) in order to 'become the alien.'[8] As Félix Guattari puts it, the chaosmic Universe can be constellated with all kinds of becomings: vegetal, animal, cosmic, or machinic.[9] When chemically induced molecular revolutions are unavailable, however, the neuronal reorderings of minor literature can be just as revelatory. In this case, I intend to magnify the spores found in an episode of the Original Series *Star Trek,* alongside the multiple incarnations of sci-fi B movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* with some help from spore-loving anthropologist Anna Tsing, thanks to her work on the matsutake mushroom.

In the 1967 episode of *Star Trek* 'This Side of Paradise,' the Enterprise heads to Omnicron Ceti III after contact has been lost with the 150 men, women, and children who have attempted to colonise the planet. Fearing that the colonists will be dead due to the lethal Berthold rays that are bathing the planet, the crew are startled to find on beaming down that not only are these hardy earthlings still alive, but in *perfect* health. Their leader, Elias Sandoval, avoids the issue of their literal 'radiance,' focusing instead on his philosophy 'that men should return to a less complicated

8 Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 98.

9 Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm,* trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), 68. We might add to this list fungal becomings, since fungi are neither vegetal nor animal, but more than the sum of both 'Queendoms.' (I'm using 'Queendom' as opposed to 'Kingdom' following the example of Peter McCoy, founder of 'Radical Mycology,' although of course there are far more than two genders operating in the world of fungi).

life.'[10] The colonists possess no vehicles or weapons, and live in complete peace and harmony. When asked what happened to their animals, Elias replies simply 'We're vegetarians.'[11]

The rigorously logical Mr. Spock tries to get answers to the riddle of the planet from Leila, a botanist (naturally) who also happens to be a soft-focus blonde *and* Spock's ex-flame (it's a small galaxy). Leading him to a patch of rubbery, leggy looking shrubs with pink flowers, Leila tells Spock, 'I was one of the first to find them. The spores.' 'Spores?' Spock asks quizzically, just as one of the plants ejaculates in his face.[12] Clutching his head and falling to the ground in pain, Spock attempts to resist the vegetal realignment of his senses. Luckily for Leila and the viewers, his intense struggle is futile, and shortly, completely against character, Spock says 'I love you' to Leila. The couple kiss, and love, drugs, flower power, peace, harmony, and vegetarianism reign. All suspicions that Omnicron Ceti III is a 1967 middle-American sci-fi caricature of a hippie commune are confirmed when Spock willfully ignores the commands of his superior, Captain Kirk, while

10 True to many 1960s communes, the leader bears a biblical name, and appropriately to a planet in which the colonists 'should be dead,' Elias is a prophet who raises the dead.

11 Ralph Senensky, dir., *Star Trek,* 'This Side of Paradise,' writ. D.C. Fontana, Jerry Sohl, and Gene Roddenberry (Desilu Productions and Paramount Television), March 2, 1967).

12 Ejaculating vegetation seems an appropriate motif in 1967: a sexual revolution enabled in part by psychoactive plants, particularly marijuana and magic mushrooms, although LSD, of course, was synthesised in a laboratory and taken orally. Psychoactive dust is actually more reminiscent of cocaine (what Father Yod of the Los Angeles-based commune The Source Family christened 'sacred snow') as well as the psychoactive snuff powders of the Amazon, such as the powder of the *yākōanahi* tree inhaled by Yanomami shamans. *Xapiripë* spirits, which are themselves 'as tiny as specks of sparkling dust,' can only be seen if the powder of this tree is inhaled 'many, many times.' In fact, it is a process that takes as long to unfold as it does for a white person to learn to read and write properly. 'The *yākōanahi* powder is the food of the spirits. Those who don't 'drink' it remain with the eyes of ghosts and see nothing.' David Kopenawa, quoted in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits,' *Inner Asia* 9, no. 2 (2007), 153–72.

