

## The Colonial Politics of Gazing in Joe D’Amato’s Black Emanuelle/ Laura Gemser Films

Donald L. Anderson  
(SUNY Westchester Community College)

### Abstract

This article examines two of the most controversial and horror-themed *Black Emanuelle* films starring the Indonesian actress Laura Gemser (real name Laurette Marcia Gemser), *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* [*Emanuelle e gli ultimi cannibali*] (1977), and *Emanuelle in America* (1977). These films encourage what post-colonial critics call the “colonial gaze” which operates within a dialectical framework defining the sexuality of the developed West as “civilized” while casting the developing world and its populations as sexually other and deviant. Gemser’s racial difference and erasure of her specifically Indonesian background is exploited for its imagined erotic difference. The undecidability of Gemser’s racial background permits her character to move between both developed and developing worlds. In these films and others in the series *Emanuelle*/Gemser is a mediating subject that is simultaneously “not-quite-other” and “not-quite-Western” who in an often travelogue fashion grants Western viewers their gaze into “primitive” sexuality and violence. In these two films Gemser’s placement within both the urban world of New York City and the tribal worlds of the Amazon uncovers how “civilized” sexuality requires the racist othering of people of color in developing countries in order to secure its place within the proper, bourgeois, and normative sexuality of the developed West.

**Keywords:** Emanuelle, colonialism, colonial gaze, gaze theory, Joe D’Amato, Italian Horror, Laura Gemser, sexploitation, mondo film, Asian women

## Introduction

By 1974 the genre popularly known as softcore pornographic cinema acquired its flagship film *Emmanuelle* (Just Jaeckin, 1974). Like its hardcore cousin, *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), *Emmanuelle* led the burgeoning market of erotic cinema during the 1970s. The film's European origin and emphasis on sensuality derived from atmosphere, mood, and *mise en scène* set it apart from its American counterparts. The film's director Just Jaeckin had more in common with other European directors working in horror and sexploitation films such as: Jean Rollin, Jesus Franco, Tinto Brass, and Walerian Borowczyk—all of whom carefully orchestrated onscreen eroticism in opposition to the explicit, and sometimes clumsy, sex of American films like *Deep Throat* or *Behind the Green Door* (the Mitchell Bros, 1972). The film's namesake, played by the French actress Silvia Kristel, starred in a series of sequels that established a franchise quickly exhausted by late night cable channels in the 1980s and early 90s.

The Italian exploitation film industry of the 70s regularly imitated popular genre films from the US. Both the *Star Wars* and *Jaws* franchises, for example, were capitalized on by producers hoping to cash in on twin spaghetti versions of these films. Soon after the release of *Emmanuelle*, Bitto Albertini directed *Black Emanuelle* [*Emanuelle nera*] (1975). There were two major differences separating Albertini's film from its French counterpart. First, in order to avoid legal complications, the producers dropped the second "m." Secondly, and more importantly, the producers debuted the "exotic" Indonesian actress Laura Gemser in the role formerly occupied by Kristel. The video promotional material advertised "a new experience in sexuality" and constructed Gemser as the viewer's exoticized gateway to forbidden and obscure pleasures—something Kristel, with her white, European skin, could not promise. The promotional campaign and explicit use of the word "black" to describe Gemser drew a sharp contrast between the two actresses, thus making Gemser an exotic, forbidden, and "dark" *Emanuelle* alternative.

Laura Gemser is not "black" in the sense of the term denoting someone of African descent. In fact, her Indonesian background remains to this day something magazines, articles, and fan pages regularly gloss

over. Most of her films maintain her ambiguous ethnic background so she may easily play any character with dark skin. Gemser's "exotic" appeal determined by an ambiguous racial coloring produces her as a mysterious actress and character who appeals to fans of horror, erotic, and (s)exploitation cinema. Any racial category that might stabilize her background would disrupt the erotic appeal accompanying a cinematic experience of the "unknown" and therefore "taboo." Often placed alongside pale, white European actresses, Gemser's racial difference is highlighted and becomes the means for seducing white, heterosexual, male characters.

