

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sexuality in Cinema

Wild Orchid (1989)

Zalman King (1941-2012)

Director Zalman King was born in Trenton, New Jersey in May, 1941. His last name (Lefkowitz) would be dropped at the beginning of his career. He began acting in the 1960s, playing bit parts for television movies and TV shows portraying counterculture punks and criminals. His directorial career started in 1988 with *Two Moon Junction*, an erotic film. He would continue this trend, producing the likes of *Wildfire*, *Wild Orchid*, and *Red Shoe Diaries*. He was working on the film *Pleasure or Pain* after a six-year hiatus when he died at age 70 of cancer.



Film Shot in Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, production began early in 1989. Multiple edits were done before the release in December of that year. The MPAA had threatened to give the movie an X-rating for its sexually graphic scenes, so several scenes were omitted, and those in the film were cut down. At the time of its release, critics were not kind. Many cited the “overblown editing” and Carré Otis’ lack of skill as a new actress for their displeasure. *Wild Orchid* was nominated for two Razzies in 1991, Mickey Rourke for Worst Actor and Carré Otis for Worst New Star.



Background Lead actors Carré Otis and Mickey Rourke became romantically involved during shooting. This led to rumors that the two actors had shot real sex scenes instead of simulated sex. King would use these rumors to promote the film, but both Otis and Rourke deny the allegations. *Wild Orchid* has the distinction of being one of the few films in this series to have poor ratings across the board. At the time of writing, *Wild Orchid* holds a 9% approval rating among 32 professional critics on the review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes with an average overall rating of 2.9 out of 10. The soundtrack was more popular than the film and is often highlighted by those leaving highly rated reviews.

MAIN CHARACTERS

James Wheeler – A man with considerable wealth

Emily Reed – A young lawyer on her first big job away from home

Claudia Dennis – Emily’s boss

Flavio – Claudia’s right-hand man

SYNOPSIS

Just out of law school, Emily Reed travels to New York City to interview for a high-paying job. To her surprise, she gets it, shipping off immediately to Rio de Janeiro. She is left in charge while her boss flies to Benos Aires to track down the property owner who was supposed to meet them at the beach. While working to help her employers straighten out issues with a client’s resort development, Emily discovers a ruined hotel and explores it. Inside, she watches a local couple have passionate sex. She runs back to the hotel and prepares for a dinner meeting with a wealthy man named James Wheeler. They hit it off, going to a carnival event afterwards where a masked man who resembles Wheeler tries to seduce Emily. The next morning, she awakes to find Wheeler in her room with a bouquet of orchids. They continue their fling by touring the city.

They end up heading to a party with another couple from the hotel, where some unruly navy men start to sexually assault the woman they came with. Wheeler fights them off, and the pair of couples are forced to

flee in a limousine. Seeing the other couple having relationship issues, Wheeler manipulates them into having sex in front of them, and Emily finds this disturbing. Later that night, another rich man mistakes Emily for a local and propositions her for sex, offering money. At Wheeler's behest, she agrees and has sex with the stranger.

The next day, Emily's boss returns, and they meet with some investors at the airport. To Emily's horror, one of the men is the stranger she slept with the night before. Her boss is amused by this, and afterward they become closer, talking about sex and pleasure in private. While they were making this deal, however, Wheeler was buying the ruined hotel, a property Emily's company needs to complete their resort. Emily confronts him, and he brushes her off. Later, Emily's boss asks her to translate for her: a local surfer wants to have sex, but Emily's boss doesn't speak Portuguese. Wheeler interrupts them, and Emily chases him out to the lobby, where she shouts at him, saying he wants people to disappoint him. He says that people simply disappoint him of their own volition.

The next morning, a package appears in Emily's room: it's the deed to the ruined hotel from Wheeler. Emily tracks him down and tells him she loves him, but Wheeler says nothing. That night, Wheeler is waiting for Emily in her hotel room. He explains that women finding him attractive for his wealth has jaded him and led him to play games with them. Emily offers him her love if only he'd reach out. He resists at first, but soon he gives in, leading to them having sex. The film ends as the two ride away on the back of a motorcycle.

