

December 2019

Truffaut's L'Enfant sauvage (The Wild Child, 1970): Evoking Autism and the Nascent "Eugenic Atlantic"

Joy C. Schaefer

Grand Valley State University, joy_schaefer@gvsu.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought>



Part of the [Disability Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schaefer, Joy C. (2019) "Truffaut's L'Enfant sauvage (The Wild Child, 1970): Evoking Autism and the Nascent "Eugenic Atlantic"," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.9707/2833-1508.1003

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* (The Wild Child, 1970): Evoking Autism and the Nascent "Eugenic Atlantic"

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to my anonymous peer reviewers for their careful and productive feedback. I also thank Robert Rozema for inspiring me to write this essay and Cosette Schaefer for being its first reader.

Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*, 1970): Evoking Autism and the Nascent "Eugenic Atlantic"

Joy C. Schaefer

"The context for eugenics first took shape in France." (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 113).

Recent work in postcolonial studies asks how disability is considered in global history and aims to "highlight specific located examples of disability in cultural contexts" (Barker & Murray, 2013, pp. 65). Like postcolonial studies, disability studies teaches us that the ability to assimilate to the dominant culture is not how we should judge the value of human life. In this essay, I use this common theoretical thread to examine French New Wave critic-turned-filmmaker François Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*, 1970). The film is an exceptionally early representation of autism in narrative film history. It concerns the true story of the "wild boy of Aveyron," a feral child found in a Southern French forest in 1798 when he was twelve years old. In France, the wild boy has become a famous early case of neurodiversity and the medical desire to normalize it (Sauvage, 2012). Truffaut did extensive research on autistic children before directing the film. Some of the common autistic characteristics we see the wild boy of Aveyron portray include difficulty with social interactions and language acquisition; flat affect; and stimming (self-stimulation, or repetitive movements that help focus and calm oneself, easing a heightened sensitivity to anxiety-producing environmental stimulation). In these ways, the film is important in terms of the representational history of autism and neurodiversity.

Equally important for both disability studies and postcolonial studies—and whether or not Truffaut intended it—the film's autistic child works as a metaphor for the "savage" colonial subject who is in need of the benevolent colonizer to teach him how to be "civilized." This representation is what sociologist Mark Sherry will later warn against: the dangers of abusing the "rhetorical connections" that exist between disability and

postcolonialism (2007, p. 21). Yet, it is precisely the film's problematic representation of disability as metaphor that becomes compelling for disability studies. In *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell claim that our current theories of eugenics ignore disability and impairment as socially mediated categories of human difference because they "exclusively reference 'race' as the social locus of ascribed insufficiency, while leaving disability as the default category of 'real' human incapacity" (2010, p. 111). This warning renders *L'Enfant sauvage* a complicated case study, as its conflation of race and disability leaves the uninformed spectator to wonder from which social locus the wild child's "insufficiency" stems. With this in mind, I analyze the film as a representation of the ways in which ableist ideologies, discourses and actions mirror and uphold racist and colonialist practices (and vice versa) across two key moments in French history: 1798, the film's narrative context, and 1969, the film's production context.

The film takes place less than a decade after the most famous of all French Revolutions—that of 1789. With co-writer Jean Gruault, Truffaut adapted Dr. Jean-Marc Gastard Itard's *Mémoire et Rapport sur Victor de l'Aveyron* (1806) into daily diary entries, enacted in the film as a voice-over read by Truffaut in the role of Itard. The film begins with a woman "discovering" the twelve-year-old nude boy, played by Jean-Pierre Cargol, a dark-skinned Romani boy from the outskirts of Montpellier. The boy runs around on all fours, bites people who try to touch him, and is unable to speak due to lack of human contact. He is taken to Paris where he is exposed to the public as a spectacle, much like the organizers of the World's Fair would soon do to people of color from the East and Global South beginning in the late 1800s (for a succinct and teachable introduction to this history, see Rachid Bouchareb's short film, "Exhibitions," 2009). Truffaut's film shortens this part of the boy's journey, focusing instead on the relationship between the boy, Dr. Itard, and his maid, Mme. Guérin (played by the great theatre actor Françoise Seigner).

At the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris, the most celebrated psychiatrist of the time, Philippe Pinel (Jean Dasté), thinks the boy is an irrecoverable "idiot," while his young colleague Itard thinks he has the ability to become a "normal" child with proper education. They carefully observe his physical characteristics and discover a scar on his trachea,

leading them to believe his parents tried to kill him before leaving him in the forest. At first, they think the boy is completely deaf and mute, but they soon hear grumbling sounds come from his lips and realize that, although he does not respond to all noises, he does respond to some. Itard takes him to his suburban home where he begins to educate him, naming his pupil-patient Victor because of his strong response to the sound “O.” The doctor tries to teach Victor how to sit at the table and eat, ask for what he wants, and read and say the alphabet and simple words. Sometimes Itard takes these lessons too far, provoking temper tantrums in Victor, and Mme. Guérin is consistently there to offer the boy maternal comfort and unconditional love. Near the film’s end, Victor disappears for a long time but comes back on his own after discovering that he’s lost many of his survival skills. The film ends much like Truffaut’s semi-autobiographical French New Wave film, *Les Quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959): the rebel child returns the camera’s ageist and ableist gaze.

Truffaut saw *L’Enfant sauvage* as in dialogue with his most famous film: “It’s a film that responds, ten years later, to *Les Quatre cents coups*. We have on the screen [...] someone who lacks something essential, but this time there are people who will try to help” (as cited in Gonzalez A., 2003). Like Jean Vigo’s *Zéro de conduite* (*Zero for Behavior*, 1933) before it, Truffaut’s *Les Quatre cents coups* reveals a student’s rebellious attitude toward his schoolteacher, reformatory administrator, and neglectful mother, all of whom try to instill him with cosmopolitan (‘high’ class) words, gestures, and actions while revealing their penchant for disciplining and punishing him. Truffaut’s young mentee and doppelganger, Jean-Pierre L  aud, plays a young version of Truffaut, Antoine Doinel, a rebellious twelve-year-old (and L  aud would go on to play this same character through adulthood in five more of Truffaut’s films). Truffaut dedicated the film to his mentor and father-figure, Andr   Bazin, while he dedicated *L’Enfant sauvage* to his mentee, L  aud. Thus, within the scope of ten years, Truffaut-as-character shifts from child rebel (Antoine) to disciplinarian (Itard), from student to teacher, glorifying Itard’s paternal desire to “help” the young Victor in ways that the adult characters of *Les Quatre cents coups* failed to help Antoine. As Dudley Andrew writes, Truffaut identified with Itard, Truffaut who had already shaped the life of Jean-Pierre L  aud” (2013, p. 238).

Due to these connections between Truffaut's films, and because Truffaut himself plays the doctor who attempts to cure the child in *L'Enfant sauvage*, scholars have tended to examine the film through an autobiographical lens (e.g., Allen, 1985; Codell, 2006). Seemingly uncritical of auteur theory, these analyses generally celebrate the film and its filmmaker. (Truffaut himself advanced auteur theory, which proposes that the director is the most important creative force in the filmmaking process.) Moreover, while several scholars have analyzed the film with the knowledge of Truffaut's interest in representing autism (Shattuck, 1980; Andrew, 2013; Gillain, 2013) or language difficulty (McCance, 2008), or within the context of a decolonizing France (Codell, 2006), I have found none who consider both disability and colonialism together—or the film's overt racialization of the “wild boy” via Truffaut's casting of Cargol. Engaging with these analyses, as well as sociological and historical studies of the French assimilationist model, I merge the critical lenses of disability studies and postcolonial studies to analyze the film as an early representation of autism that metaphorizes the neurodiverse child as the colonial subject. More specifically, I examine *L'Enfant sauvage* as a representation of historical connections among colonialism, eugenics, and the social construction of disability.

