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# THE BEGINNINGS OF EUROPEAN FILMMAKING IN SIAM

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## ABSTRACT

In 1908 the Danish company Nordisk Film sent cinematographer Ludvig Lippert on a journey to the East. His itinerary included Siam, where he shot impressions of Bangkok and the celebration of the 40-year jubilee of the reign of King Chulalongkorn. European photographers had been coming to Siam since the 1860s, documenting people, places, and culture, but Lippert's visit marked the first time that a European filmmaker came to Siam on a mission to make scenic films, commonly known as 'scenics', meant for distribution in Europe. Between 1910 and 1913 the French company Pathé Frères also produced its first scenics in Siam. Thus, before the outbreak of World War I, film productions by Nordisk Film and Pathé Frères constituted the first cinematic representations of Siam. Most of these scenics have been lost because of the brittleness of early celluloid and the turmoil of history. As a consequence, no in-depth academic discussion about them has taken place. This paper seeks to close this research gap. By way of contextualizing the Nordisk Film and Pathé Frères productions, outlining relevant film-historic circumstances, and drawing connections to 19<sup>th</sup>-century representations of Siam in photography, the paper offers insights into the beginnings of European filmmaking in Siam and makes an original contribution to the study of western portrayals of this Southeast Asian nation.

**Keywords:** Bangkok, Ludvig Lippert, Nordisk Film, Pathé Frères, Siam, silent film

## INTRODUCTION

European cinema entrepreneurs began documenting Siam in 1908, i.e. during the early silent film period. They shot scenic films, commonly known as 'scenics', which are short documentaries of one to three minutes' length and the forerunners of the more advanced travelogue films popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Scenics were collages of impressions of 'foreign' countries, peoples, and 'exotic' cultures. They catered to audiences' fascination with travel, exploration, discovery, and motion. Until World War II the European and U.S. American films made in Siam were documentaries that portray this Southeast Asian nation as a distant and exotic other, but since the 1950s an increasing number of narrative fiction

films have been produced to meet the demand of western audiences to watch the adventures of reliable characters roaming through Asia.

There has been a glaring lack of academic engagement with western films made in Siam before World War II because many of them are lost. Moreover, unreliable information about many films proliferated by online sources makes arriving at valid conclusions a difficult task. Thus, critical discourse has been limited to post-World War II fiction dramas, such as *The King and I* (USA 1956) and *The Beach* (USA 2000) and the documentary *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (AUS 1991).

This paper seeks to make an original contribution to a significant period in early silent film history. To this end, the researcher gathered a corpus of European scenics shot in Siam before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, focusing on those made by Danish cinematographer Ludvig Lippert for the Nordisk Film company in 1908 and 1909, as well as those commissioned or distributed by the French company Pathé Frères between 1910 and 1913. Scenics produced by other European entrepreneurs complete the discussion. Note that no U.S. American films were shot in Siam prior to World War I. Locating the European scenics in their proper film-historic context offers valuable insights into turn-of-the-century portrayals and perceptions of Siam.

The researcher found seventeen relevant films through searches in archival websites, which include the British Film Institute, the British Pathé historical collection, the Complete Index of World Film, Foundation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, as well as the Internet Movie Database. He then used a contextual approach that relies on a framework of production data, studies of the early silent film period, announcements, schedules, and reviews found in print sources of the 1908-1913 period to reconstruct the shooting locations, times of production, and preferred images of Siam, to sort them chronologically, and to place them within European and Siamese film histories.

## **EMERGING FILM CULTURE IN BANGKOK**

The period from the invention of cinema technology in the 1880s to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 is commonly referred to as 'early silent cinema'. France, Germany, Britain, Japan, and the U.S. led the establishment of the new medium. During its maiden years, technology was developed at a fast pace, screening venues were set up, and many productions, distribution, and exhibition companies were founded. In the early 1900s, rules of narration were established, most prominently by French directors Georges Méliès, Auguste Lumière, Louis Lumière, and the American director D.W. Griffith. Films became longer, their stories gained in complexity, and production quality increased to meet audience demand.