PLOT

Dusty road – The film begins with a title sequence. Under the credits, we see a man driving a horse-drawn cart down a dusty road. The camera cuts to a sedan hurtling down a similar road. It stops, pulling to the side of the road. Two women get out: a mother and her adult daughter. They hug and kiss goodbye before the young woman boards a bus headed for Kansas City. The camera jumps to New York City. Atop the Empire State Building, we look through a pair of viewing binoculars down at the rooftops of buildings down below as the title sequence ends.



Interview – A man asks, "How many other firms are you interviewing with in New York?" "Six," a woman replies. "Including yours." She answers his next question, saying she plans to resettle in New York City. She quickly outlines her work history as another man opens some nearby blinds before sitting at the table: "I've never really been out of the Midwest. After graduating from law school and passing the bar, I worked at a small firm in Chicago for eighteen months." The man who just sat down asks about her language skills: she's fluent in five and beginning work on Chinese. The older man asks about her interest in international law, and she dives into her fascination with other cultures. The younger man asks if the young woman would be willing to take the job if it meant flying out to Rio de Janeiro in the morning. She simply responds, "Wow!" In a nearby office, a shadowy figure watches. Downstairs in a hotel the next morning, the young woman is led by a man to a woman talking loudly on a phone about business. We meet both women formerly: the older woman talking on the phone is Claudia, and the young woman is Emily. Claudia quickly outlines their travel plans before they leave the hotel together, several men watching them and communicating with Claudia through body language.



Rio de Janeiro – An Air Brazil flight takes off, and suddenly we see the Christ the Redeemer statue above Rio de Janeiro. After circling the statue and looking down on the city for a moment, the camera zooms in on a busy city street where we see Emily in the back of a taxi. She gawks as the driver navigates the bustling road, taking in all of the new sights and sounds from tourists and locals alike. Claudia sits beside her, engrossed in her work.



Hotel – Claudia walks through the hotel lobby, which is decorated in garish, eye-catching colors. Two men meet her, and she greets them before introducing them to Emily. Suddenly, she stops talking and shouts stop at a man rushing toward them. He



recoils for a moment before grinning as Claudia rushes to hug him. She introduces Emily to Flavio, her “soothsayer” and “main man.” Flavio and a bellhop lead Claudia and Emily up to a room. Claudia’s business partners explain that the secretaries are arriving tomorrow, and she complains about not being able to get started. She sighs, giving Flavio’s cheeks a pinch as she says, “We’ll just have to start in the morning, won’t we?” Emily looks out over the pool and the beach near the hotel, fixating on several men in speedos.

Development – Flavio drives a red convertible down a dirt path. Emily and Claudia sit in the back. Claudia tells Emily about the plans for the development, gesturing at the work being done and the rest of the land. Heavy machinery roars as bulldozers move piles of earth and cranes help men to drive giant piles into the sand. As they pass a ruined hotel, Claudia gestures toward it, saying it will be the place where the marina will sit. Emily mentions she didn’t see that on the development plans, but Claudia explains it will be a continuing source of profit for her Chinese investors. Claudia (with the aid of Emily’s translations) learns that the foreman has gone away, and she throws a fit, nearly being run over by a large machine. Flavio steps out of the car to help her, yelling at the workers in Portuguese. Claudia leaves in a rush to find the foreman, telling Emily she’ll be in charge as Flavio drives away. The last thing Claudia tells Emily is to dress nice and go in her stead to a dinner date with a potential investor.



Ruined hotel – Etherial music plays as Emily wanders inside the abandoned hotel. She sees beautiful stained glass left in one piece and watches rats scamper away from her approach. Showing no fear, she climbs a dilapidated staircase up several floors. She’s startled to see two locals engaged in passionate foreplay. The man rips off the woman’s clothes, and Emily watches. An old pipe bursts, and the couple is doused in water, but they ignore this, the man keeping up his pace as he pins the woman to the wall. In a sudden fright, Emily runs out of the ruined hotel and into the hotel where she is staying.