The film represents a period in French history that included the first colonial empire, existing from the sixteenth century to 1814. It evokes the ways in which colonial attitudes reinforced ableist attitudes (and vice versa) in the late 1700s, at the beginning of what Snyder and Mitchell term the “Eugenic Atlantic” period—when racial and disability eugenics merged for about 150 years (2010, p. 101). Although the film's production took place a decade after the Eugenic Atlantic period, and despite Truffaut's involvement in the decolonial movement, the film reveals a troubling conflation between the disabled child and the colonial subject. The film's narrative and formal elements illustrate a strong desire to cure and “civilize” a child that may not want or need curing. Moreover, the civilizer is played by a white French man (Truffaut), while Truffaut cast a dark-skinned Romani boy as Victor, despite Truffaut's knowledge that the historical Victor was white. In its representation of autism only a year after May '68—a key moment in postcolonial French history—*L'Enfant sauvage* reveals that colonialism and ableism are mutually imbricated historical methods of normalization that span centuries.

In the first part of this essay, “Stimming,” I examine Truffaut’s study of autism and the film’s portrayal of Victor as autistic through his tendency to stim; I conclude that the film’s use of long shots to frame Victor visibly renders the disabled character less human than his teacher. In “Disability as Savagery,” the second section, I merge postcolonial studies with Snyder and Mitchell’s disability studies work on the Eugenic Atlantic period to show how the film represents this era in its conflation of disability with people of color. I also engage with the discourse surrounding it (e.g. film reviews and analyses), some of which unquestioningly reaffirms the film’s ableist and racist representation. Finally, in “White Savior,” I assess Itard’s training methods in relation to the French assimilation model and colonialist civilizing discourse.

Stimming

In *L’Enfant sauvage*’s opening sequence, we are introduced to the “wild child” through the eyes of an elderly woman who is mushroom hunting in the Aveyron forest in the South of France. She sees rustling in the trees, an image of nature before human civilization, and what appears to be a frightened animal begins to grunt in a high pitch and violently kick up leaves and dirt from the forest ground. The woman drops her mushroom basket and runs away down the hill; we cut back to the “animal” as the camera follows him running on his hands and feet through the trees. A three-quarter shot zooms into a medium shot to reveal a dark-skinned boy with long, matted hair and a filthy face who grabs the basket and shoves several mushrooms into his mouth at once [see Figure 1]. He then makes his way to a stream to drink water and finally climbs up a tree and sits on a branch near the top where he rests, basking in the sunlight. There, he holds his hair and begins to rock back and forth at a steady tempo as the camera pans out amidst the sound of birds chirping, and the scene finally fades in an iris shot.

In the second scene, the woman leads hunters and dogs toward the boy and, after he tries to escape and falls from a tree to the ground, one of the dogs bites his hand. He bites the dog in self-defense, and a close-up shot of the dog reveals that it lies motionless on the ground in defeat. The boy runs to a hole in the ground where he hides until the hunters smoke him out. Once caught, he is kept tethered in a barn, where we see

him break the window with his head and then move around forcefully and repetitively in a pile of hay. He escapes the barn only to be bullied by young children, at which point he is transferred to the Rodez police station.

Already in this opening sequence, we learn several things about the boy's tendencies, as well as his relationship to nature and civilization. First, we know the boy is "wild" enough climb trees with ease, walk on all fours, and take down a large dog by himself. Second, his relationship to civilization is one fraught with tension: adults smoke him out and lock him up, and other children his age mock him. Finally, we have evidence of his tendency toward stimming (Gillain, 2013, p. 209). Truffaut viewed



Figure 1. The "Wild Child" (Jean-Pierre Cargol) in the opening scene of Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* (*L'Enfant sauvage*, Les Films du Carrosse, 1970)

films of autistic children and used their traits when creating his titular character, and he collected books and articles on autistic children as he prepared to direct the film (Truffaut, 1987, p. 114). Found in the archives of the BiFi (Bibliothèque du Film, Cinémathèque Française, Paris), these include French translations of two works by autism studies pioneers: Dr. Lorna Wing's "Autistic Children" (1968), which describes the

behavior—including “abnormal movements”—and educational needs of autistic children; and Dr. Bernard Rimland’s speech, “A New Perspective in the Treatment of Children with Mental Illness,” given in 1965 in New York at the inaugural assembly for the National Society for Autistic Children (all translations from the French are my own unless otherwise noted). Also drawing on archival research, Dudley Andrew has shown that Truffaut was influenced by leftist activist and filmmaker Fernand Deligny’s documentary work on autistic children. In 1968, Deligny wrote to Truffaut about his newest autistic subject, Janmari, describing in detail his autistic characteristics and relating him to Mowgli of *The Jungle Book*, likening him to “a young orangutan.” Truffaut was enthusiastic about the letter, wanting to see the boy for himself. Due to filming *La Sirène du Mississippi* (*Mississippi Mermaid*, 1969) on the island of Reunion, he sent his associate Suzanne Schiffman to Cevennes to take notes and photos of Janmari, who provided an “ideal model” for Truffaut’s subject (Andrew, 2013, p. 231).

Examples of Victor’s stimming are numerous throughout the film, and many of them are revealed to the spectator through long shots instead of close-ups. The close-up shot is more likely to evoke a viewer’s emotion and connect us to the character because we are able to see their facial expressions and emotions, thus allowing us to sympathize and identify with them.

Conversely, long shots distance us from understanding, or connecting to, the character. In the case of *L’Enfant sauvage*, the formal choice of showing us the “wild boy” via long shots cements him as a specimen to be rationally studied as “defective” rather than emotionally understood as human. For example, when Victor escapes the carriage to Paris, a long shot shows him flapping his arms up and down into river water; instead of a close-up on his face to reveal his confusion and frustration during travel, Truffaut offers us a long shot of the stimming boy whose instinct pulls him back to nature. At the Institute for Deaf-Mutes, where a worker who smiles cockily displays him to Parisian visitors, Victor moves his head and shoulders around in a haphazard circle as he sits on the bed as object of the ableist gaze; here, we see the spectators in a medium shot while the boy’s body remains entirely visible to the camera—except for the gazing bodies that cover him.

Anne Gillain claims, “We have to wait until the final image in the movie before the child returns the gaze of which he is made the object at its opening. During the story, the camera does not adopt his point of view; he remains sightless, an object, a spectacle” (2013, p. 209). She describes several early scenes that are “[f]ilmed in long shots” in which the boy’s environment seems to erase or encapsulate him (2013, p. 210). She maintains that it is only because of Itard that “the wild boy is separated from the environment in which he is merged. Thereafter, he acquires a visual identity and become [sic] an autonomous body on the screen” (2013, p. 210). While the boy does become the object of several close-up shots after Itard “saves” him, Truffaut continues to use long shots to display Victor in key scenes throughout the rest of the film, especially during scenes in which he stims while connecting with nature—again cementing the autistic child as an inscrutable medical specimen.

At Itard’s country home, we see Victor’s stimming become less unwieldy (more “civilized”)—but only in the scenes that are shot indoors, a space that the film aligns with “culture.” For example, in medium and sometimes even close-up shots, we see Victor tap his teeth repetitively, including when he becomes frightened after burning himself with a candle. During language acquisition exercises, Victor blinks very hard several times, allowing the spectator to perceive these stims as evidence of the student’s difficult thinking and, thus, his intellectual progression. While at dinner, he taps his spoon loudly against the wooden table, warranting Itard to place his paternal hand over Victor’s, signaling him to stop stimming.

