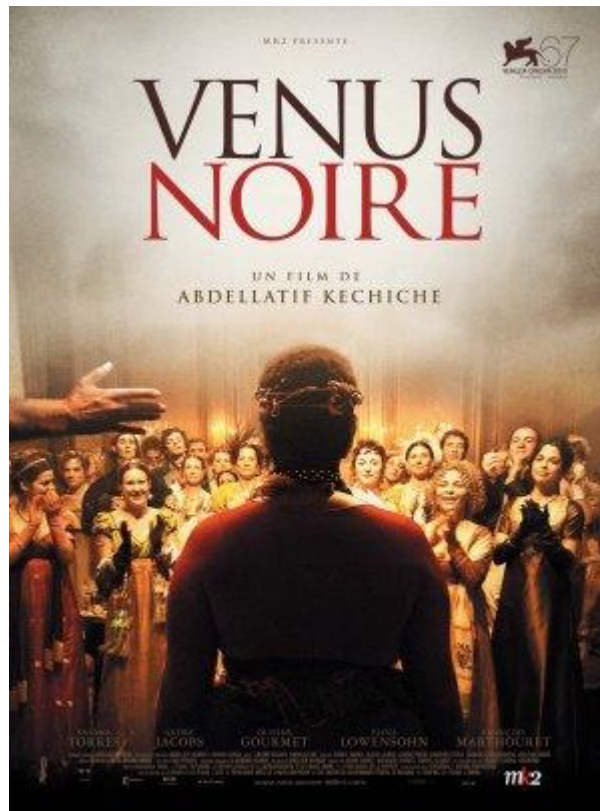


# Are you ready for your close up Ms. Baartman?



*An analysis of Sarah Baartman's representation in VENUS NOIRE*

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# Index

<b>Introduction</b>	<i>2</i>
<b>Sarah Fetishized</b>	<i>6</i>
<b>Sarah's Agency</b>	<i>14</i>
<b>Sarah's Representation</b>	<i>18</i>
<b>Discussion</b>	<i>20</i>
<b>References</b>	<i>22</i>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<i>24</i>
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<i>25</i>
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<i>26</i>

# Introduction

Sarah Baartman, also known as ‘The Hottentot Venus’, is a name, figure and icon that has resonated in various academic fields since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Khoi Khoi woman’s physical attributes, vague biological and personal history, legacy of her display and performances, remain a hot topic in academic debates to this day<sup>1</sup>. These debates rely on British and French official documents, statements and newspapers and therefore leave room for countless interpretations of Baartman’s performances and person.

Mansell Upham quotes in his article ‘From The Venus Sickness To The Hottentot Venus, Part 2’ (2007) a British report written in 1810 that could provide some factual substance and chronological order to structure the story of Baartman’s life and performances after her arrival in London (see Appendix 1 for a detailed report after Baartman’s questioning by British authorities). However, a close reading of this report reveals why Upham claims to introduce this report for reevaluation purposes while pessimistically categorizing it as “...the most invariably mostly quoted piecemeal and often even out of context...” (Upham 2007, 76). The report is in its entirety Baartman’s testimony as interpreted by her British examiners. It is not certain how much of her testimony is actually in her words, since the report concludes that a language and illiteracy barrier on Baartman’s part might have prevented a clear answer from Baartman about her situation. Thus this leaves much room for the reevaluation and reinterpretation of the circumstances she was questioned, factual information about her roots, the knowledge of the agreements made with her business associates, Hendrick Cezar and Alexander Dunlop, and the nature of her relationship with the two men and later Jeanne Réaux.

This example and short analysis demonstrate that versions of Baartman’s story exist as the interpretation and reinterpretations of European others. This conclusion can also be applied to other documents detailing her life after the production of this report. After her death in 1815, Baartman’s remains, including a skeleton, preserved genitals and a brain and molded cast were

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete overview: Ritter, Sabine. 2010. *Facetten der Sarah Baartman. Repräsentationen und Rekonstruktionen der Hottentotten Venus*. Berlin: Lit Verlag. // Willis, Deborah. 2010. *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

subject to historic scientific research regarding the human race, but her personal story of possible suffering and abuse only came to the attention of those active in visual and cultural academia during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many researched, exhibited and discussed her story and legacy at length in order to grasp a valuable and perhaps satisfactory social, cultural and emotional understanding of the figure of Baartman. Others questioned and contested her role as an icon for postapartheid in South Africa, abused women, and present exploitation of past racial differences, and referred to her as a historical figure to be named ‘The Hottentot Venus’. ‘The Hottentot Venus’ was used outside of South Africa by for example art historian Sander L. Gilman (1985) in order to demonstrate the relationship between Baartman and the development of black and prostitute iconography. Historian Percival Kirby wrote a series of articles on Sarah Baartman in South Africa the 1940s en 1950s and, according to Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, his investigation became “the basis for poems, plays, sculptures and other representations that now powerfully depicted the terrible display of the Hottentot Venus in Europe as the moniker of everything wrong with Western civilization” (2009, 3).

These artistic uses can be scrutinized and criticized for exhibiting Sarah Baartman even after her death and the possibility of painfully picking at Baartman’s scabs of wounds of the past. For example, the sculpture of Baartman constructed by South African resistance artist Willie Bester out of recycled material provoked many critical reactions when the object was placed in the library of the University of Capetown. Students and faculty members regarded this as a repetition of a painful history where Baartman’s body was exhibited and subjected yet again to science whereas Bester views his artwork as a critically valid expression about the totalitarian and colonial aspects of South African history (Buikema 2007, 80). Another example is the poem ‘A Tribute to Sarah Baartman’ written by poet, artist and author Diana Ferrus in 1997 (see Appendix 2). The poem was recited by Ferrus during the celebration of the return and burial of Baartman’s remains to South Africa in 2002. Baartman’s return was realized after years of negotiating with the French government over her remains and also at the unveiling of Bester’s sculpture of Baartman (idem, 78). These examples show that racial and gender tensions, especially when addressing physical differences, remain intact to those living in a

multicultural world even to this day. However, artistic uses can also be celebrated, stimulated and used to keep Baartman's story and legacy alive and allow this historical figure and her story an important place in every generation's historical and social consciousness.