At first, Siam and the other Southeast Asian nations remained at the periphery of these cinematic developments because they depended on foreigners to introduce them to the new medium. However, Siam is a special case. Domestic filmmaking activity in the kingdom began already around 1900, especially in the capital and with European, Japanese, and royal Siamese involvement. The following insights about the emerging cinema culture in Bangkok are by Barmé (1999), with additional sources provided by the researcher:

- King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 20 Sept. 1853 - 23 Oct. 1910) was the first Siamese to be filmed when he was on a royal state visit to Berne, Switzerland on 25 May 1897.

*Berne: Arrivée du Roi de Siam* (tr.: “Berne: Arrival of the King of Siam”), also known as *Le Roi du Siam à Berne* (tr.: “The King of Siam in Berne”). The film by Francois-Henri Lavancy-Clarke shows the royal procession in the streets of the Swiss capital (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Still from *Berne: Arrivée du Roi de Siam*, 25 May 1897.**

- A second film showing King Chulalongkorn was recorded during his visit to Stockholm, Sweden on 13 July 1897. Bachmann (2013) states that it was titled *Konungens af Siam landstigning vid Logårdstrappan* (dir. Ernest Florman, tr.: “King of Siam landing at Logårdstrappan”), aka *The Arrival of the King of Siam in Stockholm*. This was the first film ever made in Sweden and shows Siam’s king visiting a fair and being welcomed by Sweden’s King Oscar II (p. 360).
- The first public screening in Siam took place in June 1897 at a venue owned by Prince Mom Chao Alangkarn. Traveling showman S. G. Marchovsky (nationality unknown) screened two films to an audience of six-hundred people. Later, he put on more screenings for members of the royal family and Bangkok’s aristocracy.
- Fascinated by the new medium, Prince Sanphasat Suphakit, a younger brother of King Chulalongkorn, became a cinema enthusiast and the first filmmaker of the royal family. In 1900 he acquired the necessary equipment to produce and exhibit his own short films. In 1903 his works were part of a screening program organized by the American Edison Cinematograph Company at the Oriental Hotel. The royal patronage of the medium was significant, giving it prestige and assuring the Siamese people’s positive attitude towards it. They labelled films ‘nang farang’, i.e. ‘shadow-theatre by foreigners’.
- Around 1903, foreign cinema entrepreneurs began to discover Siam as a new market. The Edison Cinematograph Company and the British Imperial Bioscope Company screened their productions in Bangkok. Thus, foreigners were among the first to make films locally, but they were soon outnumbered by their Siamese counterparts.

- The Japanese pioneer Watanabe Tomoyori arrived in Bangkok in October 1904. He received a permit to set up a tent for 1'000 spectators in Nakorn Kasem, a central area of Bangkok, for screening Japanese documentaries. In 1905 Watanabe had Bangkok's first cinema constructed and then ventured into film production together with his Japanese associates.
- Some European and Chinese entrepreneurs set up small screening venues, such as tents and warehouses. In 1905, a Frenchman opened a cinema close to the Oriental Store. This was followed by the Royal Vitascope Theatre, which began operations in October 1906.
- The Thai-Chinese Phatanakorn Film Company was founded in 1910 and was made profitable by its leader Siaw So'nguan Sibunru'ang. He signed contracts with producers and distributors, such as the American companies Vitagraph and Selig Polyscope as well as the French companies Éclair and—most relevant to this paper—Pathé Frères. Other major players were Krungthep Cinematograph, Nakorn Kasem Cinema Company, and the Siam Niramai Company, which all contributed to the flourishing of Bangkok's film culture.
- In celebration of the three-year anniversary of Watanabe's cinema and the 40-year jubilee of King Chulalongkorn's reign, screenings were held in November 1908 at the Dusit Palace. Further recordings of various royal ceremonies followed in 1910. Amid growing competition in the Bangkok cinema market and growing public demand for the new entertainment, Watanabe's cinema received royal endorsement in 1910.
- 1912 saw the production of the first Siamese narrative film: *A Siamese Elopement*. Another local production made that year was *The Burglar and the Chloroform*. The title suggests some European involvement in the production process. After 1912 there are no further records of Siamese-initiated film projects until 1922. In that year, the Royal Siamese Rail Film Unit was established and played an important role in the formation of Siam's film industry (Barmé, 1999, pp. 308-318).

