





CAST

Yahima Torres Saartjie Baartman
Andre Jacobs Hendrick Caezar
Olivier Gourmet Réaux
Elina Löwensohn Jeanne
François Marthouret Georges Cuvier
Michel Gionti Jean-Baptiste Berré
Jean-Christophe Bouvet Charles Mercailier
Jonathan Pienaar Alexander Dunlop

CREW

Directed by **Abdellatif Kechiche**
Story by **Abdellatif Kechiche**
Adaptation and Dialogue **Abdellatif Kechiche** and **Ghalia Lacroix**
Produced by **Charles Gillibert**, **Marin Karmitz** and **Nathanaël Karmitz**
Music by **Slaheddine Kechiche**
Cinematography by **Lubomir Bakchev**
Edited by **Ghalia Lacroix**, **Albertine Lastera** and **Camille Toubkis**
Production Design **Mathieu Menut** and **Floria Sanson**
Set Decoration **Olivia Bloch-Lainé**
Costume Design **Fabio Perrone**



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BLACK VENUS

PERFORMATIVE SPACE, AMBIGUOUS AGENCY AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER

by Will Higbee

Abdellatif Kechiche was born in Tunisia and arrived in France at the age of six. He grew up on a working-class estate on the outskirts of Nice, not far from the city's famous Victorine studios. During his youth, he indulged a passion for cinema with regular trips to the Cinémathèque de Nice, where he first discovered many of the great French actors and European auteurs. After studying acting at the Conservatoire de Nice he embarked on a career in the theatre that led to a limited number of film roles, most notably as the lead in *Le Thé à la menthe* (1984) and *Bezness* (1992). Reacting against what he saw as the paucity of meaningful roles for French actors of Maghrebi immigrant origin, Kechiche began to develop his own screenplays in the 1990s. Since that time, Kechiche has written and directed six feature films: *Blame It on Voltaire* (*La Faute à Voltaire*, 2001), *Games of Love and Chance* (*L'Esquive*, 2005), *Couscous* (*La Graine et le mulet*, 2007 aka *The Secret of the Grain*), *Black Venus* (*Vénus noire*, 2010), *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (*La Vie d'Adèle*, 2013) and, most recently, *Mektoub, My Love: Canto Uno* (2017).

Even though he has enjoyed considerable critical and commercial success (his third film, *Couscous*, attracted over one million spectators in France, and his films have won numerous awards in France and internationally), like most independent directors, Kechiche has struggled to raise the finance for his often-challenging films. He famously announced in 2017 that he would be auctioning off the Palme d'Or awarded to him in 2013 at the Cannes festival for *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* in order to complete post-production on his latest film. His transformation over the past decade and a half from a relatively unknown stage and screen actor to an artistically uncompromising and internationally acclaimed director makes him one of the most prominent auteurs currently in the French cinema today. Nevertheless, his career as a director has not been without controversy: following success at Cannes with *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, Kechiche entered into a bitter row with one of the film's co-stars, Léa Seydoux, who spoke of his demanding and overbearing



approach to his female actors on set, stating that shooting the key lesbian love scenes had left her feeling “like a prostitute” – charges that the director strenuously denied. Elsewhere, the author of the original graphic novel from which *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* was adapted described the film’s lesbian sex scenes as “porn”. These issues of how Kechiche chooses to represent his female characters on screen and to what ends need also to be seriously considered in *Black Venus*.

Though benefitting from an international cast of established actors, *Black Venus* maintained Kechiche’s preference for showcasing unknown acting talent, rather than bankable stars, with the casting of screen debutante Yahima Torres, a Cuban émigrée living in Paris. Kechiche also continued to work with trusted creative collaborators – cinematographer Lubomir Bakchev and editor/co-writer Ghalia Lacroix (also the director’s wife) – ensuring that aesthetic traits from his previous films, such as the visual style of largely static camera positions combined with the use of zoom and extreme close-ups, an emphasis on performative spaces and the body as spectacle, the dynamic use of language surrounding a taciturn central protagonist, a linear but expansive plotline, and the refusal of an optimistic narrative resolution, remained prominent elements in *Black Venus*.