While these indoor scenes allow us to identify with Victor as he stims via close-up shots, scenes in which he is outdoors represent his stimming as “wild”; the long shot consistently distances us from Victor when he is aligned with nature. This even occurs when he is standing at, or viewed through, the window—his gateway to nature (on the window’s symbolism, see Codell, 2006, p. 115-16; and McCance, 2008, p. 78-9). Itard’s voiceover commentary also tends to associate the boy with nature in these scenes. For instance, as his voiceover explains the joys of the countryside, a long shot from outside the window reveals Victor seated against a wall on the floor in his room as he rocks back and forth. In another scene, as the

boy receives a wheelbarrow ride from Itard's friend, he taps his hands repetitively and with power against the wood—again in a long shot.

These shots illustrate Stuart Murray's explanation of the public's fascination with, and misunderstanding of, autism. In *Representing Autism*, he states, "Autism appears as a peculiarly silent and pernicious version of this disruption [of the majority non-disabled worldview], an object difficult to identify and too problematic in its range (from the non-verbal to the garrulous, from severe sensory and environmental experiences



Figure 2. A three-quarter shot of Victor's (Jean-Pierre Cargol) first upright steps focuses on Itard (François Truffaut) rather than our titular character, whose face we cannot see (*L'Enfant sauvage*, Les Films du Carrosse, 1970)

to small character 'eccentricities') to regulate precisely" (2008, p. 4). The film thus presages our contemporary media landscape: representations of autistic people abound that reveal a fascination with a disability that "elude[s] comprehension" and is therefore thought to be unable to be "corrected" (Murray, 2008, p. 4).

The long shots of Victor stimming in nature offer a stark contrast to the close-up shots we see of Itard's hand as he writes his notes on the boy's

progression (with voiceover), as well as the close-ups on Itard's stoic face throughout the film. Even a three-quarter shot reveals Itard as the protagonist with whom we should sympathize while distancing us from Victor: in an early scene, a three-quarter shot reveals the doctor as he teaches Victor how to walk upright; while we also have a three-quarter shot of Victor, we see only the lower half of his torso, his arms, and his legs [see Figure 2]. While the camera consistently humanizes the rationalist doctor and prioritizes his story, it distances the audience from its disabled patient, especially when that patient becomes too "uncivilized."

Disability as Savagery

The most nuanced and multifaceted analysis of *L'Enfant sauvage*'s post-colonial production context thus far is Julie F. Codell's "Playing Doctor: François Truffaut's *L'Enfant Sauvage* and the Auteur/Autobiographer as Impersonator" (2006). Codell historicizes the film's production within the intellectual and political debates of (post)colonial 1960s France, including structuralism's re-assessment of Enlightenment ideals and the left's critique of French humanism, rooted in Enlightenment values, for justifying colonialism. While other scholars had argued that Truffaut's film endorsed these values, Codell argues that *L'Enfant sauvage* reveals an ambiguous view of Enlightenment reason, science, and classification methods. As evidence of Truffaut's distrust of these principles, she cites his anti-colonial politics; several of the film's formal elements; the juxtaposition of Itard's masculine rationalism with Mme. Guérin's maternal love for Victor; and the shift in focus from Itard to Victor by the film's end (2006, p. 104). While Codell's analysis is rather convincing, it fails to mention the film's representation of disability and tends to over-celebrate the auteur filmmaker and his intent.

In *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*' recent In Focus dossier on "Crippling Cinema and Media Studies," Kateřina Kolářová writes that "disability is always both entangled in symbolic racializations and serving dynamic constructions of the East-West dichotomies" (2019, p. 161). Not only does *L'Enfant sauvage* showcase Victor's autism as a deficiency via distancing long shots, but it also presents the autistic boy as both racialized and one-with-nature from its opening sequence. This is significant when we consider that the film was produced just after the

end of the second colonial empire, which began with the conquest of Algeria in 1830 and ended when colonized subjects pushed the French out, for example, during the Algerian War of Independence from French colonial rule (1954–62). The film thus locates the intertwining of racism and ableism at two critical points in French (and global) history: while the film represents the period after the Revolution of 1789, the nascent eugenics period, it was produced only a year after the events of May and June 1968, France’s nationwide upheaval of protests and strikes that were heavily influenced by the decolonial movement in France and Algeria (Ross, 2008).

Gillain’s chapter on *L’Enfant sauvage* in her book, *Tout Truffaut*, analyzes the film through the literal lens of the window and the dichotomy of universes it divides: “child/adult, nature/culture [...] house/forest, inside/outside, tree/staircase, writing/body” (2019, p. 121). These binaries, she argues, structure the film and lend meaning to its narrative, with the window acting as “a place of communication between these two universes, [...] at once a promise of harmony and a call to escape for the savage” (2019, p. 122). While this lens is useful, Gillain fails to mention that these binaries are historically situated within French colonialist ideologies and contemporary stereotypes of, and discriminations against, people of color in France. As Edward Said established in *Orientalism* (1978), Western imperialistic discourse has for centuries constructed people of “the East” and Global South as exotic, irrational, incomprehensible, primitive, innately connected to nature, and ruled by instinct—a discourse that in many ways mirrors ableist discourses regarding disabled and impaired bodies. Orientalism thus renders the rational, secular, white Western man as the universal “normal” subject, while ableist discourse constructs the able-bodied, able-minded, neurotypical person as the norm.

The film’s conflation of Victor’s disability with primitive instinct illustrates an historical slippage between racialization and disability. As Roger Shattuck explains in *The Forbidden Experiment*, “Truffaut imagined a whole repertory of animal-like movements, some of them derived from the behavior of autistic children. [The boy] is almost on all fours and gradually becomes erect. Like a cat, he continues to rub against and touch many of the objects in his environment” (1980, p. 210). As the film’s first scene ends, Victor rocks steadily back and forth as the camera pans

out amidst the sound of birds chirping, associating the stammering child with the magic and mysteriousness of nature. Here and elsewhere in the film, the disabled body becomes a metaphor for the animal within nature, man's prelinguistic state—similar to the representation of racialized people during (and after) colonization.

In this context, it is important that Cargol, who plays Victor, is Romani—better known by the racial slur “Gypsy,” which originated in the sixteenth century when Europeans thought Romani people had come from Egypt. Romani is an ethnicity, culture, and language originating in India that was particularly vulnerable during the Holocaust. Cargol was living in a *cité* (low-income housing projects, or the suburban “ghetto”) in the outskirts of Montpellier when he was “discovered” by Truffaut’s assistant. Contrasting Truffaut’s method of casting to Werner Herzog’s for *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), Andrew claims that “The Gypsy [sic] boy chosen to portray Victor was not essential” (2013, p. 238). Yet, Truffaut and his assistant chose a dark-skinned Romani boy to play the “wild child” even though several reports that Truffaut collected during his research for the film described the historical boy as white. For example, Henri Maynard in *Le Rouergat* newspaper described the boy’s skin as “tanned from weathering” (1969, p. 8). Excerpts from the reports of biology professor Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre, the first scientist to study Victor, describe him as having “fine, white skin; a round face; black, sunken eyes, brown hair; a long, pointed nose; an average mouth; rounded chin; an agreeable physiognomy and gracious smile; in short, from the outside, nothing distinguishes him from others.” With writings like these in Truffaut’s own *L’Enfant sauvage* file (BiFi archives), it seems odd that he would choose a boy of color to play his pupil. He returned to the casting method he had used for his second film, *Les Mistons* (*The Mischief Makers*, 1957). He states,

I directed five boys from Nîmes, of whom one or two really had something *savage* about them. [...] I sent my assistant to watch when school let out, at Arles, Nîmes, Marseilles, etc. It was in a street in Montpellier that she noticed, questioned, and photographed among others a little gypsy [sic] boy, Jean-Pierre Cargol. Jean-Pierre, the little gypsy [sic] who I finally chose to play the role,

is a very handsome child, but I think *he really does look as if he just came out of the woods*. (Truffaut, 1987, p. 115, my emphases)

Perhaps without realizing it, his casting and direction of *Cargol* allows the “wild child” to mirror France’s constructed image of the people of its former colonies: dark, different, savage, inscrutable.

