Paris 1817, at the Royal Academy of Medicine: “I have never seen a human head so similar to that of an ape.” Standing by a molded cast of Saartjie Baartman’s body, anatomist Georges Cuvier’s verdict is categoric. A group of distinguished colleagues break out in cheers. Seven years earlier, Saartjie left her native South Africa with her master, Caesar, to expose her body to the audiences of London’s freak shows. Free and enslaved all at the same time, “The Hottentot Venus” became an icon in the slums, destined to be sacrificed in the pursuit of a shimmering vision of prosperity.
Abdellatif Kechiche: Psychology limits our understanding of the human being. The appearance of a person alone can reveal a lot more about the subtleties of human nature than all attempts at psychological explanations. When cinema is able to be as subtle as real life, it’s a wonderful thing.

The acting has a lot to do with it… You always have to keep in mind that cinematic techniques can have a negative affect on the acting and render it completely lifeless… And then, sometimes, for no good reason, there is a part that remains a mystery. Saartjie is a very mysterious person… that is what drew me to her in the first place… At the end of the day, we don’t really know much about what really motivates her, we just have a few key dates: the journey from South Africa to England, the performances, the court case in London, her christening and her time spent with the French scientists. Everything else is just snippets of information. It is the spaces left between that are interesting to film.

By preserving the sense of mystery around her we, the audience, are constantly forced to look inside ourselves for the answers. I have read everything that has been written about her, and I found that too often there is a tendency for too much analysis. Either she was just portrayed merely as a slave, which I found difficult to believe because she could have taken the opportunity offered by the court case in London to claim her freedom. But she chose not to. On top of this, in the most recent historical findings, we know that she was performing in the Cape… Or, the stories of her life were over-romanticised and fictionalised, taking away the mystery surrounding her, which I personally felt was disrespectful. Respect was one of the first things that Saartjie Baartman gained from me. This respect did not come from what was written about her, but from her whole persona. A picture sometimes says so much more than words. That is what I felt when I discovered the drawings of Saartjie by the Museum illustrators. And, even more so when I saw the original plaster cast mould of her that remains in France to this day: I was incredibly moved by her face. I was incredibly moved by her face.

You can clearly see her suffering, her face is swollen from drink and illness, but beyond that she seems (both in the drawings and the plaster cast) to have an ethereal quality, an almost mystical distance… Her endless suffering has a lot to do with this… The disappointment too… That was what I was most moved by. When I think about her I think about detachment, complete self-denial and intelligence. She must have known a lot about the nature of man… When I saw her, I felt compelled to tell her story…

TO BE AN ARTIST, AS SAARTJIE TRIED TO BE, IS TO GIVE YOURSELF COMPLETELY TO THE PUBLIC, HOLDING NOTHING BACK

Saartjie never gave her whole self to the public even though she was constantly violated. What people saw was not her true self; it was a caricature: too much what they wanted to see. Accepting someone else’s opinion of you, when that opinion is degrading, is very painful and complicated, and in that way she really was a slave. Saartjie was an artist. This was often written about: she played a musical instrument, had a good singing voice and danced well. As a true artist, the saddest thing perhaps was that she was never able to express her true self because that was not what people expected from her.
there to illustrate a set of beliefs and to consolidate the reasoning of that period. She
also felt as though she was starting out. And the position people hold.

She was a prisoner of other people’s beliefs. When it comes down to it, perhaps this is the
most important aspect of her character. She was very limited. She was not able to
see things from her own perspective. She was not able to make decisions on her own.

The actors then would or each individual’s potential.

African intellectuals, who will do a far better job than me, to defend their place in the
struggle with yourself, because of course we are all easily in
the lugubrious fate of people who have a greater interest in
examination. They were not blinded by their ideas, they blinded themselves deliberately with
falsehoods. When
I
had to dilute the facts. When
I
had to bring my own ideas to the table, I had to make some compromises. I had to dilute the facts.

The process in cinema. I’ve always tried to install the same strict work
discipline. The actors then worked hard. This concept of forming a troupe has
to decide what they wanted to do and to do it properly, as in a painting. But
again you jeopardise the reasons why you are doing it by putting your energy into the
maintenance of things that you’ve already done. As far as I was concerned the rules were limited, because the funding was
limited. The original cost estimate for the film was double what it actually ended
up costing to make. The first thing I had to cut back on was the period set. Next, the very over-dressed sets often used in cinema to illustrate the past have never
been more real. Hollywood is not a historical place, but it’s a place that has
been influenced by the least make-up possible rather than sets and costumes.

