

Full Text | Scholarly Journal

'What Am I Going to Do with My Philodendron?' Looking at a Plant in *Desk Set*

Evans, Georgina. **Philosophies; Basel** Vol. 8, Iss. 1, (2023): 9.
DOI:10.3390/philosophies8010009

Full Text

Translate

1. Introduction

Desk Set, a 1957 20th Century Fox comedy directed by Walter Lang, portrays a time of upheaval in the New York offices of a broadcasting company. The workplace plays host not just to human workers, but to various forms of decorative plant life, consistent with a world in which, as Susan McHugh describes, 'the mod cons of piped water and central heat enabled commercially-produced, ornamental houseplant-keeping to become an ordinary urban experience' [1] (p. 191). In the midst of just such an ordinary urban setting and story, one plant above all, an enormous, thriving philodendron, is singled out as the object of care, the gaze, and the casual speculations of its human companions. What does it mean to bring one plant out of the invisibility to which it might ordinarily be subject, in both the intradiegetic workplace and the superficially realist world of the Hollywood studio comedy? In asking *Why Look at Plants?*, Giovanni Aloï draws a parallel with John Berger's consideration of

animals, proposing that such attentive looking at plants involves a comparable refocusing on forms of life which may have receded from conscious view, despite being fundamental elements of the terrestrial environment. Aloi proposes that 'paying attention to plants entails the possibility of considering new modes of attention and crafting new modalities of perception' [2] (p. xx). *Desk Set* is a film with an entirely conventional anthropocentric storyline, relatively little studied and perhaps most viewed now through the prism of its star casting of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Yet within the narrow parameters of the studio comedy, the film directs us to notice one plant among many, thereby opening up to contemplation the role of the plant within urban modernity and in its filmic representation more broadly (Figure 1). The plant is ever at risk of being subsumed into a symbolic role in the constructed tensions of the plot, but what more might we gain from looking at it? What, to borrow the words of protagonist Bunny, will we *do* with it?

Desk Set was adapted from William Marchant's 1955 Broadway hit play *The Desk Set*, and the writers Henry and Phoebe Ephron follow much of his text quite closely, while altering some aspects of the characterisation and changing the romantic storyline [3]. The women staffing a television network Research and Reference department find their livelihoods apparently threatened by the arrival of a 'methods engineer' who introduces a computer, without offering any apparent sense of how this innovation may affect them. The computer, known as EMMARAC, an acronym for 'Electro-Magnetic Memory and Research Arithmetic Calculator', appears set to take over the women's daily task of answering queries posed to them over the telephone by other departments of the organisation, on an encyclopedic range of topics. Announced in the opening titles as having been made with the 'cooperation and assistance' of IBM, the film was, as Merrill Schleier elaborates, the subject of 'unprecedented' levels of sponsorship from the company and 'the first film to actively endorse the computer's inclusion in the skyscraper office' [4] (p. 232). The film explores the anxieties of a post-war workforce in the face of growing technologisation, and ultimately seeks to appease such fears with an ending which results in a happy union between the computer and the human skills of the women researchers, as well as between EMMARAC inventor Richard Sumner (Spencer Tracy) and Head of Reference Bunny Watson (Katharine Hepburn). The putative conflict is resolved by exposing the limitations of computer information retrieval, as EMMARAC spews out pages of irrelevant data, and by advertising the time savings the machine might supposedly offer the women. This, it is suggested, will enhance their present research methods, which rely not just on the contents of the in-house library but on the workers' memories; when Bunny's junior colleague Ruthie expresses her wish to do well in her job, Bunny tells her, 'just

get to learn the reference library'. Despite the pacificatory ending, Carol Colatrella points out that the resolution still derives from a competitive business case for the value of the women's labour, as EMMARAC proves incapable of intuiting which information serves the purpose of the enquiry [5] (p. 7). The film, and Bunny as a character, slot into what Janet Thumim terms Hepburn's 'spinster cycle', 'in which the unloved and ageing professional woman is required, through the diegesis, to recognize that what she has always really wanted is a man' [6] (p. 92). In *Desk Set*, Bunny is never in any doubt that she wants a man, but is investing her affections in her boss Mike Cutler, who exploits and undervalues her and is shown not to appreciate her mind as Richard eventually will. The New York setting, flagged up by a few key indicators, sets the parameters of the women's lives. They enjoy a degree of professional authority, albeit heavily circumscribed by gendered structures, and take pleasure in shopping at the stores close to their office. Bunny makes her late arrival for work clutching a dress box, declaring 'wait till you see what I snagged at Bonwit's!', while her junior colleague uses the telephone to pursue 'that little black velvet strapless you had in the window'. Here, *Desk Set* fits with a wider corpus of New York-set romantic comedies and their protagonists. As Deborah Jermyn describes, 'It is because New York permitted the rise of the "savvy" or "spunky" urban single woman that she became so readily available and focal to the genre (and its hero) within this location, flourishing into a dynamic character type with which to facilitate the romantic machinations of the rom-com plot' [7] (p. 15). Bunny is consistent with this model, and, in line with Hepburn's very well established star persona, is presented as someone whose thinking is both razor sharp and eccentric in style. When Richard puts her through a series of testing puzzle questions, which she sails through and turns inside out, she declares simply that 'I associate many things with many things'.