lolling with Leila, watching clouds and rainbows, and swinging upside down from a tree with a broad grin on his face.[13] Spock suggests it is the increasingly apoplectic Kirk who needs to be 'straightened out.' He and Leila lead Kirk and two of his crew to a clump of flowers, where they are instantly sprayed with spores, yet Kirk remains unaffected, even as his crew fall under the plants' spell. It is as if, in the style of Bill Clinton, Kirk witnesses a utopian psychedelia unfolding before him, but 'doesn't inhale.'[14]

Spock's elven ears already associate him with mushroom people, so it is appropriate that he is the first to be 'infected' by love spores. In this intergalactic Eden, Spock is Pan, who has been reanimated after the enforced slumber that started on December 25, in the year 0 AD. Although the stardate is 3417.3, it is in 1967 that Pan awakens (and see what party-pooper extraordinaire Ayn Rand had to say two years later about muddy horizontal Dionysian revelries at Woodstock versus the upright, Kirk-like phallicism of the Apollo Mission).[15]

Kirk heads back to the Enterprise to find that the plants and spores have already beamed aboard (the ship's botanist saw to it), and now the entire crew is in summer-of-love mutiny against the Captain, the sole remaining proponent of order. Kirk rails against the planet's 'private paradise' (said with Shatner's famously plosive enunciation), while Spock tries to explain to him the miracle of spores drifting through space, then inhabiting plants while

13 The 'Acidemic' who writes 'Psychedelic Film Criticism for the Already Deranged' agrees with my prognostication that this episode is a parable for hippie culture's refusal of participation in the military industrial complex, while hinting at the War on Drugs to come. Erich Kuersten, 'Sex, Drugs and Quantum Existentialism: The Acidemic STAR TREK Short Guide,' *Acidemic Film Blog,* June 5, 2012, https://acidemic.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/60s-sex-space-drugs-existential.html.

14 For anthropologist and mushroom enthusiast Anna Tsing, there needn't be particulate matter in the inhalation, but smell itself is a transformative encounter with 'an other,' a response which 'takes us somewhere new; we are not quite ourselves anymore' (*The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 46). Indeed, 'spores model open-ended communication and excess: the pleasures of speculation' (ibid., 227).

15 Ayn Rand, 'Apollo and Dionysus,' in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* (New York: New American Library, 1971), 57–81.

waiting for human bodies to colonise. Thriving on Berthold rays, the spores live in symbiosis with their host body, promising complete health and peace of mind. But Kirk is disgusted by a planet with 'no wants' and 'no needs,' because human beings 'weren't meant for that.' According to Kirk, man 'stagnates if he has no ambition' or challenge. Eventually, though, even Kirk's resistance wears thin. He is the last man left on the bridge of the Enterprise, and a lurking flower sprays him. Finally, he understands, and prepares to evacuate the ship. But as he places a very mid-20th-century suitcase on the transporter pad (packed with his Star Fleet medals), the enormity of the situation overcomes him, and Kirk summons all his willpower to liberate himself from the tyranny of peace and love. Personal torment suddenly turns into relief as he realises the potential of violent emotion to break the spell of the flower's power. He hatches a plan to make Spock 'see reason' by goading him with insults until the Vulcan is driven to violence, which will allow him to break through the spore-induced haze.

'All right, you mutinous, disloyal, computerised, half-breed, we'll see about you deserting my ship,' Kirk begins. Spock answers him even-handedly, but Kirk persists: 'You're an overgrown jackrabbit, an elf with a hyperactive thyroid'; a 'simpering, devil-eared freak whose father was a computer and his mother an encyclopedia'...'rotten like the rest of your subhuman race'; a 'carcass full of memory banks who should be squatting in a mushroom, instead of passing himself off as a man'; 'you belong in a circus...right next to the dog-faced boy.' Mistrust of miscegenation, of human-animal-plant-machine hybridity, of machine elves and machinic assemblages, is writ large in Kirk's desperate attempt, as the ultimate in colonial power, to subdue via insult.[16]

