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The Fruit of Contradiction: Reading Durian through a Cultural Phytosemiotic Lens

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Abstract: Distinctive for its pungent and oftentimes rotten odor, the thorny fruit of durian (*Durio* spp.) is considered a delicacy throughout Asia. Despite its burgeoning global recognition, durian remains a fruit of contradiction—desirable to some yet repulsive to others. Although regarded commonly as immobile, mute, and insentient, plants such as durian communicate within their own bodies, between the same and different species, and between themselves and other life forms. As individuals and collectives, plants develop modes of language—or phytodialects—that are specific to certain contexts. Focused on vegetal semiosis or sign processes, a phytosemiotic lens views plants as dynamic and expressive subjects positioned within lifeworlds. Absent from phytosemiotic theory, however, are the cultural sign processes that take place within and between plants—what I call *cultural phytosemiotics*. The framework I propose calls attention to the interlinked biological, ecological, and cultural dimensions of signification between plants and non-plants. From a phytosemiotic standpoint, this article examines historical, cinematographic, and literary narratives of durian. Reflecting the fruit's divisive sensory effects, historical accounts of *Durio* by Niccolò de' Conti, Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, Georg Eberhard Rumphius, and William Marsden alternate between praise and disdain. Moreover, films such as Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian* (2000) and Anthony Chen's *Wet Season* (2019) narrativize the polarities that similarly figure into historical depictions of the species. Literary narratives, including the poems "Durians" (2005) by Hsien Min Toh and "Hurling a Durian" (2013) by Sally Wen Mao, investigate the language of durian's olfactory and gustatory sensations. Along a continuum between adoration to revulsion, durian embodies the otherness of vegetal being. In an era of rampant biodiversity loss, learning to embrace botanical difference should be a human imperative.

Keywords: botanical life; durian; film; fruit; literature for children and young adults; narratives; phytosemiotics; plants; poetry; Southeast Asia

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1. Introduction: Durian Devotion and Dissention

Characterized by its pungent and oftentimes rotten odor, durian is considered a delicacy across many parts of Asia. Notwithstanding its widespread cultural appeal, especially in East and Southeast Asia, the durian remains a strongly paradoxical vegetal agent—eminently desirable to connoisseurs yet thoroughly revolting to novices. Colloquially labelled the 'king of all fruits', durian represents the capacity of botanical life to unsettle binary categories, becoming both a blessing and bane simultaneously ([1], p. 538). Native to Southeast Asia, the world's 'stinkiest' fruit embodies the plant realm's uncanny ability to stretch the bounds of linguistic conventions. Accordingly, its potent effects on olfaction and gustation "elicit devotion as well as revulsion" ([1], p. 538). In 2023, the international market for the "polarizing fruit" grew by four hundred percent [2]. While the delicacy attracts more and more devotees globally, commentators continue to grapple with the complexities of evoking the sensory experience of durian—of describing its "indescribable taste" ([3], para. 5). An article touting the health benefits of durian characterizes the odor in no uncertain terms as "a combination of sulfur, sewage, fruit, honey, and roasted and rotting onions" ([4], para. 7). As a consequence of durian's potent sensory presence, narratives

circulating in the news media commonly resort to metaphor, simile, overstatement, and imaginative figuration: "Some say it's sticky-sweet, others say it smells like socks. Love it or hate it, the appetite for durians is growing voraciously" [2]. Similarly, an account of Vietnam's nascent yet rapidly expanding durian industry compares the fruit, in fantastical terms, to "a giant's spiky massage ball" pungently suffusing its environment ([3], para. 3).

In shaping its lifeworld and interacting with other beings, including humans, durian educes oppositional states: pleasure and unease, desire and disgust, affection and antipathy. Indeed, durian folklore in Southeast Asia brims with stories of airline executives, rail managers, taxi proprietors, and hotel owners forbidding the fruit. Tales also abound of families clashing over its odoriferous presence in their kitchens. In 2018, as a case in point, close to two-thousand kilograms (about four-thousand five-hundred pounds) of the stinky fruit delayed the takeoff of an Indonesian flight from Bengkulu, Sumatra, to Jakarta, Java, as travelers demanded the removal of the noxious cargo [5]. Evident in historical narratives and contemporary anecdotes alike, this contradictory nature of durian reflects the plant's peculiar agency—its specific capacity to influence its surroundings through heterogeneous sensory significations. Nonetheless, cloaked by farcical scenarios of airplanes grounded by a smelly load of fruit, on the one hand, and tantalizing intimations of "custardy innards", on the other, are the looming threats to durian diversity in Southeast Asia ([3], para. 3). The global dominance of Musang King and other cultivars marginalizes the fruit's "obscure wild relatives" ([1], p. 538). Although there are thirty scientifically documented species of durian, *Durio zibethinus* completely occupies the global market. All the while, new species, such as *Durio gerikensis*, which is endemic to Peninsular Malaysia, continue to be identified [6]. Some of these highly localized species have been cultivated sustainably by Indigenous Southeast Asian societies for centuries ([7], p. 89). The conservation of the less cosmopolitan relatives of *Durio*, therefore, demands an examination of the interlinked environmental and cultural exigencies impacting durians in Borneo and other biodiverse places ([1], p. 538).

