



Abdellatif Kechiche's *Vénus noire* (2010) Pygmalion, Ophelia, and the voyeur

Janice VALLS-RUSSELL

- 1 This is not a film where you would expect to find a reference to Shakespeare, still less to Ophelia. The opening shots take the viewer into an amphitheatre crowded with dark-suited men, seated around a small stage on which stands a tall object hidden by a drapery, before a display of drawings. A line on the screen indicates: “Paris, Académie royale de médecine 1815.” A white-haired man enters, bows to applause. The drapery is removed, revealing the upper half of a black female figure. The camera travels in extreme close-up from the head and its unseeing eyes, down her powerful shoulders, her large firm breasts, her stomach, and lingers on her genitals. The physically imposing figure is absolutely still. Is this a live figure? A statue? Is the surface texture skin? Copper? Painted plaster? The white-haired man, who is the naturalist Frédéric Georges Cuvier (François Marthouret), hands round a jar containing the genitals of a woman and, comparing them with those of monkeys, comments on their shape by pointing to the drawings on display. As he uses zoological language, speaking with the confidence of a renowned scientist, the scene briefly cuts to the woman’s expressionless face. At the close of Cuvier’s lecture, the camera offers another extreme close-up of the woman’s face: by then, the offscreen spectator has understood that the figure in the amphitheatre is a statue. And yet – and yet: surely, this time, this is a live woman’s face?
- 2 The following sequence takes us back in time (“Londres, juin 1810”), to a grey-bluish, urban atmosphere, with one of the rare long, outdoor takes in the film. The camera swiftly closes in for a full, then medium shot of a fairground, with a fire-eater and booths, before hustling the viewer inside one of the booths, where a barred cage stands on a tiny stage, covered with an animal skin. A man cracks a whip and a half-crouching, black female figure emerges, almost naked. We see her through the eyes of the onscreen crowd (and ours, offscreen?) then the camera turns and we briefly fear that it will pick us out, in the tight, close-up knot of humbly dressed men, women and children who gaze open-mouthed, squeal and jeer. Later in the film, the scene changes yet again, to reception rooms in Paris crowded with gowned women and men in evening dress or dress uniform. They press in around a black woman dressed in skin-tight red leggings and top, who dances as in a trance then replies with monosyllables to their questions, before they crowd in on her again. A man rides on her back, striking her as he would a horse’s flank, then, in a later scene, a woman. Eyes examine her, hands touch her, with an eagerness, conveyed by the camera closing in, that suggests a collective rape into which we are drawn even as we watch.
- 3 The objectified female figure submitted to medical scrutiny, gawking and prurient voyeurism – all manifestations of an obscene fascination/repulsion with otherness – is the “Hottentot Venus.”¹ In *Vénus noire*, which was released in 2010, Abdellatif Kechiche retraces the experience of Saartjie “Sara” Baartman, a young black slave who was persuaded to leave South Africa for Europe in 1810 with Alexander Dunlop, a navy surgeon and exporter of museum specimens from Cape Town. At the time, “flora, fauna and people were all commodities to be collected,” especially when “just arrived

¹ On the term “Hottentot,” which Europeans used to designate the Khoisan of South Africa, see François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar. *L’Invention du Hottentot, histoire du regard occidental sur les Khoisan (XV^e-XIX^e siècles)*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002.

from the interior of Africa,” to quote a poster of the time advertising Baartman’s exhibition.² Dunlop promised her freedom and a chance to make her fortune as a dancer, but the reality she discovered was somewhat different. Sold to a showman, Hendrick Caezar, Baartman was exhibited at human freak shows in London and elsewhere. Sold to a French animal-trainer, Réaux, she was commodified as an attraction in aristocratic and libertine circles in Paris, where she may have ended up as a prostitute – the option Kechiche has chosen to make his. She was also submitted to the scrutiny of scientists and artists, who produced the ethnographic illustrations. After her death in 1815 or 1816, at the age of 26 or 27, she continued to be a victim of pseudo-scientific theories on the human species and became a museum artefact. A cast was moulded from her body which was then dissected, her skeleton was preserved, as well as her brain and genitals which were displayed in jars. Her skeleton and body cast were exhibited in Paris at the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle, then at the Musée de l’Homme until their removal in 1974 (for the skeleton) and 1976 (for the body cast).³

- 4 A quarter of the way into the 162-minute film, there is this exchange between Baartman (Yahima Torres) and Caezar (André Jacobs), mostly filmed in close-ups and extreme close-ups. It comes after Baartman has complained about being touched and pinched. Caezar is irritated because she has not played her part as a “wild woman” convincingly enough:

Saartjie. You said more heart.

Caezar. I didn’t ask you to sing! They come to admire your backside. A fat healthy arse they can touch. You’re human, like they are. Your body enthral them. You should be proud.

S. You said I could sing and dance, but instead I’m in a cage, grunting like an animal. They pinch me, it’s always the same. I don’t want –

C. But it’s only a game! You and I, we play like children.

S. I want beauty!

C. Beauty? Meaning? You want to play Ophelia too? Our show is beautiful. We give pleasure to those poor English folk who come to dream. Understand? We give them a taste of the wild. Isn’t that beautiful?