Depending how history is told, either she is portrayed as a slave in the most basic
aspects of her death to
I
found that absolutely horrific. You cannot, in the name of science, be so inhumane.
I
could not believe that smart gentlemen could butcher a woman’s dead body in
total impunity and then put it into jars, and parade it about, giving lectures, as if it
were a trophy.

//no one imaginates that she was closer to an animal than a
human, but everything in their notes leads us to believe that they were unsure...
The film was double what it actually ended
up costing to make.

Perhaps that is what
I
am most angry with them about: intellectual dishonesty. They were not stupid, they were
trying to prove that she was closer to an animal than a
human. But they were not blinded by their ideas, they blinded themselves deliberately with
falsehoods. The race was on, in the scientific world, to see who would be the first
to make a discovery that could be used in the interests of science. That is what was going on
on at the time. They had to take any fault of humanity away from the African people
to give themselves the right to oppress them.

AFRICAN CULTURE AND THE NOTION OF CIVILIZATION ARE OPPOSED

This is the kind of statement that illustrates the viciousness with which plausible
intellectual movement is trying to make African lower people. I refuse to get involved
in any such debate. It’s the same way Carter thought. He believed that even though the
Egyptian intellectuals had black skin that they belonged to the White race. I’ll leave it to the
African intellectuals, who will do a far better job than me, to defend their place in the
entertainment world. And the position people hold.

In my own way to have
I
hope in my own way to have
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sentiment that the lives of people who have a greater interest in
examination. They were not blinded by their ideas, they blinded themselves deliberately with
falsehoods. When
I
had to dilute the facts. When
I
had to bring my own ideas to the table, I had to make some compromises. I had to dilute the facts.
Filming "Black Venus" was not always easy for everyone, especially for the technical team. It was the general feeling, that is difficult to put my finger on. Filming someone's suffering, especially in the scenes that took place in the libertine salons, repeatedly rehearsing each take in order for the truth of the characters to show through, left no one untouched.

Between writing "he hits her" or "she lay on the floor in front of her audience" and seeing it, there is a big difference that can make things very uncomfortable... You can't approach a film like this as you would a gentle romantic subject. When you question humanity, it undoubtedly has an affect on those involved in the filmmaking process. The scene in the libertine salon was the most striking example. In the script the scene was far cruder and more explicit. Everyone was looking to me to see how I was going to direct the scene. I relied upon existing witness statements and interpreted them in my own way. For example when I "saved" the libertines who put a stop to the performance when confronted with Saartjie's tears. I liked the idea that after having suffered violence at the hands of the scientists, Saartjie is then confronted with a group of people, libertines, who looked upon her as an object of beauty and desire and end up respecting her. I also wanted to question the power of the group, where the individual feels less exposed as his responsibility is shared with others...

Even though I filmed what is unbearable on a human level, I never lost sight of the rules of respect towards my team. I let myself be guided by all the preparation I had done as well as whatever came out spontaneously. It is the actor, his emotion, his violence and his rhythm that give you the feeling as a director that you need to go this way or that... As with my previous films, I wanted the set to be a space for creation and not just a pre-planned performance.

The filmmaker's opinion dictates and influences the opinion of the spectator. I have never felt as much as pressure of opinion as I have when making this film. To construct Saartjie's character as truthfully as possible; I led an investigation to piece together the facts about her life. And it's these details that I used to build her story. Like the moment when a woman in the audience in London pokes Saartjie on the bottom with an umbrella. This is how the story was told by a witness at the time. People really did go and see the Hottentot Venus to touch her bottom even though they were afraid of being bitten. The violence in the film comes primarily from the way people see Sarah. The film makes us as the audience consider how we view others. It makes us think about cinema too in general: what does the audience expect? What should we as filmmakers give them? How should we deliver it?

The question of what actually is the director's responsibility follows on from this. My approach was to get inside each of the characters. Caesar may have been thinking about getting rich, but he still had certain artistic demands. Réaux is a showman ready to do anything to satisfy the expectations of his public. Even Cuvier, beyond his scientific ambitions, shows signs of aesthetic consideration. I wanted to give each character their own set of beliefs.