In this article, I contend that understanding durian devotion and dissention requires focusing on historical and contemporary representations of the plant's curiously divisive nature. In order to argue this point, I develop cultural phytosemiotics as a critical framework for reading historical, literary, and cinematographic depictions of durians. For instance, as discussed later in this article, the travelogues of writers such as Dutch merchant Jan Huyghen van Linschoten in the late-sixteenth century and German-born botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius in the early-eighteenth century alternate between admiration and aversion. Moreover, in *The History of Sumatra* (1783), the first in-depth account of the tropical island to be published in any language, Irish linguist William Marsden noted that durian "rinds, thrown about in the bazars [*sic*], communicate their scent to the surrounding atmosphere" ([8], p. 98). Marsden's evocation of durian scent as a medium of communication chimes with the idea of phytosemiotics as the analysis of sign processes within plants. Investigating vegetal semiosis, a phytosemiotic stance acknowledges plant beings as sovereign agents existing relationally within *Umwelten* or subjective worlds. Although regarded as sessile in comparison to humans, animals, birds, and insects, plants are known to communicate at various levels including *intraorganismically* (within their bodies), *interorganismically* (between the same and different species), and *metaorganismically* (between plants and non-plants) ([9], p. 170). As individuals and collectives, then, plants express *phytodialects* in specific contexts such as the Sumatran marketplace that Marsden observed ([10], p. 549). In scientific terms, phytosemiotics places emphasis on cellular and tissue-level sign processes governed by secondary metabolites, hormones, and other compounds, all of which facilitate the transmission of plant scent, including durian pungence ([11], p. 258). Viewed from a phytosemiotic perspective, Marsden's account reveals his bearing witness to durian's communicative agency in the public space of the bazaar.

Markedly absent in theorizations of phytosemiotics, however, are the culturally mediated sign processes between and within plants to which Marsden and other writers gesture. Extending beyond the biological domain of metabolites and related chemicals,

the framework I propose here locates processes of signification between plants and others within biocultural contexts. After bringing theories of phytosemiotics and cultural semiotics into dialogue, I apply this framework to a reading of historical accounts of durian by Venetian merchant Niccolò de' Conti (1395–1469), Portuguese naturalist Garcia de Orta (1501–1568), Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563–1611), and Georg Eberhard Rumphius (1627–1702), among others. I then shift to contemporary durian texts by filmmakers, poets, and authors of literature for children and young adults. Hong Kong filmmaker Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian* (2000) narrativizes the dynamic interplay of polarities that similarly informs historical depictions of the species [12]. In contrast, Singaporean director Anthony Chen's *Wet Season* (2019) centralizes traditional Southeast Asian beliefs, values, and practices surrounding durian, including its purported aphrodisiacal qualities [13]. Turning to literary representations, I examine the cultural phytosemiotics of Singaporean writer Hsien Min Toh's poem "Durians" (2005) and Chinese–American poet Sally Wen Mao's "Hurling a Durian" (2013), with specific attention to olfaction and gustation [14,15]. As an example of short fiction for young readers, Malaysian author Leela Chakrabarty's collection, *Where the Durian Tree Grows* (2015), underscores the ecologically networked semiosis of the plant [16]. Positioning everyday human–flora interdependencies at the front and center of my analysis, a phytosemiotic viewpoint elucidates durian's power to disturb the rigid ontological categories constructed by human thinking. As these diverse narratives illustrate, the durian urges human subjects to embrace the nondichotomous alterity of its existence and more broadly of botanical nature.

2. Vegetal Signs: From Phytosemiotics to Cultural Phytosemiotics

The term semiosis refers broadly to the processes of signification taking place within and between beings. Linguist Thomas A. Sebeok defined semiosis as "a species' capacity to make and understand signs" ([17], p. 8). He elaborated the term further as "the biological capacity itself that underlies the production and comprehension of signs, from simple physiological signals to those that reveal a highly complex symbolism" ([17], p. 8). Succinctly put, semiosis is "sign action" according to Sebeok ([17], p. 26). Semiotics, consequently, involves the examination of sign processes and the ways in which meaning is produced. Biosemiotics, furthermore, for Jesper Hoffmeyer, emphasizes the semiotic processes underlying all life. From a biosemiotic standpoint, the natural world is "essentially driven by, or actually consisting of, semiosis, that is to say, processes of sign relations and their signification—or function—in the biological processes of life" ([18], p. 4). Applicable to multiple scales of signification, biosemiotics foregrounds the complex sign relations "in animate nature, at whatever level, from the single cell to the ecosystem" ([19], p. 157). Over the last forty-five years, phytosemiotics has emerged as a distinct area of biosemiotic theory concerned with the "action of signs in the realm of vegetable life" ([20], p. 27). In his seminal theorization of the idea, Martin Krampen characterized phytosemiotics as "the semiotics of plants," existing alongside anthroposemiotics, the study of human communication, and zoosemiotics, the study of sign processes within and between animals ([21], p. 275). In comparable terms, Donald Favareau stresses phytosemiotics' focus on the "sign-processes taking place within and between plants" ([11], p. 258).

Prior to the emergence of phytosemiotics in the early 1980s with the publication of Krampen's pathbreaking essay, the field of biosemiotics tended to dismiss the significance of vegetal sign relations and meaning-making. In the 1940s, Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll asserted that plants can neither "construct" nor "command" Umwelten, or subjective worlds mediated by the senses:

> The houses of plants lack mobility. Because they possess neither receptor nor effector organs, plants are not able to construct and be in command of an Umwelt [. . .] The plant possesses no special Umwelt organs, but is immersed directly in its habitat. The relationships of the plant with its habitat are altogether different from those of the animals with their Umwelts. The building-plans of animals and

plants are the same in only one respect: Both select precisely from among the stimuli that impinge upon them from the environment. ([22], p. 33)

For von Uexküll, plants are sensu stricto acted upon by "meaning-factors" of wind, water, and other elements. In contrast, animals construct meaning dynamically through transactions with neutral objects that become "meaning-carriers" ([22], pp. 36–37). Concerned principally with the animal Umwelt, von Uexküll regarded vegetal relations as passively "operational" rather than actively embedded within lifeworlds: "Certainly, plants do not possess sense organs or nerves—and, therefore, their whole existence seems to take place in an operational world" ([22], p. 45, emphasis added). Although botanical life has a certain coordinated internal directedness—resulting from "the planned action of impulses of living cell subjects"—plant agency does not extend into Umwelten as it does in the animal world ([22], p. 45). In other words, in von Uexküll's view, the modus operandi of plants is "passive surrender" ([21], p. 275).