S. I no longer want the cage.

C. What’s wrong with it?

S. Why don’t you go in the cage?

C. Why not! Great idea! Let’s try it. You push me into the cage, I break free and punish you with the stick. I like this idea.

S. Well I don’t.

C. That’s enough. We came here to make money. And we’re making lots. And we’ll make more if you obey! [*shakes her*] (time code: 45.46-47.04)⁴

“You want to play Ophelia too?” Caezar’s repartee is possibly one of the cruellest taunts in a relentless film that segments Baartman’s body in extreme close-ups and, in the process, anatomises the act of gazing – as regards both its cultural aesthetic conventions and its ethical implications. Baartman speaks little in the film: except for this dialogue, she hardly ever voices her inner thoughts. Since she presumably has no idea who Ophelia is and what she stands for in terms of world drama and Western aesthetic conventions, Caezar’s mockery is incomprehensible to her – but not to the audience, into whose lap the sardonic question lands like a hot potato, raising a number of uncomfortable issues:

² Sadiyah Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’.” *History of Science* 42 (2004): 233-57, 234; 237 for a reproduction of the poster.

³ For more on Baartman, see Karen Harvey. “Baartman, Sara [*performing name* the Hottentot Venus] (1777x88-1815/16), ‘celebrity and subject of scientific speculation’.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (entry date, 23 September 2004). See also Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman.” On Baartman and her afterlife, see Gérard Badou. *L’Énigme de la Vénus hottentote*. Paris: JC Lattès, 2000. For a focus on the scientists’ role, see Claude Blanckaert. *La Vénus hottentote: entre Barnum et Muséum*. Paris: Publications scientifiques du Muséum, 2013. Online edition, 2019: <https://books.openedition.org/mnhn/3912> (accessed 29 March 2021).

⁴ The languages of the film are Afrikaans, English and French. I use English subtitles when the characters speak in Afrikaans, and quote directly from the English or French soundtrack.

“Am I expected to laugh? At what? At the idea of Saartjie performing Ophelia? In contempt? Discomfort? To gasp in indignation? At the mockery? At Caesar? At Kechiche?”

- 5 I wish to use this reference to Ophelia as a thread into the film, to try and unravel the significance that may be attached to it, in the context of this fictionalised trajectory of a historic figure in a specific cultural context. This reference to Ophelia, and her fate, is framed by an unacknowledged reworking of the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion the sculptor. Opening his film, Pygmalion-like, with a statue, Kechiche breathes life into Baartman while building up around her a heavy ambience through which he exposes pseudo-scientific racial theories and confronts his audiences with a colonial legacy that continues to resonate. Cuvier functions as a counter-Pygmalion, reducing a living woman’s body to an object of observation, measurement, dissection and ultimate petrification: stepping onto the stage of the Académie de médecine like an acclaimed artist, he theatrically pauses as his assistant removes the drapery to reveal the master’s “oeuvre.” The moment when Baartman’s face seems to come to life at the close of Cuvier’s conference dramatically conveys a tension between the anatomist’s life-denying technicity and the film director’s life-giving art: as with the story of Ophelia, the viewer knows how Baartman’s will end – all the more so after this “prologue”; yet, for a few seconds, the illusion is held out of another option, as in the brief moment Hamlet shares with Ophelia before he understands that she is being manipulated by Polonius and Claudius.
- 6 When the reference to Ophelia occurs, Baartman is in England. She still hopes to escape her sordid exposure in the freak shows and human menageries that are the precursors of the “human zoos” which survived right up to the Paris Exposition coloniale of 1931,⁵ and to make a name for herself as a performer. A little later, she insists, “I am an actress... I’m acting” – a phrase that is all the more significant since she speaks so little in the film. This assertion is made at a London court, where her master has appeared to face charges of slavery, brought against him by abolitionists of the African Institution.⁶ An actress in the audience asks, crucially, “Do they touch you?” The answer, as the offscreen audience knows, is “Yes.” The camera has already shown how she cannot bear the pinches and blows that she is expected to submit to without protest, just as later in the film she is expected to submit to sexual assaults and, in the name of “science,” to invasive measurements and intimate physical scrutiny. Nevertheless, having been convinced once again by Caesar that her situation will improve, she insists, “I’m acting” (time code: 57.59, 58.20). In denying the way she is being treated, she is, more than ever, his “thing,” fashioned into different personae for the fairground and the law-court.⁷ Caesar represents what one might term Pygmalion’s nasty flip-side, an analogy that is suggested by earlier shots showing him modelling a series of clay figurines of Baartman, presumably for sale (time code: 20.07).
- 7 In the law-court, Baartman is forced into a role which is not hers, that of an actress, claiming to be what she aspires to become, before returning to the dehumanising part she is condemned to play in the fairground booth. In this, she fleetingly resembles Ophelia in that both are manipulated by men who are in a position to dominate them: just as Ophelia is coached by Polonius and Claudius on how to play her part when she meets Hamlet, Baartman is instructed on how to behave in court. Caesar and Réaux (Olivier Gourmet) refashion Saartjie into Miss Sarah Baartman, a former slave from a colonised country and now a free woman, elevated from a supposedly primitive condition into allegedly civilised Christianity by philanthropists and baptism (time code: 1.08).⁸ Saartjie is a performer: briefly allowed

⁵ See for instance Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, *et al.* (eds). *Zoos humains. De la Vénus Hottentote aux reality shows*. Paris: La Découverte, 2002. See also Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman.”

