

## Mapping Emmanuelle, Encountering Bangkok: Why Cultural Context Matters

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Over the past eighty years, an array of Western movies has been set in Thailand's capital, Bangkok. They range from the much-loved, 1956 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*, where Governess Anna Leonowens teaches her son to whistle in order to allay the fear of arrival in such a "barbarous" city; to the more recent comedy blockbuster *The Hangover Part II* (dir. Todd Phillips, 2011), with its ominous tagline "Bangkok Has Them Now." In *Hangover's* dystopian Hollywood vision, Bangkok is clearly marked as female, demonic, lascivious, alluring and wily. It epitomises the perfect Orientalist fantasy of the Other – a site to be feared and loathed, yet which ultimately captivates. Such stereotypes similarly flourish in other forms of popular culture, among them the bewitching and conniving Siamese cats in Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) or the 1984 song *One Night in Bangkok*, in which Murray Head opines:

*One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster*

*The bars are temples but the pearls ain't free*

*You'll find a god in every golden cloister*

*And if you're lucky then the god's a she*

*I can feel an angel sliding up to me.*

Dating from at least the mid-nineteenth century, Bangkok has been the locus in Western eyes of "uncivilised" practices such as polytheism and polygamy. As Peter Jackson notes in his survey of missionary and traveller reports on Siam, "Western visitors were often outraged by Siamese sexual customs, especially at what was perceived to be the debased and enslaved status of Siamese women." (Jackson, 2003, paragraph 29, page unnumbered). He refers, by way of example, to the words of Edmund Roberts, an American naval visitor to Bangkok in the 1830s, who observed that: "Temporary marriages are so notorious, that to sell a daughter wholly to a stranger, or for a stipulated term of time, is as common among the middling and lower classes of people, as to sell any common commodity, usually to be found in a bazaar." (ibid.) Coupled with this, came the horror expressed towards traditional Siamese forms of dress, exemplified by the words of American visitor George Bacon, writing in 1892:

"[A]s a nation they do not know what shame is, and as the climate is mild and pleasant, and the majority of the people poor and careless, their usual dress consists of a simple waist-cloth adjusted in a very loose and slovenly manner; while many children until they are ten or twelve years old wear no clothing whatever. When foreigners first arrive in Siam they are shocked almost beyond endurance at the nudity of the people.... Not until Siam is clothed need she expect a place among respectable, civilized nations." (quoted in ibid., paragraph 27, page unnumbered.)"

Fast forward to the more intense impact of US involvement in Thailand (the country changed its name from Siam in 1939) post World War II and it becomes possible to see how

the legacy of the Vietnam War was to rework some of these founding stereotypes into a pervasive Western view of Bangkok as the “Brothel of Asia”. With American GI’s deploying Thailand as a base for Rest and Recreation until their defeat in 1975, the country was subsequently left with an infrastructure of Western-facing sexual services in the form of massage parlours and go-go bars that lent itself to adaptation to the sex tourist industry. Through this short history of little over a hundred years, Bangkok had found its way into the popular Western imagination as a site of limitless sexual adventures, the perfect backdrop for a cinematic exploration of untamed desires.

When the delicate young French woman Emmanuelle, played by Sylvia Krystel, arrives in the city in the eponymous movie released in 1974 and directed by Just Jaeckin, her first impression is one of engulfment and fear: having collected Emmanuelle from the airport, her diplomat husband Jean drives her in his ultra-modern, open-top banana-yellow sports car through the narrow and chaotic streets. Stopping off to buy something, he temporarily leaves Emmanuelle alone in the passenger seat, only for her to be crowded out by an intensity of screaming, gawping children, a leering beggarman stretching out his hand for a donation, and the full-frontal view of a chicken being slaughtered by a gratuitous slit to the throat. As Emmanuelle recoils in horror at the visceral intensity of the experience, the children dangle the bleeding bird before her and she screams to be rescued from the horror. Such is Bangkok, red in tooth and claw!

The connections between *Emmanuelle* and Bangkok are curious ones, drawing not simply on pre-existing Western fantasies of Thailand as an exploratory erotic space. The original film *Emmanuelle* was based on a novel of the same name, written in French under the pseudonym Emmanuelle Arsan, that of Bangkok-born Marayat Krasaesin, who subsequently moved to France with her diplomat husband Louis-Jacques Rollet-Andriane. The accuracy of attributing authorship to Krasaesin has more recently been called into question, however, by a competing view that Rollet-Andriane was himself the text’s creator. Whatever the truth of its origins, Krasaesin clearly makes an appearance in the 1974 movie production, as a playful and adventurous masseuse in one of the opening scenes of the film. Nor was this her only acting role, given that she had already starred as Mally under the stage name Emmanuelle Arsan in *The Sand Pebbles* (dir. Robert Wise, 1966) alongside Richard Attenborough and Steve McQueen.

