

Joela Jacobs.
***Animal, Vegetal, Marginal: The
German Literary Grotesque from
Panizza to Kafka***

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Joela Jacobs' new book *Animal, Vegetal, Marginal* is a timely work that interrogates fascism, censorship and the turn-of-the-twentieth-century provocateurs whose humour never lost its aim. Jacobs begins her German literary grotesque book on *Grotesken* with masturbating plants.

The concept of plants and sex is a hot topic. Stella Sandford's 2023 *Vegetal Sex: Philosophy of Plants*, for example, asks what a philosophy of plant sex might be from the point of view of plants.¹ Jacobs takes a more literary approach by focusing on animals, plants and marginalised Jews within the works of several key works from German grotesque literature.

Jacobs' book contributes to the phytopoesis praxes within the Plant Humanities field.² Phytopoesis is where authors co-create with the vegetal world as a response to misunderstandings about plant agency, independence and, in this case, vegetal sexuality. She does this through her critical analysis of the *Grotesken* literary tradition.

- 1 S. Sandford, *Vegetal Sex: Philosophy of Plants* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).
- 2 J.C. Ryan, 'Poetry as plant script', *Transformations Journal* 30 (2017); P. Vieira, 'Phytographia: Literature as plant writing', *Environmental Philosophy* 12 (2) (2015).

The grotesque, the short form prose that sits somewhere between horror and laughter, was a means of social critique, Jacobs maintains. Around 1900, grotesque prose was extremely popular and also censored and marginalised. The author argues that this period, tipping into the 20th century, was marked by both a decentering of man and of god. This crisis of religion and patriarchy shifted thinking around the human. The *Grotesken* was part of that shift away from andro-normative concepts of being. But what has this to do with the masturbating plants?

We will get to the plants but, first, the genre. *Grotesken* occurred during a time of modern man's lost certainty and an associated uncertainty of language. For many of us, these are the most dangerous times of all because there tend to be backlashes of misogyny, racism and hateful violence when the scales are tipped too far away from delicate androcentrism. The *Grotesken* literary epoch highlighted the failures and abuses caused by racist, gendered, religious and political discriminations and were, of course, widely censored and silenced, some authors even imprisoned and exiled. As Jacobs explains, most of these grotesque literary books ended up on the flaming pyres of the Nazis.

The most important characteristic of *Grotesken* was its comedic horror. The abnormal, the distorted and the repulsive all had a flipside of humour and even beauty. In the face of rising Aryan superiority in the change from nineteenth to twentieth century societies, there was a concomitant subnormal characterisation of marginalised humans. This literature, Jacobs argues, was impossible to disentangle from the politics of hate from 1900–1940s and it showcased social horror to the world.

Grotesken were characterised by their narration, which tended to be male bourgeois figures of trust whose rationality was challenged by the grotesque encounter. These authors were unreliable narrators, figures of trickery and deceit and humour. A ubiquitous delusion or illusion in these prose pieces created a kind of 'madness' as the reader lost faith in the unreliable narrator. These subversions were carried out through language, which was made clear through the usually mute and silenced non-human voices, such as plants, that were given a means of expression in these texts. Finally the *Grotesken* was characterised by embodied sexuality which was mostly taboo and immoral, repressed and prohibited. This manifested as masturbation, sex work and same sex encounters in the texts.

Jacobs argues that authors of grotesque literature were forced to circumvent, mediate and avoid censorship through creative means. Exaggeration and ambiguous wordplay, even sarcasm, were the play-things. She cites Panizza, Ewers, Friedlander and Kafka as examples of authors who pushed the limits of satire and abjection so that other writers could know the risks.

Oskar Panizza (1853–1921), psychiatrist and author of short prose, critiqued the Catholic Church and the Wilhelmine Empire. His writing scorched organised religion, capitalism and militarism. He wrote a play about syphilis and religion, *The Love Council* (1894), a drama about the mad Emperor *Nero* (1898) and an antisemitic caricature of a Jewish academic *The Operated Jew* (1893).

Film director and author Hanns Heinz Ewers also provoked authorities with his pornographic and violent texts. His *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1910) was about cult psychology. His *Alraune* (1911) was about eugenics and artificial life. In 1921 his text *Vampire* was full of bloodthirsty horror.

Jewish philosopher and physician Salomo Friedlander (1871–1946) had some beef with Ewers' horror elements, according to Jacobs and focused on wit, laughter and wordplay. In effect, he stayed away from the darker forces and used laughter as a powerful resistance.

Finally, Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was a Jewish German Prague-based writer, who was extremely well known but his fragmentary writing has multiple layers and double meanings. Jacobs argues that Kafka's stories of alienation and nonsense exemplify the *Grotesken's* ideological principles.

This brings us back to the original question: what does *Grotesken* have to do with plants? This genre is revealed by its unreliable narrators, madness, sexualised embodiment and language. Jacobs compares Ewers' 1904 *The Petition* and Panizza's 1891 *The Crime in Tavistock-Square*, and by doing so establishes a connection between sexuality, reproduction and vegetal eroticism. You might think this is drawing a long bow ... but I love a long bow. These texts offer plants as sexually active beings, presents magnolias as erotic masturbators. The plants commit lusty crimes in these *Grotesken* books. Pollination becomes masturbation. No doubt plants' capacities to self-reproduce were a crime against nature. These deliberations within the grotesque books serve as a resistance to normative values, as activism against increasing censorship.

The *Grotesken* works show nature as out of control and endlessly pro-creating. In Panizza's work, Jacobs notes the protagonist was 'arrested like a plant'. Jacobs analyses Ewers' text by noting the protagonist, the Catholic priest's, name, Dornblüth, connotes thorns and blossoms. The celibate Dornblüth is disgusted by pollen and self-fertilisation. Jacobs says that 'human sexuality is mapped onto plant sexuality' (p. 72).

In Jacobs' book, chasteness and lust are drawn as reciprocal connectors between literary humans and plants. These ideas are charged, dangerous, insecure and were even considered criminal at the time the books were published. Animals, the marginalised Jew and dogs narrating stories are covered in Jacobs' book too, all with a focus on satire, sexuality and a deep desire to disrupt painful and hateful norms.

Jacobs takes on complex and challenging material in her book, with philosophical and literary verve and a sense of wonder that emanates from the very texts she explores. She manages to draw interesting connections between the gestures of plants and these texts, the limits of plant language and these texts, vegetal excess and these texts. Jacobs is part of the phytogenesis movement, whereby she manages to analyse plants and texts with poetic panache. At a time when, once again, non-normative realities are being silenced, her book is timely and reflects an underlying anxiety that we have all heard before.

Prudence Gibson is an author and academic at the University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia. Her latest books are *The Plant Thieves* (2023), *The Plant Contract* (2018) and *The Pharmacy of Plants* (2015). Her forthcoming book is *Just Poison Them*.

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