⁶ Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807 and in the British Empire in 1833. On the political context of the court case and the impact on Baartman’s fame, see Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman,” pp. 238-41.

⁷ For a discussion of the woman as “thing” and her “thing,” in relation to the myth of Pygmalion, in the early modern context, see Ruth Morse. “Pygmalion, once and future myth: Instead of a conclusion.” In Janice Valls-Russell, Agnès Lafont and Charlotte Coffin (eds). *Interweaving Myths in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017 (paperback, 2020), pp. 239-58, 248-9.

⁸ Her very name is a form of alienation. Sara is the name she is given after being baptised and Saartjie, meaning ‘little Sarah’ in Dutch, is a diminutive of the kind “often used to differentiate slaves or collared people from

to have her own (black) servants and to ride in a carriage, she is cast as an actress and she plays her part competently enough for the court to believe her, albeit reluctantly and with evident distaste for her person.

- 8 For all his talk against forwardness, Polonius forces his daughter into a form of emotional self-debasement that Hamlet sees through and denounces, with relevantly obscene language, which he throws at Ophelia and at the father who has cast himself as a voyeur. Like Ophelia, who knows that her father is overlooking the scene, Baartman, who has been schooled by Caesar on how to reply, is very much aware of his gaze as she endorses his discourse before the judges.
- 9 The fraud is extended in the ensuing discussion on performance, in which Caesar, just as he ridiculed Baartman's ambitions, mocks the court for its inability to tell art from life:

Caesar. I am amazed that such erudite and intelligent people such as yourselves cannot see things in the correct perspective. This is the nineteenth century... Miss Sara Baartman is a free woman and an artist. (time code: 49.50)

Lawyer. Those who unfairly hound my client confuse representation with reality (time code: 50.54)

And the lawyer insists on Baartman's acting talents: "Miss Baartman performs wonderfully and enthusiastically." Baartman is briefly taken in, but has no illusions by the time Réaux, to whom Caesar has sold her, barks out at her in Paris: "*Tu n'es rien, tu n'es pas une artiste! Tu n'es rien! Rien! C'est fini! Terminé. Terminé. Tu n'es plus rien. Terminé.*" [You are nothing, you are not an actress! You are nothing! Nothing! It's over! Finished. Finished. You are nothing. Finished] (time code: 2.11.31).

- 10 If we feel uncomfortable with the allusion to Ophelia in *Vénus noire*, it may be because of how scholars and directors and artists have invited us to see Ophelia, and how we think she should look – just as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art has helped shape our representations of Galatea, Pygmalion's statue.⁹ More specifically, French audiences may backread the reference to Ophelia in *Vénus noire* through the filter of the special position she held in French arts throughout the nineteenth century. The fascination she exerted may be traced to the visit to Paris in 1827 of an English company, which produced *Hamlet* at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, with Charles Kemble as Hamlet.¹⁰ Ophelia was performed by Harriet Constance Smithson, who had played the role some twelve years earlier, at the age of fifteen. Although she was initially reluctant to accept the part, and tried to induce other actresses to take her place, her Paris performance proved immensely successful.¹¹
- 11 Led by Victor Hugo, the French Romantics were enthusiastic about Shakespeare, whom they championed in their rebellion against the canons of classical French drama. They attended the Théâtre de l'Odéon in force. Reviewers raved about Smithson's mad scenes, with her sobs and songs; Hector Berlioz fell in love with her and married her. Her performance may have inspired a couple of lines in Hugo's poem, "Fantômes," in the collection *Les Orientales* which he published in 1829: "*Ainsi qu'Ophelia par le fleuve entraînée, / Elle est morte en cueillant des fleurs!*" [Just like Ophelia, borne away on the river, she died whilst picking flowers].¹² Around 1830, Eugène Delacroix began work on a series of lithographs representing scenes from *Hamlet*, all of them linked to Ophelia and inspired by Smithson. He also painted several oils representing Ophelia's death, such as the one in the Louvre, dating from 1844. Four decades later, Ophelia inspired another painter, Alexandre Cabanel. In her

their white counterparts, effectively assigning them the status of children" (Qureshi. "Displaying Sara Baartman," p. 235).

⁹ See for instance, Louis Jean-François Lagrenée's "Pygmalion and his statue" (1777), Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki. Online: <http://kansallisgalleria.fi> (accessed 29 March 2021); and, a century later, Edward Burne-Jones's two series of four oil paintings (1875-78). One series is on view at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Online: <https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

¹⁰ On France and Ophelia, see James M. Vest. *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989.

¹¹ On Harriet Constance Smithson, see Peter Raby. "Smithson [married name Berlioz], Harriet Constance (1800-1854)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (entry date, 3 January 2008).