In 1998, Zola Maseko offered through his documentary, *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SARAH BAARTMAN*, a visual representation of Baartman's life, death, legacy and cultural and historical significance. Using historical drawings, cartoons, legal documents and interviews with cultural historians and anthropologists, the documentary deconstructs the social, political, scientific and philosophical assumptions which transformed Baartman into a representation of savage sexuality and racial inferiority. The documentary then offers a new visual way of telling her story and by using historical artifacts and interviews by experts. Maseko produced a coherent and extensive representation of what was known about Baartman up to the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Baartman's story is still told by others. Just as in the representations discussed in previous paragraphs, the documentary and any other representations for that matter, Baartman has never voiced her own story due to the fact that her own interpretation of her reality was never specifically documented and never will be.

More than a decade after Maseko's documentary, Abdellatif Kechiche wrote and directed *VENUS NOIRE*, a film of fiction that chronicles the last years of Baartman's life until her death in 1815. Baartman is portrayed by the Cuban school teacher and first time actress Yahima Torres in the film, but also by writer Ghalia Lacroix and writer/director Abdellatif Kechiche. This is the first attempt to visualize Baartman's story through a feature film instead of a documentary or scientific report. Kechiche does not hold back when putting Torres' body up for an extensive and detailed display. This type of display is used during numerous scenes where Baartman has to perform in front of the British and later on French public and when she is examined by the French scientists in Paris. The film provides the viewer with repeated displays of the big and flexible buttocks and other physical features, humiliating acts that were part of Baartman's daily performances, the relationships between Baartman and her business associates, Georges Cuvier's examination and his views regarding her humanity, and the unavoidable road towards prostitution, venereal disease, and her sudden death in Paris,.

Throughout VENUS NOIRE Baartman's character is mostly passive, silent, never alone and allows Cezar (Andre Jacobs) and Réaux (Olivier Gourmet) to decide her faith while having to perform multiple times in order to assure their profit. Although VENUS NOIRE is yet again a visual representation of Baartman provided by others than herself, Kechiche has allowed the character of Baartman some form of agency not present in previous visual representations.

In order to gain insight into the subtle, however richly detailed, clues and cues I will analyze how the film style in VENUS NOIRE characterizes Sarah Baartman. I offer an analysis of two sequences with help of Cinematics software where I believe that the character of Baartman is fragmented and another analysis of two sequences where the character seems to express agency. In these analyses I take a closer look at the cinematography, editing and sound according to guidelines presented by David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson in their book '*Film Art*' (2008). I will link the first analysis to Stuart Hall's take on Freud's fetishism and I connect the second analysis to Laura Mulvey's take on the gaze in cinema. These findings will be interpreted along theories of (the politics of) exhibition formulated by Hall (1997), Barbara Kirschenblatt (1998) and theories of representation in visual culture formulated by Laura Mulvey (1975) These theories present several layers of meaning and will aid in extending and refining my interpretation of the chosen scenes and assist me in formulating my answer on the way Sarah Baartman's character is represented in VENUS NOIRE.

# Sarah fetishized

## Sequence 2: prologue





The film name title opens with a prologue where French scientist Georges Cuvier lectures at a seminar for scientists in a room at Académie Royale de Médecine in Paris, France. The room is evenly filled with light beaming through the windows. For the discussion Cuvier and his assistant place a plaster statue of Baartman on the audience's left and a board with several drawings on their right. The scientists are seated in a slightly elevated half circle of wooden benches, so that every object and person in the room can be viewed in its entirety from every angle similar to Foucault's panopticon *'Discipline & Punish'* (1975). The scientists, Cuvier and his assistant are all white males, neatly dressed according to the French fashion of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This forms a contrast with the dark, nude statue of Baartman.

Cuvier claims that her physical features are similar to those of the so called 'Bosjesman' tribe and concludes that she did not belong to the Negroid race. The statue is never acknowledged in its entirety in Cuvier's monologue or by the camera since the focus of his monologue and the camera is on the body parts. A full frontal clear medium shot of the genitals is provided when Cuvier talks about the length of her swollen labia. Besides this shot, there is also a medium shot of the statue's upper body and face but shorter in length than the aforementioned shot. Cuvier's assistant then allows her removed genitals, now floating in an alcohol filled glass container, to go around the room for the others to observe. The latter seem to be intrigued by the size. The statue remains present, but vaguely visible in the background in medium close up to extreme close up shots of Cuvier walking around the room discussing other physical features and comparing them to those measured on apes, ancient tribes and civilizations such as the Egyptians. Here, the camera focuses with medium shots on the drawings of the heads of female apes and later zooms in on the head of a mummy shown to the scientists. These shots are interrupted only once by a short close up of the statue's head where the closed eyes are the most noticeable.