16 The similarities between Captain James Kirk of the Enterprise, and Captain James Cook of the Endeavour, have been commented upon in numerous fan sites, while the quotation that begins each episode of STAR TREK, 'To boldly go where no man has gone before,' is said to be based on one of Cook's journal entries. Is Spock, then, an intergalactic Tupaia, the Tahitian navigator and priest who acted as Cook's translator throughout the Pacific? Spock is racially ambiguous, as Kirk's outburst proves, and as a result he is almost always Kirk's interface with and inter-

Kirk breaks Spock's spirit, thus breaking the spell of the spores, and Spock is 'himself' again — a patsy, Uncle Tom, strike breaker. Together, he and Kirk beam a sonic frequency to the planet's surface — perhaps something like the 'unpleasant' space signals Lawrence intercepts in the Mojave — just enough to make everyone irritable and pick fights with each other. Cue scenes of formerly peaceful colonists hitting each other with spades. Victory! Even founder Elias comes to his senses, realising there has been 'no progress' and the last three years have been wasted — never mind that intoxication with the plants has actually saved them from the certain death of the Berthold rays.

When the Enterprise leaves the planet with the colonists on board bound for a new home, the bridge crew gaze upon Omnicron Ceti III as it disappears from view. Dr. McCoy comments that this was the second time man was thrown out of paradise, but Kirk disagrees, stating, 'we walked out on our own.' Man, according to that most manly of men, Captain Kirk, was not meant for paradise, rather 'we' (humanity) were meant to 'struggle, claw our way up, scratch for every inch of the way.' Tellingly for a period in which politics were being played out musically, while the Vietnam war raged, Kirk opines: 'Maybe we can't stroll to the music of the lute. We must march to the sound of drums.' But this victory speech, and the restoration of order, is surely just a ruse, for viewers in 1967 wanted to be sprayed by cosmic spores, to run from swaggering authority figures with barrel chests and overly tight pants, to see Spock smile and swing from the trees. Kirk's martial rhetoric is immediately undone by an unusually pensive Spock, who, with as much sadness as a Vulcan can muster, muses: 'For the first time in my life I was happy.'

Eleven years after 'This Side of Paradise' put contagious spores from space and the vegetal mind on mainstream TV, Philip Kaufman's magisterial 1978 remake of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* signaled the final disintegration of the flower power decade. The opening credits feature gelatinous forms copulating in some anonymous location in space. The eerie sound effects — galactic pulsations, cellular chittering, ghostly screams — are 'unpleasant to human ears', like Lawrence's signals

preter of the 'alien other.'

from space. The opening sequence is a 'spore's eye view,' which is also the favoured perspective of writers as diverse as Terence McKenna, for whom magic mushrooms are aliens living in our midst, and anthropologist Anna Tsing, who writes 'under the influence' of the matsutake mushroom, such that she even takes on the perspective of a spore when writing an academic essay.[17] Kaufman's eerie spores sight our blue planet, Earth, then plunge through the atmosphere, through cloud cover, and into the gardens of San Francisco.[18] Thanks to the rain, the spores soak thoroughly into the vegetal fabric of the city, and soon strange pink flowers are popping up on host plants. The pinkness of the sensorially-penetrative flowers in both *Star Trek* and *Invasion* 78 is remarkable: to 'pink' means to pierce or prick, appropriate to airborne insemination which is more akin to divine impregnation — asexual reproduction aided by a mere breath of wind (or an angel).[19]

Jack Bellicec (Jeff Goldblum) and his wife Nancy (Veronica Cartwright) own a bathhouse in which corpulent men bathe in mud, like spuds or pods.[20] Nancy fills the bathhouse with plants, insisting that classical music be piped throughout the establishment because the plants 'just love it.' She assures her customers that plants have feelings 'just like people,' and is fascinated by the idea that classical music stimulates plant growth, noting, 'They've done tons of experiments on them.' Clearly, Nancy has read *SLOP,* where an experiment on summer squashes demonstrates how those exposed to classical music grew towards the speakers, while those exposed to rock'n'roll literally climbed the walls to escape. Plants' enjoyment of Western classical music,

17 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 31, nos. 2-3 (2014).

