



Killer plants and fungi in horror cinema

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As recently addressed (Rasia, 2020), animals have been the focus of horror films since the very beginning of the genre, with more than 400 films about killer animals to date. That is not the case for other two “Kingdoms” of life – Plantae and Fungi – despite many plants and fungi representing a danger to humans due to their poisonous nature. Nevertheless, some plants (e.g., carnivorous plants) and fungi (e.g., zombie-insect fungus) have inspired a handful of horror movies because of their bizarre manner to kill animals (although not humans).

In this work I analyze horror films about killer plants and fungi, attempting a classification of them.

METHODOLOGY

I revised all the horror movies about plants and fungi that I could find in movie databases and compared them to extant plants and fungi. A total of 27 films were considered, excluding those in which plants and fungi are not the central figure of danger, or at least do not have a significant participation. All the movies can be found in the following list: <https://letterboxd.com/ghelhal/list/killer-plants-fungus/>.

This study discusses plot details (also known as spoilers) of many films. So, if the reader intends to watch any of the mentioned films, please consider doing so before reading this article.

In this work I introduce the term “deep-

splotation” to refer to deep ocean-themed films of the late 1980s and early 90s, like *The Abyss* (1989), directed by James Cameron, and *DeepStar Six* (1989), directed by Sean S. Cunningham (known from *Friday the 13th*, 1980).

The movies were classified in two major groups: (1) inspired by real plants or fungi, and (2) not inspired by real plants or fungi.

MOVIES INSPIRED BY REAL PLANTS/ FUNGI

Carnivorous plants

Carnivorous plants live in nitrogen-poor soils and therefore, need to gain nutrients by trapping animals, mainly arthropods. These plants have modified parts of their body that act as traps (e.g., Lloyd, 1942; Ellison & Gotelli, 2001).

Films in which these types of plants can be clearly identified are *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), and its musical remake *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), where a giant plant called Audrey eats people using a modified flower as a “mouth” (Fig. 1).

In adaptations of John Wyndam’s novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), which comprises a movie (1962) and two TV series (1981, 2009), giant plants with the ability to walk and communicate among themselves suddenly start to kill and eat people using a modified flower as a poisonous whip.



Figure 1. Top: Venus flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*) trapping a fly; source: Wikimedia Commons (B. Moisset, 2007). Bottom left: poster of *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986); source: IMDB. Bottom right: the singing carnivorous plant Audrey, from *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986); screen capture from the movie.

Other killer plants

There are some plants that have the capability to kill indirectly, entangling the body of animals, with the possible advantage that brings having extra nutrients from the decomposing carcass. These plants are bromeliads like *Puya chilensis* (Wikipedia, 2022), and many brambles of the genus *Rubus* (e.g., *Way Out West*, 2015; BBC, 2021; Fig. 2).

Films that get some inspiration from these killer brambles, though adding more active and conscious movement, are a segment of *Dr. Terror House of Horrors* (1965) and *The Ruins* (2008; Fig. 2), about vines that can trap and kill people. In addition, the film *The Crawlers* (a.k.a. *Contamination .7*; 1991) has radioactive tree roots in the forest that attack the people of a small town.



Figure 2. Left: sheep trapped in a bramble; source: BBC (2021). Right: poster of *The Ruins* (2008); source: IMDB.

Zombie-insect fungi

Entomopathogenic or insect-pathogenic fungi, also known as zombie-insect fungi, are fungi that act as parasites of insects, changing their behavior and killing them (e.g., Samson et al., 1988).

Many films have been deeply inspired by these type of fungi. The oldest one is *Matango* (1963), directed by Inoshiro Honda (known mainly for *Gojira*, 1954), about an island with strange fungus-people that are actually humans infected with the spores of a local fungus (Fig. 3).

In *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), based on the homonymous novel and with a similar plot to the videogame *The Last of Us* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013), A fungus turns people into ravaging zombies. The infected finally form giant sporangia (i.e., spore-producing structures) to infect other people.

In the film *The Superdeep* (2020), a massive fungus living thousands of meters below the surface infects humans that ventured down a drill hole near the Arctic. The infected people aggregate to form a creature to capture other humans.

There are two recent films, *Gaia* (2021) and *In the Earth* (2021), where a giant fungus-like organism living in the jungle/forest parasitizes humans, either using some of the infected to obtain new prey (in the former) or compelling them to sacrifice other humans (in the latter).

In addition, in the film *Splinter* (2008) some kind of fungus infects animals (including humans), killing them and taking control of their dead bodies.

Hallucinogenic mushrooms

In the film *Shrooms* (2007), the hallucinogenic effects of mushrooms have terrible consequences for humans.

Killer spores

The spores of the black mold (*Stachybotrys chartarum*) can cause severe respiratory diseases in humans (e.g., Mooney, 2004).

In the film *The Spore* (2021) a mutated fungus infects and kill everybody that get in contact with its spores.



Figure 3. Top: zombie-insect fungus (*Cordyceps* sp.) growing on a wasp; source Wikimedia Commons (E.G. Vallery, 2005). Bottom left: Japanese poster of *Matango* (1963); source: Wikimedia Commons. Bottom right: human in initial stage of fungal infection from *Matango* (1963); source: IMDB.

MOVIES NOT INSPIRED BY REAL PLANTS/FUNGI

Supernatural plants and fungi

There are some films where the plants have some degree of consciousness and it is generally related to supernatural or magical forces.

In the Killer Tomato “saga”, which comprises four movies (*Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*, 1978; *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!*, 1988; *Killer Tomatoes Strike Back!*, 1991; *Killer Tomatoes Eat France!*, 1992), a group of giant conscious tomatoes attacks people. Similarly, in the low-budget film *Fungicide* (2002), giant conscious blood-thirsty mushrooms attack people.

The film *The Guardian* (1990), directed by the horror master William Friedkin (from *The Exorcist*, 1973), shows a tree that represents the embodiment of an ancient deity feeding on human babies.

Little Otik (a.k.a. *Otesánek*, 2000), directed by the Czech stop-motion master Jan Švankmajer, tells the story of a couple that raises a tree root as their own child, which turns into a murderous tree-monster (Fig. 4).

In the classic deepsploitation film *The Rift* (1990), directed by the Spanish Juan Piquer Simón (from *Mil Gritos Tiene la Noche*, 1982, and *Slugs*, 1988), a submarine is sent to the deep ocean to rescue the wreck of another submarine. There, they find all sort of mutated creatures, including mutated algae that can grow astonishingly fast, killing humans.

Plants revenge against humanity

This is an original movie plot that counts with two films released in the same year: *Treevenge* (2008) about Christmas trees that went into a killing spree; and *The Happening* (2008) directed by M. Night Shymalan, where plants react to humans when they are a threat, killing them with some kind of toxic pheromone.

Plants take control of humanity

In the stylish film *Little Joe* (2019), a genetically engineered flower, designed to bring happiness, threatens to take control of humanity (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Left: movie poster of *Otesánek* (2000; Source: IMDB.com); right: movie poster of *Little Joe* (2019; Source: Filmaffinity.com).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the potential for original and interesting plots for horror movies, plants and fungi have a markedly lower number of features (less than 30) than animals (more than 400; see Rasia, 2020). However, in recent years the number of films about fungi and their spores have increased notably (five films in the last three years alone), which possibly forecasts a brighter future for plants and fungi in horror films.

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