

## **The Green Man: The Desire for Deeper Connections with Nature**

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The Green Man is an iconic carved image of a face with foliage. As an artistic and architectural aesthetic, these stone carvings have adorned the bosses, eaves and buttresses of thousands of churches and cathedrals across the UK and Europe since the first century BCE and were particularly numerous during the medieval epoch. It was an image of pagan worship that was eventually commandeered by the Church, significantly in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries (Hayman 5). Green Man carvings, then, have existed for at least 2000 years and can be seen, with hindsight, as a symbolic forerunner to recent philosophies of plant/human hybridity, where desire for closer connection with nature emerges from a state of loss. The Green Man carvings share plant/human hybridity qualities with the work of several contemporary international visual artists who are also working with the vegetal. This paper extends how culture/nature interactions in contemporary art now, as with historical Green Man motifs of the past, affect the desire to relate closely to plants. Any human yearning to be connected with the plant world, in a hybrid mode, imaginatively collapses the distinction between the self and the other, and introduces the abject nature of human/plant hybridity.

A history of the Green Man in Australia is limited to the last 240 years of white settlement, with only a few extant examples, such as at the Adelaide Gaol and St Peters Cathedral in Adelaide, South Australia. Australian colonial artists struggled in their representation of the Australian bush, often returning to British conventions and imagery in their artworks instead. There was a lack of alignment between artworks created and the natural specifications of Australian bush vegetation: ‘the fringe of the empire’ (Smith 3). In Australia, it is possible to argue that there has been an even greater yearning for plant/human hybridity, as something that exists mostly on other continents, in other places far away. The focus here, however, is on documented Green Man carvings in the UK and on plant/human hybrid works by artists from the UK (Ackroyd/Harvey), Slovenia (Petric) and the US (Kac).

This paper asks if the Green Man’s role as a link between human and plant endures as an abject hybrid in the contemporary art works discussed. Focussing on three artist case studies to interrogate the longevity of human-plant hybridity, the inquiry is intended as a means of reclaiming human relations with the wilderness in this epoch of the Anthropocene. As Carolyn Dinshaw says, these medieval Green Man objects are important in contemporary life because they are helpful to ‘think with’ ideas of nature and they are deeply countercultural (1). Here, too, the Green Man helps make sense of our ontological relation with the vegetal world and functions as a reminder that desire for plant life (as source, as co-species) may be a reflection of how humans (especially in urban cities) have a reduced connectivity with extended areas of vegetal life.

The Green Man carvings were originally expressed as folkloric rascals; as apotropaic symbols to ward off evil; as pagan images of worship; and as signs of bacchanalian revelry (Negus 247; Hayman 5). These stone features have been traced to as early as the first century BCE but the Green Man concept is also evident in German manuscript illustrations of the twelfth century and in the work of such seventeenth-century Italian artists as Pietro Ciafferi (Centerwell 28). There was a cultural association of seasonal worship with the carving of these plant/human images. With each new season, fruit and berries would arrive, small crops would be harvested and herbs would be gathered. Nature in medieval times was considered something to appease, an entity of significant power and sovereignty (Hayman).

Green Man, its name changed from Foliate Face by Lady Raglan in 1939 (45), has also been cast by scholars as a figure of fertility and therefore an evocation of bounty and fecund promise (Hicks 3). Were these wild men also used to explain unexpected pregnancies? In the small communities of country folk, the notion that a fertility god could bring such gifts from the forests was not so far-fetched. High up on church bosses, eaves and as interior adornment of the pillars and cornices, there are thousands of churches across Europe where the Green Man outnumbers images of Christ (Hicks 15). These high numbers of Green Man motifs ensured its presence as an image that was a mainstay of collective cultural knowledge across Europe and across time. Yet it is an image that eludes our easy understanding as mere fertility fetish or as offerings for ready harvests. Its hybridity, its morphing of two species provokes further thought.