“Quite an improvement” – A man watches Emily enter the elevator in a rush. She emerges some minutes later with freshly washed hair and wearing a little black dress. “That’s quite an improvement,” the man says, appearing over her shoulder. She apologizes for being late, calling him James. “I’d prefer it if you’d call me Wheeler,” he asks as he leads her out of the lobby. Two large men follow. “Do they go everywhere with you?” Emily asks a bit later, gesturing to the bodyguards. “Almost everywhere,” Wheeler says before explaining that he’d been kidnapped before and wishes to avoid it happening again. After a while they make their way past some carnival stalls and into a restaurant, Wheeler frequently admiring Emily’s appearance.



Restaurant – At the steps of the restaurant, a woman introduces Emily to a pair of brightly colored macaws. “He’s saying ‘Welcome! Welcome!’” she says when the bird squawks. Emily jokes that he sounds like he’s saying, ‘Watch out! Watch out!’ Inside, Wheeler awaits Emily at a table flanked by servants. She’s led to the table, Wheeler’s bodyguards following, and champagne is already being poured as she sits. Wheeler begins to flirt with her about how she’ll tell her grandchildren about this before admitting that he took the liberty of calling Emily’s mother before the dinner date. The conversation shifts to reading people from their appearances. Wheeler asks Emily to try the skill on a nearby couple, and she does, saying the man married the woman for money and that he was a failed professional athlete and it’s causing their relationship issues. Soon, the conversation turns to her and her desires, but she tries to avoid the discussion. After a while, Wheeler asks Emily to come with him, and they leave.



Masquerade – Wheeler helps Emily into a mask before leading her into a room where a strange, ritualistic performance begins. Among the tables of richly dressed people in masks, naked women stride, some walking away with men. Emily seems shocked and frightened as the people stand and begin to dance to the music. In the chaos, she’s separated from Wheeler. She watches a couple dance passionately before they begin having sex on a table in front of everyone. A man in a wolf mask appears, placing his hands on Emily’s shoulders and circling her. He lifts the mask and moves to bite her neck, and she flees



out into the street. The boy she mentioned seeing before stoops to pick up her discarded mask, looking in her direction as she runs.

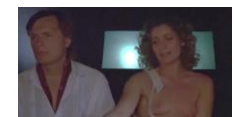
Phone call – The phone rings in Emily's hotel room. Emily rouses in her bed, sitting up in shock when she sees Wheeler sitting on her couch. She answers the phone, and Wheeler just watches her. It's Claudia: the foreman wasn't lying when he said he had a wedding to attend, and she's there, dancing with him. Claudia informs Emily that she'll be coming back tomorrow and that they'll get to work on the business deal then, joking that she'll bring the foreman back on a leash if she has to. Emily hangs up the phone and turns her attention to Wheeler. "I'm not used to women," he begins, "running away from me." "I'm not used to men in masks biting my neck," Emily quips back. Wheeler claims the man wasn't him. "He looked like you," says Emily. "Felt like you." Wheeler grins, saying, "How do you know what I feel like?" He asks to make things up to Emily, offering to take her on a tour of the town after lunch. "How would you know what I want?" she asks. "Instinct," Wheeler says before giving her a bouquet of orchids.



Motorcycles and a party – We see the couple Emily was told to speculate about before, and Wheeler congratulates her on her instincts, saying her guess wasn't far off but that the man was a race car driver, not an athlete. Wheeler explains that he introduced himself to the couple after Emily left, and they'll be going on a tour of Rio with them that afternoon. On the back of a pair of motorcycles, the couples make their way to a party, followed by a limousine carrying Wheeler's bodyguards. On their way there, the couples pass a truck filled with rowdy sailors and their dates. A big shindig takes place on the beach with carnival performers preparing for a parade. The sailors show up, and the dance floor quickly becomes chaotic. They start to harass and sexually assault the rich woman Wheeler and Emily came with, tearing her dress. Wheeler steps in, fist-fighting several sailors before getting the others into his limo and speeding away.