2. 'Time Is Money, So They Say...'

Our first encounter with the plant which forms the focus of this essay occurs at the initial meeting between Richard and Bunny, where his fascination with her is sparked. We glimpse the philodendron before we meet Bunny herself, as visitor Richard is ushered into her private office to wait for her. As we share the view of Bunny's three co-workers through the glazed doors, we see him measuring and pacing the room beneath a lush climbing plant, looped along close to the ceiling. It is only once Bunny has returned and is talking with Sumner that it comes more fully into view, along with its pot on top of a bookshelf. While the two central characters cautiously interrogate each other's professional credentials, Bunny reaches into her desk, spoons some white powder from a tin, and mixes it into a glass of water without breaking the flow of conversation. As Richard

observes that 'time is money, so they say', she equivocates with 'mmhm—so I've heard', and moves across the room towards the philodendron, as the film cuts to a medium shot to show the plant's full extent (Figure 1).

As Bunny pours the plant food mixture into the pot, Richard's baffled gaze prompts a point of view panning shot which carefully traces the philodendron round the top of the room, right to its slightly trembling end (Figure 2). A comic refrain in the soundtrack amplifies the general mood of astonishment. To his wordless reaction, Bunny simply responds 'green thumb!', before the ringing telephone curtails any further comment. What is the nature of the joke, or unease, here? The building is full of plants, all presumably requiring watering. Some of the signalled comedy springs from the sheer size of the philodendron, its extension in space (and therefore the duration of the shot) implicitly excessive in failing to stop. The film's visual language takes its shape from the philodendron, deploying an 8 second long, mobile shot purely to trace the rambling linear growth of the plant, and refusing a cut back to Richard's face until the very last leaf has been taken in.

Wrapped up in this sense of excess is the degree of attention Bunny accords to the philodendron, both in the immediate moment, in which she continues to minister to the plant even as Richard engages her in a tense professional discussion, and in the preceding years of care manifested in its growth. While this sequence indubitably serves a purpose, in progressing our sense of Bunny's ease with her own unconventional work style, this is a secondary effect of a moment where the plant commands our gaze. Richard's words propose time as a quantifiable economic resource, whereas Bunny's glance at the philodendron hints at an alternative possibility of time as growth, time as extension in space, time as a potentially generative dimension without teleology. For the rest of the film, the plant is given no direct attention until EMMARAC mistakenly issues pink slips firing everyone in the building, and the research staff begin to gather their personal possessions. This is a straightforward matter of sorting the contents of the office according to ownership, until the plant is again brought to the fore. Bunny clammers onto a chair, telling her colleague Peg that she must take all the books on the top shelf as 'they're worth an awful lot of mon...' before suddenly finding herself face to face with the plant. 'My philodendron! What am I going to do with my philodendron?', she exclaims, before joking that she could 'dump all the plant food in and head it toward Emmy', or take it on the bus and 'say it's alive and pay an extra fare'. Again, the plant is deployed as a symbolic antithesis to any rationalizing agenda, indeed each and every time the plant comes to the fore some question of money is running in the dialogue as a potentially opposing current. The plant, and her care for it, offers a simple

symbolic demonstration of her idiosyncratic working style within the corporation, and hints at a conflation of the organic and the feminine at work in her systems—or non systems—of knowledge organisation. While this may be a simple, even obvious co-option of the vegetal into a human drama with a rather slight political bite, the tendrils sent forth through our looking at the plant nonetheless extend beyond that.