The general use of the term "black" to describe an Indonesian actress summons the twin histories of how both African American and Asian women have been fetishized by straight white men. The racist terms "jungle fever" and "yellow fever" used to describe the selective fetishization of African American and Asian women respectively, imply that such an attraction is an illness—something that is "caught" by straight white men with the implied cure being the sexual claiming of these women. Therefore, the attraction to women of color is regarded as already abnormal and a deviation from the attraction to white European women. This racist terminology characterizes women of color as a deviation from the proper and clean attraction to white women and denigrates them as exotic manifestations of an illness.

The fetishization of Asian women emerges from an incredibly long history of specific representations of Asian women in visual culture, literature, opera, film, TV, and pornography. The late twentieth-century iterations of the sexually submissive Asian female stereotype partly resulted from US military interventions in Korea and Vietnam where US soldiers encountered, what was to them, an exotic population of Asian women. The manufactured representations in Western mass media from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to early Hollywood's depiction of the "dragon-lady" figure preceded these encounters and ultimately predetermined how Asian women would continue to be treated and represented. It is, therefore, no surprise that the real world meeting between GIs and local women in Vietnam would become (re)represented in later visual artifacts like *The Green Berets* (Ray Kellogg, 1968), *Full*

*Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), and *Good Morning Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987). There existed a feedback loop between pop culture and its artifacts representing Asian women stereotypes that mediated the experiences of US soldiers and the subsequent visual texts that emerged from these experiences. This loop continues to feed current stereotypes of Asian women and their sexualization in American culture. Emanuelle's generalized "blackness," therefore, makes her both desirable as an exotic character, yet deviant as a sexual object of the male gaze.

In her examination of the representations of Asian women in the pop cultures of American history, author Patricia Park similarly points to the colonizing aspect of the GI/Asian prostitute relationship. She writes, "The American GI—representing a first world power with first world resources and privileges—colonizes the Asian female who comes from a place of poverty, weakness, and everything else often associated with the 'third world.'"<sup>1</sup> The Emanuelle films perpetuate a similar cinematic colonization, but these films' visual matrices absorb more than just Asian female sexuality. The landscape of the third world that provides the mise en scène for this sexuality is also claimed and finally cast as the excess that retroactively defines first world civilization for what postcolonial critics term the "colonizing gaze." This excess includes first world fears of magic, "bizarre rituals," ancient tribal customs, promiscuity, and finally a sexuality that is paradoxically submissive, yet untamed and wild. Park argues that "The perception of sexualized Asian women was informed by a long tradition of the Western male writing and controlling that perception, leaving the women no agency and no control over their own representation."<sup>2</sup> Park captures an important part of the "colonizing gaze" when she invokes perception as an instrument of control—an instrument wielded by the Western male perceiver. As "black" Emanuelle, Laura Gemser embodies these twin histories of imagined Asian submissiveness crossed with the mythical stereotype of the uniquely sex-skilled Asian female, and the exoticization of African women dating back to US slavery. This generalization further governs her arbitrary participation in roles requiring nothing more than a sexy and exotic female of color to entice mostly European male viewers.

In this article I examine two of Gemser's most notorious and

controversial films, *Emanuelle in America* (1977) and *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* [*Emanuelle e gli ultimi cannibali*] (1977), both directed by Joe D'Amato (real name Aristide Massaccesi). What makes D'Amato's films worth investigating, outside other *Emanuelle* films starring Gemser, is the regular integration of disturbing images of death and violence that seem oddly out of place in an erotic film and propel such films into the horror genre. While the colonizing gaze appears in a film like *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, it is later turned back on itself and decolonized in *Emanuelle in America*. Such a relationship between the films demonstrates how contradictory messages about othering, race, and power may coexist in the "lower" film genres of horror and sexploitation cinema even when directed by the same director. This last point further challenges auteur film theory which posits that films directed by the same director will maintain some trace of ideological and thematic consistency. Joe D'Amato's body of work spans horror, western, thriller, action, softcore, and hardcore pornography. Lastly, my analysis of *Emanuelle in America* suggests a way of reading against the goal of exploitation cinema—to exploit sex, horror, violence, racism—and show how this film in particular critiques such goals. Exploitation cinema remains a valuable site for critical inquiry because such films can be, on the surface, incredibly problematic in their representations of sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity. *Emanuelle in America* is significant because it is one such film that sets a precedent in exploitation film scholarship for reading similar films against the often sordid and questionable goals of exploitation cinema.<sup>3</sup>

Having been racially paralleled with Kristel (who is never referred to as "white" Emmanuelle), Gemser's "unknown origin" and racial difference writes her as the eroticized "other" upon which predominantly white male fantasies of exotic sexuality are projected. Although there exists a long history of scholarship analyzing how images and the gaze distribute subject positions according to a subject-who-looks and an object-who-is-looked-at, my argument, like many relying on the politics of gazing in cinema studies, owes its foundations to Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" where she analyzes the gendered power relationships concomitant with the cinematic gaze.

