



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# When Good Plants Go Bad

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | DECEMBER 12, 2008 ✓ PREMIUM

Even a man who is pure in heart  
And says his prayers by night  
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms  
And the autumn moon is bright.

Ever since *The Wolf Man* (1941), and possibly even earlier, horror films have shown us the nightmares that occur when the forces of nature run amok, whether in the form of werewolves, mutant worms, giant ants, or asteroids from outer space. That theme has been unusually prevalent in the last two years, when nature has turned lethal in numerous films about unforeseen environmental disasters that threaten to devastate the human race. In *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Quarantine* (2008), and *Doomsday* (2008), the culprit is that old horror-movie motif, the accidentally released manufactured virus that turns ordinary people into flesh-hungry killers. In *The Invasion* (2007), a remake of the 1956 classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the virus is of alien origin and has the ability to recode human DNA, turning the infected host into an emotionless clone. Other recent films exploit the anxiety inherent in anomalous climate conditions. *30 Days of Night* (2007), an offbeat vampire movie, takes place in an isolated Alaska town that is plunged into darkness for a month each year; *Whiteout* (2009) is set in Antarctica, when the sun is about to set for six months; and *The Mist* (2007) depicts a freak storm that releases toxic fogs enshrouding squidlike monsters from another dimension.

Perhaps the least likely of these new eco-terrors is the killer plant. While scary vegetation has shown up in stories from *Jack and the Beanstalk* to *The Day of the Triffids* (1962) and *The Evil Dead* (1981), in which one poor girl is raped by a tree, horror films about vicious



storyteller to make us feel truly afraid of something with only the most basic nervous system, if a plant can be said to have a nervous system at all. After all, unlike animals, robots, and zombies, plants don't turn on their owners, they don't hold grudges, and they can't gang up and plot revenge. In fact, there's something ridiculous in the idea of being terrorized by a plant, which is why the subject makes such fertile ground for spoofs like *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!* (1978).

Yet there's nothing funny about *The Ruins* (2008), in which a group of vacationing teenagers falls into the clutches of terrifying jungle vines that have "evolved" into vicious man-eating predators, so advanced they can vibrate in such a way as to imitate different human voices, and even the sound of a cellphone. As if crafty malevolence, toxic venom, and razor-sharp "teeth" weren't enough, these uncanny creepers can also infiltrate wounds, twisting and blossoming painfully under the victim's skin.

Frightening foliage also provides the threat in M. Night Shyamalan's latest film, *The Happening* (2008). As we're informed by one of the characters, a slightly unhinged ecologist, plants communicate with one another by releasing chemicals, emitting different poisons to get rid of specific pests. Recent outbreaks of mass suicide in big cities, the ecologist speculates, are being caused by a toxin released by plants that is triggered by the presence of large groups of people.

This, apparently, is the first sign that Mother Earth is finally starting to reject human beings as pests, a scenario some might not find far-fetched. If, as the Gaia theorists have it, the earth is a living being, the damage we are doing might very well turn us from welcome guests to unwanted parasites, inviting our eradication by the planetary equivalent of pest control. If such a scenario were ever to occur, the earth's rejection of humankind would be a natural process of adaptation to changing ecological conditions. What's especially telling about films like *The Ruins* and *The Happening* is their emotional tone, their implication that the plants are angry with us. Very angry. And, as we quickly learn, there's nothing like the wrath of shrubbery scorned.

Significantly, in the 1980s, the vegetable world gained a supremely articulate spokesplant in *Swamp Thing*, the eponymous hero of a long-running horror comic-book

series that had started in 1973. When author Alan Moore took over the series in 1984, he turned Swamp Thing — a mass of sentient vegetable matter with human emotions, memories, and skills — into an ecowarrior who refers to human beings as "screaming meat." When not at home in the Louisiana Bayou, Moore's Swamp Thing was off representing his constituency at the Parliament of Trees (also known as "The Green"), an elemental community representing the interests of all plants on earth.

The ecological situation has become impossible to ignore in the last few years, and it's tempting to consider this recent crop of killer plants as a backlash to the Green movement. After all, these movies remind us, nature is not green at heart, but "red in tooth and claw," and plants, like animals, can be destructive, repugnant, noxious, and devastating to their environment — an idea that helps us justify the way we've been treating them.

On the other hand, perhaps these nightmares of nature are a projection of our own green guilt. We devastate foliage with pesticides and bring forests to the brink of destruction; we genetically deform vegetables into monstrous hybrids and cause irreparable damage with weed killers and growth hormones. What's more, we cultivate plants solely in order to eat them, or to cut them off in their prime and enjoy the way they smell as they slowly die. With no Parliament of Trees to defend their rights, perhaps we can't help but unconsciously imagine plants to be, at some level, voiceless, resentful, and oppressed.

That may be the anxiety at the root of films with smart, vengeful plants cutting humans down in our prime. We reap what we sow.

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