A person watching a story such as this has to be alert. First of all me, as I don't have all the keys necessary to explain, or to understand Saartjie's character despite the empathy I feel for her. I never saw her as a symbol of a saint, but as someone who could teach me to talk about certain things. Look at the aura she has today. Despite everything that was taken from her I believe that Saartjie still has more to give, something more to tell us. Perhaps after ten years spent 'together', I have become her instrument (laughs).
When was the first time you heard of the “Hottentot Venus”?

Yahima Torrès: I didn’t know much about Sarah until Abdel first told me about her. We met by chance in Belleville in 2005 when he was preparing “The Secret of The Grains” (aka “Concorde”) and then three years later when he was casting “Black Venus”. I was very touched and also honoured that Abdel chose me for the role. I started compiling as much information as I could find about her on the internet.

This woman suffered enormously. She often felt extremely vulnerable and lonely even when “protected” by Caezar or when she was surrounded by many women “friends” in the brothel. What I really appreciated about Abdel’s portrayal of Sarah was the depth he brought to her character. She deeply yearned to be an artist at a time when people were incapable of looking beyond physical appearances. Sarah was an exotic creature, someone both physically and culturally different. This story needed to be told, for the good of mankind.

How did you manage to immerse yourself in this character that we still know so little about today?

Sarah’s characterisation built up little by little. This role is packed with intense emotions, and sadness, but there is also her pure determination and ability to manage her differences. I had to learn the basics of Afrikaans, her very particular way of dancing, to play an instrument and to sing. I had to be good enough at these arts to be as multi-talented as she was. I can sympathise with how lonely she must have felt having left her home country. Before coming to live in France I lived in Colômbia – there I experienced a strange mix of discovery, learning and yet yearning for my homeland all at the same time. Every immigrant must feel connected to their roots whether through meeting other people, listening to certain music or keeping strong memories alive. I was lucky to have all of that. Sarah’s dream was to make it as an artist in South Africa, she was working for Caezar, in exchange for a minimum wage: in theory slavery had been abolished but Sarah’s family had always worked for white colonists. Plus she was Caezar’s partner, most probably because he offered her protection in a strange land.

As a woman, can you understand another woman’s choice to exhibit her body in the desire for recognition?

Saartjie’s dream was to come to Europe to make it as an artist. In South Africa, she was working for Caezar, in exchange for a minimum wage: in theory slavery had been abolished but Saartjie’s family had always worked for white colonists. Plus she was Caezar’s partner, most probably because he offered her protection in a strange land.

YAHIMA TORRÈS SAARTJIE
As regards her body, no one today dares imagine that a woman does not have the right to say “no”. When Sarah exhibits herself, it does not mean that she is authorizing violation of her body. Otherwise it is just abuse, a form of domination that is sub-human.

In the film scene where Saartjie is playing the role of a sex slave in a Parisian salon, the libertines are aroused. They see her as an object of pleasure, but Sarah’s facial expression shows that she knows she is a woman, a human being, and she looks at them like they are the animals.

Did you regard Sarah as an artist from the outset?

Yes. She was capable of doing beautiful performances on stage and communicating her emotions to an audience. Even though the performances she subsequently gave were not the sort originally promised by Caezar, she retained her artistic integrity. For example, when she began to sing songs about her African heritage, in her wonderful voice, no one derided her then. On the contrary, the audience went silent as she won them all over. She could have been a fantastic spokesperson for African culture if people could have seen beyond her physical differences. Saartjie didn’t speak much but she observed and thought deeply.

How do you feel about the two men, Caezar and then Réaux who dominated Saartjie?

Caezar was responsible for the performances in London: he understood that by getting Sarah to play the role of “Hottentot Venus” he would make more money than by simply showing off Sarah’s unusual physical attributes. He manipulated her for his own ends and crossed the limits that prove he could not have had much respect for her. On the other hand, he did take care of her in his own way. They were also having a relationship. She had been drinking for a few years but when he left her alcohol became her only companion. I am not implying that Saartjie wanted to die, but she had no more will to live. Réaux was nothing like Caezar; the only thing they had in common was that he too promised her the moon. In my eyes, he was far worse and had no compassion for Sarah – he was a circus showman whose only interest was to make money. He went as far as prostituting Sarah and even pimped his own girlfriend Jeanne.

