

LT309: German Theories of Vegetable Genius

Meets: Thursday, 9:00-12:15
Seminar Leader: Ross Gillum Shields
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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

The philosophical definition of the human as a rational animal separates us from the botanical world even more completely than from the zoological. Animals, it was long presumed, have at least something *analogous* to our own mental life, whereas plants simply vegetate (think: “couch potato”). But botanists in recent decades have increasingly put this view into question: plants are now recognized to have perception, memory, communication, and even the ability to learn. Conversely, the idea that humans and animals are ontologically superior forms of life has been criticized as a bestial brand of chauvinism that distorts our relationship to the natural world. This course will ask how the ‘vegetable Other’ challenges us to rethink what it means to be human. Starting out from the “German theories of vegetable genius” described by M.H. Abrams, we will trace an underground current of botanical thought through romanticism and transcendentalism to contemporary ecology. Special attention will be paid to literary and philosophical representations that problematize the plant/human divide, by either anthropomorphizing plants or describing human activity in botanical terms.

Requirements

- Thoughtful preparation of reading assignments and engaged participation in class discussions.
- Weekly postings (see below)
- Midterm exam (see below)
- Final paper (see below)

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Unexcused absences will lead to a significant reduction of the participation grade. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FALL 2022: Some students may need to begin the semester remotely due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. In addition, all students

and instructors must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill. Instructors should make efforts to offer alternatives to in-person attendance where needed, including remote participation or asynchronous options.

Assignments

- Weekly postings in forum (completion grade).
- Midterm take-home exam (due October 15th).
- One research paper (12-15 pages), due on December 15th. You may choose your own topic, but you must discuss it with me prior to November 20th.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

- 30% Preparation of readings and participation in discussion
- 15% Weekly postings in forum
- 15% Midterm exam
- 40% Final research paper

Schedule

Introduction

Week 1 (9/01)

- Bennett: *Vibrant Matter*

Week 2 (9/08)

- Bennett: *Vibrant Matter*

German Theories of Vegetable Genius

Week 3 (9/15)

- Leibniz: *Monadology*

Week 4 (9/22)

- Kant: *Critique of Judgment* (excerpts)

Week 5 (9/29)

- Kant: *Critique of Judgment* (excerpts)

Week 6 (10/06)

- Goethe: selected readings on morphology

- Goethe: “On German Architecture”

The Romantic Unconscious

Week 7 (10/13)

- Schelling: *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (excerpts)
- Hegel: “On Vegetable Nature”

-----Midterm take-home exam due October 15th-----

Week 8 (10/20)

- Novalis: *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (excerpts)
- August Wilhelm Schlegel: “On Dramatic Art and Literature”

Week 9 (10/27)

- Fall Break (no class)

Week 10 (11/03)

- Coleridge: “The Poem as Organism”
- Shelly: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (excerpts)

Vegetable Genius in the 20th Century

Week 11 (11/10)

- Döblin: “The Murder of a Buttercup”

Week 12 (11/17)

- Bergson: *Creative Evolution*, excerpts

Week 13 (11/24)

- Deleuze: *1000 Plateaus*, excerpts

Week 14 (12/1)

- Latour: *The Pasteurization of France* (part 2: Irreductions)

Week 15 (12/08)

- Haraway: “Cyborg Manifesto”
- Coccia: *The Life of Plants* (excerpts)

-----Final research paper due December 15th-----

Library and Book Purchase Policies

With the exception of Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (978-0822346333), all readings will be made available as PDFs. All students should procure a copy of *Vibrant Matter* by the first day of class.