Arsan’s purpose in the film version of *Emmanuelle* is to form part of the human backdrop, adding authentic local colour to the setting of what is essentially an exploration of Western erotic desire. Emmanuelle’s multiple sexual encounters throughout the narrative are primarily with white Western men and women of the same social standing and class. In an early scene, set at Jean’s palatial mansion, the Thai servants espy their French masters at sexual play and are in turn aroused by what they see. In consequence the “houseboy” chases the “chambermaid” into the surrounding banana plantation, eventually catching her and seducing her *en plein air*. The interplay of locations further marks the racial and social disparity between the two groups of characters portrayed.

Given the nature of these two distinct racial realms, their interaction with each other is of note. While the Thai servants take sexual inspiration from their French employers, the white expatriates who occupy Bangkok are in turn intrigued by the fantasy of Oriental sexuality

and all that it connotes. "For instance, look at this girl," Jean extols the virtues of his masseuse (played by Arsan) to his colleague as they share a massage together. "Her skill is mixed with a wonderful innocence. Believe me, she wasn't born with such gifts. She had to learn." Here Thailand is introduced in the opening minutes of the film as a location where one finesses one's sexual experiences and expands one's repertoire through an education in the senses. It is no surprise, therefore, that Emmanuelle truly transforms from girl to woman by the close of the movie as the result of multiple sexual encounters with a series of Thai males. With the elderly and debonair Mario as her Western escort, Emmanuelle finds herself in an opium den, sharing a pipe with Mario as he invites her to contemplate the true meaning of the erotic. "We must cultivate the unusual," he whispers didactically as the camera turns to focus on the face of a rugged, young Thai male, similarly indulging in the drug: "The unusual that is opposed to all the rules," Mario expands. He then watches on as Emmanuelle is raped by the man, presumably embodying all that Mario means by the most "unusual". Emmanuelle's journey of sexual liberation closes in a Thai boxing ring, its ritual music providing an intoxicating backdrop to the tangle of muscular bodies that fight and cheer as the combat ensues. Mario gifts her to the victor as the remainder of the crowd gather around to enjoy the stimulating pleasure of the gaze. Her response to Mario when he later lifts her from the floor announces the depth of her interracial mediated transformation. "I'm a real woman now.[...] Yes, now I'm a woman."

The weight and complexity of racial interaction carries over and multiplies yet further in *Emmanuelle in Bangkok* (dir. Joe D'Amato), the 1976 sequel to *Black Emmanuelle*. Drawing again on the erotic capital of Bangkok as its backdrop, this second feature further complicates the articulation of sensual stereotypes through a racial sleight of hand. Central to this is the fact that the role of Black Emmanuelle is taken up by Laura Gemser, a Dutch national born of Indonesian parents in Surabaya in 1950. While Gemser plays the part of an American photojournalist who travels to Bangkok from Venice by boat, she clearly reads visually, at least to an informed audience, as Southeast Asian. Further layers of visual nuance are added with the early appearance of the character of Prince Sanit, a "cousin" of the Thai king whom Emmanuelle has been tasked to photograph. In something of the well-worn tradition of *The King and I*, in which Russian-American actor Yul Brynner famously performed the part of the revered Thai monarch Rama IV (King Mongkut, r. 1851-68), Sanit is played by the Serbian-Italian actor Ivan Rassimov. As Prince Sanit, allegedly a native of the city, shows newcomer Emmanuelle around its favoured sites, the latter looks distinctly more local than the former. "First of all, I can acquaint you with my country," Sanit suggests as an entry into the depths of traditional Thai hospitality, initially signalled by gifts of flowers, glasses of wine and the chivalry of lighting Emmanuelle's cigarettes for her. As the couple tour a Bangkok floating market amidst the city's network of canals, Prince Sanit provides Emmanuelle (and the audience) with some valuable Thai cultural context: "It might help for you to know that the royal family here has divine origins. It goes back so far that today there's an enormous number of descendants," he explains, before adding further salacious detail to his family history: "In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century one king actually had 80 children. I wouldn't say they were all quite as prolific ... but they did all right. And so did their children after them. And since we consider all children to be legitimate, the number of people in this country with royal blood calling themselves cousins of the king is enormous. Like the number of canals."