Georges Cuvier, in the name of science, was the person who most violently undermind Saartjie’s dignity…

He and his scientific committee chose to ignore that Sarah was a human being and regarded her in an animal-like fashion. Cuvier catalogued Sarah’s unusual physique, to serve his own ambition. He understood this perfectly and differentiated between what he was given to see in Sarah and what he got with this group of scientists. She refused to allow the scientists to examine her feminine organs because she knew they were violating her body and her sense of self.

The only person who had true regard for her dignity and held her in respect was the artist Jean-Baptiste Berre. He drew sympathetic sketches of her, giving her back her humanity as if thanking her for who she was. It is a very moving scene in the film, a space where the film can breathe and the audience can take stock.

Abdellatif Kechiche considers Saartjie with honesty and respect, he considers you in the same way as a woman and as an artist.

Yes, and his opinion is as much that of an artist as of another human being. He has never allowed himself to judge Saartjie or any of the other characters. What he learned from the film set into total respect for the actors. That is why I never once felt uncomfortable when we were filming the nude scenes or the scenes of sexual subjugation in the libertine salons. On top of rehearsals and my performance, Abdellatif was very careful to make sure that I was neither hurt nor emotionally scarred by acting out such violent scenes. The other actors were also all very supportive. I felt completely secure.

What do you think are the modern day echoes of a life such as Sarah’s?

It was of the utmost importance that Sarah’s remains be returned to South Africa because everyone has the right to a respectful burial. In South Africa, there now exists an organisation named after Sarah that helps women who are victims of abuse. For obvious reasons, she has become a symbol.

Now she is finally considered as a person in her own right. The film conveys a simple yet universal message that we have everything to learn from each other. And in order to achieve this we need to learn to respect what is different whether it be physical, cultural or linguistic differences. That is what being human is all about.
What did you know about the life of Saartjie Baartman before filming "Black Venus"?

Andre Jacobs: She is considered an icon for many South Africans. I knew that she had spent time in London and that the French returned her remains to South Africa a few years ago. But I only read her story when I was preparing for the film. The South Africans will hate me for saying this, but I think it's a good thing that the French, and not the South Africans, have made this film. Saartjie is a universal symbol beyond being a national one. Her story is one of horrific dehumanisation, which alas knows no frontiers. Abdel did an enormous amount of research into her life but he did not want to make a historical film. I think he made the right choice. It is the moral and philosophical aspects of the film as well as its contemporary relevance that interest me the most.

What did you learn about Caezar during your research?

In real life he was a rugged, illiterate farmer who lived in the Cape Province. His wife fell ill during her first pregnancy so Saartjie looked after the child. A Scottish doctor for whom Caezar worked suggested putting on a show in London with Saartjie to make money. They accepted and left for London on a journey that would turn into a nightmare. In the film, Caezar is portrayed as being driven above all by money and success. If he had been a musician, Saartjie would have been his violin. She was his instrument.

How were you able to play the part without judging him?

Abdel didn't want any judgement cast on any of the characters. An approach that makes the film strong. It was far more difficult for me to be objective; I needed to talk through Caezar's character at length with Abdel. During the first week when we were filming the scenes in Piccadilly I was still asking myself questions about Caezar and how I was going to play him. Abdel simply calmed my doubts. He had by saying: 'You're thinking about it too much. What you're doing is good.' I finally let go, the trust in his eyes was sufficient.

Abdellatif first showed you signs of his trust in rather a surprising way the first time you met him…

It was extraordinary. At the beginning of 2009 my agent called me to tell me that a French production company was looking for South African actors with my age and background. Forty days or so later I went to Paris for the first time ever. When I saw Abdel he just looked at me and smiled. I knew then that I had the part.

In my view, every one of his films asks the question about what it means to be French, and the relationship to others, but "Black Venus" opens the way for a more universal approach. From the first scene I realised that Abdel shoots in a completely different way from the Hollywood directors, and the minute by minute approach that I was used to in South Africa. It was a real revelation to me. There is also the tight-knit working group, very similar to that in the theatre, that Abdellatif Kechiche creates around himself on each of his film sets…

In the court scene, when Caezar is defending himself against charges of slavery, he presents Saartjie as an artist. She confirms this to the judges — a status that is more important to her than being a free woman. You really feel this consideration for the artist when you work with Abdel. He has a natural ability to draw together actors who have the potential to work as a group and the mix is fascinating. Olivier is a very precise actor who has amazing control of his energy, whereas I have more of a tendency to externalise my emotions. There was a true alchemy between us.

