

LES GARÇONS SAUVAGE:
AN INTER(S)EXTUAL ECOLOGY OF THE WET AND WILD

by
Nicholas Tyler Reich

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Approved:
Jennifer Fay, Ph.D. (director)
Iggy Cortez, Ph.D. (co-director)

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**LES GARÇONS SAUVAGE:
AN INTER(S)EXTUAL ECOLOGY OF THE WET AND WILD**

Inter(s)extual Monstrosity

Style Incoherence: Films must be hybrids containing at least two genres.

I create hybrids, sexual and cinematic.
-Bertrand Mandico¹

Bertrand Mandico's *Les garçons sauvage* (*The Wild Boys*, France, 2017) is a monstrosity. It growls and gurgles, oozes and seeps. Its violence is erotic, its sex brutal. Moreover, it is deeply hybrid in its allusory composition. Fatimah Tobing Rony describes *King Kong* (USA, 1933), a strong reference in Mandico's film, as "itself a monster" in the way in sutures together the tropes of fantasy and scientific expedition.² Similarly, the citational matrix in *Les garçons sauvage* is so relentlessly, monstrously dense, we might call it a cinema of citation, or inter(s)extuality.³ The film's title draws on Williams S. Burroughs' *The Wild Boys: Book of the Dead* and François Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*, France, 1970). And between these wilds, *Les garçons sauvage* amalgamates bits and pieces from tales of adventure and lost youths, sea voyage and shipwreck literatures, Hollywood exploration and ethnographic films, transnational islandic films, and the queer avant-garde.

The aims of this article are twofold: mainly, to elucidate how Mandico engages in, with, and against traditions of tropicality, orientalism, and racialized gender in American and European queer avant-garde cinema through citation. Techniques of allusion and reference become Mandico's way of theorizing cinematic citation as both an engine of racialized gender, (re)generating combinations of tropes that perpetuate the body's (dis)integrity across dimensions of race and gender taken together, as well as a tool for making visible this cycle across cinematic

networks. The film's intertextual synthesis likewise reveals certain cinematic conceptions of racialized gender as particularly ecological and already deeply citational, from racist ethnography to white queer appropriation. Secondly, this article thinks about intertextuality (citationality) and intersexuality together, one as a kind of aesthetic practice or theorization of the other. While Mandico's corpus of queer texts are predominantly the products of white cis-gay men, his citational techniques nonetheless help open ways of thinking intersex (or trans*) becoming on screen. This film's queerness, then, in C  el M. Keegan's terms, creates a "trans point of reception" even as it reproduces tropes and techniques that might otherwise expand gay life while delimiting a capacious approach to racialized gender.⁴

I'm curious why Mandico's particular repertoire of source material almost inevitably leads to a story where wild, trans-sexed youths destroy a group of racially marked sailors, and where intersex-ness becomes a shadowy stasis between racially coded points of visibility. The film begins with these five French schoolboys—Jean-Louis (Vimala Pons), Tanguy (Ana  l Snoek), Hubert (Diane Rouxel), Sloane (Mathilde Warnier), and Romuald (Pauline Lorillard)—who sexually assault and then murder their literature teacher (played by Nathalie Richard, with all the French art cinema-ness that comes with her). The State moves to rehabilitate by sending the boys on a sea voyage with *Le Capitaine* (Sam Louwyck). After a treacherous crossing, on which they are occasionally bound and gagged and only allowed to eat some unidentifiable black and hairy fruit, the boys arrive Nowhere, a legendary island where strange plants rule. Unbeknown to the boys, *Le Capitaine* is working with S  verin/e (Elina L  wensohn), a mad scientist figure who has discovered that some of these plants have endocrinal properties capable of switching the eater's sex (if not to say their gender). S  verin/e has lured the boys here (all played by women) to change their bodies from male to female. War is a man's game, and it's killing the world. S  verin/e's

solution is Gynocenic. Eliminate men. Albeit, some boys don't transition like the others, but instead remain in a contested intersex space.

Popular critics leaned on the catchphrase “gender bending” to discuss *Les garçons sauvage*.⁵ What this film does show quite forcefully is that the racially gendered body in cinema has always been a product of citational inundation, the cleaving of many photographic captivities to the vessel which can only just sustain their heaviness, if at all—some bodies are sundered entirely. In other words, racialized gender on screen is a matter of accumulation. Bodies are racialized and gendered through tropes and citations. I'm thinking here of Susan Stryker's claim that all bodies carry the “seams and sutures” of citational gendering, or Frankensteinian monstrosity, while perhaps those sutures become marked in trans and intersex subjects.⁶ In this way, Mandico's movie is less about mobilizing new gender politics than theorizing existing histories of cinematic gendering. Furthermore, *Les garçons sauvage* situates racialized gender in ecological terms and in this way pushes viewers to consider how filmic constructions of gender are buried inside constructions of “nature” on screen—in this case the so-called *exotic* natures of an imaginary tropicity. Mandico's citational cinema depicts an Anthropocenic war-logic operative on the amalgamating processes of racialized gender, as weapon and vulnerability. By cobbling together bodies through cinematic and literary reference, Mandico emphasizes the place of the cinematic image in this ongoing history of the end of the world.