18 Blue echiums seem to be the first port of call, then a New Zealand flax bush, both of which I have in my garden (should I be worried?).

19 See more about pink and bodily invasion in: Tessa Laird, 'Pink Data: Tiamaterialism and the Female Gnosis of Desire,' in *Aesthetics After Finitude,* eds. Baylee Brits, Prudence Gibson, and Amy Ireland (Melbourne: re.press, 2016), 191–200.

20 The original 1956 version of the film popularised the term 'pod people,' meaning humans with no distinguishing features, signifying the undifferentiated and therefore sinister masses.

however, is far exceeded by their love for Hindustani classical music, as plants listening to Ravi Shankar actually embraced the speakers.[21] Interestingly, Tsing uses the concept of polyphonies as found in pre-modern musical forms such as fugues, to illustrate a way of listening to a world of multiple entanglements. Musical unity via a unified coordination of time is considered 'progress,' and in rock'n'roll, the strong beat resonates with the listener's heart, suggestive of individualism and a 'single perspective.'[22] Nancy Bellicec gets all of this, but nothing can prepare her, or the rest of the cast, for their conversion into alien spore-infected 'pod people.' In fact, for all her understanding of the vegetal mind, Nancy is the only one who manages to hold out and not be taken over by intergalactic plant consciousness. The film's classic denouement comes when she sees her friend Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland), and whispers to him conspiratorially, only to find that he has become one of 'them.' He points at her in psychotic fury, emitting an ear-splitting, non-human shriek, like a mandrake being pulled out of the ground.

It's a given that sci-fi reflects the world in which it is produced. The original 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is primarily a McCarthyist red scare — communists, or at least communal thinking, have invaded middle America — although it can also read as a subversive *critique* of McCarthyist hysteria. 'This Side of Paradise' parodises flower children and the 'enemy within' of a drug-savvy youth culture, yet it too has some anti-communist paranoia: Spock dons rather Soviet-style overalls when he decides to ignore the orders of all-American Captain Kirk.

There is another common denominator between the 1967 TV episode and the 1978 feature — Leonard Nimoy. In *Star Trek,* his Vulcan armour is pierced by a pink flower, making him more emotional, while in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* he is Dr.

21 Bird and Tompkins, *Secret Life of Plants,* 141. It is also worth noting here that musician Stevie Wonder was so enamoured by the book that he composed a double album with the same name, and produced a documentary featuring some of the book's key findings, interspersed with his own songs (1979). The breathtaking finale features a fly-over as Stevie, in pseudo-Egyptian garb, sings in a field of sunflowers.

22 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 23.

David Kibner, a psychiatrist and charismatic self-help guru who puts people in touch with their emotions. In both cases, Nimoy's playing against the expectations of his most famous character heightens the sense of emotional intensity. And while there are still hints of a mistrust of collectivity over individualism in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* what stands out more than political subtext is the breakdown of monogamous relationships. In the 1970s, the sexual revolution has mainstreamed, promiscuity is the norm, and divorce rates are surging. The 1978 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* gives ordinary spousal dissatisfaction the sci-fi treatment: partners act indifferently with each other not because they are bored but because they are actually aliens! Kibner counsels countless individuals for whom the 'person I married' becomes someone, *something,* else![23]

Karen Barad refers to slime moulds, or 'social amoebas,' as exemplary beings because they 'queer' identity, resisting classification as either group or individual, and existing somewhere between animal, plant, and fungal kingdoms. Barad notes the unease with which such social amoebas are portrayed in the media, given their self-sacrificing behaviours (individuals 'committing suicide' for the betterment of the group). Depending on your interpretation, the 'sticky contingencies' of slime moulds either paint Nature as 'an exemplary moral actor or a commie activist (or, heaven forfend, both)!'[24] Barad compares the xenophobia lurking in popular science literature to another 1950s horror sci-fi film, *The Blob,* and notes that systemic incitement of fear did not die off with McCarthyism, and does not only take the form of rabid anti-communism. According to Barad, the smeary fingerprints of *The Blob* can be seen in the hysterical responses