Ian Hancock, scholar of Romani culture and language, writes that “Somehow Gypsies aren’t considered real people; the word is usually written without a proper noun’s initial capital letter, as though it referred to a category like ‘hippie’ or ‘beatnik’” (1985, p. 16). Indeed, more than half of the film reviews found in the BiFi that mention the ethnic background of *Cargol* use the French word’s lower-case spelling, “gitan,” instead of “Gitan.” *Canard Enchaîné*’s review, with its repetition of the word “little,” explicitly links savagery to Romani culture: “The role of the little savage is played by a little gypsy [sic]” (D., 1970). The most famous Romani character in French literature, Esmeralda in Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1831), largely aligns with Hancock’s analysis of the Western representation of Romani people in children’s literature: Romani characters are inserted into a text to serve a specific narrative purpose as “liar and thief of property or (especially) of non-Gypsy children”; as “witch or caster of spells”; and as “romantic figure” (1987, p. 47). In Hugo’s famous novel, “gypsies” steal Esmeralda from her white mother and, as a teenager, Esmeralda becomes both witch and romantic figure—she is our disabled hero Quasimodo’s love interest and obsession. She is such a magical and noble savage, it seems, that he is drawn to place his body over her corpse and allow himself to starve to death while holding her (see also Kilbane, 2008).

The Nazi Regime murdered over 90,000 Romani people (Margalit, 2002, p. 53-4). This is important for *L’Enfant sauvage* because, while the Holocaust occurs at the end of the Eugenic Atlantic period, the film is set during its emergence in the late eighteenth century. Snyder and Mitchell deem the Eugenic Atlantic an historical period and transnational site where beliefs about racial and biological inferiority joined forces for a period of 150 years (2010, p. 100-1). They define eugenics as the “science of racial purification and the elimination of human ‘defects’” (2010, p. 103)—presumed biological inferiorities in terms of physical or

mental impairment. They explain that eugenics became a transatlantic pseudo-science shared and (re)produced among the fields of social work, public policy, science, and psychiatry in the U.S., France, Canada, and Great Britain—even before German eugenicists began using it as an ideology to justify murdering disabled bodies in psychiatric institutions and, later, Jewish people, Romani people, and other non-normative people in concentration camps during the Holocaust. Because several Western nations were producing eugenicist theories, each nation used the others' as justification for their own ableist practices.

Drawing on Paul Gilroy's "emphasis on transatlantic traffic in racial thinking" within his notion of the "Black Atlantic" (1993), Snyder and Mitchell locate the beginning of the Eugenic Atlantic period in the late 1700s (2010, p. 101). In this historical period, "beliefs that informed racial and disability eugenics as peculiarly Western modes of intolerance toward biologically based differences explicitly dovetailed" (2010, p. 112). Important for our film, they explain that the "wild boy" was the historical starting point of eugenicist pseudo-science:

The context for eugenics first took shape in France. In 1797 the capture in rural France of a "savage" or "wild boy" [...] led to his involuntary incarceration. During the period of his confinement the "wild boy" was objectified as a specimen of exhibition. French researchers pursued numerous efforts to "train" him out of his "prelinguistic" silence. (2010, p. 113)

Following Itard's failed efforts to "civilize" the boy (part of the original story that our film ignores in favor of an ambiguous ending), his successor Edouard Seguin, at one time supervised by Itard, argued for the systematic education of "idiot children" (Hochmann, 2012). While absent from the film, Seguin is important in this history. As Dominique Sauvage (2012) explains, although Leo Kanner (1943) and Hans Asperger (1944) were the first to describe "autism" under this name, Seguin's *Moral Treatment, Hygiene, and Education of Idiots and Other Backward Children* (1846) already tells us a lot about the disability that was formerly called idiotism and, later, childhood psychoses or schizophrenia.

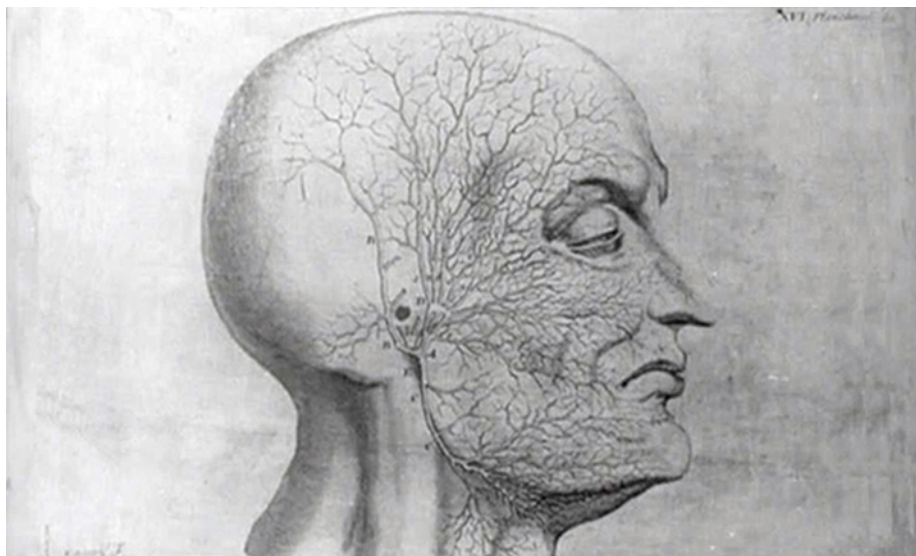


Figure 3. An image reminiscent of eugenicist pseudo-science lurks in Itard's office (*L'Enfant sauvage*, *Les Films du Carrosse*, 1970)

Snyder and Mitchell explain that eugenics stemmed from these early theories and practices and included training people with cognitive and physical differences; confinement practices; sterilization; intelligence testing (a move from focusing on apparent disability to measuring non-apparent “inferiority”); and restriction of marriage, reproduction, work, neighborhoods, and immigration (2010, p. 112-3). They maintain that the Eugenic Atlantic, as a diasporic discourse of disability, constructed disabled persons as pariahs and “defectives,” and they theorize that disability studies must contest the assumption that “normalization [is] the adjudicator of human value” (2010, p. 103-5). *L'Enfant sauvage* explicitly represents the nascent Eugenic Atlantic period in its representation of the historical “wild child.” It focuses on the narrative of a white doctor who treats, trains, confines, and attempts to normalize an autistic child and “cure” him of his “defects” (e.g., stimming). Equally troubling, the film depicts the child as a “savage” boy of color in need of these theories and punishments.

Several of Snyder and Mitchell’s “cultural locations of disability”—sites where disabled people are “deposited, oftentimes against their will”—grew out of the Eugenic Atlantic period (2010, p. 3-4). Regarding our film, one important location of disability is institutions for the “feeble-minded.”