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French are mine.

overview of Ophelia's enduring presence in nineteenth-century French art, the art historian Delphine Gervais de Lafond describes her as "a muse capable of holding French painters' attention across many diverse schools of art with very different aesthetic concerns, from Romanticism to Symbolism."¹³ In England, meanwhile, John Everett Millais painted his "Ophelia" (1851), on view at Tate Britain, London, which influenced Arthur Rimbaud's poem, "Ophélie" (1870). Rimbaud's lily- and snow-white, blue-eyed Ophelia stuck in the minds of generations of French teenagers: school anthologies included his poem, which they illustrated with a reproduction of Millais's painting.¹⁴

*Sur l'onde calme et noire où dorment les étoiles
La blanche Ophélie flotte comme un grand lys [...]
On entend, dans les bois lointains des hallalis. [...]
Ô pâle Ophélie! belle comme la neige!
Oui tu mourus, enfant, par un fleuve emporté! [...]
– Et l'Infini terrible effara ton œil bleu.*

[On the waters, still and dark, where the stars sleep,
White Ophelia floats like a large lily [...]
One hears, in the distant woods, the mort sounded. [...]
O pale Ophelia! beautiful as the snow!
Yes, you died a child, borne away on a river! [...]
– And dread Infinity petrified your blue gaze.]

- 12 Millais's, and Rimbaud's, Ophelia, a pale, child-like figure floating down a river surrounded by flowers, is far removed from Baartman's appearance; but the reference to Ophelia is loaded with what Bernard Franco calls her "*pouvoir d'irradiation*," a radiating influence that is one of the dynamics associated with myth.¹⁵ There is no river in Kechiche's film; flowers and plants are almost totally absent, except in the conservatory of the Jardin des plantes in Paris, where several Museum artists sketch her. When one of them tries to persuade her to remove her loin-cloth, another, the naturalist Jean-Baptiste Berré (Michel Gionti), says: "*Laisse-la tranquille, n'insiste pas*" [Leave her alone, don't insist] (time code: 1.42.36), and Baartman turns to look at him in wonder. Later, Baartman escapes from the scrutiny of the scientists into the Jardin des plantes. Among the flowers and under the trees, she meets Berré, who tells her, "*Quel plaisir de vous voir*" [How nice to see you] (time code: 1.47.48): she offers him food, which he accepts ("*Merçi*," time code: 1.48.05), and he shows her a drawing of her head ("*Ça vous plaît?*" [Do you like it?], time code: 1.48.23), briefly touching her arm as he shows her other drawings, including one of her with a young child, and offers them to her. She then accepts to sit for him, in yet another, poetic, take on the Pygmalion role of the artist. Still later, cross-cutting with scenes of Cuvier and one of his assistants preparing Baartman's body for dissection, the camera shows Berré working on the plaster cast, expressionless except for a fleeting, barely perceptible, movement of the lips when he discovers that the moulding has been successful. Extreme close-ups show him smoothing the white plaster stomach and navel to a satin sheen, then painting the head. Finally, he covers the statue with a sheet. The film ends with the draped statue standing alone in the empty amphitheatre. Berré's face as he works on the statue allows us no clue as to his thoughts, but his careful craftsmanship, like his respectful artist's gaze in the garden, go some way towards redeeming the violently voyeuristic attention she has been receiving. Unlike the fairground visitors and voyeurs, he *sees* her – just as the camera's extreme close-ups of her face throughout the film oblige the offscreen spectators to distance themselves from the colonial construction of otherness as a separate category and to *see* her, in keeping with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who locates

¹³ See Delphine Gervais de Lafond. "Ophélie in Nineteenth-Century French painting." In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (eds). *The After Life of Ophelia: Reproducing Shakespeare*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 169-91, 170.

¹⁴ See for instance André Lagarde and Laurent Michard (eds). *XIX^e Siècle. Les grands auteurs français du programme*. Paris: Bordas, 1969, pp. 520-21 (for the poem) and plate 69 (for the painting). Millais's, or Delacroix's painting, may also have influenced a poem (1856) by Théodore de Banville, "À Henry Murger," *Odelettes* (1856), in which he compares Murger's heroines to Ophelia and Juliet.

¹⁵ Bernard Franco. "La rivière d'Ophélie." In Juliette Vion-Dury (ed.). *Le Lieu dans le mythe*. Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 2002, pp. 207-20, 217.

the ethical acknowledgement of a shared humanity in the face of the Other.¹⁶ Nothing can save Baartman from death and the ultimate dehumanisation of literal, post-mortem anatomisation and evisceration by Cuvier. Yet the sequence in the garden silently and visually recalls Gertrude's tribute to Ophelia (*Hamlet*, IV.7.164-81),¹⁷ the power of poetry and art to turn to nature to breathe life back into the dead, and to inspire in turn other poets and artists, whether directly or mediated through the performance of an actress who captures the audience's imagination. This moment, in which the humanity of the Other is seen and recognised, is not unlike the scene in *The Elephant Man* (directed by David Lynch and released in 1980), when John Merrick and the actress Madge Kendal read the sonnet sequence from *Romeo and Juliet* (I.5.92-105).¹⁸