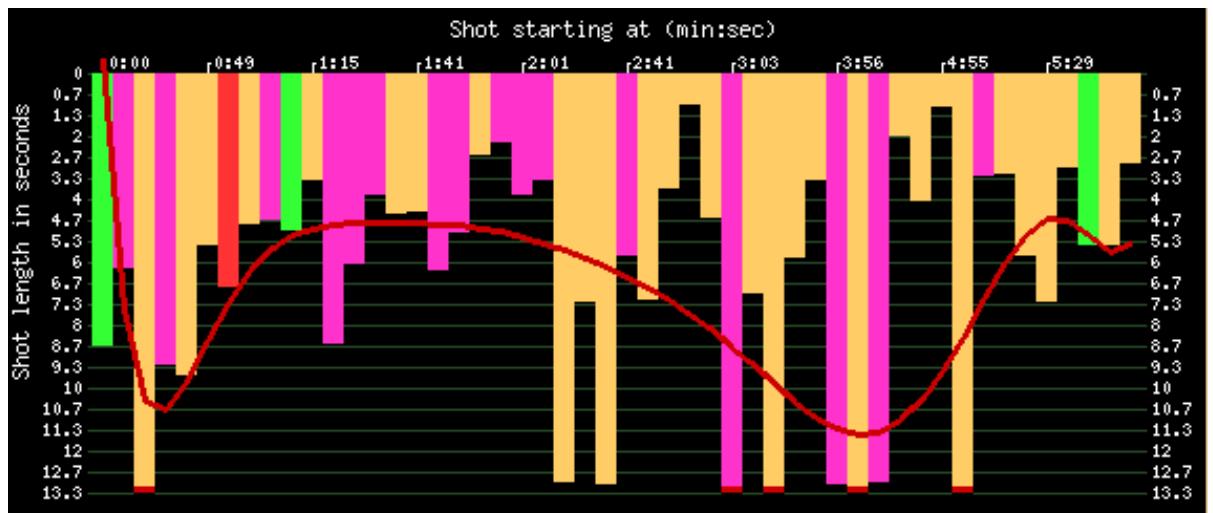
Cuvier's voice seems omniscient while he speaks about Baartman's measurements and defining her behind as a physical feature only belonging to the 'Bosjesman-tribe'. His voice is the only sound audible in the room, besides other diegetic sounds made by him and his assistant moving around the room and changing the drawings. Although his loud voice with a serious tone seems omniscient, a slight melancholy surfaces in his facial expression in close up shots when Cuvier addresses Baartman. This melancholy is also noticeable in the last close up shots of his face staring at the floor when his conclusion is met with applause from the other scientists. Although scientifically he has reached his goal of categorizing Baartman, it is suggested that he may not be satisfied with the way this happened.

The scene is mostly shot with a shoulder or hand-held camera in continual movement and extreme close up shots that mostly linger on Cuvier's face as he speaks. Constant close ups of his (white) face, his movements around the room and his audience paying close attention to his words and the content of his speech stand in contrast to the dark plaster statue of Baartman that stands still and silent with its eyes closed and less acknowledged next to the drawings. It is only acknowledged in parts and measurement for the purpose of categorization.

## Cinematics Analysis sequence 2

Sequence where Cuvier explains his findings				
ASL: 7.1 MSL: 5.4 MSL/ASL: 0.76 LEN: 5:52.5 NoS: 50 MAX: 27 MIN: 0.9 Range: 26.1 StDev: 5.4 CV: 0.75				
Name:	CU	MCU	MS	LS
Number of shots:	30	1	16	3
Length(min):	3.56	0.11	1.89	0.32
ASL(sec):	7.1	6.7	7.1	6.3
MSL	5.1	6.7	5.9	5.4
MSL/ASL	0.72	1	0.83	0.86
StDev	6	0	4.6	1.6
Min	0.9	6.7	2.1	4.9
Max	27	6.7	20	8.6
CV	0.85	0	0.64	0.26
Display?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Color				





### Sequence 9: first examination by Cuvier

After a performance in Paris, Cezar and his newly acquired partners Réaux and Jeanne are asked by Cuvier to bring Baartman for examination and proof of authenticity to the Musée de L'Homme. In exchange for her complete cooperation he promises them financial compensation for missed performances and an even larger sum of money if Baartman's authenticity as a Hottentot is scientifically proven. Cezar accompanies Baartman to the museum believing the scientists wish to see a show, but is quickly dismissed as they are only interested in measuring Baartman's body. Baartman is dressed in blue and red dress, red leather gloves and a decorated wicker hat. She is then asked to undress upstairs. She complies with this request, but when she comes back down the stairs, she has put on the decorated waistcloth she usually wears over her bodysuit during her performances. Although the scientists are startled that she is not completely nude, as requested, they proceed with examining and measuring her mostly uncovered body in an exam room in another part of the building.

The scene where she is examined by the scientists is also shot with a hand-held camera in continual movement and extreme close up shots with some medium shots in between. Baartman stands in the middle of the room, surrounded by measuring equipment and eight scientists. Her eyes are looking down while she undergoes the examination. The room is also

filled with light beaming through the windows and sounds of birds outside can be occasionally heard.

Close up shots are predominantly used in a specific order while Baartman's physical features are examined. First a shot of her body measured by metric instruments, followed by a shot of a seated scientist writing the measurements down as the scientist doing the examinations mentions the numbers out loud. When she is asked how she developed the large size of her buttocks, she tells them in a mixture of French and English that this happened after giving birth. However, due to the language barrier it is not clear to the scientists and Cuvier if they believe or understand this properly. When the scientists try to loosen her waistcloth in order to measure her genitals she sternly removes their hands while shaking her head. For this part a medium shot is used with the scientists (with Cuvier in the middle) shot from the back with Baartman, still looking down, rejecting their attempts. One associate of Cuvier suggests that she should be comfortable and be able to trust them in order to go completely nude.