Krampen expanded von Uexküll's theoretical biology and Thomas Sebeok's zoosemiotics to give prominence to sign interactions within and between plants. For Krampen, the multidimensional meanings of plants to human existence call attention to the importance of phytosemiotics as a third area of biosemiotic theory. He contended that plants "not only evoke nurturance behavior but often become something like 'teachers' when we interact with them" notably through their characteristics of "comfortable calm" and "passive resistance" ([21], p. 275). Moreover, "the example of the plant's life rhythm can be very instructive to humans," especially in relation to the seasonal adaptations exhibited by different species ([21], p. 275). Krampen, additionally, suggested that "symbiosis with plants" enhances human aesthetic experience ([21], p. 276). The study of art, literature, and religion, therefore, should consider that "plants have served as meaningful signs, indexical, iconic, and symbolic, in many cultures because they are living beings possessing features that evoke the attribution of meaning to a very considerable degree" ([21], p. 276). As delineated by Krampen, a phytosemiotic standpoint positions plants as autonomous meaning-making subjects coexisting with other beings in lifeworlds rather than submissively surrendering to other subjects in von Uexküll's terms. As individuals and collectives, plants generate their own phytodialects, integrating their unique modes of behavior, learning, communication, signification, and meaning-production within specific biocultural milieus ([10], p. 549). Although stationary in comparison to other life forms, plants communicate through these dialects at multitudinous levels, including within their bodies, within the same botanical species, between different botanical species, and between plants and other life forms ([9], p. 170).

A significant limitation of phytosemiotics, however, is its prevailing scientific logos privileging the mediation of plants' sign processes by biochemical signaling. To place stronger emphasis on the cultural registers of plants pointed out by Krampen, phytosemiotics can be interwoven with cultural semiotics, a well-established area of semiotic theory that understands culture as a system of signs. As argued by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok in the late 1970s, "culture is a universe created by a plurality of mutually interacting and mutually supportive sign systems" that can be studied through diverse texts including, but not limited to, linguistic forms ([23], p. 122). Cultural semiotics encourages a focus on the systemic and contextual relationships through which meaning is produced and transmitted ([24], p. 6). Accordingly, cultural semiotics approaches objects of analysis, including verbal, iconic, and multimedia texts, vis-à-vis their cultural function and their systemic correlations. The principal aims of cultural semiotics are, firstly, to identify how sign systems contribute to a culture and, secondly, to reframe cultures themselves as sign systems shaping individuals' relations ([25], p. 56). Bringing cultural semiotics and phytosemiotics into discourse, then, cultural phytosemiotics refers to the examination of forms of signification and meaning-construction arising within plants as well as between plants, non-plants, ecosystems, communities, and societies through sensory exchanges and mnemonic processes. Working across the longstanding Western historical and philosophical division between human culture and vegetal nature ([26], pp. 13–40), cultural

phytosemiotics foregrounds botanical processes of signification within human–plant, or phytocultural, spheres of relation. Thus, rather than creating a pleonasm, adding cultural to phytosemiotics ensures that the study of plant signs seriously considers how culture mediates signification. The framework of cultural phytosemiotics, accordingly, aims to liberate phytosemiotics from its prevailing biological bias toward cellular and tissue-level sign processes predicated on secondary metabolites, neurotransmitters, and hormones. In the next section, I apply the framework of cultural phytosemiotics to an analysis of historical narratives depicting durian's multidimensional imbrications with humankind.

3. "Passionately Addicted to It": Historical Narratives of Durian

When Portugal established the first European colony in Southeast Asia in the early sixteenth century, durian had already been vital to the local and Indigeneous cultures of the region for hundreds of years. In Indonesia, for instance, the species appears in a relief panel adorning Borobudur, the ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist temple, where the fruit represents the sustenance people derive from plant life ([1], p. 544). In Malaysian villages, moreover, home courtyards would traditionally include several trees of intergenerational importance that supplied food, medicine, fiber, shelter, shade, and other material benefits ([1], p. 543). The cosmological significance of durian is evident in Southeast Asian narratives such as "The Story of the First Durian," a Filipino myth in which a hermit creates a special fruit to assist an elderly king (discussed in Section 5 of this article in relation to Toh's poem "Durians"). While a comprehensive review of local and Indigenous stories of durian is outside the scope of the present article, it is nonetheless crucial to recognize the multifarious cultural resonances of the species. For local cultures, durian is not merely an oddity or paradox but, instead, it is a member of an extended community of humans and more-than-humans. Indeed, narratives by European chroniclers such as de' Conti, van Linschoten, Rumphius, and Marsden document some local views of and interactions with durian.

The durian's paradoxicality is a recurrent theme across Western texts published since the early-fifteenth century. Venetian merchant Niccolò de' Conti's account of traveling in Southeast Asia during the 1430s offers the earliest known European references to the fruit. According to Italian scholar Poggio Bracciolini's retelling of de' Conti's journey in Historia de Varietate Fortunae (A History of the Vicissitudes of Fortune), published in Latin in 1492 ([27], p. 100), de' Conti stayed for a year in Sumatra, where he viewed durian as "one of the most highly esteemed fruits of the Malay Islands, but extremely offensive to those who are unaccustomed to it, on account of its nauseous odour" ([28], p. 9). In Sumatra, as per Bracciolini's secondhand version, de' Conti observed "a green fruit, which [the Sumatrans] call duriano, of the size of a cucumber. When opened five fruits are found within, resembling oblong oranges. The taste varies, like that of cheese" ([28], p. 9). In geographer Henry Yule and Sanskrit scholar A. C. Burnell's English translation of Bracciolini's gloss in the late-nineteenth century, however, the durian noted by de' Conti is more fittingly "as big as a water-melon. Inside there are five things like elongated oranges, and resembling thick butter, with a combination of flavours" ([29], p. 332). Whether likened to "thick butter" or "cheese," the taste of durian evades straightforward narration through its "combination of flavours." In the sixteenth century, moreover, Portuguese physician Garcia de Orta alluded to durian in his Colóquios dos Simples e Drogas e Coisas Medicinais da Índia (Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India), published in 1563 in the form of a dialogue between the author and Ruano, a fictional interlocutor. When Ruano asks about durian, de Orta replies, "They say that at first it smells like onions, but that afterwards one begins to like it, until at last the taste seems very good" ([30], pp. 176–177). In further satisfying Ruano's curiosity, de Orta evokes durian visually as "the size of a melon" and bearing "a very thick rind covered with small excrescences" ([30], p. 177). Unlike the "nauseous odour" detected by De' Conti, the smell of durian for de Orta is "universally praised" by partakers, yet only after a period of olfactory acculturation ([30], p. 177).