Mulvey shows how the “determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”<sup>4</sup> Emanuelle’s on screen coupling with mostly white men in numerous sexual scenarios, most of which are unmotivated by meaningful plot devices, affirms the fantasy of the white male viewer that women, and in particular women of color, are uncontrollable agents of sexual desire. Although Gemser’s *Emanuelle* is indeed “coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that [she] can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness,”<sup>5</sup> my argument adds another dynamic to the gender politics of the gaze—the role of the ambiguously raced body of *Emanuelle* that confirms Western male beliefs in civilized superiority. In her study of photographs by Zora Neal Hurston and Richard Wright, postcolonial critic Katherine Henninger examines the complex viewing dynamics of gazing between black and white southerners. She writes, “both Hurston and Wright were from a young age acutely aware of the white Southern colonizing gaze upon them.... Under this gaze black Southerners such as themselves firmly represent the objectified colonized body, fulfilling the fantasy of mastery for Southern white, and Northern ones too.”<sup>6</sup> What I propose here is a combination of Mulvey’s foundational theorizations of gaze theory and Henninger’s postcolonial approach to draw out how the colonial gaze operates in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* before expanding on how this gaze is decolonized in *Emanuelle in America*. Prior to this, however, it is worthwhile to consider the larger global context of these films by examining a brief history of mondo cinema.

### The Mondo Film Genre and the Emerging Global Village

An important historical and cinematic origin of the colonizing gaze and the Black *Emanuelle* films is *Mondo Cane* (1962) directed by Paolo Cavara and Gaultiero Jacopetti. Disguised as a documentary film seeking to uncover the “bizarre” rituals of tribal cultures in Asia, Africa, and South America, *Mondo Cane* and subsequent mondo films (“mondo” is Italian for “world”) were often narrated by a scholarly voice that combined sensationalism with academic inquiry. *Mondo Cane* and the films that followed in its series promised to take Western viewers on a guided

trip into the unknown. The documentary gloss of these films indulged in sensational excess under the guise of pseudo-anthropology. Mondo cinema demonstrates the cinematic colonization of the “primitive world” and translates it into an object of perversity against which the Western world may define itself as “civilized.” The world in 1962 must have felt significantly larger when compared to today’s massive global interconnectivity which allows us to compress time and visual space using the Internet. Compared with today’s television offerings, there were fewer travel channel documentary TV shows (which tend to avoid the exploitative mistakes of the mondo film). There was little visual access to the world provided today by everything from Google maps to Wikipedia, from Anthony Bourdain’s *Parts Unknown* to YouTube, all of which supply twenty-four hour access to Marshall McLuhan’s now fully realized “global village.”<sup>7</sup> As one of the few channels available for Western viewers of the 1960s to gaze into the “unknown,” *Mondo Cane* played upon the myth of “primitive” cultures by affirming Western viewers’ worst fears about the limits of so-called “human depravity.” As the tagline for *Mondo Cane* states, “All the scenes you will see in this film are true and taken only from life.... If often they are shocking it is because there are many astounding, even unbelievable things in this world.” Mondo films disingenuously suggested it was the spectator’s responsibility to know about sex rituals and animal slaughter—insisting such sequences were simply, and naturally, a part of life.<sup>8</sup> Such a goal insincerely justified the film’s gratuitousness and any visual pleasure the viewer derived from such gratuitousness.

To better understand the colonizing gaze in mondo films it is helpful to place this term within literary critic Roland Barthes’ discussion of myth. If myth is a form of speech whose status as either “true” or “false” remains in abeyance, always waiting to be confirmed, then it is the role of ideology to confirm the myth, or in Barthes’ language, to “naturalize” the myth.<sup>9</sup> And so, mondo cinema functioned ideologically to confirm that the third world was far removed from civilization and that its role in the human sciences was to stabilize Western civilization. Naturalizing the myth of primitive humankind accomplished this move by providing a timeline on which Western humankind could be marked as modern

and contemporary while the developing world, despite existing at the same point in time as modernity, may be marked as “primitive.” The ideological function of mondo cinema is to both naturalize the developing world as degraded, perverse, and primitive while simultaneously naturalizing the West as proper, clean, and modern. The colonizing gaze in mondo cinema, therefore, accomplishes its ideological goals through a racist form of quasi-scientific learning.