Baartman is then covered with a blanket and brought food, shown in a medium shot. In a close up shot she starts biting away at the skin of a piece of chicken, almost reluctantly, until she notices that every scientist in the room is still observing her and making notes, shown in a following medium shot. In the subsequent medium shot, she suddenly reaches across the table, puts bread and cheese in a napkin and grabs a bottle of white wine and leaves the room. Then, in a long shot, she is shown walking outside. Here, the screen is filled with light, in this case the sun, and the birds are chirping even louder. She meets one of Cuvier's assistants who is busy drawing a portrait of her. He explains to her in French that he is drawing her and she seems to warm up to him and offers him food while he tries to explain to her that he is drawing her in her native environment. In the following shot she is posing while sitting on the tree branch and wearing the blanket as he finishes the details of his drawing. In the following section I will explain how Baartman is thus never safe and without onlookers; having suggested her flight from the male scientists, the scene shows that she cannot escape the male gaze.

When she returns to the room and Cuvier himself attempts to remove her waistcloth again after telling her aggressively that "*Je veux vous voir!*", she replies while grabbing his

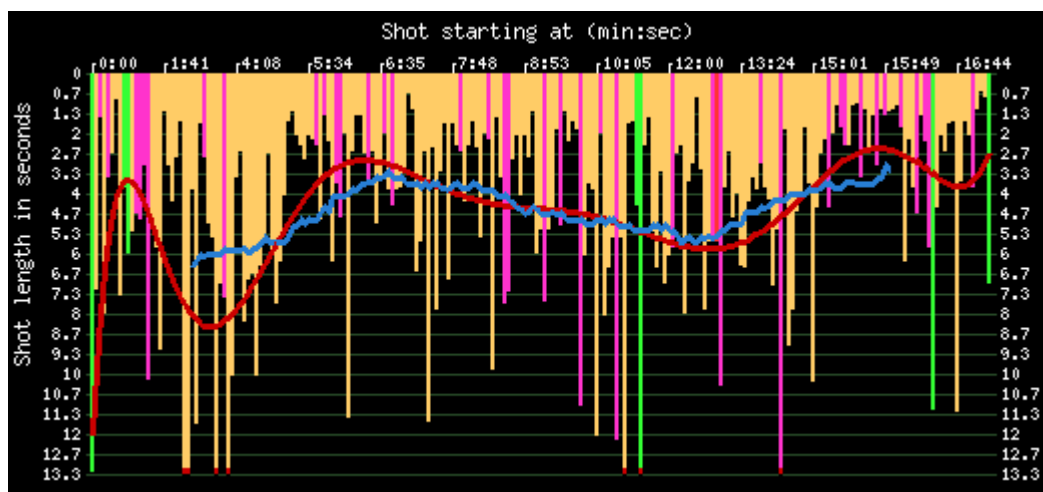
crotch with the same aggressive touch: *“Toi vous voire!”* and proceeds to leave the room after he subsequently tries to bribe her with some coins. Mostly medium shots are used here, with close ups of Cuvier’s associate hand with the coins. Here a lot of medium close up shots are alternated with some medium shots. The camera is always on the same height as Cuvier and his associates, but seems to be somewhat tilted down in shots of Baartman. Baartman has left the room and is walking outside towards the building where she left her clothes. This is shown through a long shot with the same light and sounds like before, but this time she is not alone. The scientists follow her back to the building. As she goes upstairs and starts getting dressed, one scientist follows her and tries to get a peek at her genitals when she seems to bend over with her backwards. She quickly discovers him and repeatedly starts screaming *“Laat mij!”*, switching from broken French to English to Afrikaans in a desperate attempt to be left alone. This part is shot from the viewpoint of the scientist through medium close up to close up shots. This is the first time Baartman has ever raised her voice for protest, but she is only seen in parts to small openings of the screen she is standing behind. This is immediately followed by a medium shot of Baartman leaving the Musée de L’Homme dressed in a carriage with a severe facial expression on her face. It seems as if the most important message this sequence tries to convey, is that Baartman refuses to subject herself fully to the scientific examination and expose her genitals for the scientists to see.

## Cinematics Analysis Sequence 9

Sequence: first examination by Cuvier and others

ASL: 4.6 MSL: 3.6 MSL/ASL: 0.78 LEN: 17:15 NoS: 225 MAX: 24.2 MIN: 0.5 Range: 23.7 StDev: 3.7 CV: 0.81

Name:	CU	MCU	MS	LS
Number of shots:	177	1	40	7
Length(min):	12.91	0.09	3.2	1.05
ASL(sec):	4.4	5.5	4.8	9
MSL	3.4	5.5	3.7	6.9
MSL/ASL	0.78	1	0.77	0.77
StDev	3.6	0	3.4	4.9
Min	0.5	5.5	1.3	3.7
Max	24.2	5.5	17.6	17.9
CV	0.83	0	0.71	0.54
Display?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Color	Orange	Red	Pink	Green



### Interpretation

During both sequences and noticeable in the statistics derived from the Cinemetric analyses it is clear that a large number of close up shots are used. Statistics show that these close up shots outnumber other shots by far and they also reveal that some close up shots last more than 25 seconds. The sequences start and conclude with a long shot. The focus of the close up shots is on the body parts of both Baartman and the scientists. In the case of the scientists, Cuvier is the leading professor and is thus awarded the central role by the camera. In both sequences the camera focuses on Cuvier's face when he discusses his research on Baartman during the prologue, but also during his examination. His eyes carefully search Baartman's physical attributes in order to determine what she is. The close up shots of Baartman's body parts during

the examination and the cast during the presentation force the viewer into his point of view. It is clear from the prologue that Sarah Baartman does not fit the ethnocentric norm applied to European women and, falling outside a western classificatory system of what 'women' are like; she has been constructed as 'Other' (Hall 1997, 265).