13 Rather in the way that Galatea is viewed essentially as an artefact fashioned by Pygmalion to conform to his ideal of the desirable female body, nineteenth-century gazing tends to flatten Ophelia as an object for aesthetic contemplation and Baartman as an object of pseudo-scientific investigation and voyeuristic exhibition.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the viewer's standpoint may be challenged or critiqued when the work of art is held up to his gaze from an unexpected vantage-point, whether through the use of the camera, as in Kechiche's film, or an ethical engagement. Tom Hunter's artwork, *The Way Home* (2000), for instance, revisits Millais's painting of Ophelia through photography in an urban contemporary setting to record the death of a young girl after a rave party.²⁰ Kechiche creates multiple levels of reception, to generate discomfort by placing spectators in a danger area of potential identification with the dehumanising gaze of other audiences: he uses the camera to have the onscreen and offscreen perspectives converge and overlap, imprisoning his audiences in long takes, which he combines with the relentless filming of both viewers and those being viewed in tight one, two and three shots. Watching all those people watching Baartman places the offscreen spectator in the uncomfortable position of the voyeur, all the more so since the very tight framing of scenes and over-the-shoulder shots, emphasising proximity between viewers on and off screen, places them virtually inside the onscreen audience, jostling and shoving their way forward for close-up views of Baartman's anatomy. The camera also records Baartman's awareness of all those eyes on her, lingering on her own eyes, the way she turns her head, in fear, wariness or resistance even as she controls her features and avoids laying bare her innermost thoughts, except when tears run silently down her face. Such close-ups, as mentioned earlier, enable the offscreen audience to acknowledge her humanity and resist the voyeuristic ploy. The more exposed she is, the more remote she seems, even when required to

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, [1969] 1991, pp. 197-201. Mara Mattosio discusses Kechiche's focus on Baartman's face in the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work on the close-up and the "reflective face" in "What's in a face?: Sara Baartman, the (Post)colonial Gaze and the Case of *Vénus noire* (2010)." *Feminist Review* 117 (2017): 56-78.

¹⁷ References are to William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Rev. ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2006, 2016.

¹⁸ References are to William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. René Weis. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. I am grateful to Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin for having drawn my attention to this moment in David Lynch's film. A number of critics and spectators have discussed *Vénus noire* against *The Elephant Man*. See for instance Florence Colombani. "Au cœur des ténèbres de la 'Vénus noire'." *Le Point* 24 October 2010. Online: https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/au-coeur-des-tenebres-de-la-venus-noire-24-10-2010-1253643_3.php. Also Didier Péron. "La freak du sud." *Libération* 27 October 2010. Online: https://www.liberation.fr/cinema/2010/10/27/la-freak-du-sud_689342/ (both accessed 29 March 2021). While the aesthetics of Lynch and Kechiche differ widely, their respective films powerfully expose the exploitation of individuals in freak shows, probe the mechanisms of domination, and explore both the potentialities and limits of art and literature as a means of reaching out to the Other.

¹⁹ On Ophelia, whom Millais "reduces [...] to one more visual object," see Elaine Showalter. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." In Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds). *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. London: Methuen Routledge, 1985, pp. 77-94, 85.

²⁰ For a discussion of Hunter's work, see Kimberly Rhodes. "Double Take: Tom Hunter's *The Way Home* (2002)." In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (eds). *The After Life of Ophelia*, pp. 213-29. The photograph may also be viewed on Tom Hunter's website: <http://www.tomhunter.org/life-and-death-in-hackney/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

“play” up to audience expectations of savagery and bare her teeth, and however hard the camera tries to force her privacy in extreme close-up shots. Torres’s highly sophisticated performance ensures that Baartman’s humanity is never forfeited, through an impressively restrained negotiation of the way the character is forced into roles and subjected to violent psychological, social and physical manipulation. Kechiche further complicates the moral stakes by creating a voyeuristic environment which rejects the idea of gendered solidarities. While the world of science is exclusively male, Kechiche avoids the easy trope of male voyeurism objectifying a female body: in the fairgrounds, in the court and in the Paris *salons*, as well as offscreen, audiences are mixed, male and female – and the fairgrounds also include children. The *bande dessinée* version of *Vénus noire*, which was released at the same time as the film, frames a close-up of Baartman’s grimacing face with the reactions of female viewers.²¹ In the *salons*, women crowd in on her, their faces jostling in the camera’s tight frame, touching her hair with their gloved hands, wanting her loincloth to be lifted in order to see her genitals when Réaux obliges her to lie on her back. The prurient, intersecting objectification here is of a racially signified, sexually loaded, otherness: “The contemporary interest surrounding Sara Baartman – the Hottentot Venus – exemplified both the assumed racial inferiority and excessive sexuality often ascribed to black men and women at this time.”²²