The philodendron is the exception amongst countless other, less remarked, plants inhabiting the offices of the Federal Broadcasting Network. Work spaces and lobbies are adorned with all the conventional flora of the thriving corporation, the 'superfluous trinkets of urban decoration' in Emanuele Coccia's terms [8] (p. 3). Identical, single-stem, roses sit in bud vases on desks, and glossy green potted plants unobtrusively augment corners of the décor. The President's vast, contemporary office plays host to several TV screens, verdant ornamental plants, and a staged fireplace laden with logs, dead wood offering an ersatz allusion to some other time and place in which plants were more directly utilised. In this respect, the *mise en scène* reflects what Michael Marder describes of plants which form 'the inconspicuous backdrop of our lives—especially within the context of "urban landscaping"—much like the melodies and songs that unobtrusively create the desired ambience in cafes and restaurants', omnipresent but drawing a 'practical lack of attention' [9] (p. 3). These invisibilised plants are complemented in the film by those which we might, following Marder, see as more directly instrumentalised. The co-opting of plants into a symbolic decorative function reaches its greatest height in setting the scene for Christmas, the film's leap forward to that season being signalled by a shot of the Rockefeller Christmas tree, followed by a cut to mistletoe being hung above the office door and a scene of the workers decorating a real tree in the reference department: 'I told you the old-fashioned kind are the prettiest!', announces Bunny. Flowers are deployed as tokens in the transactions of the romantic plot, in line with Marder's account of how 'we wrap them—and other plants that matter to us—in layer after layer of symbolic significance, cultural meanings, and utility. [...] Indeed culturally, flowers are usually assigned the task of mediation between romantic partners, but to narrow their language down to this function is to impoverish their self-expression' [10] (p. 165). Mike, Bunny's boss and noncommittal romantic partner, brings a stiffly arranged pot of pink carnations to her office on the day they are due to go away for a weekend. As she expresses her delight at their loveliness, he intones that 'you'd better read the card first' before cancelling their trip; the flowers are not to be disentangled from the purpose they were purchased to serve. In the closing moments of the film, Mike, now wanting to win Bunny back, appears clutching a glossy beribboned box of red roses, the flowers identifiable more through the

sheer predictability of the choice than by being visually legible as themselves. After Mike gives up hope and abandons the roses on the desk, they are spotted by Richard, who then immediately passes them to Bunny. This floral gesture articulates a love he has so far expressed most directly through asking EMMARAC, 'Should Bunny Watson marry Richard Sumner?', and the computer had seemed set to come between them. Now, as the fears around the computer have been assuaged, he hands Mike's cast-off flowers to Bunny. She looks at them and accepts the unspoken message before they kiss in front of EMMARAC, the work of the narrative now completed as the lights on the computer announce, 'The End'. As Marder writes, in such uses of plants 'we do not yet encounter them, even though their outlines become to some extent more determinate thanks to the intentional comportment on the part both of those who tend them and, less so, of those who ultimately consume them' [9] (p. 4). The cut flowers of *Desk Set* facilitate human social manoeuvres, but never appear as themselves.

3. What's in a Name?

So far then, the film abundantly illustrates cultural norms around the marginalisation and instrumentalisation of the vegetal world. In this respect its representation of plant life is akin to that of multiple other studio films aspiring to represent a modern urban existence—see, for example, the houseplants and cut flowers in the stylish apartment of Doris Day's single New Yorker in *Pillow Talk* (1959). In *Desk Set*, the philodendron claims exceptional status, which of course springs partly from its symbolic role in representing Bunny's organic working and thinking styles and implied resistance to a technologised, capitalist world. But this does not mean that it falls into being entirely instrumentalised, and arguably the sheer amount of attention we are invited to devote to this particular plant opens space for other possible ways of relating to it. In an interview, Henry Ephron comments that the plant was 'mentioned in our script as being a philodendron—the long word got a laugh when she [Hepburn] wrapped her tongue around it' [11] (p. 177). But the sense that the humour associated with the plant derives from its name is hard to draw from the film as it was released, in which the word is spoken only twice and then only in the very late scene when Bunny packs up her office. The word does however emerge as a source of contention in anecdotes about the production of *Desk Set*, during which Katharine Hepburn reportedly objected to the plant which was first put in place, and switched it for one she felt to be a better fit. Henry Ephron, interviewed by Garson Kanin, describes the debate on set as one revolving around the identity of the plant:

Kate came onto the set, looked at it, and asked, 'What's *that* supposed to be?' The prop man replied, 'That's the philodendron.' 'Ridiculous,' she said. 'That's not a philodendron.' 'Well, the next thing [...] I was down on the set. I had other things to worry about but she was raising hell, and the set decorator said, 'I don't know what she's talking about. That's a philodendron.' Kate was absolutely furious and kept saying, 'It is *not*. Don't tell *me!*' So they sent for the studio gardener and he looked at it and they asked him what it was and *he* said it was a philodendron. [...] In a couple of hours she came back with a truck, and in the truck was a plant that was too big to get into the elevator, even. She got it onto the set and, sweating, pointed at it and said, 'Now, that's a philodendron.' I guess the point of the story is that it was and the thing we had wasn't; so, of course, we used hers [12] (p. 286).