The overview given above shows that there was a steadily growing cinema culture and industry in turn-of-the-century Bangkok, with the royal endorsement of the modern medium being pivotal to its acceptance by the public. Early on, Siamese, Japanese, and European entrepreneurs engaged in film production and exhibition. From 1903 onward, travelling filmmakers stopping in Bangkok could expect the locals to be familiar with the new medium and appreciative of the visitors' cinematic missions. It is problematic to determine, however, whether Bangkok's film businesses and visiting crews collaborated, and if they did, how the collaboration occurred.

Meanwhile, the years 1905 to 1912 saw significant global expansion and stabilization of cinema, as fierce competition in a quickly internationalizing production and distribution market began. Pathé Frères and Gaumont, both from France, as well as Nordisk Film from Denmark, set the pace, with companies from Britain, Germany, USA, and Japan also showing international ambitions. As will be seen below, Nordisk Film and Pathé Frères pivotal to the beginning of European filmmaking in Siam. One would expect that Gaumont or even the American Biograph Company, founded in 1895, would produce scenics in pre-World War I Siam too, but it appears that they did not, because they were beaten to the race by their competitors.

## NORDISK FILM AND LUDVIG LIPPERT

Since Ole Olsen founded Nordisk Film in Copenhagen in 1906, the company survived two global conflicts and several financial crises and still produces films today, making it one of the oldest film companies in existence. Nordisk Film single-handedly put Denmark on the map of European cinema. It entered the competition with Pathé Frères and Gaumont outside continental Europe, for instance, by expanding its distribution capability with the opening of the Great Northern Film Company in New York in 1908 and by sending cinematographers to Africa and Asia. One of them was Ludvig Lippert (1878-1939), who worked as cameraman and director on short documentaries (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Ludvig Lippert (ca. 1930).**

From 1907 to 1912 Lippert travelled abroad more often and further than any other Nordisk Film employee. During his journeys, messages from the company headquarters in Copenhagen kept him up-to-date on the competitors' releases and suggested subjects he could shoot next. It was important to avoid making scenics like those of the competition because audiences expected to be entertained through a combination of familiarity and originality.

In 1908, as has been elaborated by Engberg (2003, pp. 48-50) and Bachmann (2013, pp. 84-85), Nordisk sent Lippert on a journey to the East. Bachmann (2013,) writes:

[O]ne trip of some importance was Lippert's Eastern tour in the autumn of 1908. The route was via Belgrade [Kingdom of Serbia], Constantinople [Istanbul, Turkey] and Port Said [Egypt] to Bangkok. It was crucial for Nordisk to alert him that Pathé had just issued a film of Constantinople "paa Kryds og Tvers [*sic*]" – i.e., all over that city, and that also (the likewise French) Raleigh & Robert had made a Constantinople film. Hence, they wanted Lippert to save his precious film stock unless he was certain to capture the sultan as well as the palace including interiors, such footage



apparently being a rarity. In preparation, Nordisk arranged to pay a Mr. Rosenberg at the Danish consulate DKK 500, provided he brokered exclusive access for Lippert to something of interest and paved the way for some original footage. (pp. 84-85)

Lippert became the first filmmaker to take pictures of Sultan Abdul Hamid II during a large procession. The 7-minute film *Sultan Hamid and the Harem Ladies* premiered in Copenhagen on 23 Oct. 1908, but it no longer exists. Lippert continued his journey to Egypt, where he made the short films *Egyptian Cities* and *Oldtidens Ægypten* (tr.: "Ancient Egypt"), both of which are also lost. On his next stop in Sudan, he made *Drommedareksercits in Sudan* (tr.: "Dromedary drill in Sudan") (Bachmann, 2013, p. 48).

His next stop was Siam.

According to Bachmann (2013), the "main purpose of [Lippert's] trip was to cover the celebrations of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Chulalongkorn's reign in Siam" (p. 360). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of important social and political changes in Siam. King Chulalongkorn, who reigned the nation from 11 Nov. 1868 to 23 October 1910, was instrumental in Siam's modernization processes, nation-building, and forming of diplomatic relations with western nations. The West was certainly aware of the developments in Siam; consequently, a company such as Nordisk Film would show an interest in filming a major celebration of Siam's monarch.