Canon Albert Radcliffe of Manchester Cathedral points out there are thousands of churches across the UK with Green Man iconography. Norwich Cathedral has a number of leafy heads – nine visages with oak, maple, strawberry, buttercup or gilded hawthorn leaves. Richard Mabey reads one of these foliate faces as being a ‘gigolo’ and another being a ‘diablo’ (99). He refers to them as ‘symbolically sinful’ and ‘undoubtedly having a theological status’ (101). Mabey traces Kathleen Basford’s research into eighth century theologian Rabanus Maurus’ interpretation of Green Man’s leaves as sins of the flesh from lustful and wicked men (101). Mercia MacDermott focuses on the startling and grotesque Gothic iterations of Green Man which have attracted most scholarly attention. Whereas, William Anderson sees the Green Man as a more generic universal figure of a Gaian connection to earth. Mabey refers to Basford, a scholar who has worked with the history of the Green Man, as creating an ‘admonitory’ interpretation of the image (Mabey 101). In addition to being a scolding and a reprimand or a source of cheeky revelry, we can now see the Green Man, with hindsight, as a sad vindication (even an ironic validation) of our anthropocentric disconnection from the natural world.

The Green Men gargoyles vary in shape, facial expression, leaf pattern and size. Leaves emanate from ears and noses in some. Others have leaves as hair and beards. Some have wolf-like foliage all across their faces. Others have clenched teeth or sad and soulful eyes. The most interesting, for me, are the Green Man carvings that have leaf foliage emanating from their mouths. They are spewing out leaves, ‘expressing’ back the nature that they are. They are speaking leaves: nature speaks through the Green Man. This is relevant in an era when plant science is showing us that plants sense and make decisions, learn and remember (Chamovitz; Gagliano, *Green Symphonies*) and yet we humans do not have the vocabulary to articulate what this might mean. Humans are limited by their anthropocentrism, necessarily, and are also limited by the incapacity to

appropriately translate what plants are communicating. The Green Man reminds us that we have not allowed plants the agency and autonomy that is their nature. They remind us that humans are distinct from the vegetal world and that their expressions recall that there is no true hybridity, only an abject longing to hybridise.



The Green Man has been linked to the fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* (Hayman 7), which follows Arthur and his knights who begin a mid-winter feast. An unknown knight arrives, dressed in grass green, riding a green horse with sparkling green stones along the saddle girth and the harness enameled green. He carries a holly bough and a large axe with a blade of good green steel (*Sir Gawain* 7). After an altercation, the Green Knight is beheaded by Gawayne; the knight retrieves his head and rides away issuing a challenge for 12 months' time at a 'grene chapelle' (7). This literary reference supports the medieval curiosity and narrative affect in the merging of man and vegetal greenness. The Green Knight is a stranger, a queer headless element, in an otherwise conventional tale. The Green Man image later became associated with processions, pageants and revellers (men dressed in green and with foliage costumes) based on Joseph Strutt's engraving of the May Day figure, *Jack-in-the-green* (Centerwall 28). There are connections we might tentatively make with fifteenth century outlaw Robin Hood and later figures such as 1962 Marvel comic hero 'The Hulk', or even the silent root-man, the 1960 Marvel comic-book hero 'Groot', who re-emerged in the 2014 film *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

As an enduring hybrid icon, Green Man represents the human desire to merge with plants, in order to safely moor humanity to the wilderness. Humans are a part of nature but also have a conscious cognition of it. The disconnect and connection between these two perceptions of the environment, as being immersed in it and aware of it, are evident in the motif of the Green Man. Human identity exists at the very point between nature and a constructed concept of it. Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder collaborated on a recent book, *Through Vegetal Being*, where they presented philosophical perspectives on vegetal matter and human being. They each responded, in individual chapters, to the same topics. Marder's philosophy seeks to raise the status of the plant, due to their generative capacities to seed and to sprout (*Through Vegetal Being* 135). The Green Man sprouts a foliage beard and offers a foliate face and can be considered a cultural figure worthy of greater vegetal consideration and ontological relevance, perhaps a champion of the vegetal world that is receiving greater attention by Marder and other scholars.