The frustrated batting to and fro of the word 'philodendron' points to some unarticulated gulf in understanding between Hepburn, Ephron and Lang, in which the word apparently only hinders everyone's attempts to express what they are seeing—or failing to see—in the individual plant in front of them. The presence of a philodendron in Bunny's office was specified in the property list for Marchant's play, with a snaking dotted line on the plan of the set indicating the path of the stem around Bunny's office, a layout replicated in the screen adaptation; the word then precedes any individual plant brought in to fulfil it [3] (p. 80). The story of *Desk Set's* production raises the question of whether some prime exemplar of the genus, or a particular species, was required, or alternatively whether the disagreement was really situated in the distinct qualities of each of two individual philodendrons, and the extent to which they were felt to fit the 'role'. The breakdown in communication suggests that any notion of the word 'philodendron' as a term characterised by precision can only persist in relation to a certain mode of thinking. Karen Houle observes how every act of naming of a plant makes a claim, which becomes more entrenched with repetition: 'Only one aspect of an apple, or a Douglas fir, is reached for with one kind of word, and that quality of the thing—its color or its species' name, or what it means for national security—emerges in response to that mode of address. It is ordered and "stands forth" each time we speak, and in a certain way' [13] (p. 165). There are various forms of uprooting inscribed in the very word 'philodendron', including the erasure of the name these plants had through centuries of indigenous knowledge before European botanists collected and catalogued them [14]. The etymology of the genus name *Philodendron*, coined only as recently as 1829, speaks of a plant which 'loves' (*philo*), or needs, a tree (*dendron*) as its source of support, but here it finds itself on a film set standing in for a skyscraper office, rather than in the forest canopy. The film showcases reference management systems, represented by the stacks of

catalogued materials on every surface of the department, which feel remote from their objects and run through with Western colonialist history; enquiries about indigenous people are considered a matter for The Explorers Club. The knowledge culture of the organisation would therefore seem consistent with the classification of plants in scientific language, of which Marder observes 'In the West, nominalism has been the prevalent method of thinking about plants, integrated into ever more detailed classificatory schemas' [9] (p. 4). In the story of the switching of plants on set, the name seems to be a positive hindrance to comprehension. The discussion hinges around the degree to which either plant fulfils the word which precedes them both, 'philodendron', even as the unnamed studio gardener insists that the first plant fits the bill. Marder elaborates that 'These names are meant to capture the essence of the plant by assigning to it an exact place in a dead, albeit highly differentiated, system that swallows up the sunflower's singularity and uniqueness. The actual sunflower turns into an example of the genus, tribe, and so forth, to which it belongs and is nothing in itself outside the intricate net of classifications wherein it is caught up [9] (p. 5). In *Desk Set*, the presence of the plant might at first have been instigated through a top-down process, driven by one word, and the limitations of that word became conspicuous in the practical business of production. In the finished film, however, we find the indexical impression of one plant in particular, which to some extent escapes the fate of being a non-individuated specimen of a plant group, simply through the way it is shown, but not named. When at last the philodendron is invoked in language, it is not in the same spirit as the abstracted, unseen objects of the department's research, but claimed as an individual in the exclamation 'My philodendron! What am I going to do with my philodendron!'. While it is framed as a possession, it is one which is in the same breath figured as having a claim to Bunny's care and protection.

4. Figure and Ground

The philodendron is rendered hyper visible through the film's own presentation of it as spectacle, along with Richard's reaction to it. The scene of Bunny and Richard's first meeting closely follows both the text and action of Marchant's play. Marchant's stage direction specifies that '*She pours the mixture into the philodendron plant that climbs round the window frame. He follows it around with his eyes. She catches his look*' [3] (p. 13). This 'catching' of his look, the prompt for response, has implications in film, which do not arise in the theatre. While Bunny 'catches' his look, in the sense that she remarks it, we as film spectators also catch the look in a more contagious sense, and what might on stage pass as a far less conspicuous moment of diversion is enshrined as significant by the cinematography and editing. The cut to a point of view