As for Yahima, she was playing her first ever role in the cinema, and what a part!
Filming was difficult for her, we all gave her a lot of support, but she has an amazing inner strength. She showed such determination which enabled her to get right to the core of Sarah’s character, and play her role.

How would you explain the unique mixture of love, affection and domination that ties Saartjie to Caezar?

It’s difficult because their relation is very complex. Caezar expects a lot from her from an “artistic” point of view. He pushes her to commit herself totally to her art. At the same time he looks after her, a bit like a father with his child. In his own way of course. When Caezar gets drunk, he sees her as a woman and takes advantage of her, sexually. At the time, this was very common behaviour in South Africa, especially in the Cape, where I live. It was almost an insult not to have this kind of rapport. Caezar was therefore able to abuse her. But above all he was obsessed with making money: Saartjie was his ticket to climb the social ladder.

Do you consider Caezar to be a director?

Not in the strictly artistic sense, no. Caezar is not even a man of the theatre, he does not have the flair. On stage, he treats Saartjie like a General would a soldier. He does not direct her, he gives her orders. His aim, above all, is to make himself look good. When Saartjie improvises and sings and plays music beautifully he is furious because he is so afraid that she will steal the show from him. Deep down, he does not care at all about Saartjie’s artistic performance and the emotions she conveys to the audience.

Caezar believed that an artist should have no boundaries when in front of an audience. Do you share his views?

This depends on the artist. It is for each person to decide if he needs limits and where to place them. Personally I believe you have to push yourself to your limit to be able to create. That is when the line between the character and yourself becomes very thin: at certain times Caezar and I were the same person, if just the fact that we were both strangers in London. I too was a stranger in Paris, I was on a film set where everyone else was speaking a different language to my own.

Has this film made you question your own perception of mankind?

Incredibly. As a South African, living in a culture deeply marked by the relationship between class and race, this film really resonates within me. I find it both powerful and universal, because it does not make racism its main theme. “Black Venus” speaks about inhumanity: Saartjie was humiliated while she was alive and continued to be humiliated after her death. She never stopped being violated, right up until the moment she was bought back to South Africa.

It is definitely not an easy film, but pushing people to look beyond appearances, to see “others” in their full complexity is key to the evolution of us as sentient human beings.
How did you go about building up the character of Réaux, when there is so little factual information about him?

Olivier Gourmet: There is a lot of information about the black Venus but when I searched on the internet for the name Réaux almost nothing came up! Abdel obviously did slightly more investigative work than I did (laughs)! I mostly built up the character drawing on his love of instinct, naturalness and pleasure in every given moment. Réaux is an intelligent person who knows how to analyse each situation and take advantage of those around him exploiting their character flaws and depraved natures. Abdel was insistent that Réaux should not be made into an evil or Machiavellian figure. Primarily because a certain level of respect and affection did exist in his relationship with Saartjie. He was immersed in a showman’s world where being aware of another person’s limits did not exist. The historical context at that time and the world of the fairground are his defence: a lot of people had never been educated about where the boundary lies between good and evil, between respect and debasement. Abdel discusses Réaux’s character in a way that gives you, as an actor, a certain amount of artistic freedom. This loose approach suits me perfectly.

In your view is Réaux just a man who has no boundaries aside from his own personal satisfaction?

He never once shows any outward sign of regret, remorse or sudden realisation. There is something about him which is instinctively animal, which is so wrong of course, because what he does with Saartjie is terrifying. Réaux is also a showman with a huge ego and is looking for fame and recognition, probably more so than Caezar. The purpose of Abdel’s film is also to show that Saartjie was not coerced to come to France by Caezar. She was aware that Réaux and Caezar were exploiting her. Despite this, she continued…

The moment there is debauchery and drinking people lose their inhibitions. This comes naturally to fairground people, especially when they are drunk. This comes naturally to fairground people, especially when they are drunk. Réaux lives life to the full. He is driven by a quest for new sensations, excitement, and money. That is probably why he lies so much that he destroys everyone he comes into contact with. Réaux is a typical fairground person, a physical and therefore sensual man. I could relate to this because I am the sort of actor who finds it easier to express himself physically rather than with words. I also think that Abdel wanted to choose actors with a predisposition to take on the physicality of the role.

Does playing a part such as Réaux, such a murky character, inspire pleasure or is it uncomfortable to play?