As well, the Green Man can be read psychologically as a way to fill this perceived lack or longing in humans. This longing, caused by a sense of exclusion from nature or *solastalgia* (Albrecht, et al.), is the distress felt as a result of changes to the green environment. Luce Irigaray calls this 'lack' an absence of thinking (3). The lack, the exclusion, the loss also ties into Marder's 'plant thinking'. Plant thinking is not thinking like a plant or suggesting that humans have access to human-like plant thought. Instead plant thinking is an ethical mode of making sense of the world, a 'vegetal deconstruction of metaphysics' (*Through Vegetal Being* 113). Marder is referring to emerging plant ethics and plant behaviour, in his field of Critical Plant Studies, and how this changes the way humans think, ontologically and epistemologically, about

being human and knowing the world as humans. Marder's current and influential work and the enduring relevance of cultural icons such as the Green Man begs the question: at what point did humans, mostly in the Western urban world, become separated from nature, yet wish so vehemently to reconnect? And while we might rush to bookend the Age of Reason, and the Romantic period, the Green Man is important as a reminder of changes in human perceptions of nature. Where the foliate face once was associated with a respect for, and worship of, the natural processes of the wilds, it now is a reminder of the widening gap between the natural world and human perception of it. To desire nature, to be in it, with it, amongst it, to eat it, be protected by it and to represent it is a desire charged and sexuate (that is, having separate sexes, or the ability to reproduce sexually) (Irigaray 87). This desire can be seen as an acknowledgement of the differences between human elements and distributed plant behaviours.

The first artist discussed is distinctly aware of the vegetal qualities that might be shared between human and plant species. In the Green Man we see extrusions of foliage from mouths, part of the cultural aesthetic of a time, which was deeply connected to the prospect of a merging of human and plant life. US artist Eduardo Kac works with plant-human material, which is of interest in new Critical Plant Studies. Kac creates the abject in a distinctly hybridised plant/human way by casting off singular human qualities and experimenting with a merging of the human with the plant. Kac genetically engineered a flower that was a hybrid of a Petunia and himself. Developed between 2003 and 2008 and exhibited at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis, this abject artwork *Natural History of Enigma* created a new life form called 'Edunia.' Kac called his flower a plantimal and he described the genetically engineered flower as expressing his DNA exclusively in its red veins (42).

Kac describes his work as follows:

The new flower is a Petunia strain that I invented and produced through molecular biology. It is not found in nature. The Edunia has red veins on light pink petals and a gene of mine is expressed on every cell of its red veins, i.e., my gene produces a protein in the veins only. The gene was isolated and sequenced from my blood. (*Signs of Life* 43)

Kac's Edunia can be propagated through its seeds but each time a new flower sequence occurs, his own DNA will be present. Whilst medieval cultures might have seen the Green Man as a reminder of potential ills, or a felicitator of fertility, the Green Man in this example reflects a human need to merge with nature. A dangerous need, it is a wilful desire that Kac has likewise exacted with the Edunia.

### **Desire as Longing**

Mabey suggests, after all the Green Man gargoyles he has seen, that these foliate faces were 'caricatures of village elders, terrifying portents of damnation, clever visual puns . . . [and] that over the centuries they developed into an all-purpose design feature, a logo endowed with the perennial magnetism of the chimera and an irresistible eye-worm for stone carvers' (102). Kac's work has a solemnness and a sobriety that does little to recall the lascivious Green Man gargoyles. Like the Green Man icon, however, Kac's scientific merging of two species is an expression of desire and an abject need to

remove the barriers between human and plant species. A desire for nature can act as a call to life. As Irigaray says, 'Desire, then, loses its living roots, unless it falls back into more or less wild instincts' (86). In other words, lack of contact with the natural world creates a deficit: a lack of life, a lack of living. Better, in fact, to become re-connected with sexuate beings in order to connect better with the other-than-human wild world: 'such a cultivation of our sexuate surges is crucial for our becoming able to behave as a living being among other different living beings without domination or subjection' (Irigaray 87).

