



AN EROTIC ODYSSEY INTO THE SPRAWLING MULTIVERSE OF EMMANUELLE.





eaturing in a 1981 episode of the American film review show, *Sneak Previews*, Gene Siskel observed to co-host Roger Ebert, “Rarely do you ever read in a film review – or, in fact, in any review of any work of art – that the critic was aroused sexually by it.” The subject of the episode was ‘Guilty Pleasures,’ and alongside examples from the then-culturally abject genres of blaxploitation (*Superfly*), giant-monster (*Infra-Man*) and horror (*Last House on the Left*), Siskel offered one of the most famous examples of softcore erotica. “Well, I’m saying that this critic is as human as the next guy or woman, and yes, *Emmanuelle* turned me on.”

Based on the notorious erotic memoir of Emmanuelle Arsan, the Bangkok-born wife of a French diplomat, 1974’s *Emmanuelle* was an instant phenomenon in France, selling more than eight million tickets and eventually playing one Champs-Élysées theatre for 13 years. In the US, where it was distributed by Columbia Pictures, it was one of the few subtitled films to become a mainstream hit. Long before it spawned six official sequels, a slew of imitators, and an American cable spin-off called *Emmanuelle in Space*, the “Emmanuelle” brand had become a shorthand for a certain kind of gauzy softcore erotica. In other words: agree with him or not, Gene Siskel was not the only mid-’70s viewer who was rock hard.

Film theorist Linda Williams coined the term “body genres” to denote genres meant to evoke involuntary physical sensations: comedy (laughter);

melodrama (tears); horror (shock); and erotica (sexual arousal). With these genres, success and failure is, to some extent, inarguable: if it makes you laugh, it’s funny; if it gives you an erection, etcetera. But a joke that was funny 50 years ago may or may not be so funny today, and today’s horrors may become tomorrow’s kitsch, and everything may drift back into fashion depending on how the zeitgeist swirls. So, how does *Emmanuelle* hold up for this 2023 viewer? Well, like Gene Siskel, I’m not immune to the charm of Sylvia Kristel, the willowy Dutch beauty who starred in the series’ most famous films. But still, I’m much less a fan of *Emmanuelle* than of *Emanuelle* (sic), her parallel-universe twin – the sexually-liberated, globe-trotting photojournalist who appeared in 12 wildly disreputable films. But more on her later.

The success of the original *Emmanuelle* can only be understood as a culmination of over 20 years of sexual revolution and gradually relaxing censorship on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1973, five years after the dissolution of Hollywood’s censorship code, *Variety*’s list of the year’s 10 top-grossing domestic releases included two explicitly sexual films that signalled a new cross-pollination of erotica and art: *Last Tango in Paris*, whose emotionally-violent simulated sex scenes “altered the face of an art form” (per Pauline Kael), and Gerard Damiano’s *The Devil in Miss Jones*, a hardcore film that attracted respectful mainstream notices for its acting and atmospherics. When Columbia advertised *Emmanuelle* with the evocative tagline “X was never like this,” it promised an unabashedly erotic film without the high-art pretensions of *Last Tango* or the gynaecological explicitness of porn, and with far greater production values than the softcore smut on the drive-in circuit.

But revisiting *Emmanuelle*, I’m most struck by two scenes that grate unpleasantly against the liberal sensibilities of today. The first comes shortly after *Emmanuelle*, the trophy wife of French diplomat Jean (Daniel Sarky), is reunited with her husband at a

resort in Bangkok – the first of this series’ many eastern locations whose exoticism lubricates the white protagonists’ animal instincts. *Emmanuelle* is no sexual neophyte – “Nobody loves making love more than her,” Jean raves to a friend – but she’s a one-woman man, resistant to Jean’s desire to explore polyamory. As the couple makes slow, passionate love in their room, two young Thai workers, a bellboy and a maid, peep through an open window. Overcome with desire, the boy playfully chases the girl through the forest and ravages her. Don’t worry, folks – she wanted it. The “primitives” are doing their mating ritual.

“Columbia
advertised
Emmanuelle
with the
evocative tagline,
“X was never
like this.” ”

The second scene comes near the end, after *Emmanuelle* has fallen under the spell of Mario (Alain Cuny), an older gentleman whose militant belief in sexual freedom alienates all but the hardiest adventurers. Frustrated by Jean, *Emmanuelle* grows intrigued by his promise to liberate her from bourgeois morality. After dinner, he takes her to an opium den, where he watches her be raped – an encounter that awakens something deep within her. Does this scene sound deplorable to you? It did to Sylvia Kristel, who described its shooting in her 2007 memoir: “Today I will be raped. I hate

this scene. The violence, the physical constraint makes me want to run away.” Nowadays, the end of *Emmanuelle* – in which the title character readies herself to follow her older teacher to new frontiers of liberation – is one of those sexual-revolution landmarks that feels a little dated and discredited, like Hugh Hefner’s once-celebrated mansion or Marlon Brando’s improv with the butter.

Success inevitably brought 1975’s *Emmanuelle 2* (aka *Emmanuelle: The Joys of a Woman*), in which Emmanuelle and Jean explore every configuration of freedom (for my money, the most enjoyable film in the series), and *Emmanuelle 3* (aka *Goodbye Emmanuelle*), in which the challenges of polyamory finally catch up with them. The three films represent a contained trilogy with a tidy beginning, middle and end, but they also laid the groundwork for plenty more French-funded art-rotica, including *Emmanuelle* director Just Jaeckin’s *Story of O* (1975), Nagisa Ōshima’s *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) and Shūji Terayama’s *Fruits of Passion* (1981). Meanwhile, the name “E(m)manuelle” became an exploitable signifier for schlock merchants who toyed with what it represented.