Illustrations from Dutch cartographer Jan Huygen van Linschoten's Itinerario (1596) are among the earliest known Western graphic representations of durian. One plate features

a durian specimen, or iaquas, beside cashew, mango, and rose apple trees, as smaller ginger and pineapple plants occupy the foreground ([31], pp. 78–79) (Figure 1). Attached to the durian tree are seven fruits, while on the ground, one split fruit with five exposed fleshy seed outgrowths, or arils, lies scattered about. Another illustration depicts durian alongside bamboo and mangrove trees with a caption in Latin and Dutch stating, "Durians are delightful, abundant fruits that are grown only in Malacca [the Malay archipelago]" ([31], pp. 86–87) (Figure 2). On the Malaccan durian, van Linschoten remarked that "in taste and goodness it excels all kinds of fruits, and yet when it is first opened, it smells like rotten onions" ([32], p. 51). Notwithstanding its initially putrid olfactory impression, durian invariably becomes esteemed "above all other fruits, both for taste and savour" ([32], pp. 52–53). Van Linschoten also detailed the medicinal attributes of durian as a warming agent for the body, yet, at the same time, noted the Malaccans' consumption of betel leaves (Piper betle) to counteract the oral swelling triggered by eating a large amount of the fruit ([32], p. 53). In reference to durian's fabled aphrodisiacal quality emphasized, as well, by later writers, he concluded, "because they are of so pleasant a taste, the common saying is that men can never be satisfied with them" ([32], p. 53, italics added). Durian addiction leaves the partaker craving more.

Figure 1. As one of the earliest Western visual depictions of durian, this plate from van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1596) features the species beside cashew, mango, and rose apple trees in the background, while pineapple and ginger plants occupy the composition's foreground. Image credit: public domain (published before 1929).

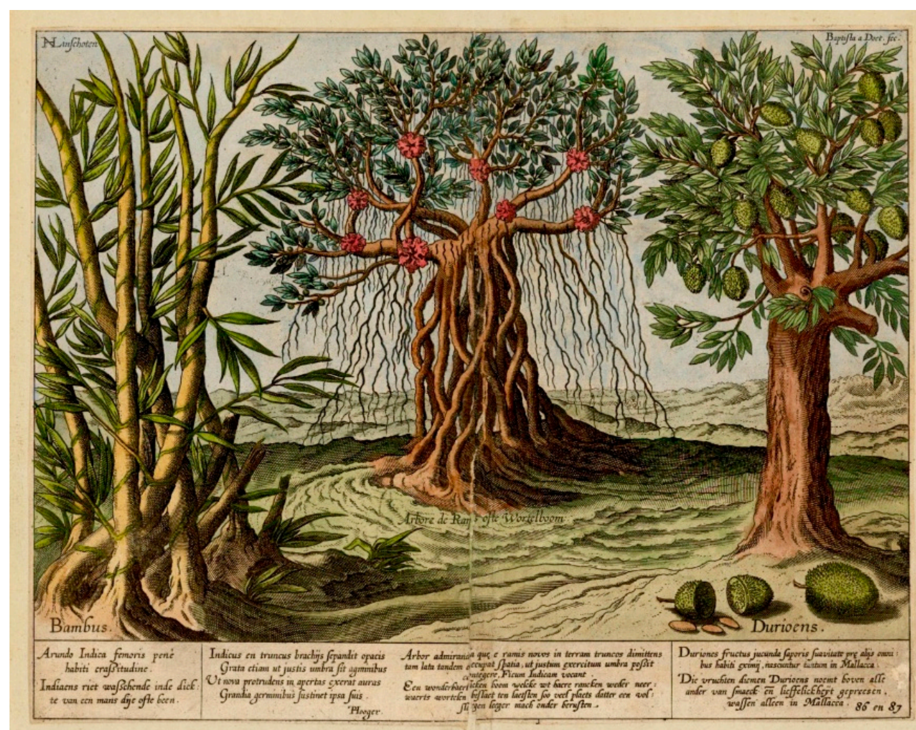

Figure 2. As another early Western visual representation of durian, this plate from van Linschoten's *Itinerario* depicts the species beside bamboo and mangrove trees as two fruits lie on the ground. Image credit: public domain (published before 1929).