Paradoxically, Truffaut's shooting location for the majority of the film—out of the institution and into the suburbs—buttresses the conflation between disability and savagery. Codell points out that Truffaut, unlike the historical Itard, takes Victor out of Paris, creating “a laboratory in Itard's home free from the restraints and cruelties of an urban institution” (2006, p. 104). However, this change in location also offers the film plenty of opportunities to associate the autistic Victor with nature and in opposition to Itard's cultivated connection to science. The provincial location allows Itard to educate Victor in a calm, idyllic space, linking Victor with nature and placing him in opposition to Parisian urbanity and civilization. For instance, one scene shows the doctor drawing a hammer, scissors, and key on a chalkboard. Victor successfully places the objects under the appropriate drawings, a training method known as the “Sicard Method” (named after Abbé Sicard, director of the Institute for Deaf-Mutes who would eventually be responsible for evaluating the historical Victor's condition). A gentle, high-pitched flute begins to play—a recurring extradiegetic melody that signals progression—as Itard says, “good job, Victor, that was very good.” He hands Victor his prize, a glass of water, and encourages him to drink. The doctor is framed by an anatomical diagram of a human skull hanging on the wall behind him, which mirrors the shape of Truffaut's head and is consistently aligned with him throughout the film, thus associating Itard with culture and science (Codell, 2006, p. 117). Yet, the poster is also reminiscent of eugenicist images created to evaluate and compare the shape and size of human skulls to produce racialized hierarchies of intelligence [see Figure 3].

While Itard is framed by a symbol of “civilization,” Victor is framed by the open side of a two-paneled window as he calmly sips his water. Itard's voiceover states, “He stands near the window looking out over the countryside, as if in this moment this *child of nature* had sought to reunite the two blessings to survive his loss of freedom—a drink of pure water and the sight of sunlight on the countryside” (my emphasis). We cut to pigeons on top of a barn, panning down to a long shot of Victor cutting wood. Given the image's consistent conflation of Victor with nature in these scenes, Itard's paternalistic voiceover becomes redundant and even patronizing: it reifies the boy's connection to nature on the audio track even while we have a clear image of the boy's affinity for nature on the image track.

In a scene that follows, Itard takes Victor for a long walk in the countryside as the extradiegetic soundtrack of Vivaldi's upbeat and joyous "Concerto for Mandolin" plays. After we see several long shots of the doctor and patient walking along playfully together, with Victor wearing Itard's top hat, we see the boy running around, sometimes on all fours, in the rain via a static long shot. Victor opens his mouth several times to catch the drops and we cut to a close-up shot of Itard, his head mirroring the medical poster. This scene clearly juxtaposes Victor, who relishes being in nature, revealed to us via a distancing long shot, and the cultivated doctor, shown via a humanizing close-up shot, who is associated with science. These key scenes in the middle of the film highlight its representation of "the mind/body, civilized/savage binary" (McCance, 2008, p. 77) and its association of these hierarchized concepts with Itard the doctor versus Victor the autistic child.



Figure 4. To his doctor's (Truffaut) satisfaction, Victor (Cargol) begins to leave his flat affect behind (*L'Enfant sauvage*, Les Films du Carrosse, 1970)

When we do see close-up shots of Victor, it is usually when he is indoors and in the process of "becoming more human"—for instance, when Mme. Guérin cuts his long, matted hair; when he begins to cry, revealing that he is learning how to show his emotions outwardly (in contrast to the flat affect he reveals at the beginning of the film); or when he attempts

to connect to his teacher. An hour into the film, Itard receives news that “Citizen Pinel has convinced the administration that the idiot children he observed at Bicêtre Asylum share traits with the wild boy of Aveyron, and therefore Victor will never learn how to socialize, and nothing can be hoped for by continuing his education.” Itard rushes off to Paris in a horse-drawn carriage to persuade Parisian authorities of the usefulness of Victor’s education but returns home worried. He enters the boy’s bedroom and sits on his bed. Victor takes Itard’s hand and places it over several parts of his face in a moment of communication. Itard says to the boy, “That’s your way of talking.”

We end the scene with a close-up of Victor’s face under his doctor’s hand. The scene directly after this reveals another close-up on Victor’s face, but only after he’s been punished with a few moments in the closet and, due to this treatment, he begins to cry—again revealing his progress in becoming more (outwardly) sensitive and thus more “human.” Itard writes (and the voiceover proclaims): “Today Victor cried for the first time” [see Figure 4].

Another scene in which we see a close-up of Victor’s face occurs after a language acquisition exercise for which he is blindfolded. When Victor fails several times—each time with a cheeky adolescent smirk—Itard uses a pointing stick to tap his hand with force. Gillain notes the “cruelty of the exercise that consists of blinding a child devoid of language. Itard deprived him of his major sense of relating to the world” (2019, p. 124). Itard says to Victor, “I’m wasting my time with you [...] I’m discouraged and disappointed.” Then his voiceover takes over: “Had I known his limits I would have thought he understood. I had barely spoken when the tears started streaming from under his blindfold [...] I condemned the curiosity of the men who wrenched him away from his innocent and happy life.” The scene ends with a close-up on Victor’s blindfolded, tear-stained face. These close-up shots on Victor allow the spectator to sympathize with him when he appears “human” by showing “civilized” affect—crying and communicating with another human. Conversely, the long shots construct him as a stimulating spectacle when he connects with nature. Moreover, they represent Victor’s stimulating as abnormal, in need of

fixing, savage, and even scary—rather than allowing this common autistic quality the humanizing effect of the close-up.

After the failed blindfold lesson, Itard thinks Victor has run away and goes out into the trees to search for him. The voiceover narrates, “I heard rustling above my head.” Itard looks up into one of the trees that surround him to find Victor sitting on a high branch. This scene mirrors the sequence of events at the film’s end. When Itard cannot take Victor on their daily walks due to being ill, the boy’s frustration leads him to jump out of the window. Just as in the previous scene in which the boy runs away from Itard’s home—as well as when we first meet Victor in the woods in Aveyron—we hear and see leaves rustling. This sound and image of Victor-as-nature is contrasted with a striking medium shot of Itard and the recurring image of the anatomical poster of the skull [Figure 3]. While Itard’s face and torso remain in the dark, candlelight illuminates the poster, which symbolizes cultivation, indicating his presumed failure at civilizing the boy. We see Victor attempt to steal a hen from a neighbor before he finally comes back to the doctor’s home. Itard tells him, “This is your home. You’re no longer a savage, even if you’re not yet a man.” As Mme. Guérin guides Victor up the stairs to his bedroom so he can rest, Itard looks up at him. “Later we’ll resume our lessons,” he says to his pupil, who returns the doctor’s gaze with a rebellious gaze of his own.

Both Gillain (2013) and Codell use this final shot to further prove the film’s and Truffaut’s critical or ambiguous (respectively) stance in regard to Itard’s rationalist ideas and training methods. For example, Codell concludes her analysis by stating that *L’Enfant sauvage* reveals Truffaut’s “ambivalence regarding institutions. [...] He admired Itard and his Enlightenment mentality, but also recognized its failings as a cold, anonymous scientific model fed by panopticons and government discipline and punishment, all conveyed in Victor’s last contemptuous look at Itard” (2006, p. 107). However, we could also read this last scene as yet another representation of Victor as abnormal autistic child in the context of postcolonial France. A close-up on Itard’s face is answered with a reverse shot of Victor and Mme. Guérin, also in a close-up—but the boy and his mother figure walk up the stairs and away from the camera as the doctor remains still, looking up toward his discontent patient. Victor returns the gaze, which we could read as a form of the child’s agency; however,



Figure 5. An iris fade-out renders Victor (Cargol) a medical specimen (*L'Enfant sauvage*, Les Films du Carrosse, 1970)

an iris shot frames him before fading the screen to black and ending the film, placing Victor in the position of a disabled and racialized medical specimen [see Figure 5]. Codell writes that, throughout the film, the iris shot “captures Victor in his stages of development, his past joys (the rain), his important lessons, and his frustrations. But the iris also expands and closes in on Victor, mirroring his confinement” (2006, p. 113). While Truffaut as Itard remains human in his final close-up, the iris shot—meant to return us to a former time in cinema history and reminiscent of D.W. Griffith’s racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—once again renders Victor inhuman. Further, the casting of Cargol creates an image of a racialized pupil who has yet to be truly “saved” by his master’s teachings.