The close-ups of Cuvier's face and those of Baartman's body reduce the representation of the human body to nature where the body becomes the signifier. Because of this reduction, Stuart Hall states that body can be read as a way of interpreting the absolute 'otherness' of Baartman and therefore of an irreversible difference between races (idem, 265). The close ups of both Cuvier's gaze and Baartman's body parts contribute to a form of reductionism where the focus is Cuvier's face examining Baartman while quantitatively and qualitatively breaking her into parts for his analysis. This causes the character of Baartman to physically undergo a kind of symbolic dismantling or fragmentation and the camera does not allow her to exist as a person, but only in a collection of relevant body parts.

The way Baartman's character is physically and symbolically dismantled through the film style can be related to Stuart Hall's claim that Baartman has been subjected to fetishism. He states that Baartman did not exist as a person. "She had been disassembled into her relevant parts. She was 'fetishized' – turned into an object" (idem, 266). Through the close up shots the viewer no longer perceives her as a person, but as an object fragmented into body parts that need to be categorized.

Hall also introduces displacement while discussing his views on fetishism. Displacement refers to the transfer of emotions or meanings to another part of the body or another object which substitutes for it. The reason for Hall's mentioning of displacement is Sander Gilman's argument that in the case of the Hottentot Venus "the sexual object of the onlooker's gaze was displaced from her genitalia, which was really obsessed them, to her buttocks" (Gilman 1985, 91). The film shows this displacement in reverse. In the prologue Cuvier's focus is on the genitalia and facial features, but as the other sequence reveals, due to Baartman's refusal to reveal her genitals, his focus was displaced to her buttocks. I also consider

this a form of dismantling since the focus is yet again on her relevant parts, first her genitalia then later to her buttocks.

Hall also brings up the term disavowal. Disavowal refers to a strategy by means of which a “powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied. It is where what has been tabooed nevertheless manages to find a displaced form of representation” (Hall 1997, 267). The viewer is confronted in the prologue with an anatomical approach to Baartman through French eyes where her enlarged genitals take center stage. However, during the first round of examination other body parts are emphasized due to her reluctance of showing her genitals to the scientists. Due to the consistent use of close up on her body parts the viewer is first confronted during the prologue with her genitals, but the focus shifts to her buttocks as film showcases her performances.

The sequences during the prologue and Cuvier’s first examination can be considered a strategy that makes the viewer become aware of both representing and not-representing the tabooed object. The film displaces the gaze from the genitalia to the buttocks; but it also allows the observers to go on looking while disavowing the sexual nature of their gaze. The prologue where Baartman’s cast of her body seems to be purely discussed as a scientific research object for necessary anatomical evidence is used by the scientists and indirectly the viewer as the cover or disavowal, which allows the illicit desire for the viewer to look at her fragmented body.

The scientists, look at, examine, and observe Baartman’s body naked and in public, classify and dissect every detail of her anatomy, on the perfectly acceptable alibi that it is all being done in the pursuit of gaining of objective knowledge, and ethnological evidence. Meanwhile, the film’s audience relies on the knowledge that this detailed examination is all being done in the pursuit of historical knowledge.

# Sarah's agency

## Sequence 4: Residence of Baartman, Cezar and Dunlop

Baartman arrives at their residence in London and throws herself on her bed, exhausted after yet another performance. In the following medium shot she is shown sitting at the dinner table smoking a cigar. Her contemplation is interrupted by Cezar's entrance with two male black servants carrying several boxes. He takes her by the hand and takes her to where the boxes and servants are while telling her that he has something pretty for her. As she follows him, a close up shot of her face while he takes her by the hand reveals a suspicious glance directed towards Cezar, the servants and the boxes. Baartman maintains this suspicious look as he explains that he has gifts for her and that he has hired two servants, Harry and Matthew, who will get her anything she desires and will take her for rides in the carriage. After having introduced them to one another, he opens the boxes and shows her the articles he has bought for her; a hand fan, red leather gloves and a blue hat. She remains stoic in her indifferent look as Cezar tries to cheer her up. He orders her to put on the gloves in order to feel how soft they are. Constant close ups of the faces of Baartman, Cezar and the servants, while Baartman is trying on the hat and the gloves, reveal that Cezar is desperate to lighten Baartman's mood to ensure that she is willing to continue to perform. Baartman does not show any kind of appreciation, presumably as he has ignored her previous requests not to be treated like an animal during the performances. The servants are clearly flabbergasted by the lack of a positive reaction and her indifferent facial expression to seemingly expensive gifts.

The next medium shot takes the viewer outside of the residence and Baartman is wearing the gifts from Cezar while taking a carriage ride with her servants. A flute plays over the diegetic sound of the horse and carriage, children are playing, and the sun is shining brightly. Although the location is established due to interruption of two medium shots and a long shot of the park, the focus lies upon the close up shots which are directed at Baartman's face and twice exchanged by a medium close up shot of her servants sitting across from her. They look uncomfortable since Baartman does not show any emotion or kindness towards them,

maybe because she has not come to terms with Cezar's gifts. Baartman takes them to a store where she exchanges the blue hat for a purple and pink version. The servants stay outside while she chooses another and she simply glances at them and walks to the carriage. They quickly follow as if she is their mistress. This part of the sequence is shot in close ups followed by a medium shot.

What can be derived from this sequence is that Baartman reluctantly accepts Cezar's gifts, yet still attempts to stay in control by exchanging the hat for one that she prefers. Although she wears the gifts since Cezar has ordered her to do so, she uses the opportunity to be driven around in the carriage. However, there is no sign that she is enjoying herself. This can be understood as silent form of protest where she has accepted the gifts forced upon her, but remains ambivalent towards them until she is treated with the respect during her performances or might she be trying to mimick upper class white ladies?