The head of the abject Green Man might fit well into Julia Kristeva's concepts of ejecting death. Rather than speaking a non-human tongue, perhaps the Green Man is rejecting mortality by spewing forth or rejecting that end. As Kristeva says, the abject is neither subject nor object and the abjection is the casting off of the self as well as a perverse rejection of the sacred (26). This is relevant in the sense that it is speculated that the Church adopted the image of Green Man to attract the pagans to its pews (Hayman 5). Yet there is an anti-religiosity to these images. To be afraid of the Green Man, is to be afraid of the unnamable; fear is 'the frailty of the subject's signifying system' (Kristeva 34). Kac's work too is frightening. This is not the hoped-for connection to the wilderness. Instead, Kac's hybridity is cultivated, cultured in a laboratory, combined in a petri dish. This is a rewilding of culture but it is a queering of that desire to re-wild.

### **The Rewildings**

Another contemporary example of hybridity and abjection is the dismantling of boundaries between human portraiture and grasslands. Like Kac, Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey are using new cultivated species of plant and artificial modes of horticulture to metaphorically re-wild human lives. Ackroyd and Harvey are British artists, each of whom were working with grass when they first began collaborating in 1990. They undertook study in Wales on particular grass species. Ackroyd and Harvey have made a sensational art career from working with grass. They filled churches, stone staircases, gallery walls—and erected five-metre-high curtains—all of grass. They use the process of projecting negative images of a human face on walls of grass they have grown, using the light to manipulate the natural process of photosynthesis. They have said, 'Grass may be the material of our investigation but chlorophyll is the primary medium that binds us' (3).

The exciting albeit abject aspect of the duo's works is the way the image emerges and 'grows', merging the human face with the growing stems of grass, as an artistic expression of a casting off of the self. At last we see the human temporality of growth at the same rate as the vegetal temporality of growth. From 1997, Ackroyd and Harvey have been collaborating with scientists Helen Ougham and Howard Thomas, who work in pioneering new strains of grass. The interesting and yet so obvious element of their work is that they grow grass from seed on the vertical plane. This makes shadowing and the development of photographic imaging more effective. The various shades of yellow and green light work consistently as a black and white photo might. By projecting a negative photo image onto the seeds as they grow and manipulating the light in that way, the image forms:

[O]nce exposed to light in a gallery environment, the grass in the yellow regions quickly seizes the available light and gradually, over hours, changes color, greening up. Kept in very low light levels in a living state, the green grass begins to dismantle its chlorophyll and, taking on a quality akin to an old tapestry, the image slowly fades away. (Ackroyd and Harvey 2)

The 'lack' displayed here is less an emptiness or a futile hopelessness about the current environmental concerns and more about the drive to fill the lack, the desiring motivations that urge us to return to nature or merge with a hybrid state, to create lines of desire that deviate from the civic passages through our urban and non-urban landscapes. As Irigaray writes, 'Desire can transform a simple territory into a world' (95).

The last artist to discuss is Slovenian Spela Petric who 'confronts vegetal otherness' in her performance work *Skotopoesis 2015*. Petric created a nineteen-hour performance work that involved her interaction with germinating cress, a more formal bodily hybridisation. Her experimentation was with ethics and inter-cognition between plants and humans, and the work explored the 'novel human-plant relationships beyond the limits of empathy, interfaces and language' (Petric 1). Her work is relevant to the idea that the Green Man concept of hybridity and abjection has endured into contemporary aesthetics. Like the Green Man, there is evidence of a collapse of boundaries between self and other, between human and other-than-human environment, between artist and cress plants. This collapse creates a disruption, ideally, so that viewers start to see human relationships with the plant world differently because we become more aware of the influence of one species upon another, rather than relying always on the effects of human life on the vegetal world alone.