In the eighteenth century, detailed taxonomical accounts of durian began to appear with the advent of Linnaean natural science and the influence of imperial botany in Southeast Asia [33]. One of the most significant works of the era is German-born botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius' Herbarium Amboinense (The Ambonese Herbal) published in 1741. The text furnishes a comprehensive botanical overview of the durians of Ambon Island located in the Banda Sea between Sulawesi, Timor, and New Guinea in present-day Indonesia ([34], pp. 101–103). Rumphius distinguished between the species Durio borneo ("which bears the greatest fruit of all"), Durio caffomba (recognized by its "intensely yellow" bark and "pale red" flesh), Durio manka (distinguished by "flesh that is soft to the core"), and Durio babi (known for "harder and more abundant flesh") ([34], p. 101). According to the botanist, durian is endowed with "a pleasant smell and charm that invigorate men, as the best and most beautiful of the fruits" ([34], p. 102). The rind, nevertheless, effuses "a noxious, acrid, and bitter stench in the streets" ([34], p. 103). Among the Ambonese, or Moluccans, "by public decree, the rinds are thrown into places that men seldom cross and where they are quickly smothered, as on the seashore and other more distant places" ([34], p. 103). Evident in Rumphius' narrative is the oscillation between adulation and aversion that collectively typifies historical and contemporary durian texts. Herbarium Amboinense, additionally, includes a taxonomically precise illustration of durian's elliptical leaves, spiny husk, and fleshy oblong arils contained within woody carpels ([34], plate 19, pp. 104–105) (Figure 3). Since devised by Rumphius in the 1700s, the genus Durio has undergone multiple revisions to reflect the identification of new species and to avoid confusion with soursop (Annona muricata), breadfruit (Artocarpus altilis), jackfruit (Artocarpus heterophyllus), horse chestnut (Aesculus hippocastanum), and other taxonomically unrelated plants with comparable visual features. In fact, four years prior to the appearance of Herbarium Amboinense, German botanist Johann Wilhelm Weinmann in Phytanthoza Iconographia (1737) assigned Durio zibethinus to Castaneae (now the beech family, Fagaceae), owing to the thorny fruit's resemblance to horse chestnut ([35], plate N468).

Figure 3. This black-and-white illustration from Rumphius' *Herbarium Amboinense* (1741) features a taxonomically accurate rendering of durian's oblong leaves, thorny fruit, and fleshy arils housed within woody containers known as carpels. Plate 19. Image credit: public domain (published before 1929).

In the 1770s, William Marsden worked for the East India Company in Benkulen, south–west Sumatra. In The History of Sumatra, he compared durian's appearance to a breadfruit, but with a thornier façade: "The fruit is in its general appearance not unlike the bread-fruit, but larger, and its coat is rougher" ([8], p. 98). Like van Linschoten, Marsden recognized durian's contradictory qualities as "a rich fruit, but strong, and even offensive, in taste as well as smell, to those who are not accustomed to it, and of a very heating quality" ([8], p. 98). For the uninitiated Western palate, durian at first offends olfaction and gustation. Habitual eating, however, cultivates appreciation over time, as de Orta also pronounced: "one begins to like it" ([30], p. 177). Marsden noticed that those who consumed durian consistently became "passionately addicted to it" ([8], p. 98). When the fruit ripened, local Malaysians would "live, almost wholly upon its luscious and cream-like pulp" ([8], p. 98). During durian season, the rinds "communicate their scent" to the marketplace environs ([8], p. 98). Marsden's framing of durian's complex odor signature as an expression of the plant's agency in the human–vegetal domain of the market prefigures the phytosemiotic idea of botanical signification occurring within phytocultural lifeworlds. Indeed, the uncanny ability of durian to enchant by unsettling binaries and upsetting conventions is further evident in contemporary cinematographic depictions.

4. A Smelly, Thorny Delicacy: Cinematographic Narratives of Durian

The interweaving of polarities—pleasure and disgust, attraction and revulsion, passion and enervation—that characterizes historical narratives also figures prominently in durian filmic texts. Chan's Durian Durian (2000) presents a significant example of durian narrativization that underscores human–flora relationships in urban Southeast Asian contexts [12]. The film features the protagonists Fan, a teenage girl, and Yan, a prostitute from mainland China who is residing illegally in Hong Kong. Yan initially encounters Fan in an alleyway. The two become acquaintances after Fan witnesses an unknown assailant strike Yan's pimp in the head with a whole durian. Taking place approximately thirty minutes into the story, the scene offers the first image of the film's namesake, constructed in this instance as an object of brutality ([12], 29:30) (Figure 4). The fact that viewers of the film see the offending durian rather than the human aggressor points to the fruit's agency and narrativity. After recovering from the assault, Yan's pimp strolls down the alleyway carrying the same durian used to injure him ([12], 34:10). He asks Fan's mother for a knife to split open the spiky fruit. On prying it open after some exertion, the durian's soft white flesh contrasts markedly with the jagged dark yellow rind, thus linking the scene to the etymological basis of the term duri in the Malay word for 'thorn' ([36], p. 2). The unnamed pimp's eating of the same durian deployed unexpectedly as a weapon against him represents an act of recuperation mediated by the vegetal world. The scene concludes with an image of a pile of prickly husks strewn in the middle of the alleyway. As the film progresses, the durian acquires an increasingly vital narrative position. As Fan and her mother approach the pile of durian husks cautiously, Fan remarks, "It smells" and her mother responds, "Something smells bad. Is it a dead rat?" ([12], 36:30–36:38). Signifying durian's cultural phytosemiotics in the urban Kowloon environment, the unruly stench begins to perfuse the film. Walking into a café, Yan's pimp reeks of durian as nearby customers complain, "What's that smell? It stinks!" ([12], 37:24).

Figure 4. This still from Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian* shows Yan's pimp collapsed in an alleyway after being struck on the back of the head with a durian by an unseen aggressor. 29:30. Image credit: fair use (non-commercial educational purposes).