Prince Sanit's monologue is an important one for a number of reasons, the first of which relates to the choice that *Emmanuelle in Bangkok* makes about the particulars of the cultural context it provides. In keeping with Orientalist stereotypes of the East as a site of sexual profligacy, it alludes to the historical tradition of polygamy, and, by implication, to the royal harem. As noted in the opening of this essay, both topics had long attracted the keen attention of nineteenth century missionary and trading travellers to Siam from the West. This is cinematically evidenced, for example, in the opening dialogues of both *The King and I* and its predecessor, *Anna and the King of Siam* (dir. John Cromwell, 1946), whereby governess Anna Leonowens is forewarned of the sexual prowess of the Thai monarch. On disembarking from the boat she is taken aside by its kindly Scottish captain, to whom she addresses a question about the royal palace:

"Have you ever been inside?"

"Yes, almost all of it. Except, of course, the *Nang Ham*."

"Oh! [Anna's moral disapproval is evident in the hushed tones of her voice.] The harem you mean?"

"Yes. It's quite a place. I've heard it called the universe. With a single sun and a thousand moons. The king being the sun, naturally."

"Good gracious!"

"[...] They say too that he's the disc of light they all revolve around."

"How many women revolve around this "disc of light"?"

"Oh, a thousand or more."

"Really?" [Anna responds in quiet, contemplative shock.]

A second reason for the importance of Prince Sanit's introduction to Bangkok regarding the backdrop of royal promiscuity, lies in the fact that that by implication it extends to Prince Sanit himself. At a formal party held by the prince for his four Western visitors (Emmanuelle, her Italian boyfriend Roberto and the nominally heterosexual American couple Jimmy and Frances whom they encounter on a temple tour) in addition to the Thai masseuse Gee (albeit played by the Japanese actor Koike Mahoco) the evening collapses into one of sexual experimentation, aided as ever by the input of opium. Significantly, however, Prince Sanit distances himself from the action, participating only as an erudite onlooker. Believing Emmanuelle to be superior to her fellow travellers, - "You are not like them. You are different." - he leads her away from the pile of collapsed post-coital bodies for an Asian lesson in sensuality. "You understand how to control your ecstasy," he tells her.

"You're capable of letting the pleasures of eros enter all your senses. You live them with your entire body. Not just those few erotic zones Westerners concede to love-making. I can make you cry out with pleasure. But you must first give back that which you have been given. And you do know how. This is God's gift to you. You know how to suspend yourself in a tunnel where time no longer has meaning. And when the moment arrives when your pleasure is on the verge of becoming glorious pain then, only then, do you permit yourself that most sublime moment of all - that which the French call *le petit mort*, the little death, and we Orientals call "The Great Ecstasy."

In this didactic, sensual monologue, Prince Sanit exhibits an attention to the detail of Thai/Asian/Oriental sexuality, real or imagined, that perpetuates the fantasy of films such as

*Emmanuelle in Bangkok* and the original *Emmanuelle*. That this is possible as an erotic framework emerges from the historical development of the view of Bangkok in the Western imaginary over time. As such it is also always a hybrid, materialising from a complex mixture of fact and fiction, of cross-cultural cliché combined with enough accuracy to render it credible. The setting of the Buddhist temples (such as Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn) in which Emmanuelle, Roberto and Gee first encounter Jimmy and Frances confirm local colour, as does the addition of scenes of traditional Thai dancing or of the iconic architecture of the now defunct Siam Intercontinental Hotel where Emmanuelle takes a room. In this sense what transpires to be the cause of the abrupt ending to Emmanuelle's sojourn in Bangkok is particularly intriguing: she is required to abandon her project to photograph the king when she learns that Prince Sanit has been arrested in a failed attempt to depose him. It can be of no coincidence that the film was made in 1976, at a time of growing political tension in Thailand, playing out in Bangkok in the form of increasingly pro-Communist student-led demonstrations on the one-hand, and right-wing, pro-monarchy vigilante activism on the other. *Emmanuelle in Bangkok* has its finger just sufficiently on the pulse of the times to allow us to suspend our disbelief in the fantasy of the erotic action.

## References

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