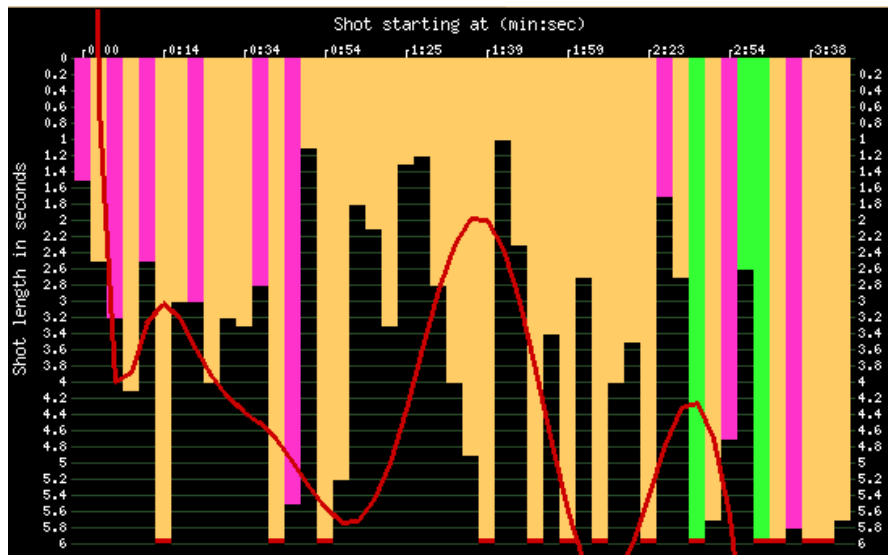
This form of protest reminds us of the above described sequence 9, where she refuses to reveal her genitals to the Cuvier and his associates. Although this protest is a bit more verbal, her attempt to ensure that she is not entirely treated as an object is successful.

#### Cinematics Analysis Sequence 4

ASL: 5 MSL: 3.8 MSL/ASL: 0.76 LEN: 4:0.6 NoS: 48 MAX: 18.2 MIN: 1 Range: 17.2 StDev: 3.9 CV: 0.78

Name:	CU	MS	LS
Number of shots:	36	9	3
Length(min):	3.1	0.51	0.4
ASL(sec):	5.2	3.4	7.9
MSL	4	3	6.5
MSL/ASL	0.77	0.88	0.82
StDev	4	1.5	5
Min	1	1.5	2.6
Max	18.2	5.8	14.6
CV	0.78	0.43	0.63
Display?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Color			





## Interpretation

The Cinematic statistics of sequence 4 showcase a similar pattern in comparison to the other analyzed sequences regarding the amounts of close ups and the opening and closing shots. During sequence 4 and 9 Baartman is shown protesting in two ways against the fragmentation of her body parts and exhibiting agency. Although in both sequences there are subtle signs of agency, they differ in the way this protest or agency is visualized. During the sequence where she seems to suspiciously undergo Cezar's shower of gifts and hire of servants, the viewer is shown that she decides to use the carriage to go and exchange the hat for another one she actually prefers while ignoring the presence of her servants. During the carriage ride to the hat shop she is clearly ambivalent of the expensive gifts she has received since she is indifferent towards her new servants. Throughout the carriage ride Baartman's face is filmed through a close up shots twice exchanged by the shots of the servants' faces. The latter do not know where they are going and look as if they have no idea how to start up a conversation or have been taught that servants are not allowed to speak to their mistress. Although Cezar has attempted to bribe her with expensive gifts, she remains stoic. Although she has not verbally expressed dislike towards the hat gifted by Cezar, the viewer is left wondering about her decision to exchange the hat and her reluctant behavior towards the gifts. During this sequence the film style remains faithful to the use of close up shots and a hand-held camera and focusing on her facial expression and her body parts (now covered by expensive clothes). Because the viewer is

left wondering about her decision he is indirectly made aware of Baartman as a human being. During sequence 9 she is almost nude most of the time and protests when Cuvier forcefully attempts to expose her genitals. Here she protests vocally while behind a screen in order to convey her message of wanting to be left alone to curious scientist.

What is crucial about the discussed sequences is the affect created for the viewer. As the film includes sequences in which Baartman is shown expressing emotion or undertaking actions, the viewer is reminded of her humanity. She is no longer fragmented and reduced to her body parts, but expresses her own will both silently and vocally. This element within the story line serves as an aid in constructing the identity of Baartman's character in the film where she simply cannot be viewed as an object at the mercy of her masters. She is rather seen as a human being who can, although displayed consistently through fragments by ways of close ups of her body, decide to exchange a gift forced upon her and refuse the exposure of her genitals for scientific research.

## Sarah's representation

In her book *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museum and Heritage* (1998) Barbara Kirschenblatt discusses in the chapter "Objects of Ethnography" the exhibition and representation of people as ethnographic artifacts as objects of ethnography. She mentions two options for displaying people within cultures, the zoological and the theatrical, in order to stage their culture, but also their wildness. The zoological approach refers to the focus on the physical attributes and the theatrical aspect focuses on recreating the habitat of the specimen in realistic detail. In this thesis I argue that both the theatrical and zoological displays are present in the representation of Sarah Baartman in *VENUS NOIRE*. Zoologically, the film style fetishizes Sarah Baartman in order to make the viewer aware of how the scientist and the film's audience classify and dissect every detail of her Baartman's physique in pursuit of gaining ethnological evidence of her Khoi Khoi heritage.