The pseudo-documentary nature of mondo cinema requires its subjects perform for the camera. “Perform” here assumes a double meaning. On the one hand, tribal subjects literally performed by simply moving within the frame of the camera shots, while on the other hand, they theatrically performed the activities expected by Western viewers. The tribal natives had to slaughter and sacrifice animals in front of the camera and magic rituals had to be on display and penetrated by the camera from all angles in order to naturalize the myth of the primitive. We can trace this performative function and regard how it is used to bolster notions of civilization and nationalism to the photography of Francis Benjamin Johnston, a white woman, whose photos of the progress made by African Americans following reconstruction were shown at the Paris Exposition of 1920. Johnston’s photos showed young African American students saluting the American flag and studiously concentrating on their schoolwork. These images, according to Sean Michelle Smith, “demonstrate the ‘nature’ of an essentialized national character, if not of an essentialized racial identity.”<sup>10</sup> Here too, as with mondo cinema, Johnston’s photographs engender a dual naturalization seeking to prove that the integration of African Americans into American culture was occurring seamlessly (despite Jim Crow laws and segregation), and that this integration only occurred due to an already stabilized national American identity. African American integration and the nation into which this integration was directed are constructed as “natural.” While Western spectators of mondo cinema can remind themselves that they are civilized, likewise, Americans at the turn of the century were able to continue a racist form of nation-formation utilizing patriotic images of young African Americans as tools for masking national discontinuity following the Civil War and reconstruction.

Johnston's photography helps us mark the ways the colonial gaze and its visual descendants represent racialized subjects in shaping national identity. We can also point to the similar fashion mondo cinema shapes, on a much larger scale, "first-world" identity requiring the aggregation of many nations under the general terms "civilization," and "third world." Laura Gemser's racial undecidability and her role as "black" Emanuelle twice marks her as a figure upon which dual colonial and sexual fantasies of white viewers about African and Asian women depend.

In light of the racially problematic dynamics of Italian mondo cinema emerging from the façade of "documentary" filmmaking that aims to discover "truths" about the developing world, the racial figure of Emanuelle assumes a provocative role. She is not necessarily the racial "other" of the white spectator. Emanuelle, instead, operates as an intermediary between the civilized developed world and the primitive developing world. However, for some critics, Gemser's raced body cannot escape becoming something completely other. In his analysis of the ways Gemser becomes a "monstrous figure" in the Black Emanuelle films, horror and cult film theorist Xavier Mendik argues the film's "cultural significance" is based on a "black female protagonist whose erotic and implausible investigations embroil her in archaic and monstrous situations."<sup>11</sup> Mendik later claims that "under Joe D'Amato's direction, he literally render[s] his heroine as 'monstrous' via Gemser's increased exposure to horror, savagery and death."<sup>12</sup> I want to separate myself from Mendik's analysis and suggest Gemser never really becomes monstrous. Her ambiguous racial background allows her to blend within a multitude of racialized sites. As a journalist in New York City she is regularly seen working with her older white boss. Although her mostly white lovers may find her dark skin "exciting" or "new," Gemser rarely plays up to her exotic look. Her role is racially undecidable and it is this undecidability that permits her to cross the artificial lines drawn between the mondo film's developed and developing worlds. It is also this undecidability that fails to locate her as either monstrously other or totally civilized. Further, I will later argue that although Gemser/Emanuelle may be regularly subjected to the colonial gaze, it is her performance in *Emanuelle in America* that decolonizes the gaze and

returns this gaze back on to white civilization.