Tunnel – The four are silent in the back of the limo as it rolls down the highway through a big, dark tunnel. The woman who the sailors harassed begins to come out of her shock, crying and trying to cover her bare chest. Her husband jerks away from her, thinking she was leading the sailors on and feeling jealous. As the woman continues to cover herself up, Wheeler tells her to stop before talking about their relationship troubles as if he were privy to them. The two are in shock for a moment, but as they listen, they come to realize what fools they've been, and they begin to kiss in front of Emily and Wheeler. Wheeler then encourages them to have sex, and they do. This disgusts Emily. "What is this?" she demands of Wheeler. "Some kind of joke?"



Lasting impression – The limousine pulls to a stop in front of the ruined hotel from before. Emily and Wheeler step out, and the car pulls away. She turns to him, asking, "How?" He smirks, responding with his own questions: "How did I know about the roast beef and mashed potatoes? Or how did I get into your room?" "Why all the trouble?" Emily demands angrily. "This place seemed to have made a lasting impression on you," he replies, heading inside. "I'm going to find out why." "Why?" Emily demands. "Because I'm interested in you," says Wheeler. As they walk up the stairs inside, Wheeler makes assumptions about Emily's life. When they stop at a landing, Emily asks, "Why do I feel like if I reach out and touch you, you'll disappear?" "Why don't you try and see?" Wheeler says, taunting. Emily holds Wheeler, but it's clear he's uncomfortable with the contact. He gifts Emily the rich woman's necklace, given to him as a thank you by the other couple. In her hotel room, Emily looks at herself in the mirror while thinking about all the sexual things she's seen in Brazil. She does her makeup and puts on a dress.



Man at the bar – In the strange restaurant where the masquerade took place, Emily sits at the bar in a mask, ordering in Portuguese. A man sits beside her and orders in English before turning to her and clumsily reading from a travel translation guide and trying to ask if he can buy her a drink. It quickly becomes clear that the man thinks she's a local, but she doesn't do anything to correct him, simply nodding in understanding as he introduces himself. He gushes about her beauty and how much he wants her before



he offers her money for sexual favors. Angrily, Emily storms off. She stops in her tracks, though, as Wheeler appears and encourages her to go through with the transaction. She takes the key and the money the man left before leaving the restaurant.

Sex for pay – Slowly, unsure of herself, Emily enters the man's room, taking a look around at the strange décor before walking to the nearby barred window. Placing her hands on the bars, she looks out and sees Wheeler looking up at her, encouraging her with his body language. The man from the bar, now nude, appears behind Emily and pulls off her dress. In full view of Wheeler, the two begin caressing. He pulls Emily toward the bed, and he tries to run away, but he pins her to the floor. There, they have sex.



Airport – The next morning, Wheeler walks the beach, the sea stirred by wind and storm. We see a private plane land. At the airport, the camera jumps between this and Emily rushing down the city streets. She keeps running, rushing to meet the plane. Claudia emerges with a leashed man in tow, Emily giving them a strange look: In her past couple days' adventures, she's completely forgotten the joke Claudia kept making about "bringing him back on a leash." In a nearby hanger, Claudia and Emily prepare to close the deal. Claudia asks about Wheeler, Emily describing him as strange. When the businessmen enter, Emily is shocked to discover that one of their lawyers is the man she had sex with the night before. Emily stops the meeting after a few exchanges to tell Claudia what has happened. Claudia just laughs before saying, "So that's all of it? You fucked the guy?" Emily says she should withdraw from the negotiation, but Claudia encourages her to stay, saying it makes everything so much more interesting. Back at the meeting table, Claudia threatens to tell the lawyer's wife about his little indiscretion with Emily, ending up giving her company a better overall deal.