Once in Siam, Lippert made scenic films, commonly referred to as 'scenics'. These rudimentary documentaries were precursors of the more sophisticated travelogues. Conveying images of traditional life in European countries and on other continents, scenics offered a window to the world. They allowed viewers in the West glimpses of distant peoples and places, incorporated elements of travel reportage as well as ethnography, and offered impressions of traditions and cultures that the film production studios marketed as picturesque or exotic. It was typical for a travelling filmmaker like Lippert to produce scenics that would be considered authentic, e.g. by observing people at work and by ensuring the freshness of the impressions. Stereotypical images had to be avoided.

The modes of visual portrayals of distant cultures used by scenics had been established by 19<sup>th</sup>-century photography and non-fiction literature. Bachmann (2013) states that Nordisk Film productions presented "views familiar from postcards, stereography, [and] travel literature (p. 86)". Thus, company decision-makers were familiar with common visual and literary representations of other nations, including Siam. In prominent pictures of Siam taken between 1860 to 1910 by photographers from Germany, France, and Switzerland (see Chakrabongse & Piemmetawat 2015; Bautze 2016), the following subjects dominated: portraits of royals, people in high office, and monks, as well as pictures of commoners at work or in front of their homes, religious rites, royal ceremonies, Khon and Lakhon performers, royal barge processions, the king's elephants, the dwellings of commoners, temples in Bangkok, the Chao Phraya River, the river shores, Wat Arun (Temple of the Dawn), Wat Saket (Golden Mount), the royal palace, and temple guardian figures. Moving images produced in Siam after the turn of the century, whether by Lippert or others, must have included many of these impressions known from photography.

Engberg (2003) mentions four works by Lippert made in Siam in 1908: *Kongen af Siams Regeringsjubilæum*, *Bankok i Fest* [sic], *Siamesisk Skuespil*, and *Fra Elefanternes Land* (p. 48). *Kongen af Siams Regeringsjubilæum* (Dn 1908, tr.: "King of Siam's Government Jubilee", also known as *Siam-Kongejubilæum*, tr. "Siamese King's Anniversary") was 155 meters long (Engberg, 2003,

p. 48). It was presumably shot around 11-13 November 1908 in Bangkok in front of Throne Hall, capturing the festivities and processions in celebration of King Chulalongkorn's 40-year anniversary on the throne.

*Bangkok i Fest* [sic] (Dn 1908, probably *Bangkok i Fest*, tr.: "Bangkok Fest") was 95 meters long (Engberg 2003, p. 48). Unverified alternative titles are *Fest i Bangkok* (Dn), *Bangkok, Festivals in Bangkok*, *Bangkok: The King of Siam's Capital*, and *Bangkok: The King of Siam* (Complete Index to World Film, n.d. -b). It may have been another recording of abovementioned celebrations in honor of King Chulalongkorn.

*Siamesisk Skuespil* (Dn 1908, tr.: "A Siamese Drama"), with the alternative title *Siamese Actors and Actresses Play a Siamese Drama*, was 110 meters long. The title implies that this was a recording of a traditional Siamese drama, possibly of the Ramakien, which is a national epic, or of a Khon dance performance. The drama was most likely staged for the camera, just like many Siam-set travelogues in the following decades would include a segment of a staged Ramakien performance.

Engberg (2003) explains that due to the humidity in Siam the celluloid of already shot footage stuck to the inside of the zinc boxes in which they were stored and destroyed them (p. 49). This is true for the first three films, but *Fra Elefanternes Land* (Dn 1908, tr.: "The Land of Elephants"), with the alternative titles *Le pays des éléphants* (Fr) and *Das Land der Elefanten* (De) and a length of 155 meters, has survived. Engberg (2003) has suggested that Lippert shot it in Bangkok during a grand procession (p. 48, see Figure 3), but Petterson (2011), groups it together with six other Nordisk Film productions from 1909, none of which were set in Siam, stating: "Danish nature film series, of which none have survived" (p. 192).



**Figure 3: Lippert shooting a procession in Siam**

Petterson is correct in saying that *Fra Elefanternes Land* was not made in Siam, however, the version made with German language intertitles exists. It has recently been digitalized by the British Film Institute (n.d. -c) and made available in the public domain under the

German title *Das Land der Elefanten* and the alternative title *Hard Working Elephants*. It shows elephants working to move large logs of teakwood. The traditional clothes and head scarfs of the coolies riding on the toiling elephants suggest that it was made in Burma or India. Thus, even though *Fra Elefanternes Land* is most likely Lippert's work – the Nordisk Film company logo is visible on the intertitles – and features astonishing footage of elephants and coolies in the jungle, it does not belong to the first films made in Siam.