Mandico brings this complexity to screen in rhetorical and formal strategies. He performs racialized gender as a cinema of citation, thereby situating the film as not just about racialized gender but also its place in diegetic and technical cinematic histories.⁷ Such a formal citation might look like, for instance, the swinging demon Trevor as a direct correlation in image, movement, and phantasmagoria to the pendular flowers in Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (*A Love Song*, France,

1950) (see Figs. 1 and 2). Although, such echoes are not always so direct. Mandico’s signature filmmaking techniques—color field, black-and-white photography, rear projection, elaborate and obviously artificial set pieces, tinted lenses, dubbing in post, and even using exclusively expired film stock—craft a cinema that is anachronistic in that it both recalls and refuses to be left in the past, but rather worked and reworked into ceaseless constitutivity. I’m reminded of Jennifer Fay’s claim that “cinema helps us to see and experience the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice,” where the differences between human-crafted worlds and nature begin to disappear; as well as Eliza Steinbock’s claim that “trans-ness underpins the cinematic”—beginning as a trope and technique with the numerous instant sex-changes in the films of Georges Méliès.⁸ If we accept both these provocative claims, then we might also accept that trans*ness is pivotal to the Anthropocene as a cinematic practice. Let’s say that *Les garçons sauvage* is intrigued by the cinematic construction of the Anthropocene, and reveals in the citational tracking of such a technical history how racialized gender is a component of this human-made nature, part and parcel with a geopolitical imaginary. Such a project could hardly be coherent, a movie without demarcations, wild or civilized, male or female, wet or dry, this movie or that movie.



Figure 1 In *Les garçons sauvage*, Trevor teases Tanguy with oral sex.



Figure 2 In *Un chant d'amour*, the protagonist fails to grab his fellow inmate's flowers.

In the remaining sections of this essay, I scrutinize some of the citational groupings—wild adolescents, tropical exploration, and bodily waste—significant to Mandico's vision of an incoherent, racially gendered avant-garde. The Incoherence Manifesto, an auteurial program written by Mandico and Icelandic filmmaker Katrin Olafsdotir, aims to allow cinematic technique to speak of and for itself precisely by shaking up the taken-for-granted coherencies of contemporary arthouse cinemas—or, in Mandico's words: "To be incoherent means to have faith in cinema...disturbed and dreamlike...an absence of cynicism but not irony."⁹ Incoherence resonates with wildness. As Jack Halberstam writes, the wild is "a space of the unrecoverable, the lost, and the illegible."¹⁰ I want to consider, in this way, how new citations of the queer avant-garde are well-situated to scrutinize cinema's historic and ongoing role in forming incoherent, or wild, assemblages of race, gender, and "nature."

Wild Child

I will flourish wherever I am brought.

Les garçons sauvages begins in Réunion—or Île Bourbon, as it's still called in the film's presumably fin-de-siècle setting. Though originally settled by the French in the 16th century, this

island in the Indian Ocean remained a geopolitical contest for approximately four hundred years and only became a French *département d'outre-mer* in the mid-20th century. In regard to this film, it's important to note that not long after this official colonization the French Réunion administration began a program in the 1960s to forcibly relocate over 2,000 children and adolescents from the island to continental and metropolitan France, abandoned or not, delinquent or not. For over twenty years, these “Children of Creuse,” as they came to be known, many of whom but not all were Black or Brown, were placed into predominantly violent homes and unpaid labor. This is not to say that *Les garçons sauvage* is about these youths in any documentarian sense. And yet, Mandico is clearly invested in geopolitics as they're wrought on and within the bodies of adolescents. Outsider artist Henry Darger's work on the “Vivian Girls” is a primary citation in this regard for its fantastical treatment of child slavery, the exploration of an uncharted island, pubescence as a turning point between wild childhood and colonialist adulthood, and evidently transgender bodies (see Fig. 3).¹¹ Darger's imbroglio of wild child and islandic aesthetics would seem to allegorically white-wash the racial specificities of such enmeshments, except that by foregrounding unstably sexed white children these storied joinings incidentally render whiteness conspicuous as a gendering quadrant of the wild-civilized dichotomy. This will, at least, be my approach to Mandico's use of the unstably sexed white youth.



Figure 3 An illustration from Darger’s posthumously released fantasy compendium *The Story of the Vivian Girls in what is known as The Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelimean War storm, caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. The Vivian Girls are often drawn with penises. Imagine, too, that the opposite of this image occurs in *Les garçons sauvage*.