In other ways, however, *Black Venus* signalled a departure for Kechiche. All his previous films had been shot on low budgets, with narratives set in present-day France: *Black Venus*, in contrast, was shot in three languages (English, French and Afrikaans), employing an international cast of professional actors and hundreds of extras, with an attention to ‘authentic’ historical reconstruction (costumes, set design, props, recreation of historical locations) and a budget to match of nearly €13 million. As such, the film forms part of the growing interest in historical biopics in French cinema since the early 2000s.

Black Venus recounts events from the final five years in the life of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoekhoe tribeswoman from the Cape Colony, who was transported as a servant from South Africa to Europe in 1810. During her time in Europe, Baartman was exhibited or ‘performed’ (depending on the interpretation of how much control she actually had over her stage act) before audiences in England and France. She obtained celebrity during this period as the original ‘Hottentot Venus’: an object of curiosity, fear and prohibited (sexual) desire, first sold to a bourgeois consumer culture of the exotic in the freak shows in London and then to the libertine salons of nineteenth-century Paris. Western audience’s fascination with what they saw as an ‘exotic’ black body was heightened by Baartman’s steatopygia, a genetic condition characterised by the presence of excessive fat in the buttocks. Depictions of Baartman are found in scientific and anatomical drawings from the period as well as playbills and aquatint posters, cartoons, paintings and sculptures produced both before and after her death (a fact alluded to in the film by the newspaper cuttings announcing the

‘Hottentot Venus’ that Baartman pins to the wall of her bedroom in London). Whilst living in Paris, the real-life Baartman was also the subject of ‘scientific’ observation under the direction of Georges Cuvier, Professor of Natural History in the Collège de France. After her premature death from tuberculosis in 1815, Cuvier instructed that her brain, skeleton and (most disturbingly) genitals were to be preserved and exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, where they remained on display until 1974.

Performative spaces, the act of looking and questions of power and agency involved therein endure as central concerns in *Black Venus*. From the film’s opening scene, where Cuvier (François Marthouret) emerges from behind the curtains of the auditorium to deliver a lecture on the science of racial hierarchy, to the courtroom in which the African Association attempts to prove that Baartman is being held in conditions tantamount to slavery and the prostitutes in the Parisian brothel parading themselves in front of clients, the film is essentially a *mise-en-abyme* of performance that continues the theme of the exploration of the performative (female) body and the body under duress found in Kechiche’s earlier films. In *Black Venus*, this focus on the female body is pushed to ever more uncomfortable extremes. In one particularly disturbing sequence, as she performs to a private audience in a Parisian salon, a clearly intoxicated Baartman is subjected to a harrowing objectification that effectively amounts to sexual assault. The assembled libertine public are encouraged by Baartman’s new master, Réaux (Olivier Gourmet), to embark on a tactile and ocular exploration of the Hottentot Venus’s body in order to better understand their own (sexual) desires and overcome their own inhibitions. The sequence is filmed in graphic detail by Kechiche and, beyond any question of representation of the characters themselves, arguably verges on exploitation of the young and inexperienced Cuban actress playing Baartman.

Unlike the female protagonists of Kechiche’s earlier films (such as the formidable Rym in *Couscous*), Baartman is a taciturn figure, unable to articulate her feelings and emotions. Baartman’s various performances in the film as the Hottentot Venus are thus analogous with the life-size cast of her body that stares back blankly at the audience from Cuvier’s lecture – an icon that is repeatedly observed, analysed and contemplated by various onscreen audiences in the film without us actually gaining any greater insight into her motivations or desires. The onscreen spectacles in which Baartman performs as the Hottentot Venus frequently begin with an establishing shot that frames her from behind, obscuring her face and looking out towards the expectant audience. The danger of this representational strategy, which is consistent with Kechiche’s refusal across all his films to claim an absolute knowledge or truth over his protagonists, is that Baartman/Torres is reduced to a mere cipher, who mobilises gender and race as markers of perpetual otherness.