Cross-dressing – Two women in suits and hats look in a mirror. One smokes a cigarillo. Claudia enters with Emily behind her, asking the young woman, "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a guy? Do you wonder what it would be like to be Wheeler for just fifteen minutes?" She describes Wheeler's traits as she buttons the shirt she's wearing: "Interesting, distant... Total control. I wonder what it would be like to be Wheeler all the time, because then I'd maybe understand his source of power over me." She continues putting on men's clothes, a tie and suit jacket, as she details her past obsession with Wheeler. Emily insists she doesn't want to hear about this, but Claudia sees how Wheeler has already sunk her teeth into Emily. She admits that the dress she left for her on her first night and the date she'd gone on with Wheeler were meant for Claudia, and she used Emily to test Wheeler. After this, she convinces Emily to dress up as a man as well. Outside, Claudia notices one of her partners talking with Flavio, and she grabs Emily's arm, encouraging her to ignore them. Despite their best efforts, they're dragged back to work with a report that someone has bought the ruined hotel they need to complete their development: Wheeler.



Celebration – Still dressed as men, Claudia and Emily confront Wheeler, who maintains a smug stoicism. That night, still in their suits and hats, Claudia and Emily go to meet their Chinese investors on the beach. Emily laments that not informing the investors of Wheeler's purchase is misrepresentation, but Claudia insists that Emily just follow her lead. They greet the men coming out of the helicopter before we're transported to a long table where Emily translates the lead Chinese businessman's sentiments of gratitude. After signing a few documents, Claudia stands and begins the celebration. Fireworks erupt and a band is rolled in on the top of a large, speaker-laden truck. The celebration goes on for hours it seems as we're shown snippets of the dance floor and the dancers spilling out onto the streets where Carnival is in full swing. The camera occasionally glimpses Emily and Claudia among the madness in the streets. Toward the end of the sequence, Emily crosses paths with Wheeler, ignoring him.



Translator – The next morning, Emily watches a young man run the beach from her balcony. Claudia approaches her, asking if she made love to Wheeler. Emily simply looks away. The young man on the beach looks up and notices Claudia. She dangles her room key, and the man smiles. Suddenly, she

drops it, and he scrambles to find it in the sand. The young man now sits in Claudia's bedroom, smiling. She stands just outside the door, asking Emily a big favor: translate her sexual advances for her. Emily does as she's asked, and the young man responds simply "with pleasure" before stripping. Claudia smiles and asks Emily to translate another sentence before dismissing her as the young man starts to remove her robe. She pushes him away, and Claudia and the young man make it clear they're interested in a threesome with Emily.



Confrontation in the Lobby – Wheeler appears suddenly, striking the young man from behind. Emily chases after him, screaming at him in the lobby as he saunters away. She accuses him of never letting people have a chance to do anything but disappoint him, but he turns, insisting calmly that people are simply disappointing. Perplexingly, he accuses her of being unfaithful. Afterwards, Wheeler rides the roads on his Harley, thinking of Emily. He stops at the ruined hotel where the young boy who follows Emily is. He takes the boy back into town and asks him to deliver a package to Emily. She opens it to find the deed to the ruined hotel, bringing the news to Claudia. While perplexed, Claudia is happy.



All the things he said – Emily walks up the steps in the old hotel, things Wheeler has said drifting through her mind. The boy appears behind her, and there is a sudden cut to the ocean at sunset. Emily sits on a rock overlooking the sea. Wheeler sits elsewhere, lighting a cigarette on the back of his motorcycle.



Surprise visitor – Emily enters the room to find a bouquet of wild orchids. It's not the only thing waiting for her: Wheeler is there too, dressed in a lavender suit jacket. She crosses her arms, and he dives into a spiel about his distant father, his upbringing, and his poor performance at school. He talks about his real estate business, starting with one house and expanding to an empire. Then he talks about falling in with women who only cared about his money and how this led him to playing sexual games with them, saying, "The games became a way of life." Emily offers him a way out, saying he needs simply to accept her affection as she begins to undress. At first, Wheeler walks past, but he stops, drawn in by Emily's insistence and a little insult toward his masculinity. After a cut to the bouquet, we see a long sex scene between Wheeler and Emily. The passionate sex comes to an end after what feels like forever, and Emily curled up asleep on Wheeler's lap. The next morning, they ride away on the back of Wheeler's motorcycle.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Emily

Emily is a young lawyer from the Midwest. She makes her way to New York City, seeking a job in international law, as she's always been interested in other languages and cultures. This job takes her to Rio de Janeiro, where she meets Wheeler.