The ensuing scenes reveal a transformation of the characters' attitudes toward durian. Rather than an object of violence and repulsion, the fruit begins to embody familial affection. Fan's father gives her a gift of a durian, announcing proudly, "I bought you the king of all fruits for your birthday" ([12], 44:55). Around the kitchen table with her father, mother, and brother, Fan becomes acquainted with the cultural intricacies of the high-priced yet misunderstood delicacy. Durian fallacies, nonetheless, continue to surface as Fan's father claims that the fruit originates in Mexico where it is called the "pear of America". Grasping for language to evoke durian's unusual effects on her senses, Fan likens the fruit to a porcupine and pineapple as her mother asserts skeptically, "Lychee is the real king of all fruits. Not that thing!" ([12], 45:30). After Fan's father cracks the specimen open with a screwdriver, hammer, and saw, the durian emits a potent stench that causes Fan's mother

to become dizzy and the children to pinch their noses shut for fear of inhaling the stink. In contrast, Fan's father regards the smell as pleasant and the taste as sweet. He extols the yellow flesh as more medicinal than ginseng and more fortifying than chicken soup ([12], 47:28–47:34). Slowly coming under durian's spell, Fan reluctantly samples a piece and displays no obvious adverse reaction. After Yan returns to China toward the end of the film, Fan sends her an entire durian in the mail. Comparing the durian from Hong Kong to a landmine, Yan's parents denigrate the dense, prickly fruit as a strange abnormality reeking of fermented tofu ([12], 1 h 38 min 30 s–1 h 39 min 45 s in the film). Fan's letter to Yan, however, intimates an evolution of the young protagonist's perception of durian: "If you receive my package, don't be scared. It's called a durian. I've learned that it's the king of all fruits. It's a special Southeast Asian delicacy" ([12], 1:39:19–1:39:39).

The repetition of the plant's name in the title Durian Durian signifies the species' capacity to invoke opposing states of affect—desire and repulsion—often simultaneously. Nevertheless, as the story progresses, the process of meaning-making between humans and durians accelerates and strengthens. The characters engage more fully with durian's complex range of emotional, sensory, and familial significations. As a comparable example of durian filmic texts, Wet Season (2019) by Anthony Chen narrativizes some of the traditional beliefs, values, and practices surrounding durian [13]. Depicting durian culture in Singapore, particularly through scenes of fruit merchants and markets, the film incorporates widespread Southeast Asian beliefs in durian's ability to arouse sexual desire and boost fertility. In contrast to Durian Durian, however, Chen's film represents the fruit as deeply sensuous rather than disorientingly paradoxical. Through their shared passion for the fruit, a married teacher, Ling, develops an affection for her male student, Kok Wei Lun. Ling and her husband struggle to conceive through in vitro fertilization as she is burdened with caring for her ailing father-in-law. During an after-school remedial class, Ling receives a bag of durians from her brother, a vendor who transports loads of the fruit from Malaysia to sell in Singapore. Returning to the classroom, she slowly eats a durian with Wei Lun, thus deepening their illicit intimacy ([13], 19:20–22:35). Later in the narrative, Wei Lun, Ling, and her father-in-law visit her brother's durian stall to celebrate the highschool student's success in a martial arts competition. The scene ends with Wei Lun and the elderly man smiling at one another as they delight in the experience of eating durian together ([13], 51:45–53:50). After finally divorcing her husband, Ling realizes she is pregnant and returns to her hometown in Malaysia as the sun breaks through the clouds, heralding the end of the wet season. In this way, Wet Season illuminates durian's healing power, especially its fertility-enhancing effects [37]. Indeed, the film integrates into its narrative structure durian's purported aphrodisiacal qualities, a subject of considerable speculation among Western writers, travelers, and botanists for centuries [38].

In contrast to Durian Durian and Wet Season, the titular fruit does not appear physically in The Big Durian (2003), a film by director Amir Muhammad combining documentary, fiction, and animation [39]. Whereas the films of Chan and Chen narrativize the material presence of durian in the urban settings of Hong Kong and Singapore, The Big Durian foregrounds the figurative resonances of the fruit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Amir Muhammad describes his choice of title as "fun, local, and a bit mysterious," as well as contrary and irreverent, considering that Jakarta, Indonesia (not Kuala Lumpur) is widely known throughout Southeast Asia as 'The Big Durian' ([40], p. 236). Through a series of genuine and fabricated testimonies, the film confronts major Malaysian social issues of postcoloniality, politics, race, religion, media, and freedom of expression. It is crucial to note that the Malaysian premiere of The Big Durian in April 2003 entailed a fundraising campaign for Malaysiakini, an independent online news portal raided by police about three months before ([41], p. 80). The film's narrator refers to these frictions repeatedly as berduri or "thorny," linking durian etymologically to actual and metaphorical thorns and thorniness in Malaysia. As film critic Benjamin McKay remarked, The Big Durian "revels in its quasi-documentary status and its subversion of form" ([42], p. 168). Distinguished as the first Malaysian production to screen at the Sundance Film Festival, the film investigates

a violent incident in October 1987 when a soldier, Private Adam, armed with a military rifle, murdered one person and injured two others in Chow Kit, a busy suburb of Kuala Lumpur. The tragedy instigated citywide hysteria based on fear of racial riots. The event, moreover, coincided with Operation Lalang from October to November 1987, during which the police imprisoned more than one hundred activists, intellectuals, and students under the pretense of averting riots. In relation to this turbulent social and political context, the interviewees speculate about Private Adam's motive. For instance, a retired waiter, Aloysius Tham, outlines one such theory in a café interview with a durian belanda (Dutch durian or soursop) ad on a wall in the background ([39], 19:57, 39:39). As per Tham, a sultan killed Private Adam's brother, a caddy, with a golf club but received no punishment. In response to the injustice, Adam "ran amok"—that is, went berserk—in Chow Kit. The resistance of the individuals targeted by Operation Lalang and the dissidence of the film itself as a "quasi-documentary" that confronts Malaysia's most serious concerns interleave with the subversive capacity of durian itself to defy the normative social and sensory categories imposed upon it.