Joe D’Amato brought *Emanuelle’s Revenge* (1975), a horror/softcore hybrid in which the title character entraps and imprisons her sister’s rapist husband. *The Inconfessable Orgies of Emmanuelle* (1982) has her puttering in front of prolific Spanish filmmaker Jess Franco’s usual seaside backdrop. Meanwhile, the comic potential of the character was explored in *Carry On Emmannuelle* (1978), a desperately unfunny late-period entry in the long-running British series. In *The Dragon Lives Again* (1976), a Hong Kong kung-fu movie where “Emmanuelle” is one of a bevy of ’60s/’70s pop culture icons (including James Bond, The Godfather, the Exorcist, and “Clint Eastwood”) who match wits with Bruce Lee (Leung Siu-Lung) in a purgatorial underworld. In her key scene, she attempts to assassinate the emperor of the underworld via vigorous intercourse – or, as the emperor memorably says in the



English dub track, “Her pussy’s in this plot, too! She was using it to murder me!”

The woman who would become the most significant of the alternate Emmanuelles appears briefly, but strikingly, in *Emmanuelle 2*, playing a masseuse who gives the protagonist the full-body treatment. Laura Gemser was of Dutch-Indonesian heritage and, by all accounts, never dreamed of stardom, but stumbled into a modelling career that quickly led her to film. Shortly after shooting *Emmanuelle 2*, Gemser took the title role in a rip-off, *Black Emanuelle* (1975), starring as a globe-trotting photojournalist who becomes entangled in a love triangle with a wealthy couple in Kenya. The rip-off would beat the big-

budget sequel to theatres by a few weeks and spawn a franchise that lives today arguably stronger than its progenitor.

In a video essay on Severin Films’ recent *Black Emanuelle* Blu-Ray collection, film historian Kier-La Janisse positions the spin-off saga within a wave of ’70s Italian erotica in which bourgeois characters, “take refuge in an unspoiled paradise, where they meet indigenous locals who help them to discover their own freedom.” Within this frankly colonialist subgenre, the dark-skinned Gemser represented a powerful bridging figure between the two worlds. If the film fails to transcend the odious racial politics of its genre, it at least has a slightly more interesting take on gender.

For the rest of the series, this Emanuelle is a self-possessed, uncomplicatedly sexual career woman. Subsequent “Black Emanuelle” films were mostly helmed by Joe D’Amato, a filmmaker notorious for his mingling of steamy sex with extreme violence. “The D’Amato Touch” can be found in *Emanuelle in Bangkok* (1976), a mostly routine softcore romp in which, midway through, the viewer is forced to see real footage of a snake graphically killing a mongoose. Or *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (1977), which drops Emanuelle into the stomach-churning Italian cannibal genre. Or, most outrageous of all, *Emanuelle in America* (1977), in which she goes on the trail of snuff-film peddlers and sees (simulated) snuff footage so

gruesomely realistic that it reportedly led David Cronenberg to write *Videodrome*.

By this point, “porno chic” had faded, anti-porn feminism was ascendant, and E(m)manuelle was becoming the exclusive property of the raincoat brigade. After a seven-year gap, the official series finally returned in the mid-’80s with a string of entries only marginally less absurd than *The Dragon Lives Again*. Sylvia Kristel graced *Emmanuelle 4* (1984) with just an extended cameo: in the opening scenes, she flees the lure of a torrid love affair by undergoing full-body plastic surgery that transforms her into 23-year-old Mia Nygren. Thereafter, Kristel appears only intermittently, fully clothed, in dream sequences where she teaches her born-

again self (played, confusingly, by Brinke Stevens) the art of love.

Emmanuelle 5 (1998) had an improbable director (acclaimed Polish eroticist Walerian Borowczyk) and an equally improbable star (American-born former Penthouse Pet Monique Gabrielle), with a dreamlike narrative that takes Emmanuelle from the Cannes Film Festival (where she is apparently now a celebrated auteur) to a fictional Middle Eastern country (where she is kidnapped by a prince and forced into his harem) before an action-movie finale. This delirious movie exists in several versions, soft and hard, depending on the video stores and cable channels that were increasingly home for the series. Direct-to-video pioneer Roger Corman was onboard as a producer for *Emmanuelle 6* (1988), a glorified Video Centrefold where the gimmick is that Emmanuelle (Natalie Uher) has amnesia and must learn to re-inhabit her sexuality. Five years later, another exploitation titan, Menahem Golan, brought the series to a close with *Emmanuelle 7* (1993), a ridiculous sci-fi entry that finally brought back Sylvia Kristel. Now 41 and again fully clothed, Kristel presides as the madam of a virtual-reality brothel where patrons can enact their wildest fantasies, *a la Westworld*.

Since her exit from cinema screens, Emmanuelle has resurfaced occasionally on cable, with shows called *Emmanuelle 2000*, *Emmanuelle’s Private Collection*, *Emmanuelle Through Time*, and best of all, *Emmanuelle in Space*. The latter is a tongue-in-cheek series that features Emmanuelle (Krista Allen) as the teacher to a shipful of sexually clueless aliens, who patiently explains why, exactly, women have one of these while men have one of those. Times had changed, and the Emmanuelle who crossed the final frontier was a long way from the one we met in 1974. As time of writing, director Audrey Diwan and star Noémie Merlant are at work on a remake; don’t be surprised if she shares more in common with Black Emanuelle or Space Emmanuelle than the Emmanuelle who once stirred Gene Siskel’s loins 🍷