That depends. I didn’t find enough material to be able to form a personal opinion of him, or even to consider judging him. I see Réaux as a businessman who needs to keep the show on the road. For example, I never asked myself whether or not he had a problem with black people or whether he was sexist and wanted to dominate women. It is up to the filmmaker to make up his or her own mind. The aim of the film is to encourage the viewer to question himself about Saartjie’s situation and what it was that enabled certain people to be able to manipulate her. The aim is not to shock but to make the viewer think.
Voyeurism is the precise pitfall that Abdellatif Kechiche avoids in the two scenes where Réaux exhibits Saartjie in the Parisian salons as an object of desire and of sex. We rehearsed and filmed the scene in the first bourgeois salon over a period of three nights with two cameras shooting 50-minute non-stop takes. The actors were left to be free agents, improvising from directions in the script. It was like throwing yourself off a cliff and flying through the air hoping to find something or someone to grab hold of during the fall. And that is what happened, night after night, trying things out, finding something and perfecting it. In some ways we had to get to the point of exhaustion for the truth to show through. With Abdel, the more things you experience, the more enriched you become, these moments bind together all the actors involved.

When Réaux goads the libertines in the Massai salon calling to them “Come closer and go beyond your inhibitions!”, as spectators, we feel we are being addressed, and it is as if we, as human beings, are being tested. In Réaux’s mind, it might be an invitation for tolerance, but I was thinking about that… I never thought I was capable of doing what I did in that scene: parading about with an ivory penis, grabbing the breasts of the woman who sat astride Yahima. We had to go at it all together, and just give, give give… It was never ever too uncomfortable, because it was Abdel directing, and because no one was forced to hurt or damage themselves. This scene is a perfect résumé of the whole film: it questions our sense of human dignity.

I also experienced this from an actor’s standpoint. Even when I was improvising, I maintained a certain emotional distance so as not to be swallowed up by playing the part or to avoid losing the meaning of the scene. The only things I had to go on were my own physical and intellectual boundaries.

It’s also a question of decency, of respecting your acting partner, in this case, Yahima who I would never have risked hurting. Communication between the two of us was always good. We both stepped up to the mark together… By holding back directionally, Abdel is able to push you deep within your being. He gives you confidence and respect.

Do you believe that one of the keys to acting is to question your limits with each new film you work on?

I think that each artist has a sense of their own modesty and a sense of intimacy. There are limits that do not need to be pushed, as it does nothing to enhance their talent. Nevertheless, there is some truth in the idea that you can distance yourself so much emotionally that you can show everything. Brecht is convinced of this.

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For me, the whole film is a question of limits… Obviously, the fears of the world have evolved but both intolerance and humiliation still prevail! There may no longer be ‘freak’ shows, but we display other freaks of nature, other monsters have emerged, and all of this is available to the interest of the eye. At the time the film was set, in the early 19th century, people had scientific discovery and novelty value as an excuse. People were genuinely curious about the unknown. They weren’t particularly afraid of it. Today, the unknown no longer really exists. Yet I find society more and more pervaded by voyeurism…

Is it important that a film such as “Black Venus” leaves its interpretation open-ended for the spectator?

That is the true essence of some of the greatest films: they are the ones that invite the spectator to create his own story and take a position. There is no need to lead the spectator by the hand and spell out the morality of the film letter by letter. At the heart of this film is a very strong story which is told in an intelligent enough way to leave the viewer free to make his own judgement.
What did you know about Saartjie's life and the role Georges Cuvier played in it?

François Marthouret: I had just a vague memory of this famous plaster cast mould that I had seen exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme. I knew none of the details of her life, nor the struggle that continued up until 2002, when her remains were taken back to South Africa… As for Cuvier, all I knew was the street named after him (laughs).

Have you reached your own interpretation of the nature of the ‘relationship’ that Cuvier had with Saartjie?

It would appear that Cuvier, beyond his scientific research, fell in love with his subject. This probably made him feel at ease and brought about a subjective and also very human side to his scientific research. His attachment to this woman probably undermined some of his opinions as a savant. His determination with which he tried to prove his improbable theories seems strange for an intelligent man. The inhumanity of his obsession still remains a mystery to me.

What vision of the cinema and artistic commitment do you share with Abdellatif Kechiche?