panning shot takes us into the perspective of Sumner, through which we trace the sequence of the philodendron's growth, and, with that, Bunny's care for it. Through this shot, the philodendron emerges from the general background of the office space, and is granted a formal status as a figure meriting the time and space of such a shot. Thus, it is through a choice in the translation of a stage direction to the medium of film that the philodendron comes to preoccupy our gaze. In the structuring of attention this generates, there is an interesting comparison to be made with perhaps the most mythologised example of a plant erupting from ground to figure on film, in the Lumières' *Repas de Bébé* (1895). The film, exhibited in their 1895 Café de Paris screening, famously shows a couple feeding their child at an outdoor table, while behind them the leaves of a potted plant, and the more distant garden vegetation, stir in the breeze. The fascination of this fleeting background movement is reputed to have astonished the neophyte audience, including Georges Méliès. Jacques Aumont frames the claimed effect as being tied up with an unexpected call on our attention: 'As well as enjoying so much stuff offered at once to the gaze, people were amazed at the effects that gaze singled out. Effects of pure movement, like the famous leaves that moved in the background to *Repas de bébé* [...]' [15] (p. 424). Aumont elaborates on what he finds in this, namely a constant play on the relation between figure and ground provoked by movement, asking 'what is it to film *Repas de bébé* when, in the background, there are trees whose leaves move, so marked that they attract all the attention? There is no denying that this inaugurated a hitherto unseen relationship between a figure and its ground' [15] (p. 428). The call on attention made by the plant in *Desk Set* is, formally, the antithesis of what is popularly understood to be happening with the Lumières' film, our attention directed to it not by movement incidental to the purported central action, but by the film's own determined craft. It is nonetheless, in the broader cultural landscape, comparable, as an instance rebalancing the figure and ground relation between human actors and vegetal life. For Dawn Keetley, the phenomenon of plants becoming conspicuous is anomalous enough to underpin one of her six theses on plant horror, namely: 'Plants Lurk in our Blindspot' [16] (p. 10). Keetley traces a line through multiple critical perspectives to describe how plants have frequently constituted unattended background, and 'Plant horror exploits this taken-for-granted "fact" of plants' invisibility, passivity, and harmlessness' [16] (p. 10). Keetley proposes that 'What this means is that when vegetation refuses to be mere backdrop—when it balks at being dismissed as the hiding-place of snakes, spiders, lions, and crocodiles—it becomes doubly horrifying, the dread legible through both

psychoanalytic and cognitive models of mind' [16] (p. 11). There is perhaps something of this in Richard's reaction, as he is not permitted to inhabit Bunny's office without conceding to notice the philodendron.

Yet, if the plant is attended to by the film in a way which runs counter to the norms for plants in its environment—the office, and the Hollywood studio film alike—it also becomes clear that this is not because it is somehow in the 'wrong' place. In the body of theoretical writing on plants, houseplants receive relatively little direct discussion, except under the general category of the ornamental use of plants. Presupposed by much use of ornamental houseplants is the capacity to nurture a plant often native to some other location (in the case of the philodendron, the South American rainforest). Out of placeness is not here something which denotes horror or invasion but a need for care, and a sense of responsibility wrapped into the question 'what am I going to do with my philodendron?'. *The Desk Set*, as a play, was bound by the limits of theatre to the office space, and the philodendron offers an efficient way of gesturing to forms of organic growth which would otherwise be difficult to draw into the diegetic world. As André Bazin observes, in comparing the rendering of nature on stage and on screen, even if a real tree might be brought onto the stage, there is no possibility of a forest [17] (p. 89). For Bazin, the capacity of film, versus theatre, to represent nature lies in the way the right image can postulate a wider landscape. Disparaging the artfully constructed forest of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, Bazin argues that 'the trembling of just one branch in the wind, and the sunlight, would be enough to conjure up all the forests of the world' [17] (p. 111). Such a metonymic form of realism arguably still co-opts a plant or plants into representing something other than, or more than, themselves and their own self-expression. The extent to which *Desk Set's* philodendron resists this is striking. Its individuation lies in part in the film's insistence on its status as an inhabitant of the interior world, which does not signpost us towards some putative wilderness beyond the office. Nor does it participate in the sort of 'motley, intricate weave of urban artifice and uncontrollable nature' identified by Pansy Duncan in the urban flowerbed of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) [18] (p. 222). *Desk Set* makes virtually no space at all for the idea of a vegetal existence capable of subsisting without human intervention. The world of the film is resolutely urban, with the New York setting established in the first shot by a vertiginous tilt taking us from ground level, up and up 30 Rockefeller Plaza, not quite reaching the top before we are immersed in the bustling modernist office. Fleeting excursions beyond the skyscraper never take us to any wilder zone than the kerbside, a place drenched in rain, to be escaped as rapidly as possible in a car. This is an environment in which plants survive at the will of humans, and if they are to thrive it is under their care. This is never clearer