Les garçons sauvage, as Mandico explains, stages “a collision between the viewer’s sexual impulse and the impression of childhood...These are characters that are between stages in life: they have the sexual impulses of adults, but, ultimately, they’re still children.”¹² Much the same could be said about Mandico’s references in the literatures and cinemas of lost and violent youths: Jules Verne’s *Deux ans de vacances (Two Years’ Vacation)*, R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean*, Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes*, with its many adaptations, Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, with its many adaptations, J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, with its adaptation history of casting women as boys, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, as well as Peter Brooks’s adaptation (UK, 1963), Truffaut’s *L’Enfant sauvage*, Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, as well as Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation (USA and UK, 1971), Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks* (USA, 1947), in particular but also Anger’s entire corpus, *The Young Ones* (USA and Mexico, 1960), *Young Aphrodites* (Greece, 1963), *Fighting Elegy* (Japan, 1966), *The End of August at Hotel Ozone* (Czechoslovakia, 1967), James Bidgood’s *Pink Narcissus* (USA,

1971), *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (UK, 1976), Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (UK, 1978), and *Tropical Malady* (Thailand, 2004). I imagine, as I will touch on more in the next section, it's no mistake many of these texts meld certain tropical aesthetics with the developmental emergence of young bodies, given the historically pernicious but now-defunct scientific, ethnographic adage that tropical environments hasten the onset of puberty. By evoking this literary and cinematic lineage, whether the texts be straight-faced or parodic, and by indeed instantiating the touch between tropicity and puberty, Mandico invites viewers to scrutinize the aesthetic, cinegenic linkages between these broad concepts and the idea of wild youth as a kind of racialized, and thereby trans-speciated, conduit between the knowable and the incoherent, or what we might call *the wild*. In this section, I'll explain what I mean here by focusing on how Mandico animalizes the adolescent, or perhaps renders the animal a question of pubescence, and makes props of decontextualized body parts, all through a rich citational matrix.

Trevor is a demon of wildness. It haunts the Wild Boys and inspires them to sex, violence, and disruption. Though at first associated with the image of a crystalline human skull, the one that appears when the boys murder their teacher, Trevor also seems to take the form of either a racialized, Sphinx-like creature or Le Capitaine's dog, both of which wear the head of Le Capitaine like a mask (see Figs. 4, 5, and 6).¹³ In spite of their wealthy white parents, the Wild Boys are, in effect, like Mowgli or Tarzan, being reared by this animal-demon. In some ways, Trevor is a phantasmagorical citation gone wild, a Frankensteinian splice job of the literary, cinematic currents in Mandico's references made tangible. "We can swim, we're not dogs," Tanguy yells at Le Capitaine as he forces the boys to work the ship's deck during a storm. "You're pedantic little bourgeois," he chastens. These lines summarize a tension between the boys' place as either upper-class, white, denatured human youths or wild animals capable of the heinous crimes we know

they've committed. That these categories could be indistinct elides their historical use-value in the colonizer's imaginary. As the boys wrestle against their rehabilitation, getting closer and closer to the island, Trevor assumes the form of Le Capitaine's dog—eyes shining red in the night, hovering over the sleeping boys, a direct reference to the sea-borne revenants in John Carpenter's *The Fog* (USA, 1980). Jean-Louis tackles the dog-demon into the sea, where they fight among the tangled ropes binding the boy's throat to the ship. Jean-Louis wins the fight, emerging from the water free of his bonds. Is he therefore less animal, on a path to the civilized human, despite his attitude to the contrary—some reversal of H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*?¹⁴ If Trevor represents a crucible between animal and human, childhood and adulthood, male-ness and female-ness, why would that figure need to be variously inorganic, animalized, racialized, and, most significantly, hybridized? Trevor presents more questions than it can answer, but points us in useful directions.



Figure 4 In *Les garçons sauvages*, Trevor first appears as a skull.



Figure 5 In *Les garçons sauvages*, Trevor as a dog hovers over Jean-Louis, wearing Le Capitaine’s face.



Figure 6 In *Les garçons sauvages*, Trevor as a darkened human body with breasts, wearing Le Capitaine’s face, is rear-projected above the sleeping boys.

The child has been recently taken up in critical race, gender, and wildness studies as a crucible between the raced human and the animal. Halberstam writes that “the child is a kind of liminal figure through whom we can visualize our relation to animals.”¹⁵ Its gender flux, animal-like rambunctiousness and irrationality, and lack of understanding of the colonialist logics of race, make the child a risk to whiteness—as if the “missing link” actually occurred ontologically in the developmental course of a single human lifetime, over and over. Trans historian Jules Gill-Peterson has shown that endocrinology was originally conceived around a sustained dual child-animal metaphor. Whether in the lab as test subjects or as figures of speech, “theirs [animals and