Even though I work a lot in the theatre, I am like a kid when it comes to cinema (laughs). When Abdel, who I have known for a long time, offered me this part I was as happy as a young novice. Especially as I love his films. His openness, his ability to capture each living detail that make up a human being and his real sensitivity, can never be over-emphasized. Abdel also gives his actors a lot of his own time, and that time is a real opportunity. An opportunity to doubt, to try out and to contradict. That is a real luxury in filmmaking, especially for me as I only ever got it right after about the 17th take (laughs). So I am left with no excuse!

Allowing the actors to build their own characters, even during filming, is that the best way to reach the ‘truth’ that you were talking about?

I would say that Abdel has a similar approach to that of a craftsman which suits me perfectly. I was fascinated by his ability to take on board life’s little surprises. We can see that he has done an enormous amount of research on his subject and yet at the same time has left room for empiricism. Abdel let each actor re-interpret what he or she had imagined the character to be, without being some mad conductor, driving us in any direction that took his fancy. Because this is about life and life is not formulaic. An actor can convey life through his expressions, which can take so many different forms. So why hold oneself back?

FRANÇOIS MARTHOURET GEORGES CUvier
Do you think, following Abdellatif Kechiche’s example, that Cuvier and his team of scientists were guilty of “intellectual dishonesty”?

When you first start working on a character, you try to defend them. Whatever his ideals were, his desires whether secret or not, I find it hard to believe that Cuvier was guilty of “intellectual dishonesty”. On a political level, for example, he was incredibly flexible and adapted easily to changes in regimes. You could be fooled into thinking that he was motivated by the love of science, but the truth was he was highly decorated each time… Intellectual honesty is a difficult concept. There are so many examples in politics today, of people who are probably honest at their core but do not realise that they are being corrupted by a system that allows them to stop looking at others and only look at those who “swim” in the same privileged circles as they do. And because they think that life is about “swimming”, they believe that they are not being dishonest. Aside from the hypothesis of love, what other reasons can explain Cuvier’s dogged determination to prove his abhorrent theories?

His ambition and opportunism was such that he would never have gone against the ideas of those in power. Had his theories been put into question, the whole system on which certain interests of society were based would have collapsed. On the other hand, if he confirmed that the White Man was superior, it legitimised colonization. If that was his reasoning, and he was aware of it, we can then talk about crimes against humanity. How does one tackle the ambiguity of such a character?

With generosity. Even the desire to criticise his character must only come from the audience not the actors. Cuvier’s distorted theories about Sarah had to be discussed objectively. We did not have the time to explore this side of Cuvier’s character but I personally, would like to have studied the psychology behind someone so purposefully hateful. How could a man of his intelligence stick so rigidly to his beliefs? It is the most unbelievable violation of intellectual logic. It even goes against his own writings. If his reasons were social, political or sentimental, so be it, but from a purely scientific point of view it was very surprising. Both Caesar and Réaux cynically entertained the idea that an actor must give everything to his art form. Does this standpoint resonate with you?

I don’t consider myself as an artist but I do think of my work as a craft that feeds itself on imagination and openness. Giving everything appears generous, but the real challenge is to home in on a thought or a feeling and with this bring to life the imaginary. You have to lean towards this “truth” that moves us, the audience, every time. Certain actors are more truthful than others, they just know how to tell the story of life by pulling the right levers to engage our emotion. I think that the complete commitment that Caesar and Réaux refer to is a strange version of honesty.

Adellatif Kechiche wanted no judgement to be cast on the characters, obliging the spectator to get involved, to “watch”… Most of the characters are very ambiguous, which effectively forces the audience to play an active role. Putting forward characters with no instruction leaflet is proof of respect for the audience, in the same way as a painter or musician would. In my opinion, one of the many questions that the film asks, notably via Cuvier’s attitude is: “How can one see and experience the reality of another person and yet carry on harbouring prejudice?” I’m still thinking about it…
1770 (estimated date)
Birth of Saartjie Baartman to a Khoisan family in what is now South Africa and was at the time under Boer rule.

1770–1795
Her family arranges for her to work as a slave for white colonists at Hiliplaat Stilfit’s farm. She is then sold on to Pieter Caezar, a trader from Cape Town. Over the years she finds refuge in alcohol. As a teenager, she suffers from Stomatopgia (enlargement of the buttocks) and Macronymphia (abnormally large labia). These medical conditions arouse the curiosity and sexual fantasies of Western society.