The zoological approach is balanced by the theatrical display. As the scientist zoologically dissect Baartman, the large number of close ups of her face during the scenes where she vocally or in her actions protests against her masters, remind the viewer of her humanity and the fact that the viewer is experiencing his or her own barbarity as civilized (Kirschenblatt 1998, 47). Barbarity in this context refers to the way she is displayed throughout her performances, is examined by the French scientists and treated by her masters.

Although I have only discussed four sequences in my thesis, the approach of the combination of the theatrical and zoological is present throughout the film. The constant, repetitive focus on Baartman's body, her reaction and lack thereof and her oppressors enabled through countless close ups offer the viewer a sense of the spectacle she must have gone through on and off stage, under the curious eyes of science and when subjected to her masters' will. According to Kirschenblatt, "such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce or membrane of our quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves, an effect that is also experienced by those on display" (idem, 48). If this effect is not

successfully created for the film's audience, this is made clear again through Cuvier's melancholic facial expression during the prologue.

As mentioned before, the film style in *VENUS NOIRE* consists of a large number of close ups with the use of a hand held camera. This film style refers explicitly only once to Foucault's panopticon during the film's prologue, but the panoptic approach can be visible in other discussed sequences when keeping Kirschenblatt's view in mind. She states that the panoptic mode offers the chance to see without being seen, to penetrate interior recesses, to violate intimacy. In its more problematic manifestation, the panoptic mode has the quality of peep show and surveillance: the viewer is in control, like a warden in a prison (idem, 55). This can be identified in both the theatrical and zoological aspect of Baartman's representation in Kechiche's film. However, Kirschenblatt is also aware of the other side of the coin and states that "in its more benign mode, the panoptic takes the form of hospitality, a host welcoming a guest to enter a private sphere" (idem). This can be seen when Baartman's agency is represented as to vocally or physically protest to her oppressors and the viewer is reminded of Baartman's humanity. Throughout the discussed sequences Sarah Baartman is essentialized by the film's audience by ways of the repetitive focus on her body parts while the viewer is also reminded of her humanity through the theatrical and totalization (where she is seen as a human).

## Discussion

I chose this topic for my thesis after a lecture by professor Rosemarie Buikema during the course Gender, Ethnicity and Culture Critique in 2009 where she elaborated about the ways one could research Sarah Baartman within the Humanities in combination with Genderstudies. I was fascinated by Baartman's life story and after some research for one the course's assignments I came across Kechiche's film. Since my major within my Bachelor Communication and Information Sciences is focused on film and television studies and I am interested in the field of gender studies I decided to choose the film VENUS NOIRE as subject for my thesis.

In preparation for writing this thesis aside from discussing possible angles with my supervisor dr. Babs Boter and assembling literature I also watched the film six times in movie theatres in Utrecht and Amsterdam as it had not yet been released on DVD. During these viewings in the late afternoons I was often accompanied by only a few moviegoers who shared a curiosity, and after seeing the movie slightly uncomfortable mixed with a fascination with Baartman and her story.

I regard the viewing of Venus Noire as one of the most uncomfortable yet interesting movie experiences. As mentioned in the introduction of my thesis, Kechiche does not hold back in using actress Yahima Torres' body in order to showcase every detail of Baartman's physically exhausting and humiliating performances and often inhumane treatment by her masters. Kechiche maintains his personal style noticeable in his other projects, the hand held camera and close ups, sticks to the detailed storyline that is faithful to the historical knowledge about Baartman. Through this type of visual storytelling he maintains the film's audience's awareness of the way Baartman was subjected to fragmentation while hanging on to her humanity while her overall representation in VENUS NOIRE also denotes all the problems of capturing, constituting, and presenting Sarah Baartman as a whole through parts.

When it came to Sarah Baartman's character in *VENUS NOIRE* I discovered the way Kechiche's visual interpretation fetishizes her, provides her agency and also zoologically and theatrically constructs her surroundings. This allows the film's audience to experience a visually rich and detailed story while they are constantly reminded of her humanity. My thesis focused on dissecting the film's style and its implications in order to determine Baartman's representation and its affect possibilities for the film's audience. Zola Maseko portrayed Baartman in his documentary, a genre different from feature film, historical drawings, cartoons, legal documents and interviews with cultural historians and anthropologists. It might be interesting for further research to attempt to determine which genre does an historical figure like Baartman justice or how Baartman's fictional character in the film differs or resembles those that already exist in other art forms and academia.

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# Appendix 1

The following is the result of the Examination of the Hottentot Venus 27th

Nov[em]b[er] 1810.

“She does not know when she left her native place she being very young when she came to the Cape: the Brother of her late Master, Peter Cezar, brought her to the Cape: she came with her own consent with Peter Cezar and was taken into the service of Hendrik Cezar as his nursery maid; she came by her own consent to England and was promised half of the money for exhibiting her person - She agreed to come to England for a period of six years; she went personally to the Government in Company with Hendrik Cezar to ask permission to go to England: Mr Dunlop promised to send her back after that period at his own expense and to send the money belonging to her with her - she Is kindly treated and has every thing she wants; Has no complaints to make against her master or those that exhibit her: is perfectly happy in her present situation: has no desire whatever of returning to her own Country not even for the purpose of seeing her two Brothers and four sisters: wishes to stay here because she likes the Country and has money given her by her Master of a Monday when she rides about in a Coach for a couple of hours - Her father was in the habit of going with Cattle from the interior to the Cape and was killed in one of those lournes by the 'Bosmen': her mother died twenty years ago - she has a child by a Drummer at the Cape with whom she lived for about two years yet being always in the employ of Hendrik Cezar, the child is since dead - she is to receive one half of the money received for exhibiting herself and Mr Dunlop the other half - she is not desirous of changing her present situation - no personal violence or threats have been made by any individual against her; she has two Black Boys - to wait upon her: One of the men assists her in the morning when she is nearly compleately [*sic*] attired for the purpose of fastening the Ribbon round her waist - her dress is too cold and she has complained of this to Hendrik Cezar who promised her warmer Clothing; Her age she says to be twenty two and that her stay at the Cape was three years - To the various questions we put to her whether e.g. she chose at any time to discontinue her person being exhibited. She might do so, we could not draw a satisfactory answer from her - She understand very little of the agreement made with her by Mr Dunlop on the twenty ninth October 1810 and which agreement she produced to us - The time of Examination lasted for about three hours - and the questions put to her were put in such a language as to be understood by her - and these Deponents say they were informed by the said female that she could neither read nor write.