children] was the flesh through which the endocrine system was abstracted as raw material and given new form as sex and gender.”¹⁶ Hormonal shift or manipulation, it was thought, could re-activate the dormant plasticity of the child in the adult, re-juvenilizing the adult and re-awakening a kind of animality, or non-whiteness. The racism and speciesism of endocrinology, Gill-Peterson argues, lives on in the child-animal metaphors surrounding, for instance, trans rights and the question of what to do with gender non-conforming children. *Les garçons sauvage* comes at these eugenicist anxieties by lambasting what Giovanna Di Chiro calls “new gender troubles,” or endocrine disruptor theories.¹⁷ These are the fears that environmental toxicity can produce sex or gender instability, or even transition, in animals and children—anxieties that are transphobic and reactionary in that they place the gender binary squarely in front of legitimate health concerns about, for example, the accumulation of carcinogens in the body. Such fears are also neo-colonialist in that, as Eva Hayward and Tourmaline observe, “‘the child’ is necessary for the ongoing-ness of colonialism.”¹⁸ When a concept foundational to colonialism like the gender binary does not take hold in the seemingly plastic child’s body, whiteness as stability over and above the animal is shaken to the core—an ironic fear, since industrialized racial capitalism produces the toxins necessary for this paranoia. Genitals, then, as usual, take the leading role in this theater of the eco-gender-absurd.

When the Wild Boys meet Le Capitaine at his jungle villa—an aesthetic and diegetic cousin to the outpost in *Apocalypse Now*, or Ernest Hemingway’s home in Key West—they are instructed to eat of a strange hairy fruit with white globular meat, not so subtly resembling a darkly pigmented human scrotum (see Fig. 7). I’m interested in how these fruits conjure, on the one hand, images of animal gonads removed in something like early endocrinal studies and, on the other, the castrated testicles of the enslaved, both of which fall outside the eugenic human ideal in a stratigraphy of

racialized gender according to early and contemporary endocrinology. The boys eat the black sex that (re)activates their plasticity. In her work on “racial indigestion,” Kyla Wazana Tompkins follows the Black body as an edible product under whiteness as well as the production of raced and gendered bodies through processes of eating—which here in *Les garçons sauvage* figures symbolically and literally.¹⁹ That the transitory moment leading to the Wild Boys’ eventual castration traces back to tropicity made into racialized, genital, trans-speciated flesh illustrates Tompkins observation that the “fantasy of a body’s edibility does not mean that body will always go down smoothly.”²⁰ Moreover, decontextualizing, or severing, this fruit from its origins establishes a confounding approach to body parts as self-sufficiently meaningful that will reappear both in the group castration and the biopolitical isolation of the nipple. The segregation of body parts is, according to Mel Chen, a question of animacy—which bodies have animacy because of their parts and which bodies lose animacy precisely by losing parts, through either castration or gender affirmation, to use only two examples.²¹ To think of the body holistically, rather than by its parts, Chen writes, engages “the presumably threatening possibility of a genderless relation.”²² Mandico’s film is deeply interested in such a genderless relation, but its aesthetic abstractions and citational praxis disallows extracting gender from race; it cannot hide race from gender, even as it embraces the *animating*, or affirming, possibilities of body part isolation.



Figure 7 In *Les garçons sauvage*, Tanguy eats the hairy fruit.

I'm thinking specifically here about Tanguy's intersexual stasis at the end of the film. Tanguy's transition is not *complete* like the others. He/they do not become violent, but he/they do become subservient to violence. Le Capitaine also has an intersex body. There is, for instance, a scene when Le Capitaine's penis fills the entire screen. It is large, obviously artificial, and tattooed with the *exotic* locations he's sailed. But he also has one breast, just the one, as a result of eating the island's fruit but not *successfully* transitioning, a failure for which Severin/e chastises him/them. Tanguy, too, grows one breast. These details, along with the farcical sequences when first Sloane's and then Jean-Louis' penises simply fall off on camera, participate in a queer avant-garde tradition of provocatively isolating body parts. Consider the focus on individual nipples in Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (USA, 1947), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (USA, 1963), and James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (USA, 1971) (see Figs. 8, 9, 10, and 11). More than the flirtation of violence in each of these sequences, we can see a pleasure in the incoherence of the isolated part, a reduction of the individual to a part that is not in itself an act of violence—unlike the hairy fruit, as I see it. In her rather famous read on *Flaming Creatures*, Susan Sontag wrote that Smith's film was “much more about intersexuality than about homosexuality,” the incoherent isolation of

parts such that the gender of whichever creature cannot be attained.²³ Since, as we learn from Gill-Peterson, the plastic endocrinal body is itself an anachronism, it seems appropriate to situate the bizarre pubescence of the Wild Boys/Girls in histories, both affirming and disappearing, of body part isolation. Doing so also demonstrates that, in queer avant-garde aesthetics, white bodies have a better chance of surviving this kind of body part isolation, or deriving pleasure from the affirming potential of genderless relations to certain parts.



Figure 8 In *Fireworks*, a milky fluid runs over a single nipple.



Figure 9 In *Flaming Creatures*, one of the creatures jostles their breast.