than in the only scene of any length to be set outdoors. Richard invites Bunny for lunch, an event which, to her dismay, turns out to involve a brown bag of sandwiches on the roof terrace of the office building. The terrace is a hard, frigid, built zone, with litter blowing around amidst the few desultory pigeons who provide the only example of non-human animal life in the film. Leafless trees are trained to trellis grids, with every branch shaped to fit the rectilinear demands of the supports, matching their fellows. The wooden planters in which they stand feature symmetrical diamond patterns, created by slicing and shaping wood into geometry. Deeper in the background, other trees stand with their branches wrapped up in hessian against the frost. The patio furniture represents ossified forms of foliage in cast metal. There is almost an inversion of *Le Bébé* here, the vegetal life which sits behind the diners being positioned as props in a highly controlled studio environment, against a static diorama of the New York skyline (Figure 3).

There is no prospect of leaves stirring in any breeze to draw our eye away from the conversation, indeed the branches are concerted and conspicuously immobilised. Within the fictional dimension, this immobilisation reflects acts of cultivation and care designed to ensure the plants' survival in a hostile city environment, and thereby their decorative function in more clement weather. Almost every plant in *Desk Set* then is placed in circumstances which strip away the essential plant quality noted by Emanuele Coccia, that plants 'have no need for the mediation of other beings in order to survive' [8] (p. 8). This is a place where only plants which respond to, and are offered, the mediation of others can survive. The philodendron is the most positive expression of this inescapable dependency. Marder finds a place for human care behind the self-expression of some plants, noting that 'Plants, to be sure, respond to our care without saying anything. They do so by expressing themselves more exuberantly, by spreading more branches, unfolding more leaves, or opening more blossoms. They exist, they *are*, more intensely, and this intensity is of a piece with their extending themselves further in space, or, in a word, their growth' [10] (p. 163). The exuberance of the philodendron is both an expression of itself, and of Bunny's 'green thumb'. While its name may recall its origins in the forest canopy of South America, it has indubitably flourished in the skyscraper. When the plant is taken down in readiness for Bunny's departure from the company, it is her hands and those of her co-workers which cradle it, as it is carefully teased apart from the fabric of the room (Figure 4).

5. Green Thumb

In possessing the 'green thumb' delivering the acts of care which preserve these urban plants, Bunny's character is inextricably interwoven with Hepburn's star persona, perhaps even more so from a position of retrospect. Henry Ephron's story of her selection of the 'right' philodendron reflects this element of Hepburn's character, and her reputation as a gardener forms a more and more prominent strand in her public reputation over the course of her life. Biographer Anne Edwards reports the story told by executive stage manager Bernard Gersten, who accompanied Hepburn on a tour, which involved travelling with 'trunkloads of food and other necessities, including plants she'd been given and couldn't bear to leave behind. Once, someone had apparently neglected to wrap a beautiful, delicate plant against the weather and when [we] opened the trunk [we] discovered it had given up the struggle against the cold. Miss Hepburn cried' [19] (p. 309). This sense of an imperative to protect plants from an environment in which they find themselves only through human agency recalls the wrapped trees of the *Desk Set* terrace. Yet it would be a mistake to see the forms of care expressed here as quasi-anthropomorphising sentimentality. Just as in *Desk Set* there is never any credence given to the jokes that the philodendron might participate in the workers' animosity towards EMMARAC, nor to the claim that it is 'alive' in the same sense as other bus passengers, and therefore an economic actor, so too does Hepburn's relation to plants entail a recognition of difference. In another biographical anecdote, we again see Hepburn switching plants around for maximum cinematic effect, this time in Joan Kramer and David Heeley's 1993 TV film about her, *Katharine Hepburn: All About Me*. Hepburn wanted to be seen transporting plants between New York and Fenwick, the beloved Connecticut home she had inherited from her family. The filmmakers recount how she invited them to film her departure, telling them 'We take enough stuff for a month—food, clothes, and all the flowers. I never leave the flowers behind' [20] (p. 313). For the purposes of representing this though, she borrowed a pot of red geraniums from neighbour Stephen Sondheim, having reportedly explained that 'All the flowers I have are pink and white—and they'd look rather dull on camera. No contrast' [20] (p. 313). On screen impact is of primary importance here, in a way it probably was in the choice of philodendron, and Sondheim's plant is drafted in to represent her care for plants in a general sense rather than Hepburn feeling any duty to authentically portray a relationship with an individuated plant of her own. Elsewhere, the work of gardening is figured in Hepburn's thinking as pure labour, and the cost of this is elaborated. Hepburn devotes an entire chapter of her autobiography to a piece titled 'Memorial Day', recounting the process of weeding and replanting an area of ground at Fenwick, in the company of David Lean, his wife Sandy, and Hepburn's secretary Phyllis [21] (p. 279). The story