### **The Colonizing Gaze in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals***

*Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* capitalized on the Italian cannibal film genre (itself a descendent of mondo films). Ruggero Deodato's *Last Cannibal World* [*Ultimo mondo cannibale*] (1977) was a success and like any good exploitation director D'Amato combined the *Emanuelle* films with the cannibal genre. The result is a confusing and delirious mixture of adventure, horror, and erotica. Like many previous European films concerned with tribal cultures in the developing world, D'Amato's film emphasizes the sexual practices of his "dark" subjects. As was also popular in mondo films, sequences having to do with punishment for adultery are included in D'Amato's film by way of a documentary exhibited halfway into the film (itself a kind of mondo film within a film). *Emanuelle* is shown a film about the Amazonian cannibal tribe she is preparing to visit for the sole purpose of composing a journalistic account on the supposed myth of cannibalism. In the film a man is castrated for committing adultery. Such scenes satisfy the West's interest in the sexual economy of primitive cultures while also reveling in extreme sexual violence and nudity through images of male castration. This brutal sequence also highlights Westerner's anxiety over "primitive" sexuality and its imagined link with death and violence. Mendik suggests these films "[retain] travelogue cinema's obsession with replaying colonial myths surrounding the savagery associated with black sexuality."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this desire to see, to record, and archive images of black sexuality whether through faux-documentaries or pseudo-anthropology, is predicated upon the desire to possess the secret of the "other's" sex.<sup>14</sup> If the primitive world emerges from that which allows Westerners to see themselves as civilized, then the issue of a civilized sexuality must also be confirmed by the savagery of a primitive sexuality.

Such a racialized dialectic recalls James Baldwin's novel *Another Country*, where the white character Vivaldo is having sexual intercourse with his black girlfriend Ida. Baldwin, reflecting a white man's fantasy of the racialized other, describes the scene thusly, "she opened up before

him, yet fell back before him, too, he felt that he was traveling up a savage, jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous dripping foliage ... he was determined to bring her over the edge and into his possession."<sup>15</sup> What this passage, perhaps all too obviously, reflects is the desire to possess the other's black sexuality. Baldwin evokes the classic Hollywood image of the white man traveling up the Congo, while Ida's dark pubic hair is imagined as "dangerous foliage" through which lies a "beyond" where the secret of black sexuality may be wrested from Ida's "primitive" origin. But, this is not necessarily a desire for the possession of a secret in the sense Michel Foucault outlines in *The History of Sexuality Vol.1* where the secret of sex conveys something about ourselves, about the position of our subjectivity, and our sexuality.<sup>16</sup> The desire for the other's sex in the case of the "travelogue" or mondo film is, more importantly, a desire to tell Westerners something that will convince them their sexuality is more natural and civilized. As Frantz Fanon reminds critics regarding the intentions of the colonizer in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "the settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother-country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves."<sup>17</sup> The documentizing and colonizing machinations of the mondo film and its descendants like *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* might explicitly foreground the primitiveness of natives as "others," but the history being written, and more importantly perpetuated, tracks the visual confirmation of Western civilization and sexuality. Following Barthes, this discovery of the savage secret will both naturalize the myth of the sex-crazed savage and the proper sexuality of the Western world.

During his analysis of *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, Mendik continues to place Gemser as a monstrous figure through which the spectator may be "assimilated to the Other."<sup>18</sup> However, by placing *Emanuelle* squarely within the practices of mondo cinema it becomes clearer her role is to mediate the colonizing gaze and the objects of that gaze. She is a liminal figure able to exist in both worlds. *Emanuelle* is our

very own tour guide up the “savage, jungle river” and to the “beyond” where she taps into the very same obscure sexuality written on her dark skin. When Emanuelle momentarily blends with the cannibal tribe in an effort to rescue her white friend who had been captured, she is not engendering assimilation for either the spectator or herself. She is, instead, bridging sexual economies where one will confirm the other economy’s civilized character. The spectator enters the developing world through the dark body of Emanuelle whose racial undecidability entices the spectator to follow her in hopes that the secret of savage sex will be passed to her and finally to the Western world as confirmation of its own “healthy” sexuality. Even poster art for both *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* and *Emanuelle in America* places Emanuelle between juxtaposed images of the civilized world and the supposed savagery of the developing world. Emanuelle’s role is to mediate this fantastic transaction between civilization and the primitive world while not necessarily becoming a target for the colonizing gaze that threatens to construct her as a monster or figure of savage black or Asian sexuality.