5. "That Unmistakable Waft": Literary Narratives of Durian

Historical and cinematographic narratives render durian as the fruit of contradiction, occupying the liminal zone between ontological categories as an agent of both desire and disgust, healing and discomfit. In a similar vein, literary texts navigate durian's enticing strangeness. Offering a literary example of durian narrativization, Hsien Min Toh's poem "Durians" (2005) evokes its enigmatic namesake's cultural phytosemiotics, especially of olfaction, through sensorially evocative figuration:

> During my last reservist stint, in Ama Keng, that unmistakable waft: like garbage and onions and liquid petroleum gas all mixed in one. ([14], n.p., lines 1–3)

Just as Yan's astonished parents in the film Durian Durian liken the fruit to a landmine, so too does the narrator construct durians as "spiky bombs," a locationally apposite metaphor for the poem's multiple references to Ama Keng, a Singaporean village gazetted as a military area in the 1950s and, decades later, turned into an army camp. Within this historical bearing, durian incites familial memory:

> I remembered what my dad once told me, that durian trees knew when you were underneath and would not let their deadly payload drop. ([14], n.p., lines 7–9)

The trees were "smarter than we thought" and, hence, would not risk harming the vulnerable humans responsible for disseminating their seeds ([14], n.p., line 10). As expressive entities, durians "spoke husks" about the soldiers' mission, ostensibly in service to the Singaporean military but, more precisely, directed by the trees themselves to recruit other species for ecological ends ([14], n.p., line 14). The poem's concluding stanzas invoke "The Story of the First Durian," a Filipino myth in which a cave-dwelling recluse, Impit Purok, concocts a special fruit to help an elderly king, Barom-Mai, entice a young bride named Madayaw-Bayho ([14], n.p., lines 18–22). The fruit is a strange blend of a bird's egg, flower nectar, and water buffalo milk. When Barom-Mai fails to invite the hermit to his wedding celebration, however, Impit Purok becomes enraged and curses the fruit, replacing its enlivening fragrance with a deadening stench and its smooth skin with a barbed exterior [43]. Both the myth and the poem imply that durian's 'curse' is this bifurcated nature of smelling rancid and tasting sublime. Nevertheless, as the final line makes clear, "we've been eating it ever since" ([14], n.p., line 22). In other words, durian's generative paradoxes—in which the entrenched oppositional categories of human thinking collapse through the nondual immediacy of its very flesh—have entangled human beings for ages.

Toh's "Durians" narrates the cultural phytosemiotics of the species as a volitional agent and sapient subject expressing its voice within its lifeworld. In the poem, durian is an intelligent being whose phytodialect resonates in the human–flora mythologies of Southeast Asia. The olfactory registers of durian appearing prominently in Toh's text are comparably

palpable in Chinese–American writer Sally Wen Mao's "Hurling a Durian" (2013) [15]. In Mao's poem, durian is an enigma—on the one hand, a "fantasy fruit" arousing deep-seated desires and, on the other, a psychotropic substance purging "a child's immediate memories" ([15], p. 131, lines 1, 5). Addicted to durian's perplexing charm, the speaker inhales the fruit's penetrating fragrance "like glue" and strokes its rind until her fingers turn raw and bleed ([15], p. 131, line 7). Taste and smell—pleasure and suffering—are indistinguishable as the "corpse/scent" transforms into "something sweet and eggy,/a benign tang I flush down with wasabi" ([15], p. 131, lines 10–12). Through its forceful pungence, durian becomes "a weapon of truth" ([15], p. 131, line 16). In what seems like an intertextual reference to the alleyway assault of Yan's pimp in Durian Durian, the narrator imagines "throwing a dangerous fruit at the head/of the person who has failed you, hurt you" ([15], p. 131, lines 19–20). Mao's poem discloses—as many other durian texts do, as well—the connection between scent, emotion, and memory. Physiologically, olfaction is linked to the hippocampus and amygdala, governing memory and emotion, respectively. As the brain's ancient nexus, the amygdala mediates the processing, expression, and recollection of emotions ([44], p. 3). In the final stanzas, durian's material immanence—its "smear", "husk", and "juice"—immerses the speaker in this primordial ocean of scent, feeling, and remembrance ([15], p. 132, lines 26–27).

In addition to poetry, fictional prose for children and young adults brings attention to the cultural phytosemiotics of durian within ecological networks. A salient example is Chakrabarty's Where the Durian Tree Grows (2015), a collection of five short stories in which durian proffers a metaphor for the wisdom acquired through an attitude of openness to vegetal paradoxicality [16]. The collection opens with an overview of durian's thorny etymology:

> The durian tree is a large tree native to Malaysia that bears the durian fruit. The word durian is derived from the word duri, which means 'thorn' in the Malay language. This is due to the fact that the fruit has thorns on its outer layer. It is a spiky oval fruit that contains a creamy pulp that is highly valued for its flavour. ([16], Preface, unpaginated)

Concerning the contrariness of the king of all fruits, the writer advises the reader to suspend judgement and remain open to the mystique of the species:

> This collection of five stories is embedded in a Malaysian setting. The durian fruit is symbolically mentioned in this title, as it is regarded as a symbol of mystique. One should not judge it based on its spiky outward appearance and strange smell that some describe as rancid; the magic begins when you pry open the fruit to reveal a soft, succulent, fleshy yellowish pulp. ([16], Preface, unpaginated.)

Chakrabarty's evocation of durian sensuousness recalls Fan's father in Durian Durian eagerly prying open the fruit on the kitchen table as his family watched warily.