*Skotopoesis 2015* was a durational work where Petric stood with her shadow falling across a tiny field of green cress plants. She wanted to achieve a Barad-like agential cross-over between species (American feminist Karen Barad has led the way in the theory of agential realism). Petric used 400,000 cress seedling plants. She notes that the cress plants were aware of her form as a presence that caused a shadow and prevented their access to light and therefore photosynthesis. Petric wanted to achieve 'an economy of mutual suffering' (2). She was uncomfortable having to stand there for such a long time as the areas of the cress that her shadow fell upon suffered lack of light. Of course the ethics of this is spurious because the plant had no 'say' in the matter. The blades of the cress might lean towards the edges of light on the outskirts of Petric's shadow but ultimately the artist exerted an influence over the situation. This was the breach of ethics that the performance was intended to provoke.

Petric says 'vegetal ontology is alien to humans which prevents us from establishing a legitimate empathic relationship with them' (1). She suggests it might not be human ignorance that allows us to think it is legitimate to use non-human species as manipulated subjects and usable. There might be a more fundamental metaphysical problem. Her reading of Marder's 'Vegetal Metaphysics' paper is commensurate with his conclusion that empathy for plants disregards their mode of being.

*Skotopoesis*, for Petric, means *as shaped by darkness*. She notes that as her water cress grew as the result of the artificial light, she began to shrink, from dehydration compressing her vertebrae. The audience was able to observe and, afterwards, ask questions. Once the performance was over, Petric asked that the cress be harvested and

eaten by the gallery staff. Unfortunately, this was not done, for reasons never given but most likely relating to the rush of having to uninstall exhibitions under tight timelines to make space for the next exhibition. Irrespective of why the cress was not dutifully eaten, it ended up being thrown away. This is ironic in the context of an experiment that was intended to unmask the ethics of how we engage with plant life. Perhaps it is time to redress how we relate and interact with the vegetal world and Petric has, at the very least, contributed to that debate.

The connection between the Green Man and the burgeoning interest in plant matter in contemporary art has yet to be fully resolved. The reasoning, here, is that it is related fundamentally to desire and the abject. Art might be a representation, a copy, a memory or an expression of nature; it might be a response to natural beauty or to nature's creativity and production. But art is always a *reminder* of nature.

In the Green Man we see this non-distinction between self and the natural world. Green Man represents the merging between species and because Green Man carvings still exist in churches across the UK, time allows us to attempt to understand their relevance when compared to contemporary art works in epoch of the Anthropocene, as well as in the context of current Critical Plant Studies. This conflation of both time and plant/human expression creates the context in which these artworks have been discussed. What Green Man and the three contemporary artworks have in common is a hybridisation, yes, but they also share a common quality which is that something is not quite right. The outputs are, frankly, a little weird and decidedly queer. As Dinshaw says,

These aesthetically intricate, affectively intense images represent creatures that are strange admixtures, weird amalgams: they picture intimate interrelations between the human and the non-human – interdependencies between species that throw taxonomies into question, rub categories up against one another, put classifications and hierarchies of the human under scrutiny. These are queer creatures indeed. (1)

Dinshaw is interested in relations of human to non-human, by tracing the afterlife of this medieval image, to imagine more expansively queer worlds. To allow for sexuate differences and ambiguous relations, to indulge our desires for closer connections to the plant world (or other non-human worlds), we must be prepared to lose our sense of sovereignty over nature. The Green Man emerged in great numbers in medieval Europe and endures today, unlike the forests and bushlands from which they supposedly emerged. This lingering image, then, serves as an important reminder of loss and lack. By this, I mean they remind us of how the environment has been devastated at human hands and that our desire to connect with nature is as strong as ever. The gap between the two is where queer and abject art is being made.

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