Curious Emily shows a general curiosity throughout the film. She is always seen looking around, taking in the sights, and interacting with the locals to take in the culture. Her curiosity makes her venture to places others might avoid, such as the ruined hotel. She's also seen to be curious about people in a way that gives her the ability to guess at their pasts based on their actions. This is shown most clearly when she guesses very close to the reality of how the European couple they go to the beach party with met, Wheeler telling her the minor differences before they leave for the party.

Adventurous This is one of Emily's clearest traits. She longs for adventure, traveling across the country twice in just the film's title sequence. When she's told the job she's interviewing for will leave for Brazil in the morning, she simply utters, "Wow." She explores the city streets in Rio and walks into the abandoned hotel as if it were a walk in the park. Her adventurous nature also applies to her sexuality, though this takes a bit of time to foment. She has sex with a stranger for money at Wheeler's behest, and she considers a threesome with her boss and a stranger.

Intimate Emily desires intimacy with those close to her. Claudia, her boss, takes on a much more sisterly role as the film continues and Emily opens up about her sexual exploits in Brazil. This gets to such a point that Emily even considers having a threesome with her and a surfer from the beach below the hotel. It's Wheeler's lack of intimacy that causes her to pull away in spite of her attraction and fascination with him. When he opens up at the end of the film, she practically forces intimacy on him, seeking to "cure" him of his coldness.

Wheeler

We learn quickly Wheeler prefers his surname to his first name, James. Beyond that, we don't learn much about him besides that he's rich and had a rough upbringing. His obsession with Emily comes to a head when it begins interfering with her work in Rio.

Stoic Wheeler leans on stoicism in his interactions. While it's clear he could talk someone's ear off given the chance, he has a tough guy appearance he likes to inflate by remaining distant. At the film's end, he comments on this, blaming his distant father and bad experiences at school for his reliance on this false personality and distance from especially women.

Spoiler It becomes clear in the second half of the film that Wheeler is toying with those around him. He likes to be a wrench in the works, to cause others to react by doing so. The clearest moment in which he does this is when he buys the ruined hotel Emily is obsessed with and Claudia needs to finish her new development. There's an element of this trait that makes him strangely controlling. Wheeler is always appearing in places he's not supposed to be, such as Emily's hotel room. Trying to control Emily, he spoils Claudia's sexual advances with the surfer who wants to have sex with her, as both are implying they'd like to have a threesome with Emily, he appears and strikes the surfer. While he storms out, Emily pursues, shouting at him that he sets everyone up to disappoint him. While he tries to say people are just disappointing no matter what he does, it's clear Emily has struck a nerve. The next time we see Wheeler, he admits that he feels trapped in his lifestyle and wants to change.

Jealous Wheeler has many issues with intimacy. Because of his coldness and stoic persona, he frequently falls victim to jealousy that an expressive person would avoid with simple communication. When he is angry or upset with Emily, it's because she's acting outside of his control, and this makes him possessive, another jealous trait. His jealousy comes across as strange in the film given the context of him encouraging Emily to sleep with another man before. What sets him off most violently is when another man shows obvious interest in Emily in private. Were he not trespassing in Claudia's hotel room, or had he been clear about his attraction to Emily instead of playing vague games with her to "test" her, it's likely this situation would never have arisen in the first place. In many ways, Wheeler creates his own jealousy through denial and nihilism.