### **Decolonizing the Gaze in *Emanuelle in America***

Emanuelle as a “mediator” or an “agent of transaction” between a world of unknown sexuality and the West is much more evident in a film like *Emanuelle and the Porno Nights* [*Le notti porno nel mondo*] (1978, Bruno Mattei and Joe D’Amato). This film is more typical of the documentary genre as it scours the globe in an effort to uncover discothèques, swing clubs, and massage parlors. Gemser’s narrating voice assumes a sexually progressive tone that shames the bourgeois Western world for its prudishness. Her rhetoric speaks back to the West about its sexuality while simultaneously giving it what it wants with complete access to a world of licentious sex. Gemser points out the hypocrisy fundamental to Western bourgeois sexuality—that it cannot admit its sexual desire, yet requires regular titillation. Although Gemser assumes the agent of narration and commands a non-diegetic authority over the images presented, it may still be argued she is objectified because viewers project their own desires on to her role as a narrator by imagining

Gemser has a genuine interest in the sequences being shown. I do not think, however, this is at odds with how she returns or decolonizes the gaze by calling attention to Western and white male viewing pleasure. This “giving back,” and the confrontation between the West and its own hidden perversity as mediated by Gemser/Emanuelle assumes its most radical form in the appropriately titled *Emanuelle in America*.

If mondo cinema and the cannibal film genre offered the means against which the developed West and the US specifically could imagine itself as more civilized than the developing world, it is a film like *Emanuelle in America* that forces the West and the US to confront itself and its sexual hypocrisy. This confrontation is one result of the decolonization of the gaze. Critical race theorist Fatimah Toby Rony builds on W.E.B. Dubois' theory of “double-conscious”—where one sees themselves through another—to point out what she terms the “third eye.” “The experience of the third eye suggests Dubois's insight can be taken one step further—the racially charged glance can also induce one to see the very process which creates the internal splitting, to witness the conditions which give rise to the double consciousness described by Dubois. The veil allows for clarity of vision even as it marks the site of socially mediated self-alienation.”<sup>19</sup> The third eye allows an outside gaze that remains connected to the one being looked at, but affords a bird's eye view of the power dynamics of gazing. Rony refers to this moment as a “feeling that a third eye has floated out of one's body and is observing the altercation with the dispassionate air of a zoologist examining a specimen.”<sup>20</sup> That Rony employs the descriptor “specimen” demonstrates her insistence that objectification takes place, but the third eye relates the process of objectification back to the one objectified therefore providing the potential for critique.

Pushing even further on what might be labeled the multiplicit nature of gazing, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues how there may occur both a “third eye” and what she calls an “Othering by the Other.”<sup>21</sup> In her analysis of a photograph showing an Indian man playing a sitar and other local figures in the background gazing directly at the camera, she insists the viewer “might find some discomfort in the Third Eye of the stereograph. The performers in the stereograph are quite aware of

being viewed (and captured by the camera) as objects of ethnographic spectacle, and the look back testifies to their resistance to the objectification process.”<sup>22</sup> Although “resistance” for Foster manifests as an example of “othering by the other,” it is a similar resistance that informs the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification. In his book *Disidentifications* Muñoz analyzes how subjects simultaneously identify with, and against, dominant representations offered to minoritarian subjects. He offers a short history of the lesbian performance artist Marga Gomez who dramatizes her moment of lesbian interpellation. Gomez witnesses some shamed lesbians on a talk show whose appearance is described by Muñoz as “campy” and “over the top.” Rather than inciting repulsion (which would be in the interest of heteronormative hegemony) these images actually seduce Gomez, for whom their campiness is “reconfigured as sexy and glamorous.”<sup>23</sup> Muñoz points out that, “the images of these lesbian stereotypes are rendered in all their abjection, yet Gomez rehabilitates these images, calling attention to the mysterious erotic that interpellated her as a lesbian.”<sup>24</sup> Muñoz marks such moments as “survival strategies” that work “within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.”<sup>25</sup> Gomez, although performing, relates her experience with a potentially damaging gaze. She *disidentifies* with the image and reads against its hurtful imagery. For Muñoz, disidentification is the “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”<sup>26</sup> There is an important connection between Muñoz and visual culture theorists like Foster and Rony, all of whom regard the economy of power characteristic of gazing as a complex process of transaction between subject/object that threatens to disrupt this dynamic, scramble the roles of each participant, and more significantly, outline a space where the other may look back, disidentify, deconstruct, and finally critique the very processes of othering and the gaze that others. *Emanuelle in America* operates within this complex economy.