23 This dis-ease with the institution of marriage is brilliantly lampooned at the end of *Invasion* (1956), where Dr. Miles Bennell narrates as he runs from a crowd of pod people, 'I didn't know the real meaning of fear until I kissed Becky. A moment's sleep and the girl I loved was an inhuman enemy bent on my destruction.' *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* dir. Don Seigel (Walter Wanger Productions, 1956).

24 Karen Barad, 'Nature's Queer Performativity,' in *Toward an Aesthetics of Living Beings,* eds. Cord Riechelmann and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 250–61.

to the AIDS epidemic, mad cow disease, and avian flu, each of which have demanded mass sacrifices of human and non-human scapegoats. Racism and Islamophobia are today's incarnation of *The Blob,* which 'is very much alive on the contemporary political scene.'[25] But what if, Barad asks, 'Nature herself is a commie, a pervert, or a queer?'[26]

In the 2007 remake *The Invasion,* we have come full circle to 1967, and there are hints (as with 'This Side of Eden') that 'becoming the alien' is really the best way to go, since peace on earth finally prevails. While the primary plot centres on Nicole Kidman's and Daniel Craig's attempts at escaping alien contagion (here Barad's 'blob' has become avian flu paranoia about sneezing and body fluids), we see secondary glimpses of a changing world. Peace treaties are being signed. Violent crime is nonexistent. While plants themselves are not a feature of the 2007 film, when Craig has 'become alien' his attempts to placate the hysterical Kidman involve vegetal metaphor. 'Remember our trip to Colorado?' he asks her. 'Remember the Aspen grove? Recall how peaceful it was. Remember what you said to me? You wondered how it would be if people could live like these trees... completely connected with each other, in harmony, as one.'[27]

The vegetal is the trope of ultimate interconnectivity (or the fungal, as Tsing would have it). Craig promotes a world without suffering, where 'no one can hurt each other' because 'there is no other,' which can be read as either edenic utopianism or totalitarianism, be it communist, fascist, or Borg. When Kidman,

25 Ibid., 252. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen invokes two more 1950s sci-fi horror flicks, *The Astounding She-Monster* (1957) and *Them!* (1954), featuring a horde of giant ants, which Cohen is quick to point out are really communists. He notes that feminine and cultural others are monstrous by themselves but 'when they threaten to mingle' as with Barad's queering of nature, 'the entire economy of desire comes under attack.' Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25. For Cohen, the monster's destructiveness is really 'a deconstructiveness' that undermines notions of fixed identity (14).

26 Barad, 'Nature's Queer Performativity,' 254.

27 *The Invasion,* dirs. Oliver Hirschbeigel and James McTeigue (Warner Bros., 2007).

unconvinced, cries 'You're not Ben!' Craig replies, 'I'm not Ben, I'm *more than* Ben,' unconsciously echoing terminology coined by ecophilosopher David Abram. Abram's 'more-than-human' speaks to a world in which inhuman others are not less-than, or in-opposition-to, humanity, but affirmative co-producers of a collective landscape. As an acknowledgement of intersubjectivity, the term has been enthusiastically embraced by a range of ecotheorists eager to move beyond the constructs and constraints of humanism.