THEMES

Society

Class As a story about wealthy business people and their lawyers, class is a persistent yet relatively unspoken aspect of *Wild Orchid*. Emily is stepping into a world of extreme wealth, and she mostly marvels about it, never really commenting. Wheeler is shown to be incredibly wealthy, always having what he desires at his fingertips. The other characters, save for some servants, are all incredibly wealthy, never worrying about their extravagant tastes, such as when Claudia buys herself and Emily expensive suits just to cross-dress as costumes for Carnival. In these ways, class touches every moment of the film

Culture While frequently overwhelmed by the erotic and romantic elements of the film, we see culture throughout *Wild Orchid*. Brazilian culture plays as a backdrop to the larger story. We mostly see tourist destinations where birds are on display and employees dress in ostentatious clothes that draw the eye. Part of the film takes place during Carnival, giving us our clearest glimpse into Brazilian culture.

Illustrative moment One of the more obvious moments of Brazilian culture emerges toward the end of the film when, after greeting their Chinese investors, Claudia begins the company's Carnival festivities. These performers and dancers lead the crowd on the beach into the city, where parades and dancers fill the streets and the sidewalks throng with people celebrating. We're shown a veritable montage of dancers and performers walking on stilts, riding floats, or dancing in the street in this long moment.



Leisure This is a film that, because of the wealth of its main characters, often conflates work and leisure. There is no single moment in which leisure is more on display than any other, as Claudia and Emily are often finding ways to put off their responsibilities to explore South America or party. Even when they are working, it's often greeting guests before hours of carnival parties and outings in the city. Leisure is front-and-center throughout the film, especially that available to the ultra-wealthy.

Race Race is a persistent backdrop that is poorly explored, but what we can tell about the portrayal of race is that the white characters are the most important. Of all the black characters we meet, none are anything more than servants or waiters. Even Flavio, the only named and speaking black character in the entire film, operates mostly as Claudia's servant and driver. Black bodies serve as backdrops in multiple scenes where elaborately dressed black servants flank characters, rooms, and tables.

Illustrative moment This is a story about affluent white lives, and we see this from the first moment the idea of race clearly appears on screen. Only minutes after arriving in Rio de Janeiro, Emily and Claudia find their way to the hotel via taxi cab. Waiting on the hotel steps is a black bellhop who startles Emily when he opens her door for her and takes her things to her room. This idea of black people as frightening and servile continues throughout the rest of the film.



Change

Growth This is a minor theme that emerges mostly through Wheeler's activities at the end of the film. He's cold and uncaring, especially toward women who he believes are only after his wealth. As he has for much of his life, he tries to play sexual games with Emily and is revealed to have been doing something similar with Claudia before Emily was hired. With his powers of manipulation, he even convinces the European couple to have sex in front of him and Emily in the back of the limo. At the end of the film, however, he gives Emily the deed to the abandoned hotel, giving up on his strange game with her, and tells Emily he wants to change his ways.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of growth comes at the very end of the film. Once again, Wheeler has broken into Emily's hotel room, but this time, he has something to tell her about himself. He delves into his life story, opening up for the first time we've ever seen. After this moment, Emily gives him a way out of his cruel playboy lifestyle, offering her love and demanding that he reach out and touch her. Following this, the two have passionate sex before riding off into the country on the back of Wheeler's motorcycle.



Sexuality

Voyeurism/Exhibitionism This idea comes up frequently in the film. Emily encounters a local couple having passionate sex in the ruined hotel during her first visit. We see people having sex in public several times, such as in the masquerade restaurant where naked women roam for the use of men. Again, we see this during parties and Carnival celebrations. The clearest moment of this comes in the illustrative moment below. All of the characters seem to have a sexual proclivity for either watching others have sex or having others watch as they have sex. There seems to be a sort of 'cuckoldry' element to Wheeler's enjoyment of the illustrative moment seen below, but we're never given clear insight into what gives him a thrill from pressuring Emily into this.