provides a frank digging into the pleasures and trials of working with plants, as well as a sense of entitlement to uproot plants not to her taste and choose the specimens which satisfy the eye of the human gardener. On the way to the house, the group stops at a nursery to select plants and tools, and Lean increasingly takes the lead in running the project. Back at the garden, Lean directs the work and Hepburn sweats and struggles. He warns her to be careful with the roots of the plants, describing how direct contact with manure will burn them, to which she reacts 'Fuck the roots! I thought; I'm going to die. What about my roots? These people are like a machine' [21] (p. 284). Here there is no binary opposition between plant and machine, but instead a machine-like quality is attributed by Hepburn to people whose vision of plants is in thrall to such a didactic cultivatory regime as to exclude the organic needs of their fellow humans. Hepburn herself then represents a star for whom plants were a constant presence amidst the other forces flowing in her life and work. She actively brings them forth as figures in her writing and self fashioning, they are entwined with her labour as a co-maker of film images, and shape her relation to other human beings.

6. Conclusions

What should we, as spectators, make of *Desk Set's* attention being offered to one plant, giving us the time to look at it, while invisibilising countless others? The film's treatment of the philodendron echoes all the conventional structures of 1950s Hollywood studio film form and star culture. Marder warns of the risks of such uneven generosity towards plants, commenting that, even if we can attest to a genuine, non-anthropomorphising love for a plant or plants, such a love may still be 'unjust', for 'We cannot avoid privileging the singular being or beings we love over those that do not evoke affection in us' [10] (p. 165). That affection becomes part of the mechanism of survival for a plant held, like the philodendron, in a set of circumstances which render it dependent. Coccia comments that plants' 'absence of movement is nothing but the reverse of their complete adhesion to what happens to them and their environment. One cannot separate the plant—*neither physically nor metaphysically*—from the world that accommodates it' [8] (p. 5). *Desk Set* shows the philodendron to be prospering in the office, as well as vulnerable to the threatened changes which might see it transported elsewhere, and to an outside climate which would not be survivable. There is a similar sense of vegetal precarity in the stories around the switching of plants in the production of the film, and Hepburn's shuttling of plants between her two homes. The same currents of modernity which bring EMMARAC into the office see humans override plants' natural immobility and relation to their environment. However, Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari offer a vital

caution of the risks they see in any framing of plants as 'victims' of modernity (and thereby potentially redeemers also), noting that 'plant life does not somehow remain outside of modernity or inherently in opposition to the forces that structure it' [22] (p. 2). There is a perhaps surprising resonance with *Desk Set* here, a film which does not in the end ask us to invest in any opposition between the philodendron and the computer, nor requires it to ally with humans, nor uses it to conjure up a broader natural sphere somewhere beyond the skyscraper, but lets us recognise the plant as itself, in the time and place where we find it. *Desk Set* is an industrial product in more than one sense: in its themes, in its studio production and in its sponsorship by IBM. It directs the spectator to look at the philodendron because it provides a comedic opportunity, to pit plant against corporation for a beat or two of humour. Looking at the philodendron serves a narrative which is not concerned with plant life more broadly, nor with any place or time, real or dreamed, beyond an immediate present. The philodendron and its image cannot be teased apart from the technologies which bring it to the studio set, the diegetic office, or the screen on which we see it. Yet, despite all this, having brought this plant out of the background, the film leaves us free, like Bunny, to leave behind us the logic of the original proposition and 'associate many things with many things'.
Not applicable.

Not applicable.

Not applicable.

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Footnotes

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.



Figure 1. Bunny Watson tends her philodendron.



Figure 2. The camera follows the philodendron.



Figure 3. Bunny and Richard eat lunch on the roof terrace.



Figure 4. Bunny and her colleagues take down the philodendron.