1803
Saartjie becomes the slave of Pieter’s brother, Hendrick Caezar and, through him meets, a penniless European Hendrick Van Jong who becomes her lover. They have a child together who dies, as do the two other children that Saartjie has with other men who remain unknown. Hendrick Van Jong leaves her in 1806 and returns to Holland.

1808
Hendrick Caezar, well aware of Saartjie’s “exotic” potential, persuades her that she can make a great fortune from her physical attributes. Caezar forms an association with Alexander Dunlop, a Scottish surgeon, who organizes the papers that enable them to leave South Africa.

1810
Dunlop’s insistence, Saartjie is baptized at Manchester Cathedral.

1814
Sarah leaves London for Paris, escorted by a man, probably Caezar, who had by then changed his identity. He puts her in lodgings near the Palais Royal, a hotspot of foreign dignitaries, priests and poets.

1815
Sarah is taken on by Réaux, an enigmatic shopkeeper from Steatopygia (enlargement of the buttocks) and Macronymphia (abnormally large labia). These medical conditions arouse the curiosity and sexual fantasies of Western society.

1817 – 1994
Flower pot models, her skeleton and janet containing Sarah’s brain and genitals are exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris up until 1970 when they were withdrawn from display and consigned to a storeroom.

1994
After the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the leaders of the Khoisan people petitioned Nelson Mandela to ask François Mitterrand to return Sarah’s remains to her country of birth. The request is refused by both the French authorities and scientists alike. The reason given is the wish to maintain the Musée de l’Homme collection intact, and in the name of science.

2002
The French MP Nicolas Abati presents a bill to reserve the term of “Hottentot Venus”’s remains to her country. The bill is voted for unanimously in parliament. The request published by parliament on the 30th January specifically mentions “our country must fulfill its duty to remember the past and in particular” colonialism. Although it may be difficult, we must acknowledge the errors that were made that have tarnished our past. Even through it may be difficult, we must acknowledge the errors that were made that have tarnished this period of our history, and, in particular, slavery which was a crime against humanity.

2002
As part of the celebrations of Women’s day in South Africa, the remains of Sarah Baartman are buried in the Cape Province, where she was born. The South African President, Thabo Mbeki, in presence as are a group of foreign dignitaries, priests and poets.

HOTTENTOT VENUS - OUTLINE OF KEY EVENTS

1808 – 1815
Hottentot Venus”s remains to her country of birth.

1817
The anatomist Georges Cuvier presents the remains of Sarah Baartman to the Academy of Medicine with a report detailing the results of his research on Sarah’s corpse. After her death he has dissected her body and taken plaster casts. He concluded: “Those races whose skulls are conformed and inden- tered are condemned to a perpetually inferior existence.”

1817
Sarah refuses to show her genitalia, despite pressure from the scientists.

1818
Sarah is concluded:

1819
February 26th
Following a complaint from the African Association, acc- using Caezar of slavery, the case goes before the High Court. When interviewed Saartjie declares “I have no com- plains to make about my master or those who exhibit me. I am perfectly happy in my current situation and have no desire whatsoever to return to my home country.”

1819
March 1815
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1815
Sarah is concluded:

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Black Venus

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Louis Dellos; Prize 2007

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DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER

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Original screenplay

ABDELLATIF KECHICHE

Adaptation and dialogue

ABDELLATIF KECHICHE AND GHAZA LACBOU

Cinematography

LUBOMIR BARCHEV, SOPHIA EL FANI

Editor

CAMILLE TOUBIR, GHIZA LACBOU, LAURENT BOUAN, ALBERNTE LASTERBA

Sound

NICOlas WARSCHOWSKI, JEAN-PAUL RIEER

Costumes

FABIO PERRONE

Casting

ANNE FREMIOT, MONYA GALBE

Original music

SALAHEDDINE KECHICHE

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AN MK2 production

In collaboration with France 2 Cinéma

With the participation of Canal +, France Télévisions, Le Centre National de la Cinématographie and the Image animée, Cinécomedie

In association with Soficinéma 5, Artemis Productions/Patrick Quentin

With funding from the Ifé de France region, Acér / Fonds images de la diversité, European Commission Media Programme

Producers

MARIN KARBITZ, NATHANIAEL KARBITZ, CHARLES GILLIBERT

STARRING

Suartjie

Hendrick Caesar

Relux

Jeanne

Georges Cavier

Jean-Baptiste Beret

Charles Maconar

JACQUES GENTIL

FRANÇOIS MARTHEURTE

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