While portraying the degrading spectacle of the Hottentot Venus, Kechiche similarly refuses to pass simplistic and moralising judgments on any of his characters. The African 'savage' of the freak shows is, from the first instance in *Black Venus*, portrayed as a calculated performance on the part of Baartman, encouraged by Caezar (Andre Jacobs) and designed to satisfy the expectations of her European audience. Tellingly, in one particular performance, Baartman refuses the role assigned to her as an object of fear and fascination. Instead she holds her audience momentarily transfixed by the beauty of her musical performance, a transgression in performing the Hottentot that is instantly rebuked by Caezar. The image Baartman presents to a paying public is thus far removed from the figure in the film who, during the day, rides in a horse-drawn cart and promenades in European dress through the streets and parks of London with the aid of her two African servants. The historical perspective of Baartman as helpless victim of European racism is further scrutinised in the courtroom scene, where she refuses to define herself before the judge as a slave, insisting that she has entered into a contract with Caezar to perform of her own free will. Even the supposedly noble and compassionate intervention of the African Association, who bring a court-case against Caezar to try and 'free' Baartman, is left open to the possible interpretation of being seen as a self-serving act of paternalistic self-aggrandisement on behalf of the 'civilised' Europeans defending a helpless African tribeswoman. On the other hand, the violence inflicted on Baartman by Caezar for her refusal to expose her genitalia to Cuvier during his 'scientific' observation of the Hottentot Venus casts doubt on the veracity of her earlier claims to be a free woman – a position that seems to be confirmed by the fact that Caezar ultimately sells Baartman to Réaux. Like the freak show and the scientific observation, then, the promenades that Baartman takes in the parks of London and Paris ultimately appear as yet another performance – the black female body as scrutinized, objectified, fetishized and ultimately exploited.

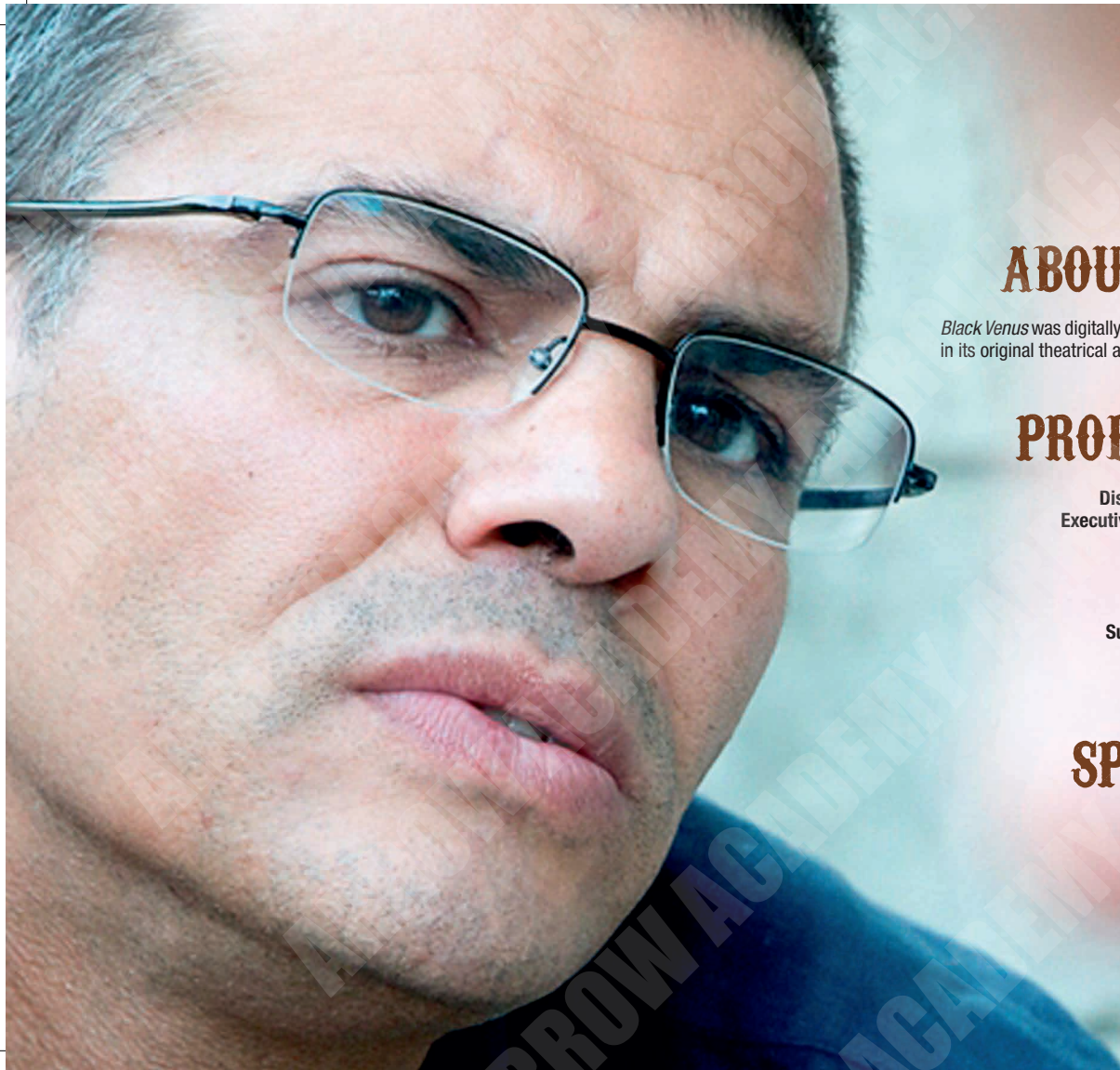
This ambiguous line between reality and performance is repeatedly exposed in *Black Venus*. As Caezar's barrister argues in the London courtroom, those who choose to see in Baartman a victim of slavery and exploitation: "confuse reality with representation". Kechiche further blurs this boundary with a cinematic representation of Baartman constructed through what might best be described as an aesthetic of detached intimacy. The repeated use of extreme close-ups on Baartman/Torres's face at key moments in the narrative (such as in advance of and during the performances in London) reveals her either with her eyes shut or with head lowered and eyes downcast, as if affecting a psychological and emotional retreat from the world around her. Although conventionally employed to evoke an emotional connection or to suggest intimacy with a given character, the close-up in *Black Venus* functions instead as a marker of Baartman's alienation.