In this film there exists no obvious “other” acting as a racial and/or sexual parallel to the West. *Emanuelle* is not gallivanting with cannibals,

and aside from a brief stay in Venice, remains predominantly in the US. Again, Emanuelle undertakes the mediating subject that traffics the complex gazing economy and grants the viewer's gaze access to a world of the unknown. It is no surprise her character is a photojournalist whose camera and gaze reveals corruption in US politics. While exposing the sexual lives of the aristocracy in Venice, Emanuelle spies a white couple having sex while watching a snuff film.<sup>27</sup> She becomes disturbed by the genuine images of torture and death and decides to investigate the film's origins. Her search leads to a middle-aged, white US senator whose private sexual life is invested in the production of snuff films in South America and the kidnapping of young girls who end up in such films. Emanuelle seduces the senator and as a prelude to sex encourages him to show her "something really strong." After her disappointment with a light S/M film, the senator shows her the same film she witnessed in Venice. Expressing interest in the film and, as a ruse, confessing her own desire to be part of such an experience, the senator flies them both to a remote area of South America where Emanuelle can see firsthand the images she had previously seen on film.

I want to again distance myself from Mendik who cannot read Emanuelle as anything but monstrous. Undoubtedly, Gemser's films with D'Amato are some of the most violent films produced in Italy during the 70s, but it is a mistake to suggest Gemser is a passive figure whose insertion into filmic narratives of monstrosity somehow reconstructs her as an object of that monstrosity. Instead, her role as an active interlocutor whose ambivalent position as not-quite-other, not-quite-Western allows her to speak back to the West and its colonizing gaze. As a mediator she is closer to Rony's "third eye" that posits an exterior view on the politics of gazing. Viewers share this exterior view with Emanuelle's character when matched with her point-of-view when she gazes upon the snuff film. This point of view match initiates the decolonization of the gaze by uncovering colonialism's catastrophic foundations on display in the snuff film scenes. Viewers become Emanuelle's gaze and are forced to watch the horrors of colonialism without the sanitized ideological veneer of nation-building.

With the notorious snuff footage, *Emanuelle in America* shows the

civilized world what its hidden foundation is composed of: torture, humiliation, murder, and rape. It is no coincidence, therefore, that it is a US senator who is deeply implicated in a snuff film ring. When she initially meets the senator she feigns interest in his patriotic passion for the United States. He insists that “America is the greatest country in the world” and that the youth who disagree should be converted by being sent off to war so they can “get their heads on straight.” The senator’s American exceptionalism crossed with his praise for the US war machine constructs him as the archetype for Western patriarchal global capitalism that regards other countries as failures in democracy whose sovereignty may be compromised for the toughening up of liberal and antiwar American youth. Through the seduction of the senator who obviously reads Emanuelle as exotic and “different,” the spectator is sutured into the narrative which wastes no time exhibiting what are perhaps the most infamous “faked” snuff sequences ever put to celluloid.<sup>28</sup> As noted above, the viewer’s gaze becomes Emanuelle’s as she later peers through a small opening into a large chamber filled with torture devices and ten or more white men torturing and raping women. The fact the snuff film is linked to sexuality throughout the film further drives the point that the West’s colonizing projects were libidinally invested. What is placed before the gaze that wishes to witness, as promised by the film’s tagline, “a new experience in sensuality” is, instead, a playback of the horrors of Western colonization. As a viewer myself, I can attest to the extreme discomfort experienced while watching these sequences. The fact that such gruesome and horrific scenes exist within a film that predominantly includes romantic and erotic scenes of sexuality, makes their sudden appearance all the more alarming. It is impossible not to interpret such scenes as intentionally provocative for the viewer expecting more of the same softcore sex scenes witnessed thus far. This key moment in the film, where viewers assume Gemser/Emanuelle’s gaze, is a radical moment of decolonization of the gaze. Viewers are led to regard these scenes as if they are just another display of soft eroticism. However, it is these scenes that expose the invisible foundation of colonization. To the Western viewer, Gemser seems to say: “So, you wanted exotic sex, well how about *this!*”