Lippert probably produced several more films in Siam, either in 1908 or 1909. Based on a letter from Stæhr to Lippert, Thorsen (2017) believes that Lippert was in Luzern, Switzerland, in February 1909, awaiting orders to travel to Greece to document a popular uprising there (p. 43). However, Stæhr's letter is dated 18 February 1910, and violent conflict in Greece between civilians and the military occurred on 6 March 1910. Thus, Thorsen has misread the year the letter was sent. It is conceivable that Lippert did return to Siam during the dry season in early 1909 to shoot more scenics. A comment by Bachmann (2015) seems to confirm this: "Stæhr's general recipe was a one-to-one ratio of the established versus the fresh. During Lippert's stay in Bangkok in 1909, he was told to photograph sacred white elephants, but at the same time that ordinary people were just as interesting" (p. 85). Therefore, the scenics *Livet på Menamfloden* and *Livet i Nordsiam* were almost certainly shot in 1909.

*Livet på Menamfloden* (Dn 1909, tr.: "Life on the Menam River") has the alternative title *Crossing Siam on the River Menam*. The original title implies impressions of the Chao Phraya River, which would have included the locals, dwellings, and nature along the river banks, possibly captured from a boat. The film may have included views of Wat Arun because it was a popular landmark of 19<sup>th</sup>-century travel photography and of American travelogue films after World War I. Western audiences would associate Wat Arun with Bangkok and most certainly see it as a symbol of 'the mysterious Orient'. This scenic may also be known as *Bangkok* (1910), as listed by Usai (1986, p. 331) and in the Complete Index to World Film (n.d. -a). The latter source gives the alternative title *Through Siam's Capital: Bangkok by Steamer and Boat* (1910) and the scenic's length at 112 meters.

*Livet i Nordsiam* (Dn 1909, tr.: Life in North Siam) has been listed as *Streetlife in the North of Siam*, *Das Leben in Nordsiam* (De), and *Dans le Siam du Nord* (Fr). The unverified alternative title *Life in Mount Siam* (Complete Index to World Film, n.d. -c). sounds peculiar The Internet Movie Database (n.d. -c) inaccurately lists *Livet i Nordsiam* as the oldest film made in Siam. Apparently, it was released in Denmark on 20 April 1909 and in the U.S. on 9 June 1909. As stated by Turner Classic Movies, the Great Northern Film Company, i.e. Nordisk Film's affiliate in the U.S., was the distributor on the new continent (2010). The original title suggests that it was shot in the north, possibly in Chiang Mai or the Golden Triangle, and that it depicts the life of common farmers.

Then, there is the curious case of *Ligbranding*, for which Lippert may have travelled to Laos. *Ligbranding* (Dn 1909, tr.: "Cremation", also known as *Dronningen af Laos Ligbranding*, tr.: "Cremation of the Queen of Laos") has been listed as *Cremation of the Queen of Laos, Siam* (British Film Institute, n.d. -b). This title is odd because Laos was an independent state and a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, no female member of the Laos royal family was cremated in 1909. *Ligbranding* may have included the cremation of a royal as well as footage of a location in Siam, but this is speculative.

Following Lippert's visit(s) to Siam, Nordisk Film continued having business connections in Bangkok. According to Thorsen (2017), Nordisk Film,



had regular agents in three markets: France, Italy and North America. In Denmark and Scandinavia, Nordisk sold its films through travelling representatives, and the three branches traded locally in Germany, Britain, and the U.S.—and sometimes they sold to territories in which Nordisk did not have an agent. Moreover, sales were sometimes made directly from the main office, for instance to Bangkok. (p. 64)

This information is based on a letter dated 19 April 1909 from Nordisk Film manager Wilhelm Stæhr to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Cooperation in Bangkok. It proves that Nordisk Film had affiliates in Bangkok and a system set up to provide exhibitors there with films.