McKenna had no problem with 'becoming the alien' — he saw it as the only means to thwart alienation. He said, 'The next great step toward a planetary holism is the partial merging of the technologically transformed human world with the Archaic matrix of vegetable intelligence that is the Transcendent Other.'[28] Of course, the best way to achieve this was by ingesting magic mushrooms, which he had done with such frequency and intensity he was able to open a communications channel with the mushroom as easily as if he was Lieutenant Uhura sitting at her console on the deck of the Enterprise. 'The mushroom speaks to you when you speak to it,' letting you in on such secrets such as: 'I am old, fifty times older than thought in your species, and I came from the stars.' McKenna says he argues with the mushroom about how much information it will reveal. As the propagator, he feels he has certain rights, but the mushroom does not want to reveal the secrets of intergalactic space travel — yet. When McKenna asks what this alien entity is doing on earth, it replies: 'Listen, if you're a mushroom, you live cheap; besides, I'm telling you, this was a very nice neighborhood until the monkeys got out of control.'[29]

McKenna's conversations with the mushroom support a theory of panspermia — that life on earth originated from cosmic microorganisms drifting through space — space dust, or maybe even 'space spunk.' In keeping with the Hermetic teaching 'As above, so below', comets certainly look like macro-scale sperm, with planets as incubatory eggs.[30] While Tsing inhabits a spore's

28 Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods: the Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 93.

29 McKenna, *Archaic Revival,* 99.

30 Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke make a feminist critique of panspermia as

eye view in order to 'infect' anthropology and transform it into a (paradoxically) *more than human* discipline,[31] McKenna is infected with the mushroom itself, such that it speaks through him:

> By means impossible to explain because of certain misconceptions in your model of reality all my mycelial networks in the galaxy are in hyperlight communication across space and time. The mycelial body is as fragile as a spider's web but the collective hypermind and memory is a vast historical archive of the career of evolving intelligence on many worlds in our spiral star swarm.[32]

McKenna's mushroom mediumism is an example of what Tsing calls 'Contamination as Collaboration.'[33] McKenna, or rather the mushroom, says this goes beyond mere 'collectivism' and into far 'richer and even more baroque evolutionary possibilities,' including symbiotic mutualism, 'a relation of mutual dependence and positive benefits for both of the species involved.'[34] For Tsing, contamination describes a transformative encounter, and it is 'contaminating relationality' which makes diversity, and cre-

phallogocentrism writ large, in which cosmic life is made to follow the pattern of the stable yet ceaselessly colonizing, patrimonial family, while earth is figured as a virgin, waiting planet (Bryld and Lykke suggest the Earth in this narrative is in fact 'raped'). For these authors, the only real 'seeding' taking place is phallogocentrism itself, which resows itself in susceptible minds. Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke, *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals and the Sacred* (New York: Zed Books, 2000), 100–16.

31 'The radical potential of anthropology has always been this: other worlds are possible' (Tsing, 'Strathern beyond the Human,' 225).

32 O.T. Oss and O.N. Oeric [Terence and Dennis McKenna], *Psilocybin, Magic Mushroom Grower's Guide: A Handbook for Psilocybin Enthusiasts* (Oakland: Quick American Publishing/Lux Natura, 1991), 14.

33 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 26. Another brilliant sci-fi example of a plant's-eye, rather than a fungus-eye view, is Mark von Schlegell's *Venusia* (2005), which features, among many other tales, strange rituals with psychoactive plants on Venus, and ends with the reader's realisation that the entire novel has been narrated by a potplant.

34 Oss and Oeric, *Psilocybin,* 15.

ates a 'happening,' that is, an event that is greater than the sum of its parts.[35] Even without non-fungal participants, the lives of fungi are already made up of many players — in particular, they have famously non-binary sex lives, which Tsing describes as akin to 'having a child together with your own arm,' resulting in a 'mosaic body, stuffed with heterogeneous genetic material…you, and you, and you, and me, all in one.'[36]