I signed] Slamuel] Solty

I signed] J[oh]n.. Geolrgel Moojen

King's Bench

Samuel Solly of Bridge Row Common Street London merchant and John George Moogen of Crutched Friars LondoTi Merchant severally make oath and say and first this Deponent Samuel Solly for himself.”

(Upham 2007, 76-77)

## Appendix 2

### A poem for Sarah Baartman

By Diana Ferrus (2003)

“I’ve come to take you home –  
home, remember the veld?  
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees  
the air is cool there and the sun does not burn.  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckle sing-songs  
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to wretch you away –  
away from the poking eyes  
of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark  
with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit  
who likens your soul to that of Satan  
and declares himself the ultimate god!

I have come to soothe your heavy heart  
I offer my bosom to your weary soul  
I will cover your face with the palms of my hands  
I will run my lips over lines in your neck  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you  
and I will sing for you  
for I have come to bring you peace.

I have come to take you home  
where the ancient mountains shout your name.  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white –  
I have come to take you home  
where I will sing for you  
for you have brought me peace

## Appendix 3: Segmentation of sequences

- 1) **Opening credits**
- 2) **Académie Royale de Médecine. Paris (prologue)**

*Cuvier explains the findings of his research and presents genitals in alcohol and cast of Baartman's body to fellow scientists.*
- 3) **London, June 1810**

*Several artists and their managers are promoting their shows containing 'freaks of human nature' to people passing by. Baartman performs.*
- 4) **Residence of Baartman, Cezar and Dunlop**

*Baartman goes to her bedroom. She refuses Cezar's request to enter her bedroom. The next morning Baartman tells Cezar that she does not like the audience touching her, but Cezar points out that they are making a lot of profit because of this element in the show. After the performance, Cezar brings her two black servants to cater to her needs, expensive gloves and a hat. Baartman takes a ride with the servants and goes to a store to exchange the hat for a different one. The servants try to teach her English.*
- 5) **Pub**

*Réaux, a bear handler, and his assistant Jeanne introduce themselves to Cezar and Baartman.*
- 6) **Theatre**

*Dunlop gets ahold of a newspaper condemning Baartman's performance. After the following performance Cezar and Baartman are confronted by members of the African Institution concerned with Baartman's wellbeing. Cezar dismisses their allegations about mistreatment. Baartman is tended to by her servants with alcohol and a pipe. During the following performance she refuses to cooperate when the audience wants to cop a feel. Cezar is enraged.*
- 7) **Court Case**

*Cezar defends his show in British Court. Baartman is also called to the stand and backs up Cezar's statement that she is an artist that signed a contract that benefits both her and her business associates. The court settles in favor of Cezar.*
- 8) **Pub and move to Paris**

*Réaux and Cezar bond and decide to become a team while Jeanne tries to befriend Baartman. Cezar takes Jeanne and Réaux home and shows them Baartman's genitals. Baartman is baptized and Réaux, Cezar and Jeanne go to Paris. Réaux has convinced Cezar that Parisian audiences will embrace the show more than the London public. After a performance Réaux seduces Baartman and sleeps with her. Baartman also starts performing in the salons of the Parisian elite. Cezar is disgusted by the sexually suggestive elements Réaux and Jeanne have added to the performance. After a performance a French journalist interviews Baartman in the carriage on her way home.*
- 9) **First examination by Cuvier**

*After a performance Cuvier asks Réaux, Cezar and Jeanne if he can examine Baartman in order to determine her authenticity. Baartman is brought to the Musée de L'Homme and undergoes a meticulous physical examination and questionnaire. She refuses to take off her loincloth that covers her genitals and leaves the institution. Cezar is enraged, because Cuvier refuses to pay the money promised if the examination was completed. Baartman refuses to go back and Cezar starts beating her. He sells his part of the contract to Réaux and returns to South Africa without Baartman.*
- 10) **Partnership with Réaux and Jeanne.**

*Baartman performs only in private settings. Her performance is induced with even more sexual elements. This ends up in the audience touching her genitals as if on the precipice of an orgy. When this happens Baartman starts crying and the members of the audience discontinue their touching and start to leave. This enrages Réaux and he tells her that he will no longer allow her to perform.*

**11) Prostitution and death**

*Baartman makes a living as a prostitute for men brought to the brothel by Réaux. After a doctor discovers she is suffering from several venereal diseases, Baartman is forced out of the brothel and has to live on the street while selling her body to strangers. After one of her clients leaves she gets a coughing-fit and seems to die due to lack of oxygen. Réaux brings her body to Cuvier. Her body is cleaned and a cast of her body is made. Cuvier then measures and removes her genitals, preserves her organs and brain. Cuvier's assistant then sets up the room at the Académie Royale de Médecine.*

**12) Closing credits (epilogue)**

*Report with real life images depicting the return of Baartman's remains to South Africa where she was laid to rest in 2002.*