## PATHÉ FRÈRES

The four French brothers Charles, Émile, Théophile, and Jacques Pathé founded Société Pathé Frères in Paris in 1896 and within a few years had established the company as the world leader in film technology innovation, production, and distribution. For instance, Pathé Frères produced phonograph records, newsreels, non-flammable film, and recording equipment. Early on, Pathé Frères' output was immense and its global reach in distribution unmatched. During its most prolific period from 1896 to 1924, the company produced and distributed over 6200 films, (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). In North America, the films were distributed by the General Film Company (1909-1920). Moreover, Sukwong & Suawannapak (2006) state that in 1906 the Pathé-Exchange Company opened a distribution branch in Singapore (p. 4). From there it could provide exhibitors in Bangkok with films.

Pathé Frères became the second foreign company significantly involved in the beginnings of European filmmaking activity in Siam with at least six scenics: *The Japanese Film* (Jp 1910), *Transportation in Siam* (Fr 1911), *Canaux et rivières au Siam* (Fr 1911), *Mœurs et coutumes siamoises* (Fr 1912), *Attraverso il Siam* (It 1913), and *Bangkok, capitale du Royaume de Siam* (Fr 1913). Information about them is sketchy and only *The Japanese Film* is available in the public domain. Nevertheless, their history can be reconstructed to some extent.

A scenic with the unofficial title *The Japanese Film* (Jp 1910) has recently been discovered in the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam. It is three-and-a-half minutes long and includes German language intertitles. According to Film Archive Thailand (online), its alternative title may be *The funeral procession of the late King of Siam*, a film made by the Royal Japanese Cinematograph, the first permanent cinema in Siam (2018, Oct. 22). Thus, *The Japanese Film* was filmed by a Japanese crew based in Bangkok, exhibited there in June 1911, and purchased by Pathé Frères for distribution in Europe. The establishing shots show the hustle and bustle along the Chao Phraya River banks. Boats and steamers can be seen. The view of factory chimneys on both sides of the river point to a shooting location below Rattanakosin Island (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4: The Chao Phraya River with ships and factories**

This is followed by an unrelated segment of vultures plucking on leftovers fed to them by a Siamese (see Figure 5). This scene is unique regarding early films made in Siam and is a reminder that during times of epidemics in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, corpses were sometimes taken to Wat Saket (Golden Mount) to be devoured by vultures.



**Figure 5: Vultures fighting over food scraps**

The third segment shows the elaborate preparations for King Chulalongkorn's cremation ceremony at the Grand Palace, Wat Pho, and Sanam Luang, filmed around 16 March 1910 (see Figures 6 and 7). There are workers decorating stairs, the elevation of a scaffold, followed by processions on temple grounds with Siamese militaries, dignitaries, and commoners. For its depictions of these funeral preparations, *The Japanese Film* is of immense significance. It will certainly become the subject of much scrutiny by Thai historians.



Figure 6: Cremation ceremony preparation: receiving the coffin.



Figure 7: Cremation ceremony preparation: practicing the procession

*Transportation in Siam* (Fr 1911) was released in the U.S. on 26 June 1911 as a split reel along with the drama *The Sublime Pardon* (1911) (Internet Movie Database, n.d. -d). No French title could be found. It is perhaps about the transportation of trade goods and people by boat or it may feature impressions of Siamese trains because the Royal State Railways of Siam (RSR) was founded in 1890; thus, by the turn of the century, trains could be used by film crews.

*Canaux et rivières au Siam* (Fr 1911, tr.: “Canals and Rivers of Siam”) has the alternative titles *Siam, Its Rivers and Canals*, *Rivers and Canals of Siam*, as well as *Canals and Rivers in Siam*. Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (2008c, referring to Bousquet, 1994) states that it is 130

meters long, 120 meters of which are colored, and belongs to the genre of “Scène de plein air”, i.e. it features outdoor scenes and is, therefore, a typical scenic. It is conceivable that Cinecolograph technology was used to add hues of red, blue and green. *Canaux et rivières au Siam* was announced in Ciné-Journal on 10 October 1911, played at the Théâtre Omnia, Rouen, France from 29 Nov. to 5 Dec. 1911, and was released in the U.S. on 30 May 1912 (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008c). The broadsheet Poverty Bay Herald promoted it in New Zealand as “the fine scenic subject ‘Rivers and Canals of Siam’” (Pathé Pictures, 1912, Oct. 16, p. 3). This is an indication of just how far away from France Pathé Frères products were shipped. According to Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, the scenic follows a journey on various waterways. The viewer sees river banks, an entire riverfront city furrowed by sampans and long-tail boats, impressions of the vegetation, dwellings, wooden walkways, as well as hardworking people on boats and along the river banks (2008c). These impressions of Bangkok’s waterways are typical of European travelogues made in Siam in the 1920s and 1930s and certainly also featured in the pre-World War I scenics.