The networked intelligence or 'mosaic body' is often figured in sci-fi as pertaining to plants rather than fungi. Ursula K. Le Guin's ecological parable *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) features furry green forest people, surely an inspiration for the Na'vi of *Avatar* (2009), who worship a sacred 'Tree of Souls' which connects directly to the Na'vi nervous system via a bio-machinic neural linkage system that looks unnervingly like the universal signifier for unwashed hippiedom: a dreadlock. I cannot help but superimpose *Avatar*'s hippie fluoro rave aesthetics on Tsing's description of subterranean fungal interconnectivities, where 'thread-like filaments, called hyphae, spread into fans and tangle into cords through the dirt.' Tsing asks us to imagine that the soil is liquid and transparent, and that we have sunk into the ground, only to find ourselves surrounded by nets of fungal hyphae. 'Follow fungi into that underground city, and you will

35 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 27–29; 40. Interestingly, her use of the word 'happening' chimes with 1960s counter-cultural language: the activation of the masses into culturally-productive play, rather than passive spectatorship — but see how this term is negatively detourned by M. Night Shyamalan's ecological horror film, *The Happening* (2008).

36 Tsing, 'Strathern beyond the Human,' 225–26. This has all kinds of precedents in anthropological lore (e.g., among the Yanomami, women were said to be born from the calf of an ancestral male). This also chimes well with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's description of a singular shaman as always already multiple: 'The concept of spirit essentially designates a population of molecular affects, an intensive multiplicity…the same applies to the concept of shaman: "the shaman is a multiple being, a micro-population of shamanic agencies sheltered in one body"': Viveiros de Castro, 'The Crystal Forest,' 156, quoting Peter Roe, *The Cosmic Zygote: Cosmology in the Amazon Basin* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982).

find the strange and varied pleasures of interspecies life.'[37] Mychorrhizal networks can be compared to the Internet, a veritable 'woodwide web' carrying information across the forest, and allowing ecosystems to respond to threats.[38] Taking this concept to a darker place, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* figures a world in which trees kill humanity en masse with poisonous spores, although it can be argued this is Gaian self-defense, a kind of militant disanthropocentrism (enacted by guerillas who are already wearing camouflage).[39] *The Happening* is a dystopian take on the epiphany Michael Pollan has in his garden, when he realises that it is the plants, and not the gardener, who is in control: not objects of human desire, but agential subjects, 'acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do for themselves.'[40]

As the hysterical hero of the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* tries to warn oncoming traffic, 'They're here already... you're next!' And, throughout the 60s and 70s, plants really did invade the popular imagination, from little old ladies talking to their begonias, to Ozzie Osbourne singing 'You introduced me to my mind,' in the song 'Sweet Leaf' (an ode to marijuana, not

37 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 137.

38 Ibid., 139. Tsing refers to the 'intellectual woodland' (286) and 'the spore-filled airy stratosphere of the mind' (228).

39 Shyamalan's lacklustre movie nevertheless possesses a (literally) killer premise, in which plants can work cooperatively in networks that far exceed anything humanity has achieved to date. This idea, in concert with another of Shyamalan's missed opportunities, *Signs* (2002), a film about crop circles, proposes an answer (via *SLOP*) to the question of who makes these strange geometric symbols? Instead of looking for an extra-terrestrial intelligence, or a series of human tricksters, why not look for a more intrinsically terrestrial culprit — the plants themselves? Though, if we truly believe in panspermia, the plants are the extra-terrestrials. Or, continuing with panspermia, crop circles are akin to inter-galactic cum stains, what is left over when inter-dimensional heavenly bodies collide.

40 Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001). It is this shift in point of view, this perspectivism, that Viveiros de Castro, Tsing, and many others see as being the only true decolonial and dis-anthropocentric methodology, and one which shamans, via *vegetalismo,* are adept at practicing.

stevia). But plants could be villains too, as the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and a host of other sci-fi plots made apparent (let us not forget the chilling British 1980s *Day of the Triffids* TV series, or the campy family film *Little Shop of Horrors*). And while *The Secret Life of Plants* is generally regarded as a period piece of dubious scientific and literary worth, successive generations of writers and artists unearth it to again ponder plant consciousness, and the possibility that, via electrodes, or ingestion, or maybe just conversation, we could tune in, not only to plants' ancient, inhuman wisdom, but to the stars from whence they came.