The violence visited upon Baartman's body is at once physical and psychological but Kechiche makes little distinction between the perpetrators, who come from all levels of society. Even the degrading and increasingly base acts she is required to perform as a prostitute in Paris seem less barbaric than the final clinical violation inflicted by Cuvier, who purchases her corpse and eviscerates her genital organs on the pretence of transforming them into an object of scientific knowledge. Indeed, Cuvier's repeated requests in the Jardin du Roi that Baartman agree to a scientific examination of her genitalia are, ultimately, not that far removed from those of clients in the brothel that she expose herself, since the ultimate aim of both sets of demands is control over the black, female body.

Black Venus was not only Kechiche's most ambitious project to date in terms of the logistics and scope of the production, it was also his bleakest. The sobering endings of his earlier films are, nonetheless, undercut with a sense of solidarity and the potential for change. In contrast, the narrative of *Black Venus* moves inexorably to Baartman's death through acts of degradation, exploitation, objectification and violence. When questioned in interviews around the time of *Black Venus's* release about the film's relentlessly bleak tone, Kechiche responded that his intention was to remove any idea of the film as 'entertainment'. *Black Venus* thus exposes the Eurocentric construction of knowledge, embodied by Cuvier but, equally, implicitly accepted by the popular audiences who pay to see the Hottentot Venus perform. Cuvier's lecture on the biological evidence for the superiority of Europeans over Africans articulates a scientific racism that would drive and help justify not just French but European colonial expansion through the nineteenth and twentieth century. For his part, Kechiche has argued that, although historically located in nineteenth-century France, the film's bleak exploration of the violence, humiliation and degradation that was produced by European encounters with a non-western Other actually speaks directly to an increasing lack of tolerance and hospitality in France towards the Other, revived by xenophobic discourse and a hostility to non-European immigrants and their French-born descendants whipped up by far-right racists and opportunist politicians in contemporary France.

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ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Black Venus was digitally restored by MK2 from original film materials. The film is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with optional 2.0 and 5.1 soundtracks.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
Production Co-ordinator Liane Cunje
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Authoring Silversun
Subtitling The Engine House Media Services
Design Obviously Creative
Artwork Peter Strain

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Will Higbee, Neil Young

A close-up, profile view of a person's face, focusing on the eye, nose, and lips. The skin is dark and has a natural texture. A large, semi-transparent watermark reading "ARROW ACADEMY" is repeated diagonally across the entire image. In the bottom right corner, there is a logo consisting of the word "ARROW" above a stylized arrow graphic, followed by the word "ACADEMY" and the alphanumeric code "AA029 / FCD1734".

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