Although the short stories themselves make no significant or extended references to durian, they do prominently feature the plant's companion species: mangoes, mangosteens, guavas, and dragon fruits. In the fifth story, "At the Dragon Fruit Farm", the young protagonists, Adam and Daniel, discuss how to stay busy during school holidays. They decide to work at a dragon fruit plantation: "When Adam saw the seeds, he remembered Mr Lopez, who owned a fruit plantation" ([16], Chapter 5, unpaginated). The sight of the seeds catalyzes the boy's memory, liberating him momentarily from a lingering feeling of torpor. On the olfactory and gustatory semiotics of the cultivated species, the narrator highlights dragon fruit's "sweet and mild acidic flavour, similar to the watermelon and kiwi. Most dragon fruit plants flower at night and emit a jasmine-like fragrance" ([16], Chapter 5, unpaginated). To allay the tedium of working at the orchard, the boys compete with one another over who can collect the most fruits. Although Adam works slowly and steadily, Daniel invariably ends up with twice the amount of fruit. Adam's harvest continues to dwindle every afternoon, leading him to suspect Daniel of stealing, an accusation that results in an argument. Adam decides to mark his fruits with black dots, a strategy that

empirically proves Daniel's pilfering ([16], Chapter 5, unpaginated). Where the Durian Tree Grows presents an example of literature for young readers that narrativizes the cultural phytosemiotics of durian's fellow flora. Nonetheless, the short stories evince a lack of attention to durian beyond its general metaphorical resonance. Consequently, there are ample opportunities for Southeast Asian writers to place durian's cultural phytosemiotics at the front and center of future botanical narratives for children and young adults.

6. Conclusions: Durian Care and Conservation

Literary, cinematographic, and historical narratives of durian underscore the importance of approaching this species phytosemiotically within its biocultural contexts. While calling attention to durian's lifeworlds, these texts also help counter the privileging of durian's fruit over its body as a coordinated whole and over its vast interconnectivities with mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, and other beings attracted to its sulfurous smell. Indeed, a major challenge negotiated by plant texts of various kinds is to expand the appreciation of botanical nature as more than an appropriable source of food, medicine, and materials for human consumption. In this context, the term plant blindness denotes the incapability to perceive the flora of one's surroundings exacerbated by the wider refusal to acknowledge the value of plants beyond their utilitarian functions [45–48]. In response, the interdisciplinary field of plant studies emphasizes the pedagogical centrality of literature in promoting empathy toward flora and countervailing plant awareness disparity [49,50]. This newly introduced term denotes the tendency to neither notice nor appreciate plants due to one's attitude, attention, knowledge, and interest in fauna over flora [50]. Elaborating the related notion of plant kinship blindness, furthermore, François Bouteau and colleagues argue that, from an evolutionary standpoint, plants and animals belong to sister groups [48]. Although flora and fauna have evolved from a common phylogenetic lineage, the modern Western repudiation of genetic kinship persists, largely because of the relegation of plants to an inferior position within the hierarchy of life [48].

Durian texts encourage audiences to cultivate broad awareness of botanical life while adopting a critical stance on the overwhelming focus on fruit within durian culture. The tendency to privilege the fruit as an economic commodity isolates this anatomical part from the vegetal body as a whole (leaves, wood, roots) and risks diminishing the significance of a fruit-bearing plant's ecological cohabitants (pollinators, nurturers, disseminators). As a case in point, research indicates that fruit bats are the most important durian pollinators [51]. In his formative article on phytosemiotics, Martin Krampen maintains that plants are autonomous subjects, but their semiosis diverges from human and animal modes ([21], p. 266). Accordingly, phytosemiotic approaches require concerted consideration of plants' particular mobilities, relationalities, sensorialities, and meaning-generating processes ([21], pp. 266–270). In their corporeal wholeness—in their presence not reduced to fruits, flowers, seeds, or wood—plants evoke a "nurturance instinct", thus becoming physically, psychologically, and spiritually resonant ([21], p. 274). In unequivocal terms, Krampen cautioned that if humans cease to care for plants, "they will asphyxiate themselves" ([21], p. 275). Problematizing botanical nature's relatively marginalized status in Western societies, the phytosemiotician urged the development of an "attitude-toward-plants-test" as an inventory of perceptions of vegetal life for use in public planning and decision-making ([21], p. 275). In light of Krampen's proposition, I suggest that a vital indicator of attitudes toward plants is textual material drawn from historical, cinematographic, and literary sources. Extending the phytosemiotic model, I have delineated cultural phytosemiotics as a framework for illuminating human–durian interdependencies through a focus on the sensory and mnemonic transactions evident in a diverse range of texts. Recognizing plant semiosis in textual depictions such as these, I argue, is a crucial first step toward accessing vegetal wisdom and advancing ethical regard for botanical life.

The cultural phytosemiotic perspective developed here facilitates a critical reading of durian narratives that foregrounds the plant's value beyond its narrow construction as a commodity, delicacy, or oddity. At the same time, the framework I have presented

aims to ensure that conservation strategies designed to care for durian resist bifurcating human culture and botanical nature. In Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), for instance, durian diversity is imperiled by the conversion of forests and customary farmland to rubber and oil palm plantations ([7], p. 93). Yet, durian is also consumed by charismatic fauna such as Sumatran elephants, suggesting the close relationship between plants and animals within biodiversity conservation. To become effective in the long-term, ex situ conservation at botanical gardens and in situ programs at national parks and other protected areas need to engage local residents and Indigenous Southeast Asian people [52]. Biodiverse ecosystems will help ensure healthy populations of pollinators such as bats and other organisms to sustain lesser-known, more localized Durio species in the wake of widespread land transformations in the region. Additionally, cultural phytosemiotics places emphasis on companion species potentially overshadowed by charismatic Durio zibethinus while also pointing to possible sustainable uses for bark, wood, leaves, and other parts of durian to counterbalance the fixation on fruit within the broader culture surrounding the plant. Subsequent phytosemiotic research on durian, moreover, could address the representation and ethics of the durian monocultures that are increasingly displacing native forests and Indigenous communities throughout Southeast Asia ([1], pp. 543–545). Ensuing phytocritical analysis, finally, could investigate a broader range of literary, artistic, cultural, and multimedia texts depicting durian and the relation of the species to humans and other beings. As the fruit of contradiction, in which affective responses run the gamut from adoration to repulsion, durian embodies the difference of vegetal being. In an era of accelerating threats to botanical diversity worldwide, learning to embrace this sweetly pungent otherness is an urgent task.

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