### The Present Global Legacy of Mondo Cinema and the Colonial Gaze

A twenty-first century parallel to the snuff sequences in *Emanuelle in America* may be the horrific and genuine images of torture and humiliation recorded at the Abu Ghraib Iraq prison. The somewhat grainy and amateur footage and the ominous hooded figure of the man being electrocuted, all resemble at least in form, the look of fake snuff images from American exploitation cinema.<sup>29</sup> All the signifiers of snuff are present in these photos: an unknown location (despite the outside knowledge that these photos are from the Abu Ghraib prison, there is no other sign in the photo themselves that would confirm this), dim lighting, squalid conditions, blindfolded and bounded victims, and the exposure of naked bodies. Even a cursory viewing of the fake snuff films composing the Japanese *Guinea Pig* volumes would confirm the aesthetic relationship between the photos from Abu Ghraib and fake snuff films and images. Photographs and video of state-sponsored or sanctioned violence like the video from Abu Ghraib will continue to emerge as citizens use smartphone video as a form of protest. But, the important questions following the release of such images will be: how do citizens radically interpret these images so they undermine state violence? How do citizens reposition the gaze back onto the state and its ideological notions of justice, civilization, and racial/ethnic superiority?

Such questions lead to the most crucial parallel between the Abu Ghraib images and the fake snuff sequences from *Emanuelle in America*. When taken in the context of “speaking back” to the Western/civilized spectator and decolonizing its gaze, these images become a way of critiquing the grim practices of American imperialism. For example, Dora Apel analyzes how the images of Abu Ghraib, when reclaimed by artist-activists as images for reconstruction, may be read as “contributing to the resistance against the acts they represent.”<sup>30</sup> A more recent example of Apel’s point may be the admission by many US citizens who believed in a post-racial society that, following numerous videos of white policemen shooting unarmed black men, racism continues to thrive in the US. Following Apel’s critical work I want to posit that *Emanuelle in America* surfaces as a (s)exploitation horror film that decolonizes the

Western gaze and thereby exposes the cinematic machinations of the colonizing gaze making it available for post-colonial critique. Ultimately, Gemser's exotic/erotic appeal necessitated by her dark skin seduces, not only the US senator, but the spectator who cannot help but follow her to the darkest corners of "civilization" and find, not the secret of savage sexuality, but the terrible secret of the West's own base and "savage" foundations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Park, "The Madame Butterfly Effect," *Bitch Magazine* 64 (2014): 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> The basic definition of "exploitation" is any film that overemphasizes a particular trend in filmmaking that has proven itself financially lucrative. While some trends like nudity, post-apocalyptic narratives, zombies, and gangsters may seem harmless, other trends like Nazis, nuns, schoolgirls, women in prison, and rape/revenge stories, can all venture into politically and culturally sensitive sites.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 715.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Henninger, "Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and the Postcolonial Gaze," *Mississippi Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2003): 585.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Berkeley: Ginko Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>8</sup> The practice of including actual scenes of animal slaughter unfortunately continued through the Italian cannibal genre in films like the infamous *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (Umberto Lenzi, 1981), *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (Sergio Martino, 1978), *Eaten Alive!* (Umberto Lenzi, 1980), and others. These scenes were both exploited for their gore and level of realism.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, trans. Jonathan Cape (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 116.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 172.

<sup>11</sup> Xavier Mendik, "Black Sex, Bad Sex: Monstrous Ethnicity in the Black Emanuelle Films," in *Alternative Europe: Trash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945*, ed. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>14</sup> Although the term "black" continues to problematically dominate the discussion,

its general use obscures the rise of mondo films in the Asian continent such as the *Shocking Asia* series of films directed by Rolf Olsen in 1976 and 1985. As I have indicated previously, the term "black" by way of Laura Gemser, operates as a general colonial signifier that separates "white-European" people from any peoples of color.

<sup>15</sup> James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 177.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol.1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 69.

<sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Mendik, "Black Sex, Bad Sex," 156.

<sup>19</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Captive Bodies: Postcolonial Subjectivity in Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup> A "snuff film" is commonly defined as a narrative film showing the genuine murder of an actor or actress. Such films have been suspected to exist, but have been regarded by critics as a myth. However, this does not stop films from playing up to the suggestion they might contain snuff sequences. Snuff films are also different from mondo-styled films like *Faces of Death* (1978) and *Death Scenes* (1989), which compile accidental deaths from news reports and executions, for example.

<sup>28</sup> These sequences were so realistic that one of the actresses successfully sued D'Amato, claiming the filming caused her trauma.

<sup>29</sup> Although Canadian, see David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983).

<sup>30</sup> Dora Apel, "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (2005): 96.