- 14 The reference to Ophelia participates in those dynamics, undermining aesthetic assumptions about an iconic figure and opening the way for the fleeting transformative process of the artist’s respectful gaze, as the first stage in a restorative process that eventually enabled Baartman to become in turn a cultural and national icon, nearly two centuries after her death. As the film credits unscroll, documentary footage brings us fast-forward into the present to show the return in 2002 of Baartman’s remains to South Africa, where a state funeral was organised on 9 August, the country’s National Women’s Day.²³
- 15 While this footage reframes Baartman’s story historically, the gaps in her historical biography, and the mystery and elusiveness Kechiche has opted for even while relentlessly, and, some critics argue, questionably, displaying her body, contribute to the elaboration of iconicity, as with Ophelia.²⁴ Did Ophelia commit suicide? Did she fall? Those are some of the questions that haunt the nineteenth-century paintings. Similarly, did Baartman really hope to become a public figure otherwise than through degrading exposure? The question remains open, her mystery unresolved, as Kechiche himself acknowledges: “*J’avais besoin de la diviniser, de la mythifier, à la fois martyre et un peu star. Mystérieuse.*” [I needed to make her into a divinity, a myth, both martyr and star. Mysterious.]²⁵ Her withdrawal into silence, inscrutability, alcohol and tobacco weighs on the men around her, conveys a form of resistance; and she successfully resists scientists’ attempts to examine her genitals, grabbing at Cuvier’s crotch when he insists that she remove her loincloth (time code: 1.52.04). They will have to wait for her death to be able to do so – hence his triumph when he can finally display them in a jar.

²¹ Abdellatif Kechiche and Renaud Pennelle. *Vénus noire*. Paris: Emmanuel Proust éditions, 2010. A selection of plates may be viewed at <https://www.bdfugue.com/venus-noire> (accessed 29 March 2021).

²² Karen Harvey. “Baartman.” *ODNB Online*.

²³ Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman,” p. 233.

²⁴ See for instance the critical review of the film by Anne Hugon, Delphine Peiretti and Christelle Taraud, who note the pressure this role represented for Torres. “Images, lettres et sons – Vénus noire: posture politique et imposture historique.” *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire* 111.3 (2011): 177-80. Online: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-vingtieme-siecle-revue-d-histoire-2011-3-page-177.htm> (accessed 29 March 2021). On the ethics of denouncing the exhibition of a body without displaying it or on stage, see Virginie Soubrier. “La Vénus hottentote sur la scène contemporaine.” *Revue Africultures* 92 (June 2013). Online: <http://africultures.com/la-venus-hottentote-sur-la-scene-contemporaine-11627/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

²⁵ Serge Kaganski and Jean-Baptiste Morain. “Abdellatif Kechiche: rencontre avec un réalisateur solaire, 30/10/10.” *Les Inrockuptibles*. Online: <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/abdellatif-kechiche-rencontre-avec-un-realisateur-solaire-108072-30-10-2010/> (accessed 29 March 2021). See also Michelle Lannuzel, “Abdellatif Kechiche, *Vénus noire*, 2010 (compte rendu).” *Raison présente* 177 (2011): 127-29. Online: http://www.persee.fr/doc/raipr_0033-9075_2011_num_177_1_4294_t1_0127_0000_1 (accessed 29 March 2021).

In *Harlem Duet*, Djanet Sears's prequel to Shakespeare's *Othello*, a slave, Her, recalls Baartman's fate in a reference that is embedded in the play in much the same way as the allusion to Ophelia is embedded in *Vénus noire*:

Her. In France they got the vagina of a sister entombed for scientific research.

Him. No!

Her. Venus, the Hottentot Venus. I read it in one of Miss Dessy's books. Saartjie – that's her real name, Saartjie Baartman. When Saartjie was alive they paraded her naked on a pay per view basis. Her derrière was amply endowed. People paid to see how big her butt was, and when she died, how big her pussy was.

Him. Wooo!

Her. Human beings went and oohed and aahed and paid money to see an endowment the creator bestowed on all of us.²⁶

16 As Elizabeth Brown-Guillory observes, “Sear postulates [...] that the degradation and defilement of Baartman's body is but one case of the dominant group's obsession with and repulsion of the black body, an unmitigated insignia of man's inhumanity to man”.²⁷ Like Sears, Kechiche turns the tables on a collective, degrading voyeurism to invite the emergence of another gaze, a re-viewing of aesthetic assumptions that reinstates an ethical dimension through the acknowledgement of past dehumanising processes and the recognition of a shared humanity. What Joanne Tompkins writes about Sears's characters is also valid for Baartman: “For the 1928 *Othello* as minstrel and as Shakespearean hero, and the 1860 mutilated slave, the performance of self is involuntary, signifying the other's (white) representation of black subjectivity.”²⁸

17 In retaining much of her mystery, and because she was in the wrong place at the wrong moment, Baartman may have failed to become an actress and be chosen for a role such as Ophelia. Like Ophelia, though, she has become a cultural icon, moving into that area where myth helps to make sense of history, inviting artistic variations on ethnographic exhibitions, such as Lyle Ashton Harris's photograph *Venus Hottentot 2000* in her series “The Good Life.”²⁹ Kechiche has rejected the abusive appellation, Hottentot Venus, and, through his film, transformed the erstwhile oxymoronic “black Venus” in an inclusive exploration of other aesthetic canons, that do not seek to occult victims and their suffering, but to transform them, as Sears does in her play, inviting empowerment and recognition.³⁰ As in an earlier film, *La Graine et le mulet*, set in present-day France (2007),³¹ Kechiche casts light on the timeless experiences of Others who are cast ashore in an environment where they do not master the codes and are viewed as commodities or causes rather than individuals. The discreet reference to Ophelia in *Vénus noire* connects with Kechiche's use of culture to expose social barriers and probe the sense of being a misfit in *L'Esquive* (2004), in which students rehearse a

²⁶ Djanet Sears. *Harlem Duet* (2006). Ed. and transl. Janice Valls-Russell. Nouvelles scènes anglaises, Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2012, p. 80.