This final iris fade-out echoes an iris fade-out that occurs midway through the film. We see Victor tapping on the windowsill as he looks outside, framed by the window and greenery. Mme. Guérin calls out the name “Victor” for the first time and he swiftly turns around to claim it as his own. She and Itard approach the boy excitedly as the doctor places his hands on him and an iris shot closes in on the boy, who appears confused. This close-up shot, which indicates that the boy is becoming less feral and more “human” by accepting a name, quickly turns into a

cinematic microscope: we see Victor through a circular lens as a doctor might examine a specimen. The boy becomes a passive object as he receives the patronizing touch of Itard and the pathologizing iris shot of Truffaut.

White Savior

Several critics at the time of the film's release picked up on *l'Enfant sauvage's* lack of Truffaut's famous "tenderness" (e.g. Coppermann, 1970). Relatedly, some reviewers associated the film with Arthur Penn's *The Miracle Worker* (1962), which dramatizes the true story of Anne Sullivan's oftentimes violent tutoring of Helen Keller, whose childhood case of scarlet fever rendered her blind and deaf (e.g. Garrigou-Lagrange, 1970). It seems some of 1970 French film culture picked up on the cruelty of some of Itard's training methods. Truffaut represents Itard as a doctor who thinks Victor can and should change with a "proper education": he teaches Victor behaviors that will help him to assimilate to dominant French culture. In this way, the film represents the hope that Victor has the capacity to assimilate, to "be cured," through a focus on Itard's medicalizing voiceover; conversations between Itard and Pinel; and formal elements that repeatedly render Victor an inscrutable object.

In "From Savage to Citizen: Education, Colonialism and Idiocy," Murray K. Simpson explains that the Enlightenment constructed only certain people as citizen-worthy, while non-citizens included idiots, racial others, and women. Simpson writes, "Education was firmly established as the process of transforming its targets—child, idiot, savage—into social subjects" (2007, p. 572). Enlightenment science maintained that human bodies could be categorized based on "innate" characteristics. Like people of color, disabled people were judged on biological, rather than cultural, inferiority—the *inability* to assimilate to the dominant culture. Snyder and Mitchell state, "This immutable quality attributed to races through biological traits serves as the primary locus for an analysis of human disqualification shared by racial Others and people with disabilities" (2010, p. 110).

By the end of our film, Victor has "progressed" somewhat according to Itard, but he most certainly has not achieved assimilation—and the

historical Victor would die at the age of 40 under Mme. Guérin's care. However, these medical "failures" in terms of Victor's ability to assimilate to the dominant culture do not render his life valueless.

A scene near the beginning of the film begins to explain Itard's assimilationist ideology. At the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, Victor becomes an easy target: children in the garden beat him up, yet Victor fails to respond in expected ways. Itard's voiceover explains, "The boy has no moral affectation; he doesn't cry despite being bullied." As Itard and Pinel walk up the stairs, Itard says, "The child will die here; all we do is exhibit him like a freak." Pinel responds, "He is an inferior being. He's lower than an animal." Itard, revealing his belief in assimilation, says, "That's the point: animals are cared for and can be trained." They reach a window on an upper floor and look down on Victor, who sways back and forth at the edge of a fountain in the rain. Pinel says, "I see no difference between him and the poor idiots I care for at Bicêtre." (Pinel's methods at the Bicêtre Asylum are now infamous, having been critiqued as inhumane by Michel Foucault in "The Birth of the Asylum," the last chapter of his *Madness and Civilization*, 1961). Itard claims that Victor "is not an idiot" and that he is "abnormal" only due to his isolation. The discussion ends with Itard admitting, "I've wanted to educate him since I read about him in the paper."

Not only does this conversation set up the important theme of nature vs. nurture, but it also reveals that Itard has a desire to care for, educate, and train Victor—mirroring the *mission civilisatrice* discourse of French colonialism. French officials used civilizing mission rhetoric to justify colonial rule. It included a supposedly altruistic desire to "save," civilize, educate, and render religious (i.e. Catholic) the non-European indigenous "savages" of France's colonies. With the casting of a Romani boy in *L'Enfant sauvage*, Truffaut's cinematic Itard becomes a "white savior"—a white character who saves a person of color from the "backward" aspects of their own culture.

In *The White Savior Film*, Matthew Hughey examines dozens of Hollywood films from *Cry Freedom* (Richard Attenborough, 1987) to *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), arguing that the message inherent to each of these based-on-a-true-story films "provides a roadmap for the navigation

of race relations” in “subtle and friendly terms” (2014, p. 15-16). Hughey explains that the white savior film works to “repair the myth of the great white father figure whose benevolent paternalism over people of color is the way things not only have been but should be” (2014, p. 19). Looking at *L'Enfant sauvage* through the lens of this film genre, it becomes clear that Itard is positioned as the benevolent father figure to Victor, the “noble savage.” Hughey explains the historical roots of this figure as well as its current usage in white savior films:

Birthered from the *bon sauvage* character of seventeenth-century French literature, the term ‘noble savage’ personified European discontent with modernity. As European colonialism gained momentum, Africans and indigenous New World peoples were said to possess the noble qualities of harmony with nature, generosity, childlike simplicity, happiness under duress, and a natural, innate moral compass. Contact with the noble savage was encouraged [...] Now, in modern white savior films, the nonwhite characters are often framed as worth saving because of their custody of unexplainable magical or spiritual quality that is valued but not fully understood by the logic and materialism of the white savior. By saving the people of color, the white savior takes possession of the primordial morality, making him- or herself more complete as a person, all under the guise of rescuing and protecting nonwhite others. (2014, p. 64)

A scene near the end of the film represents Victor’s noble savagery. After the scene in which Victor is blindfolded and reprimanded for his failure to learn, we cut to Victor swaying back and forth on his knees under the moonlight. Gillain’s close analysis of this scene specifies problems inherent to the white savior narrative—but without explicitly acknowledging them as such or critiquing them:

Bathing the wild child’s body with its natural light, [the moon] seems to communicate to him a happiness of which Itard has lost the secret. [...] The symbiotic relationship between the child and the elements is contrasted against the symbolic mastery achieved by Itard through writing. Whereas the one lacks language, the other lacks immediate contact with the world [...] The doctor’s words

give a voice to the wild child, and they come to confer an order, coherence, and meaning to his experience. (2013, p. 217)

Here, Gillain implies that Victor's magical oneness with nature can only be fully experienced and made coherent with the help of his savior's words. Gillain does nuance this celebration of Truffaut-as-Itard-the-savior by proposing that Victor's "language of action" prevails over writing in the end (2013, p. 219). However, a lack of engagement with the racial and colonial politics of this representation merely continues the uncritical celebration of Truffaut as civilizing, brilliant auteur rather than considering Victor's experience as an autistic child as important in its own right.