Figure 10 In *Pink Narcissus*, the protagonist rubs his nipple with a blade of grass.



Figure 11 In *Les garçons sauvage*, Tanguy's single breast is positioned over blooming flowers.

One of the next questions might be: if *wildness*, or incoherence, is a problem of colonial heuristics, how then does “new gender trouble” inculcate race and ethnicity as an ecological concern in this queer aesthetics?

Nowhere; or, the Island of Pleasure

Time and Geography Incoherence: The film must be in an uncertain geography, timeless, ban any realistic effect.

Designing an island nowhere in particular would be a mighty task if the Island of Nowhere didn't already have such a coherent aesthetic. This is the irony: we know where the island is because we know what nowhere looks like. *King Kong's* Skull Island, to take one of many examples, is tropical in the vaguest sense. It is either the fullest realization of New York City, or its totally opposite—full of antediluvian life and “malodorous vegetation,” as the narrator in *Les garçons sauvage* would say. To evoke the Island of Nowhere, Mandico cites what Rony calls the “cinema of exoticism” and, before that, its literary predecessors.²⁴ He derives an oceanic and tropical islandic mise-en-scène from writers like Jules Verne, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and William Golding and from films like *Island of Lost Souls* (USA, 1932), *The Most Dangerous Game* (USA, 1932), *King Kong*, *The Saga of Anatahan* (Japan, 1953), *Billy Bud* (UK, 1962), *Lord of the Flies*, *Matango: Attack of the Mushroom People* (Japan, 1963), *A High Wind in Jamaica* (UK, 1965), *Hell in the Pacific* (USA, 1968), *Horrors of Malformed Men* (Japan, 1969), *Sorcerer* (USA, 1977), *Apocalypse Now* (USA, 1979), and *Treasure Island* (France, 1985). Additionally, Mandico references and even reproduces how these exploration, ethnographic, and exotic aesthetics have already been cited by queer avant-garde cinemas in the mid- to late-20th century—what Jack Smith, and Hélio Oiticica before him, called “tropicamp.”²⁵ Citations all the way down.

Though the filming was often on location around the beaches and forests of Réunion, Mandico distorted this sense of coherent reality using anachronistic techniques. “I always conceived of it in black-and-white since the green of the jungle is quite polluting,” he says. “I wanted to be able to move easily from the soundstage to outdoor locations without having the viewer notice different filming sources.”²⁶ We can see in Figs. 12, 13, and 14 that Mandico's use

of miniature modeling and rear projection evoke the iconic imagery of *King Kong*, in which nearly all the visuals were produced artificially. Notice how the blackened face resembles Kong's. The only difference here is that the face in *Les garçons sauvage* has been literally as well as metaphysically darkened, a visual transformation performing similar work to the othering of Kong. Through these effects, Mandico ironically evokes the ethnographicness of early Hollywood expedition films. Rony has shown how "obsession with race and fears of hybridity" characterize this kind of ethnographic cinema, even when native human subjects are not centered.²⁷ Mandico passes this obsession through citational praxis and anachronism. And we're left with strange and incoherent inversions, processes of blackening that resituate the colonizer in the position of nativity. More on this later, but for now I want to continue thinking about anachronism as a formal technique of incoherence. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt have written on the "overuse of anachronism" as a tactic used in many queer filmmaking traditions to "destabilize the heterocentric domination over time telling and history making."²⁸ The question is, what different or asynchronous history is being told here?



Figure 12 In *Les garçons sauvage*, a blackened face looks over the shipwreck.



Figure 13 In *Les garçons sauvages*, the blackened face of Le Capitaine emerges from the cliffside.



Figure 14 In *King Kong*, Ann Darrow watches Kong battle a T-Rex.

Even more to Rony's point is that racialized subjects don't need to be on screen at all to make a film ethnographic in texture. Take all these endocrinal plants. The island's hairy fruits offer a bizarrely racialized form of eating, one that warps human and non-human bodies into a tropical nightmare where luscious exotics come back to claim lives. But this only breaches the botanic energies of the film. "The vegetation seemed alive," the narrator says. When the boys arrive on

the island, they learn from Le Capitaine that human and plant boundaries do not hold on Nowhere. They walk through a field of “groping grass” that tantalizingly slaps at their bare legs. They learn how to call down hairy fruit from the treetops by simply opening their mouths, as well as how to drink some nameless milky substance from the phallic outgrowths of certain trees (see Fig. 15). It’s as if the island wants them nourished, making moves that play to their pruriency. Le Capitaine urges the boys to both practice caution and take pleasure in the ways these organisms serve their bodies, walking a thin line between fear and arousal among this wild and agentic green. It becomes the Island of Pleasure, even if it is still the Island of Nowhere, where eros and violence are incoherently fused. Halberstam’s idea that wildness can be understood as “a form of unchecked growth” is an embodied and parodied concern here.²⁹ Who would check such growth? A colonialist and ethnographic anxiety lies in such powerlessness, when tropicality can undo the colonizer from the level of social construction all the way down to organic materiality.