²⁷ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. “Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*.” In Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (ed.). *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2006, pp. 155-70, 160.

²⁸ Joanne Tompkins. “Performing History's unsettlement.” In Janelle G. Reinelt, Joseph R. Roach (eds). *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007, rev. and enlarged 2010, pp. 71-84, p. 80.

²⁹ Qureshi. “Displaying Sara Baartman,” pp. 249-50, p. 250 for a reproduction of the photograph which may also be viewed on Harris's website, <http://www.lyleashtonharris.com/series/the-good-life-2/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

³⁰ On the epithets “Hottentot” and “noire,” see Sylvie Chalaye. “L'invention théâtrale de la ‘Vénus noire’: De Saartjie Baartman à Joséphine Baker.” In Isabelle Moindrot and Nathalie Coutelet (eds). *L'Altérité en spectacle, 1789-1918*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015, p. 55-66. Online 2019: <https://books.openedition.org/pur/78533> (accessed 29 March 2021).

³¹ The title has been variously translated into English as *The Secret of the Grain* or *Couscous*.

play by Marivaux, and *La Vie d'Adèle* (2013), in which a young working-class girl feels an outcast in her lover's artistic and intellectual world.

- 18 Significantly, in the same year as *Vénus noire* was released, Deborah Willis used Harris's photograph as the cover illustration for a collection of essays, *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* considering it "important to place Baartman in context within a discussion of images of women of African descent, particularly in Western culture."³² A decade later, 150 years after Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* premiered in Cairo to celebrate the inauguration of the Suez canal, Lotte de Beer's production for the Paris Opera invited the Canadian soprano Sondra Radvanovsky to share the role of Aida with a life-sized marionette. The figure, in grey, lava-like material, was designed by Mervyn Millar from the drawings of Virginia Chihota. The head, with its torsaded hair, the breasts and hips recalling Baartman's, and the deliberately disjointed assemblage created a singularly effective presence. In combination with Radvanovsky's intense vocal expression, the visual aesthetics of strength and anatomised incompleteness composed a tragic figure evocative of the fates of colonized peoples in the nineteenth century that ethically obligates today's audiences.³³ In allowing Baartman to voice her ambitions – "*Elle aurait peut-être eu envie de jouer Ophélie, comme moi j'aurais aimé jouer Hamlet lorsque j'étais acteur*" [She might have wanted to play Ophelia, just as I would have liked to play Hamlet when I was an actor]³⁴ – and exposing the suffering imposed on her, while probing the onscreen viewers' reactions all the better to invite self-reflexivity in the offscreen spectators, Kechiche transforms his reference to Ophelia into a fragile ethical fulcrum. Through Ophelia, he invites respect and attention on the part of the spectator, but he also reminds the film-director – including himself – and all those who are tempted to imitate Pygmalion of their ethical duty to ponder, in the words of Marlene Dumas whose work explores artists' responsibilities in their choice of images and the position they adopt, "what the painting does to the image, not only [...] what the image does to the painting."³⁵

19 Post-scriptum

The success of Kechiche's Pygmalion touch, and its impact on fellow-directors and audiences, appear to have been limited. To date (2021), Baartman seems to have been Yahima Torres's one-and-only role, in spite of the quality of her performance, while Kechiche's exacting directorial style and alleged pressure on his actors have come under critical scrutiny.

FILMOGRAPHY

Vénus noire. Dir. Abdellatif Kechiche. Scr. Abdellatif Kechiche, Ghalia Lacroix. Perf. Yahima Torres, André Jacobs, Olivier Gourmet. 2010. MK2 Video DVD.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BADOU Gérard. *L'Énigme de la Vénus hottentote*. Paris: JC Lattès, 2000.

³² Deborah Willis (ed.). *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot."* Philadelphia: Temple University, 2010, p. 4.

³³ Giuseppe Verdi. *Aida*. Directed by Lotte de Beer, conducted by Michele Mariotti for the Orchestre de l'Opéra national de Paris, 2021. On the puppets, watch this interview with Lotte de Beer and Mervyn Millar: <https://www.operadeparis.fr/magazine/les-marionnettes-daïda> (accessed 29 March 2021).

³⁴ Kaganski and Morain. "Abdellatif Kechiche."

³⁵ Marlene Dumas. "The Image as burden." Tate Modern, 2015. Online: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/marlene-dumas-image-burden>. See also Marlene Dumas: <http://www.marlenedumas.nl/> (both accessed 29 March 2021).