In Gillain's updated 2019 analysis of the moon scene, she relates its shot/counter-shot form to that of the scene of Pinel and Itard's discussion about the boy at the Institute for Deaf-Mutes, described above. One of these scenes occurs near the beginning of the film, while the other occurs near its end, again illustrating that long shots of the stimming "wild boy" in nature do not occur only in the film's first twenty minutes, counter to Gillain's claim that Victor acquires an autonomous identity on screen post-Itard (2013, p. 210). In both scenes, we see medium and close-up shots of the adult men through the frame of the window as they look down upon the "wild child." The counter-shot (a long shot) then reveals the boy from the aerial point of view of the medicalizing gaze as they watch him stim under the rain (at the Institute) and then under the moon (at Itard's home). Gillain claims that the moon scene "returns us to the origins of our being-in-the-world" through "its penchant for non-verbal communication," and that the "jubilation of the savage speaks to us" (2019, p. 127). Gillain's claims seem to celebrate the trope of the "noble savage" and describe Victor—a character that autism studies inspired—as primitive, exotic, and mystical. Moreover, her analysis does not take into account the experience of the autistic child, nor does it speak to the film's conflation among stimming, racialized "savage," and colonial subject. Instead, it centers the feelings of the white neurotypical spectator.

The white neurotypical spectator is mirrored by Itard in the film, the white savior of the autistic boy of color. Just as French officials use the discourse of the "civilizing mission" to legitimize colonial rule,

Truffaut-as-Itard uses assimilationist discourse to justify “saving” Victor. The assimilation model stems from political philosophies promoted since the Revolution of 1789. Emile Rousseau’s concept of the *volonté générale* (general will), which was taken up by revolutionary politicians, is particularly important for understanding the ongoing French desire to normalize differences. The general will developed a wariness of the interest group, placing the will of the people before the needs or desires of any minority groups (e.g., Jewish people, women) (see e.g., Hunt, 1996). The Jacobin Republic desired to create new, virtuous citizens, which led to their promotion of the abstract individual, the universal citizen. They wanted a *tabula rasa* in order to indoctrinate citizens through the use of cards and new days of the week so that their new Republic would be coherent and stable. As several scholars point out, Victor in our film represents this post-Revolution *tabula rasa* out of which Itard can sculpt “a civilized being” (Andrew, 2013, p. 238), much as the historical Victor of Aveyron was perceived and treated (Yousef, 2001).

Revolutionary politicians used the idea of *tabula rasa* to promote the ideology of French Republican universalism, wherein the individual citizen is viewed as an “abstract prototype for the human” (Scott, 1997, p. 5). While this ideology was originally meant to do away with the social and political privilege of the feudal system, this belief in a human sameness works to exclude people who do not have the qualities of the abstract individual, inevitably imagined as, and embodied by, historical figures that represent the dominant group: white, middle-to-upper class men (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006; Simon & Zappi, 2003, 2005). As French sociologists Patrick Simon and Sylvia Zappi suggest,

To benefit from rights [in France], minorities are summoned to transform themselves into an ideal citizen, to fit into certain codes and norms [...]. This idea of the ‘universal’ [...] obligates the citizen to adopt very precise cultural codes to benefit from the laws and rights that are supposed to apply to all people regardless of sex, origin, religion, sexual orientation, or health condition. (2005, p. 6)

Further, they maintain that “French Republican universalism works to create and justify a system of domination—founded on an idea of the superiority of certain values and of those who embody them—over Others

who are presumed as in need of enlightening” (2005, p. 7). In their explanation of universalism, we can see Itard and his project of “enlightening” Victor.

Isabelle Ville and Jean-François Ravaud situate impairment and disability within this history of French Republican universalism and assimilation. They explain that, because equality has been one of the foundations of the French Republic since 1789’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, any discriminatory policy—including ‘positive discrimination’ (the French iteration of affirmative action)—would be contrary to the constitution’s egalitarian ideal, whether based on race, religion, gender, or disability. They state that universalism “infers a model of assimilation which is founded upon a certain number of major principles that are considered to be ideals (secularism, equal rights, public education), and is based on a process of normalization, each citizen having to accept to live in accordance with these common rules” (2007, p. 140).

Given this context, *L’Enfant sauvage* becomes a post-1968 film that regresses in terms of views on assimilation and cultural pluralism. The events of May and June 1968 began to rattle the notion of the abstract, universal citizen. While Ross (2008) claims that May ‘68 was an anti-identity movement that was only later remembered as distinct groups that fought for their own unique vindications, the movement nonetheless led to an increased discussion of identity politics in academic, political, and popular discourses. Andrew writes that *L’Enfant sauvage* “was infused with the spirit of 1968 and its indictment of education” (2013, p. 232). However, Truffaut identified most with Itard at this point in his life, and the film itself comprises a narrative of a doctor attempting to normalize a disabled boy. Further, this normalization process becomes infused with discursive neo-colonial power given the film’s conflation of autism with savagery. The film may even exhibit material neo-colonial power when we consider that Truffaut, as Itard, is directing a Romani boy to enact savagery—again reminding us of the colonial subjects of the World’s Fairs who were compensated to perform their cultures for the white Orientalist gaze.

To achieve assimilation, Truffaut-as-Itard is also directing Cargol-as-Victor to experience intense training methods and punishments. While

many of Itard's training methods represented in the film are humane (e.g. the "Sicard Method"), other methods are violent. In one of the most discussed scenes of the film, Itard tries to teach Victor a sense of justice. Itard's voiceover proclaims, "I must do an abominable thing: lock him in the closet after he successfully completes one of my assignments to test his sense of justice." When Victor bites his doctor, Itard says, "You're right to rebel." The voiceover says, "His bite filled my soul with joy [...] By provoking the sentiment [of injustice] I had elevated the savage man to the stature of a moral being by the most noble of his attributes." While this monologue has obvious ties to the civilizing discourse of French colonizers (i.e. "I had elevated the savage man"), the film form directly after this event is perhaps even more telling: from outside of the provincial home we are given a long shot of Victor, who looks calmly out the window, which frames him; slowly, the camera closes in on the window as the gentle flute music plays. Here, Victor's contemplative shot becomes less a celebration of his success and more a celebration of Itard's success at normalizing him; after all, we still have no close-up shot of Victor's face when he's at rest after his success. His body is once again one small portion of a long shot that allows nature to encompass him.

Conclusion

Truffaut was deeply concerned with disability rights in France at the time of filming *L'Enfant sauvage*. In an interview in *Cri du Monde*, he explains that "we can find connections between [my film] and the problem of being handicapped, which authorities barely pay attention to, except during election time. Afterwards, they quickly forget. Politicians can sleep in peace: they will never see martyred and handicapped children take to the streets to protest!" (P.A., 1970).

While Truffaut's intent in making *L'Enfant sauvage* was sympathetic, his film illustrates the ongoing colonial association of people of color with savagery. In doing so, it also represents the historical moment when racial and disability eugenics dovetailed at the end of the eighteenth century. In Truffaut's film, Victor of Aveyron—both autistic and of color—becomes a symbolic nexus of the "Eugenic Atlantic" period. The casting of Cargol and the ways that the film frames him—through distancing long shots, iris fade-outs, and Itard's patronizing voice-over—render the wild

child more of a medical specimen than a human. These formal elements echo the creation of colonialist spectacle, transforming Victor into an object of the imperialist gaze. The film and some of the discourse surrounding it illustrate how systems of oppression simultaneously suppress people of color and neurodiverse people. Finally, the film's conflation of Brownness with savagery reveals a deeply neocolonial France that subsequent decades will confirm.

Joy C. Schaefer is Visiting Assistant Professor of World Literature in Grand Valley State University's English Department. She earned her PhD in Comparative Literary & Cultural Studies and an Advanced Certificate in Women's & Gender Studies from Stony Brook University. She also holds an M.A. in French Studies from New York University. Joy's work has been published in *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and *Studies in European Cinema*, and a forthcoming article on Marcel Carné's *Terrain vague* (The Wasteland, 1960) will appear in *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. She is neurotypical.