Figure 15 In *Les garçons sauvage*, Tanguy drinks a milky liquid from a tree’s phallic outgrowth.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Plant Horror*,³⁰ Dawn Keetley sketches out six theses on why plants occupy a curious subgenre of horror cinema:

1. Plants embody absolute alterity.

2. Plants lurk in our blind spot.
3. Plants menace with their wild, purposeless growth.
4. The human harbors an uncanny constitutive vegetal.
5. Plants will get their revenge.
6. Plant horror marks an absolute rupture of the known.

One of Mandico's strong citations in this regard, *Matango: Attack of the Mushroom People*, taps into just about every one of these. Forests of humanoid mushrooms. Spores that transform humans into mushrooms. A thin allegory for atomic warfare opens space for thinking through gendered paradigms of ethnographic conquest and a feminized, albeit ravenous, tropicality. We can see in Fig. 16 a woman, slowly becoming a mushroom herself, coaxing the only man left in their group to eat the irradiated mushrooms and transform into fungus. He responds by shooting at essentially everything. Tropical lush is poison to a sort of stable, academic, exploratory masculinity. It teaches him to fear what he didn't know he needed to fear, and to combine his latent anxieties into a gendered eco-terror. See, too, how in Fig. 17 *Matango's* visual texture, much like *Skull Island*, is built between the real and artificial, lighting tricks, and projection. This is a cinegenic tropicality constructed on sound stages. By the time these tropes reach Mandico, they are anachronistic several times over, and their time-tested evocations have become so aestheticized, it's a worthwhile spectacle simply to take them to their logical ends. What happens when the feminized tropicality snatches dicks and reprograms the colonizer's world?



Figure 16 In *Matango*, Mami beckons Kenji with her mushroom hand.



Figure 17 In *Matango*, light constellations float over a glade of giant mushrooms.

If we substitute the words *queerness*, *blackness*, *brownness*, or *femme-ness* for plants in Keetley's theses, it becomes easier to see how wild plants can function as a cinematic stand-in for other kinds of ethnographic and cisheteronormative anxieties about alterity—which is not to say these ontologies are interchangeable or that plants and fungi don't occupy a naturally-culturally othered space from Anthropocenic masculinities. Perhaps it is for this reason that plant sex has a notably persistent presence in the queer avant-garde—that is, plants *and* sex, plants *for* sex, or, best of all, sex *with* plants. And in basically every (re)occurrence race or ethnicity haunts this highly aestheticized enmeshment. Mandico has said that plant sex in *The Wild Boys: Book of the Dead* was one of his primary inspirations for writing this script.³¹ Burroughs writes of “an Indian boy with rose-colored flesh” teaching Audrey, one of the white protagonists, how to entice globs of milky ejaculate from a giant pink and purple phallic plant, complete with testicles.³² This “place of flesh plants” is decidedly tropical and decidedly camp, not to mention “bad.” Given Burroughs' connections to figures like Warhol and Genet, as well as his movements through the New York and European queer undergrounds in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, it's reasonable to read his novel alongside other queer avant-garde cinemas of Jack Smith's “tropicamp” variety—films that cultivated, as Juan A. Suárez puts it, “the atmospheres or the aromas of otherness.”³³ Whether

Mandico uncritically reproduces such aesthetics, adding his name to such a lineage, has everything to do with how these evocations rub against his other citations, of Hollywood exploration and transnational islandic films. Appropriation is the risk, and yet the risk itself may speak to its necessity here.

In addition to eating and drinking of the island's plant life, *Le Capitaine* also shows the Wild Boys they can fuck some of the plants. "If you're tense," he says, "take advantage of the pleasures." While the other boys suckle the milky phallic tree, group risk-taker Jean-Louis approaches what looks like the lower half of a person made entirely of foliage, a yonic flower tucked between the legs. The Wild Boy drops his trousers and penetrates the flower (see Fig. 18). The narrator wistfully reflects: "Pleasures were unlimited on the island. They tried to understand why *Le Capitaine* brought them to such a place. Was it their feverish delirium or reality?" Trans-speciated sex with nearly the same framing takes a similarly significant place in Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (see Fig. 19). Less frank, but equally erotic, forms of vegetal love and tropicamp emerge in the films of Genet, Anger, and Smith—as with the artificial flora in *Flaming Creatures* (see Fig. 20). The kitsch of such imagery is exactly to the point. As Suárez points out, devalued tropical motifs taken from the already devalued Hollywood exotic, as in *King Kong*, allowed filmmakers like Smith a language for "stylistic excess and sexual undecidability."³⁴ And this kitsch exoticism, sometimes tropicamp, sometimes orientalism, occurred in set design, props, lighting, music, photography, pacing and editing, as well as plot. Recall the belly dancing sequences and dank jungles in *Pink Narcissus* or the references to *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (USA, 1944) and the Latin music in *Flaming Creatures*, approaching and exceeding appropriation. We might allow, then, that these white filmmakers operating in what we now call the queer underground were dealing with gender and sexuality through racialization but with no language for racialized gender,

allowing the one to stand in for the other. This is a process Joseph A. Boone tracks in *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, wherein orientalism is a sign not just for the presumed legacies of homosexuality in the Middle East but also for appropriative modes of white queer becoming ongoingly.³⁵ Tropicallity likewise expands this kind of orientalist white becoming into the ecological, or the exotic lives of plants, artificial or otherwise.