References

1. McHugh, S. Houseplants as Fictional Subjects. *Why Look at Plants?: The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*; Aloï, G. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2018; pp. 191-194.
2. Aloï, G. About This Book. *Why Look at Plants?: The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*; Aloï, G. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2018; pp. xx-xxv.
3. Marchant, W. *The Desk Set: A Comedy in Three Acts*; Samuel French: New York, NY, USA, 1956.
4. Schleier, M. *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2009.

5. Colatrella, C. From Desk Set to The Net: Women and Computing Technology in Hollywood Films. *Can. Rev. Am. Stud.*; 2001; 31, pp. 1-14. [DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.3138/CRAS-s031-02-01>]
6. Thumim, J. Miss Hepburn Is Humanized': The Star Persona of Katharine Hepburn. *Fem. Rev.*; 1986; 24, pp. 71-102. [DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1057/fr.1986.32>]
7. Jermyn, D. I [heart] NY: The Rom-Com's Love Affair with New York City. *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*; Abbott, S.; Jermyn, D. I. B. Tauris: London, UK, 2009; pp. 9-24.
8. Coccia, E. *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*; Montanari, D. Polity: Cambridge, UK, 2019.
9. Marder, M. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
10. Irigaray, L.; Marder, M. *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2016.
11. Higham, C. *Kate: The Life of Katharine Hepburn*; W. H. Allen: London, UK, 1975.
12. Kanin, G. *Tracy and Hepburn: An Intimate Memoir*; Viking Press: New York, NY, USA, 1971.
13. Houle, K. A Tree by any Other Name: Language Use and Linguistic Responsibility. *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*; Gagliano, M.; Ryan, J.; Vieira, P. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2017; pp. 155-172.
14. Mayo, S.J. History and Infrageneric Nomenclature of Philodendron (Araceae). *Kew Bull.*; 1990; 45, pp. 37-71. [DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/4114436>]
15. Aumont, J. Lumière Revisited. *Film. Hist.*; 1996; 8, pp. 416-430.
16. Keetley, D. Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*; Keetley, D.; Tenga, A. Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2016; pp. 1-30.
17. Bazin, A. *What Is Cinema?: Volume I*; 2nd ed. Gray, H. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 2004.

18. Duncan, P. *Shrubs and the City: Urban Nature in Rear Window. The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World (Ecocritical Theory and Practice)*; Vieira, P.; Gagliano, M.; Ryan, J. Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, USA, 2015; pp. 219-232.

19. Edwards, A. *Katharine Hepburn: A Remarkable Woman*; Lyons Press: Guilford, CT, USA, 2019.

20. Kramer, J.; Heeley, D. *In the Company of Legends*; Beaufort Books: New York, NY, USA, 2016.

21. Hepburn, K. *Me: Stories of My Life*; Ballantine Books: New York, NY, USA, 1991.


22. Meeker, N.; Szabari, A. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*; Fordham University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2019.

© 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Notwithstanding the ProQuest Terms and Conditions, you may use this content in accordance with the terms of the License.


Abstract

Translate

Desk Set, a 1957 20th Century Fox studio comedy, made with the sponsorship of IBM, charts the relationship between a reference librarian, Bunny Watson, and Richard Sumner, the inventor of a computer which appears to threaten her job. The film displays a thriving philodendron within Bunny's skyscraper office, illustrating her organic style of thinking, and implicitly inviting us to see the plant in opposition to the computer. The suggestion that the plant is in some sense excessive, claiming attention beyond the norms of the ornamental background houseplant, opens questions about how we look at plants on film. We find here a reframing of figure and ground, which relates the philodendron to moments where plants become conspicuous in early film and in horror. *Desk Set* reflects a vegetal landscape characterised by all the commonplace instrumentalising of plants in modernity, amongst which the philodendron emerges as an exception. The plant does not point outwards to a putative

wilderness. Instead, our looking at it allows us to contemplate it as an
[More](#) 

Details

Title	'What Am I Going to Do with My Philodendron?' Looking at a Plant in <i>Desk Set</i>
Author	Evans, Georgina 
First page	9
Publication year	2023
Publication date	2023
Publisher	MDPI AG
e-ISSN	24099287
Source type	Scholarly Journal
Language of publication	English
DOI	

<https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8010009>

ProQuest 2779562078

document ID

Copyright

© 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Notwithstanding the ProQuest Terms and Conditions, you may use this content in accordance with the terms of the License.

Copyright © 2024 ProQuest LLC.