References

- Allen, D. (1985). *Finally Truffaut*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Andrew, D. (2013). Every teacher needs a truant: Bazin and *l'Enfant sauvage*. In D. Andrew & A. Gillain (Eds.), *A companion to François Truffaut* (pp. 221-41). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Asperger, H. (1944). Die "autistischen psychopathen" im kindesalter. *European archives of psychiatry and clinical neuroscience*, 117(1), 76-136.
- Attenborough, R. (Director), & Attenborough, R. (Producer). (1987). *Cry freedom* [Motion picture]. U.S.: Universal Pictures.
- Bancel, N., & Blanchard, P. (2006). Les origines républicaines de la fracture colonial. In N. Bancel, P. Blanchard & S. Lemaire (Eds.), *La Fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (pp. 35-46). Paris: Découverte.
- Barker, C., & Murray, S. (2013). Disabling postcolonialism: Global disability cultures and democratic criticism. In L.J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 61-73). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Bouchareb, R. (Director). (2009). "Exhibitions" [Motion picture]. France & Algeria: Taghit Productions & Laith Media.

- Codell, J. F. (2006). Playing doctor: François Truffaut's 'L'Enfant sauvage' and the auteur/autobiographer as impersonator. *Biography*, 29(1), 101-122.
- Coppermann, A. (1970, June 3). No title [Review of the film *L'Enfant sauvage*, by F. Truffaut]. *Les Echos*. (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris).
- D., M. (1970, March 11). *L'Enfant sauvage* [Review of the film *L'Enfant sauvage*, by F. Truffaut]. *Canard Enchaîné*. (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Madness and Civilization*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, M. (1970, December 3). *L'Enfant sauvage*, Film de François Truffaut [Review of the film *L'Enfant sauvage*, by F. Truffaut]. *Témoignage Chrétien*. (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)
- Gillain, A. (2013). *François Truffaut: The lost secret*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Gillain, A. (2019). *Tout Truffaut: 23 films pour comprendre l'homme et le cinéaste*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gonzalez A., J.C. (2003). Truffaut, François (T. Vasquez, Trans.). *Senses of cinema*, 27. Retrieved from <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/truffaut/>
- Griffith, D.W. (Director), Griffith, D.W., & Aitken, H. (Producers). (1915). *The birth of a nation* [Motion picture]. U.S.: David W. Griffith Corp.
- Hancock, I. (1985). Gypsies: A people forgotten. *Humanist*, 45, 12-16, 42.
- Hancock, I. (1987). The origin and function of the Gypsy image in children's literature. *The Lion and the unicorn*, 11(1), 47-59.
- Herzog, W. (Director), & Herzog, W. (Producer). (1974). *The enigma of Kasper Hauser* [Motion picture]. Germany: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion.
- Hochmann, J. (2012). Le devenir des idées en pédopsychiatrie, à travers l'histoire de l'autisme. *Neuropsychiatrie de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, 60, 207-15.
- Hughey, M. (2014). *The white savior film: Content, critics, and consumption*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Hugo, V. (1831). *Notre-dame de Paris*. Paris: Gosselin.
- Hunt, L. (Ed). (1996). *The French revolution and human rights: A brief documentary history*. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Itard, J.M.G. (1962). *The wild boy of Aveyron* [*Mémoire et rapport sur Victor de l'Aveyron, 1806*] (G. Humphrey & M. Humphrey, Trans.). New York, NY: Meredith. (Original work published 1894).
- Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous child*, 2(3), 217-250.
- Kilbane, A. (2008). Theater of the underworld: Spectacle and subculture in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. In V. Glajar & D. Radulesco (Eds.), *'Gypsies' in European literature and culture: Studies in European culture and history* (pp. 217-234). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolářová, K. (2019). Mediating syndromes of postcommunism: Disability, sex, race, and labor [In focus: Crippling cinema & media studies]. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 58(4), 156-162.
- Margalit, G. (2002). *Germany and its Gypsies: A post-Auschwitz ordeal*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Maynard, H. (1969, January 17). *Enfant sauvage de l'Aveyron. Le Rouergat*, p. 8. (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)
- McCance, D. (2008). The wild child. *Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques / Canadian journal of film studies*, 17(1), 69-80.
- Murray, S. (2008). *Representing autism: Culture, narrative, fascination*. Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press.
- P.A., J. (1970, Jan. 30). François Truffaut et 'l'Enfant Sauvage'. *Cri du monde* (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)
- Rimland, B. (1965). "A New Perspective in the Treatment of Children with Mental Illness." French translation of speech given in New York at the inaugural assembly for the National Society for Autistic Children of Washington, D.C. (Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)
- Ross, K. (2008). *May '68 and its afterlives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Sauvage, D. (2012). Autisme, une brève histoire de la nosographie avec une archive de E. Seguin. *Annales médico-psychologiques* 170, 510-516.
- Scott, J.W. (1997). *Only paradoxes to offer*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Seguin, E. (1997). *Moral treatment, hygiene, and education of idiots [Traitements moral, hygiène et éducation des idiots et des autres enfants arriérés]*. Paris: Comité d'Histoire de la Sécurité Sociale. (Original work published 1846).
- Shattuck, R. (1980). *The forbidden experiment: The story of the wild boy of Aveyron*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Sherry, M. (2007). (Post)colonising disability. *Wagadu: A journal of transnational women's and gender studies*, 4, 10-22.
- Simon, P., & Zappi, S. (2003). La lutte contre les discriminations: La fin de l'assimilation à la française? *Mouvements*, 3(27-8), 171-176.
- Simon, P., & Zappi, S. (2005). La politique républicaine de l'identité. *Mouvements*, 2(38), 5-7.
- Simpson, M. K. (2007). From savage to citizen: Education, colonialism and idiocy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(5), 561-574.
- Snyder, S.L., & Mitchell, D.T. (2010). *Cultural locations of disability*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, J.N. (2016). Autism as culture. In L.J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 460-484). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Taylor, T. (Director), & Columbus, C. (Producer). (2011). *The help* [Motion picture]. U.S.: DreamWorks.
- Truffaut, F. (Director). (1957). *Les mistons* [Motion picture]. Paris: Les Films du Carrosse.
- Truffaut, F. (Director), & Truffaut, F. (Producer). (1959). *Les quatre cents coups* [Motion picture]. Paris: Les Films du Carrosse.
- Truffaut, F. (Director), & Berbert, M. (Producer). (1969). *La Sirène du Mississippi* [Motion picture]. Paris & Rome: Les Films du Carrosse & Produzioni Associate Delphos.
- Truffaut, F. (Director), & Berbert, M. (Producer). (1970). *L'Enfant sauvage* [Motion picture]. Paris: Les Films du Carrosse.
- Truffaut, F. (1987). *Truffaut by Truffaut* (R.E. Wolf, Trans.). New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams.
- Vigo, J. (Director), & Louis-Nounez, J. (Producer). (1933). *Zéro de conduite* [Motion picture]. Paris: Argui-Films.
- Ville, I., & Ravaud, J.F. (2007). French disability studies: Differences and similarities. *Scandinavian journal of disability research*, 9(3-4), 138-145.

Wing, L. (1968). Les enfants autistes. L'association au service des inadaptés ayant des troubles de la personnalité. Paris: Sceaux.
(Available in the F. Truffaut files, BiFi, Paris)

Yousef, N. (2001). Savage or solitary?: The wild child and Rousseau's man of nature. *Journal of the history of ideas*, 62(2), 245-263.