*Mœurs et coutumes siamoises* (Fr 1912, tr.: “Siamese traditions and customs”) was produced by Impérium Film, distributed by Pathé Frères, and announced in Ciné-Journal on 15 June 1912 (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008d). This outdoor film has been listed as *Siamesische Sitten und Gebräuche* (The German Early Cinema Database, The, n.d.), which confirms that it was shown in Germany. The title points to the depiction of typical Siamese traditions. *Siamese Customs* (Fr 1914), listed by the Internet Movie Database (n.d. -b) as a Pathé Frères production released in the U.S. on 22 April 1914, should be the same scenic. The film presents authentic Siamese traditions and customs. Set in a luxuriant landscape, it opens with a procession to a pagoda where the Siamese intend to offer their goods to Buddha. Then, there are scenes of busy streets, a market, and a Muay Thai boxing match (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008d). Again, these are all typical subjects of interest captured by European photographers and filmmakers.

*Attraverso il Siam* (Fr 1913, tr. “Through Siam”) is another noteworthy production. According to Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (2008a), the Italian title is the original, while *À travers le Siam* is the French alternative title. *Travel Pictures in Siam*, mentioned by the British Film Institute (n.d. -f), must be the same scenic. It is 92 meters long, was produced by Modern Pictures, distributed by Pathé Frères, and announced in Ciné-Journal on 30 August 1913 (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008a). *Attraverso il Siam* begins with boats filled with goods, such as exotic fruit, bananas, betel nuts, coconuts, and sugarcane. There are sampans and light skiffs on which some of the locals are busy at work. Other locals are seen smoking and playing games with their family and friends. Further scenes include the Siamese performing a dance with knives (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008a). This is most likely a demonstration of Krabi-krabang, a traditional sword fight where the combatants showcase their agility and skills.

*Bangkok, capitale du Royaume de Siam* (Jp 1913, tr.: “Bangkok, capital of the Kingdom of Siam”) may be the same scenic as *Bangkok, Siam*, listed by the British Film Institute (n.d. -a). It was a Japanese production distributed by Pathé Frères and a Ciné-Journal announcement of 10 January 1914 indicates that it was distributed in France. It features impressions of a royal ceremony of a deceased king (King Chulalongkorn), the palace, the royal residence, and a Buddhist temple (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, 2008b).



Finally, there is the curious case of *A Battle to the Death* (UK 1930, aka *Pathé Pictorial No 622*). It shows two Siamese fish in a tank fighting to the death. British Pathé (n.d.) mistakenly gives the year of production as 1911, but the watermark, intertitles, and a rudimentary map of Siam establish it as a product of the Pathé Pictorial series launched in 1930.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has given a detailed overview of the first European scenics shot in Siam and intended for distribution in Europe and the U.S. It has discussed them within the contexts of the early silent film period, the rapidly expanding cinema industries in Europe, and the emerging film culture in turn-of-the-century Bangkok.

The most relevant scenics were commissioned by the Danish Nordisk Film company in 1908 and 1909 and filmed by cinematographer Ludvig Lippert. Equally important scenics were produced and/or distributed by the French company Pathé Frères from 1910 to 1913. For the most part, the scenics were made in Bangkok and a small number in rural areas, such as the north of Siam. Unfortunately, most of them are either lost, stored away in archives, or of obscure identity.