Illustrative Moment The most obvious moment of this dual theme happens at about the midpoint of the film. Having been mistaken for a local at the bar, a rich man pays Emily to come have sex with him in his hotel room. In the earliest moments of this, Emily stares down at Wheeler, who stands on the beach below, looking up at the window. The man from the bar approaches and strips Emily in view of Wheeler, who doesn't look away. While they have sex on the floor and cannot be seen from the outside, Wheeler seems to take some odd pleasure in knowing what is happening as he continues to stare at the window.



Group sex This theme emerges only in one moment. A surfer on his morning run notices Claudia, and she invites him up to her room for sex. Not knowing the language, Claudia asks Emily to translate as she comes on to the surfer who returns the gesture. Eventually, he takes off his clothes and starts to kiss Claudia. Emily makes a move to leave, but Claudia and the surfer stop her, wordlessly implying they'd like to have a threesome. The way group sex is explored in *Wild Orchid* is very brief and surface level, more like whispers of old Roman orgies than an explicit examination of group sexual play.



Power The idea of power comes up repeatedly in the film. Emily is given the promise of great wealth and power when taking the job in New York City. She is whisked away without much say in where she goes or when, being dragged around, adrift in the currents of others' power. When Wheeler shows up, he is sure to flex his social and economic power. While he claims to be embarrassed by it, he makes his many bodyguards obvious, two large men following him wherever he goes as well as a car full of more men. He has the pick of any table in any restaurant they visit, and what he wants happens without him speaking a word. This dazzles Emily, but she also eventually sees through the distraction: Wheeler likes to use his power to manipulate women. We hear about this from Claudia, but it's obscured from the viewer somewhat by Wheeler's general absence on screen. At the end of the film, Emily reaches out to Wheeler, giving him a chance to try and feel real love, and he accepts, having confided in her he wants to give up his high-pace real estate mogul lifestyle. It's through this release of power that the two are finally able to be together and have the connections they desire as they ride off into the sunrise to start a new life.

Role-Playing In many ways, *Wild Orchid* is a coming of age story for Emily. She starts the film saying goodbye to her mother before we see her getting a fast-paced legal job in New York City. This trend continues with some role-playing in Brazil. First, she takes on the role of a sex worker at Wheeler's behest after a man at the bar mistakes her for a local and propositions her. While playing this role for its sexual thrill, she also performs for Wheeler, who watches her window from the beach below. Claudia and Emily dress up as men in a failed attempt to ditch their responsibilities. They then wear the suits and false mustaches to a carnival celebration.

Illustrative moment Toward the film's end, Claudia invites Emily to cross-dress with her. They go to a specialized shop that sells men's suits and false facial hair to women. There, Claudia tells Emily about her deep desire to know how men experience life, specifically Wheeler. She wants to disguise herself as a man and dodge her responsibilities, but Flavio won't let her get away.



Sexual games Another under-explored element, we hear that Wheeler enjoys playing sexual games. While this is implied to be happening before the film, we mostly see him playing economic games to get under Emily's and Claudia's skin. He admits to Emily that these actions have a potentially sexual motive, as he wants to provoke Emily into acting so he can judge her. We see another sexual game emerge when Claudia and her surfer attempt to get Emily to have a threesome with them, but Wheeler sneaks in and ruins Claudia's plans. Wheeler also convinces the European couple to have sex in front of him and Emily in the back of a limo, but it's not clear exactly why he does this. Unlike in films like *Dangerous Liaisons*, we're not given any intimacy with the sexual thrills the characters get from their games.

Illustrative moment While not obvious at first, Emily's first meeting with Wheeler was a part of one of his sexual games. We learn later that Claudia had been stalking Wheeler, trying to figure him out. In one of her plots, she disguised herself as a maid and entered his hotel room, and Wheeler caught her. Afterward, he sent her a dress with a note,



telling her to wear it for a date. Claudia gives this dress to Emily and “gives” her to Wheeler just to see how he reacts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does *Wild Orchid* examine sexuality through culture?
2. In what ways does the film portray male fragility?
3. Would you say Brazilian culture is well or poorly explored in this film? Explain.
4. Are business dealings similar to sexual exchanges in the film? Why or why not?