- BANCEL Nicolas, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, *et al.* (eds). *Zoos humains. De la Vénus Hottentote aux reality shows*. Paris: La Découverte, 2002.
- BLANCKAERT, Claude. *La Vénus hottentote: entre Barnum et Museum*. Paris: Publications scientifiques du Museum, 2013. Online edition, 2019, <https://books.openedition.org/mnhn/3912> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- BROWN-GUILLORY, Elizabeth. “Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*.” In Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (ed.). *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women’s Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2006, pp. 155-70.
- CHALAYE, Sylvie. “L’invention théâtrale de la ‘Vénus noire’: De Saartjie Baartman à Joséphine Baker.” In Isabelle Moindrot and Nathalie Coutelet (eds). *L’Altérité en spectacle, 1789-1918*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015, p. 55-66. Online edition, 2019. Online: <https://books.openedition.org/pur/78533> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- COLOMBANI, Florence. “Au cœur des ténèbres de la ‘Vénus noire’.” *Le Point* 24 October 2010. Online: www.lepoint.fr/culture/au-coeur-des-tenebres-de-la-venus-noire-24-10-2010-1253643_3.php (accessed 29 March 2021).
- DUMAS, Marlene. “The Image as burden.” Tate Modern, 2015. Online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/marlene-dumas-image-burden> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- FAUVELLE-AYMAR, François-Xavier. *L’Invention du Hottentot, histoire du regard occidental sur les Khoisan (XVe-XIXe siècles)*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002.
- FRANCO, Bernard. “La rivière d’Ophélie.” In Juliette Vion-Dury (ed.). *Le Lieu dans le mythe*. Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 2002, pp. 207-20.
- GERVAIS DE LAFOND, Delphine. “Ophélie in Nineteenth-Century French Painting.” In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (eds). *The After Life of Ophelia: Reproducing Shakespeare*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 169-91.
- HARVEY, Karen. “Baartman, Sara [performing name the Hottentot Venus] (1777x88–1815/16), ‘celebrity and subject of scientific speculation’.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (entry date, 23 September 2004).
- HUGON, Anne, Delphine Peiretti and Christelle Taraud. “Images, lettres et sons – Vénus noire: posture politique et imposture historique.” *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire* 111.3 (2011): 177-80. Online: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-vingtieme-siecle-revue-d-histoire-2011-3-page-177.htm> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- KAGANSKI, Serge and Jean-Baptiste Morain. “Abdellatif Kechiche: rencontre avec un réalisateur solaire, 30/10/10.” *Les Inrockuptibles*. Online: <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/abdellatif-kechiche-rencontre-avec-un-realisateur-solaire-108072-30-10-2010/> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- KECHICHE, Abdellatif and Renaud Pennelle. *Vénus noire*. Paris: Emmanuel Proust éditions, 2010.
- LAGARDE, André and Laurent Michard (eds). *XIX^e Siècle: Les grands auteurs français du programme*. Paris: Bordas, 1969.

- LANNUZEL, Michelle. “Abdellatif Kechiche, *Vénus noire*, 2010 (compte rendu).” *Raison présente* 177 (2011): 127-9.
- LEVINAS, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, [1969] 1991, pp. 197-201.
- MATTOSCO, Mara. “What’s in a face?: Sara Baartman, The (Post)colonial Gaze and the Case of *Vénus noire* (2010).” *Feminist Review* 117 (2017): 56-78.
- MORSE, Ruth. “Pygmalion, once and future myth: Instead of a conclusion.” In Janice Valls-Russell, Agnès Lafont and Charlotte Coffin (eds). *Interweaving Myths in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017 (paperback, 2020), pp. 239-58.
- PÉRON, Didier. “La freak du sud.” *Libération* 27 October 2010. Online: https://www.liberation.fr/cinema/2010/10/27/la-freak-du-sud_689342/ (accessed 29 March 2021).
- QURESHI, Sadiah. “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’.” *History of Science* 42 (2004): 233-57.
- RABY, Peter. “Smithson [married name Berlioz], Harriet Constance (1800-1854).” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (entry date, 03 January 2008).
- RHODES, Kimberly. “Double Take: Tom Hunter’s *The Way Home* (2002).” In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (eds). *The After Life of Ophelia: Reproducing Shakespeare*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 213-29.
- SEARS, Djanet. *Harlem Duet* (2006). Ed. and transl. Janice Valls-Russell. Nouvelles scènes anglaises, Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2012.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. *Hamlet*. Rev. ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2006, 2016.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. René Weis. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- SHOWALTER, Elaine. “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism.” In Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (eds). *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. London: Methuen Routledge, 1985, pp. 77-94.
- SOUBRIER, Virginie. “La Vénus hottentote sur la scène contemporaine.” *Revue Africultures* 92 (June 2013). Online: <http://africultures.com/la-venus-hottentote-sur-la-scene-contemporaine-11627/> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- TOMPKINS, Joanne. “Performing History’s unsettlement.” In Janelle G. Reinelt, Joseph R. Roach (eds). *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007, rev. and enlarged 2010, pp. 71-84.
- VEST, James M. *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989.
- WILLIS, Deborah (ed.). *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot.”* Philadelphia: Temple University, 2010.

© IRCL-UMR 5186 – CNRS – Université Montpellier 3

How to cite

VALLS-RUSSELL, Janice. “Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Vénus noire* (2010): Pygmalion, Ophelia, and the voyeur.” In Patricia Dorval & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (eds). *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonía: The Shakscreen Collection 5*. Montpellier (France): IRCL, Université Paul-Valéry/Montpellier 3, 2021. Online: http://shakscreen.org/analysis/valls-russell_2021/.