19<sup>th</sup>-century European non-fiction texts about Siam, such as travel journals and reports by missionaries and diplomats, sometimes reveal colonial, imperial, and Eurocentric attitudes, as they fueled imaginations of Siam as a land of mystery, waiting to be discovered and conquered by the 'brave' European colonialist. However, such portrayals were not part of European scenics made in Siam. Working with impressions already known from 19<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographic photography, they were made with the genuine ambition to portray Siamese life and society accurately. This is evidenced by the scenics' titles and alternative titles in Danish, French, German, and English, which point to respectful representations of Siam's cultures and traditions. Of particular interest were dance performances as well as impressions of life and commerce along the Chao Phraya River and Bangkok's numerous waterways. They would include the people's dwellings, various vessels filled with goods, and the locals during labor and leisure. Famous temples, the Royal Palace, and auspicious events were captured too. For instance, the 1908-celebration of King Chulalongkorn's 40-year jubilee as the reigning monarch was of major interest to the Nordisk Film company and the reason to have Ludvig Lippert travel to faraway Siam to capture it on film.

Of course, the scenics had to satisfy the audience's expectation of impressions that would provide them with a sense of curiosity and discovery. Audiences in Europe and the U.S. must have associated these basic documentaries of rural idyll and pre-modern life in an ostensibly exotic, distant land with nostalgia for what seemed to be a better past because they themselves were living in a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization.

Many pieces of the puzzle that make up the picture of early European filmmaking in Siam still need to be located and put into the right places. Thus, further research may focus on several areas, three of which are outlined below.

Much remains to be clarified about Nordisk Film's and Pathé Frères's scenics made in Siam. For instance, what was the exact number of scenics, when and where were they made, and which scenics may still exist? Who were Lippert's assistants, who were the crews making the scenics for Pathé Frères, and what kind of creative decision-making power did they have?

Secondly, further research should clarify the relevance of three obscure scenics, each of which has the potential to add further insights. *Village Life in Siam* (UK 1910) was produced by the British company Cosmopolitan Films (1910-1914) – not by the U.S. American Cosmopolitan Film Company (British Film Institute, n.d. -g). Its existence is subject to verification. The title points to an ethnographic approach to Siamese rural life and would confirm that some scenics were shot outside the capital. Another potentially relevant scenic is *Views of Bangkok, India* (USA 1912), produced by the influential American director Patrick Anthony Powers (1870-1948) and announced in *Moving Picture World* (1912, Apr.-June). The title is peculiar as there is no city in India named Bangkok. It may, in fact, refer to two separate scenics that were shown as a double bill. Govlin (2015) groups it together with other early Hollywood scenics depicting cities and life in India (p. 22). Whether sites in Bangkok are included remains unclear. Finally, *C'est un oiseau qui vient de Siam* (Fr 1914, tr.: "It's a bird that comes from Siam") was produced by Gaumont. The title is a reference to the 1885-song *C'est un oiseau qui vient de France*. As the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (n.d.) only mentions the title, the subject matter and relevance need to be determined. These three films point to the possibility that apart from Nordisk Film and Pathé Frères, other western companies were also shooting footage in Siam for distribution in Europe and the U.S.

One should consider significant events in Siam after the turn of the century and their impacts on domestic and foreign filmmaking. On 11 November 1911 prince Vajiravudh (1 Jan. 1880 - 25 Nov. 1925) was crowned King Rama VI. He formed a private army named Wild Tiger Corps and on 13 January 1912, an army coup against him was unsuccessful. This turmoil had an impact on social, cultural, and political life in the kingdom and may have affected domestic and foreign filmmaking too.

What happened after the first phase of European filmmaking in Siam? During World War I European production companies struggled to remain operational domestically and did not dispatch crews to Siam anymore. For instance, as Bordwell and Thompson (2003) have pointed out, the Danish film industry—of course with Nordisk Film at its helm—remained healthy until World War I cut off many of its export markets (p. 36). There are traces of sporadic western filmmaking activity in Siam during the war, but they would require extensive probing to generate any meaningful insights. After the war, the German, French and other film industries needed years of recovery and their activity in Siam came to a temporary halt. Nordisk Film never returned to Siam and Pathé Frères did not come back until the early sound period of the 1930s. The void was filled by Americans, e.g. by filmmaker Burton Holmes, who commissioned a noteworthy series of travelogues in Siam in 1919. The most important work of the late silent film period became the Academy Award-winning ethnographic drama *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (USA 1927). American dominance of foreign filmmaking in Siam/Thailand continued until the 1960s, at which point European film producers began to return in significant numbers.

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### Filmography (In chronological order)

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