Figure 18 In *Les garçons sauvage*, Jean-Louis has sex with a plant.



Figure 19 In *Pink Narcissus*, the protagonist (left) frots on vegetation and (right) masturbates with a butterfly.



Figure 20 In *Flaming Creatures*, tropicamp queen Mario Montez bites on a fake flower.

Tropicamp as a queer modality becomes more pronounced and contestable when considering the imperial iconograph of the sailor in the queer avant-garde and the place of the ship voyage in *Les garçons sauvage*'s tropical inversion thereof. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (Germany and France, 1982), an adaptation of Genet's *Querelle of Brest*, has an almost monopolistic purchase on the queer sailor now—which is why the final sequence of Mandico's film makes a direct aesthetic and material reference (see Figs. 20 and 21). Still, this figure of the sailor has a broad presence in queer cinema and literature, and of course exploration narratives. We find it in many of the films I've named so far—*King Kong*, *Matango*, *Un chant d'amour*, *Pink Narcissus*, *Fireworks*, etc. (See Fig. 22). The sailor's violent masculinity becomes an opportunity in these texts for exploring the erotic potential in confined homosocial spaces as well as carceral aesthetics, colonial power dynamics, and the penetrative textures of military, scientific exploration. In *Fireworks*, for example, a boy dreams of being both raped and rescued by a group of sailors; they deliver him into the shining, gory, dripping crescendo of his presumably pent-up homoerotic fantasies. In *Les garçons sauvage*, however, the sailor suffers a strange inversion. Once the Wild Boys/Girls have transitioned, we see a group of sailors arrive on the island and gangrape

Tanguy, who is ‘still’ in an intersex space. This seems to fit the queer sailor’s cinematic lineage, except that the sailors here are the only marked people of color in the film, the colonizer and colonized positions switched. Inversion is completed when Severin/e leads the Wild Girls to ambush and kill the sailors (see Fig. 23). This group murder sequence echoes the group sex sequence earlier in the film—slow motion, absence of diegetic sound, feathers floating across the screen, spotlighting to bleed out other environmental details in the night—but this time in black-and-white, conspicuously deemphasizing this event within the narrative arc, as it occurs to the white protagonists.



Figure 21 In *Les garçons sauvage*, the Wild Girls prepare to dispose of sailors.



Figure 22 In *Querelle*, Querelle speaks with Roger against the setting sun.



Figure 23 In *Fireworks*, a phantasmagoric sailor holds the protagonist.



Figure 24 In *Les garçons sauvages*, the Wild Boys/Girls seduce and then kill a group of sailors.

The whites are still doing the murdering, in keeping with imperial history. But their iconographic position in the littoral paradigm has been switched out. The switch, as a kind of incoherence, suddenly lays bare an illogic of racialized gender inherent to the citational aesthetics informing it. In other words, the gendering power of the tropical exploration film along with its appropriations in the queer avant-garde is made visible precisely through its perverse inversion, wherein the citational chain generating this legacy image has been made imminently available to the viewer. Even though this film is set in the Indian Ocean—whatever that might mean for a Time

and Geography Incoherence—it’s difficult not to see the original sea voyage, boys choked on a coffer and held captive in the hold, as a perverse aesthetics of the Middle Passage. As Hortense Spillers imagines it, Atlantic crossings un-gendered enslaved people and then re-gendered them on the other side, according to the rationales of race and divisions between Black and white modes of gender allowance.³⁶ In *Les garçons sauvage*, the Wild Boys undergo a sexual metamorphosis, but more than anything the racializing qualities of their gendering are called forth. Mandico is toying with the odd connections between pop imagery, queerness, and fascism. He heightens the Wild Boys/Girls’ racialized gender by keeping white eugenicist, imperial motivations in place while transposing their image with those positions previously occupied by either Indigenous, Black, or Brown subjects in ethnographic cinema or the sailor-aggressor in the queer avant-garde—something like the opposite of the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots. This fascinating “connection between totalitarianism and kitsch” is one Suárez has explored with Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (USA, 1963), a film about a violent gang of gay Nazi bikers.³⁷ In both, it’s tempting to read the endings as largely apolitical farce—since, in *Les garçons sauvage*, white trans bodies build an extractionist model for world domination under the guise of liberal Gynocenic salvation. Nevertheless, it is the space between citations, the friction that occurs when source materials are pushed a smidge too far, that produces in Mandico’s film a lens for examining cinematic trends, both popular and underground, that have established associations between certain aesthetics and the racialized gendering stabilized therein.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

¹ Quoted in Martin Kudlac, “Rotterdam 2018 Interview: WILD BOYS, Bertrand Mandico on Shooting Gender-Bending Surreal Film,” *Screenanarchy*, February 1, 2018, <https://screenanarchy.com/2018/02/rotterdam-2018-interview-wild-boys-bertrand-mandico-on-shooting-gender-bending-surreal-film.html>.

² Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, Duke, 1996), 160.

³ Here is Mandico’s list of inspirations for *Les garçons sauvages*: <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/bertrand-mandico-s-inspirations-for-the-wild-boys>. His categories—*islands, eroticism, style, men and women*—imply a semiotic frottage I place under explicit pressure.

⁴ Cael M. Keegan, “Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image,” *MedieKultur* 61 (2016): 28.

⁵ For example: Nicholas Elliott, “Bertrand Mandico on Metamorphosis, Lovable Monsters, and the Obscure Object of Desire,” *Extra Extra*, <https://extraextramagazine.com/talk/bertrand-mandico-metamorphosis-lovable-monsters-obscure-object-desire/>. Elliot describes the film as “gender-bending, influence-scrambling,” and for the purposes of this essay I like how he combines the two notions.

⁶ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ* 1 (1994): 241.

⁷ B. Ruby Rich showed that the emerging New Queer Cinema in the 1990s “didn’t come from nowhere: it came from (almost) everywhere.” Claiming that Mandico revives a *New New Queer Cinema* is beyond the reach of this essay. And yet, his citational praxis recalls how queer avant-garde cinema, particularly in the US and Europe, has always had an interest in the constitutive potential of the recycled image or technique. B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham: Duke, 2013), 3.

⁸ Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford, 2018), 4; Eliza Steinbock, “Towards Trans Cinema,” in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema & Gender*, eds. Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača, E. Ann Kaplan, Patrice Petro (London: Routledge, 2017), 396.

⁹ See: <http://curtocircuito.org/en/blog/23/incoherence-manifesto-bertrand-mandico-katrin-olafsdottir>.

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke, 2020), 29.

¹¹ For more example of Darger’s art, see: https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/the-mysterious-story-of-outsider-artist-henry-darger-the-vivian-girls-of-the-realms-of-the-55476. It’s useful to note here that Mandico made has made two short films about Darger—*Lif og daudi Henry Darger (The Life and Death of Henry Darger)*, France and Iceland, 2010) and *Burlesque et froid (Burlesque and Cold)*, France, 2010)—both of which depict the figure of Darger locked outside of a house in the snow, knocking at the windows to get the attention of a woman painted blue who refuses to pay him mind.

¹² Quoted in Elliott, “Bertrand Mandico.”

¹³ Maybe I’m seeing Trevor where I shouldn’t. Perhaps the embodied figures are distinct from the skull. When it comes to these phantasms, though, I’m not sure being *correct* is so important, but

instead noticing what the film is achieving through the frottage of images and how it evokes a lineage of wildness as disembodied spirit or ghost.

¹⁴ Rony, *The Third Eye*, 167.

¹⁵ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 142.

¹⁶ Jules Gill-Peterson, “Implanting Plasticity into Sex and Trans/Gender: Animal and Child Metaphors in the History of Endocrinology,” *Angelaki* 22, no. 2 (2017): 50.

¹⁷ Giovanna Di Chiro, “Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana, 2010), 203.

¹⁸ Eva Hayward and Tourmaline, “Impossibility of *That*,” *Angelaki* 22, no. 2 (2017): 15.

¹⁹ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: NYU, 2012), 7.

²⁰ Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, 8.

²¹ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke, 2012), 148.

²² Chen, *Animacies*, 142.

²³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and other essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 230.

²⁴ Rony, *The Third Eye*, 159.

²⁵ Quoted in Juan A. Suárez, “Jack Smith, Hélio Oiticica, Tropicalism,” *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 295.

²⁶ Quoted in Elliot, “Bertrand Mandico.”

²⁷ Rony, *The Third Eye*, 163–164.

²⁸ Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham: Duke, 2016), 262.

²⁹ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 57.

³⁰ Dawn Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave, 2016), 1–30.

³¹ In Elliott, “Bertrand Mandico.”

³² William S. Burroughs, *The Wild Boys: Book of the Dead* (New York: Grove, 1969), 44–45.

³³ Suárez, “Jack Smith,” 298.

³⁴ Suárez, “Jack Smith,” 301.

³⁵ Joseph A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia, 2015).

³⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

³⁷ Juan A. Suárez, “Pop, Queer, or Fascist? The Ambiguity of Mass Culture in Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*,” in *Experimental Cinema, The Film Reader*, eds. Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London: Routledge, 2002), 125.