

Video Review

The Life and Times of Sara Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. A Film by Zola Maseko
Distributed in U.S.A by First Run/ Icarus Films. 52 minutes, colour, 1998.

Sara Baartman was taken from the Cape of Good Hope to London in 1810, aged about twenty, and was displayed in Piccadilly and elsewhere for paying customers as 'the Hottentot Venus'. In 1814 she was taken to France, in the interregnum of Napoleon's exile. 'La Venus Hottentote' became the object of medical and scientific research as well as prurient entertainment. When she died in 1815 her body was first copied in a plaster-cast and then dissected, leaving her skeleton, her pickled brain, and her pickled sex organs for display in Paris museums up to 1985. This reviewer remembers his amazement on encountering her naked plaster-cast and her skeleton in glass boxes as the very first exhibits to be seen by a visitor in the foyer of the great Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Man) in the 1970s, standing before tall glass windows that revealed a distant view of the Eiffel Tower. The exhibit which was set up at the time of the Eiffel Tower seemed to be saying: look here in the foreground at Man's primitive, female African ancestry, and look there in the background at the climax of Man's achievement thrusting into the sky, with a long straight avenue parted through the trees of the gardens between them.

The issue of Sara Baartman became controversial in the 1980s, when demands began for the return of her remains to the Cape of Good Hope, for burial with dignity. The display of her remains had ceased to be of 'scientific' interest, if they ever had been, and had become an icon of racial and sexual prejudice. The museum put her skeleton and plaster-cast into storage, 'lost' (apparently destroyed) her brain and pudenda, and put up a hell of a fight to retain for France such a glorious object of national heritage. A decade later, when South Africa was flavour of the month as a newly independent state, new museum staff seemed much more accommodating. Hence the film under review could be made in 1998, in expectation of Sara Baartman's imminent return to the Cape.

The film tells the story in straitforward enough manner. Spoken sketchy details of Sara's life on a farm near Cape Town are stitched together as commentary against pictures of the Cape peninsular dissolving into the waters of the sea off Table Bay. Next we pull back from the water to see the Thames and the House of Commons, and we are told she is now in London. The same technique is later used to jump Sara's life to Paris. (Somewhat disturbing for a historian, as all the buildings we see in London and Paris were built long after Sara's death.) The main interest of the film is a series of interviews with expert witnesses against appropriate backdrops, including bravura performances from the Namibian historian Yvette Abraham, the anatomist-palaeontologist Raymond Dart in his study with skeletal material round him, a theatre expert in a theatre, a museologist in a museum, etc. There are also cartoons of the time, newspaper pages and engravings, and the very skeleton and the plaster-cast of dead Sara Baartman herself. It is the latter, a mesmerizing caricature of what Sara must have almost—but not quite—looked like, that gets the most visual attention. The final sequence is of this cast being placed in a box as if for transport, with a female jazz voice singing that she's going back to Africa.

Here it is as well to add that the film is based on an optimistic false premise: the body of Sara Baartman has not yet been repatriated. The South African campaign ran out of steam. If and when the effort is revived, it would be well to draw a lesson from the repatriation of the body of 'Le Bechuana' (latterly known as El Negro) from Spain to Botswana in 2000. The Spanish national museum cleaned away and/or kept all the plastered flesh and stuffing from the body, and returned a bare skull with a few leg and arm bones in a square box. The only surviving actual remains of Sara Baartman are her bones, which may someday return to Africa. The plaster-cast is merely an image of her in death, and will no doubt be retained in Europe.

To me the most poignant moment in the film is also the most informative. It is an account previously unknown to me, when Sara tells a Paris journalist about her origins. A female over-voice recounts with engaging simplicity a tale of childhood betrothal in the Houteniqua mountains, brutally interrupted by white settler slave-raiders attracted by the smoking fires of the pre-nuptial feast. Who cares if it could have been a type-story rather than literal truth? It is the one time in the film that we

get a glimpse of a real-seeming Sara, whose previous recorded comments in a court of law are so stilted that they must have been dragged or drugged out of her.

As for using the film for teaching purposes, I showed the film to a few students and colleagues. They found the film accessible and convincing. They were simultaneously intrigued, disgusted, and annoyed at the indignity of Sara Baartman's treatment in life and two further centuries of exploitation of her body in death. They conceded that dissection and examination might sometimes be necessary for medical advance, but agreed with Tobias that the scientific value of Sara's display had long passed and she ought to be buried as soon as possible at the Cape of Good Hope.

On the down side, the sloppiness of some of the subtitles and the monotony of the too-often repeated musical dirge about going home to Africa were criticized. It was also suggested that a teaching film may not be able to have footnotes but it should at least suggest some further reading in its end-credits.

My own criticism centers on the slightly confused historical view of the origins of scientific racism propagated by the film and absorbed by my students. This confusion stems from the film's use of its most graphic cartoon. This illustration, which also features in Stephen Jay Gould's essay on the Hottentot Venus (published in his *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), is of 'La Belle Hottentote' on a pedestal, ogled by two Scots soldiers in kilts, a crouching woman inspecting between Sara's legs, and a dog sniffing up the rear crotch of one of the soldiers. This cartoon is interpreted by the English theatrical expert in the film as having been an English cartoon, a conclusion backed by a French historian in the film remarking on the lack of cartoons of the Venus in Paris.

Gould says it is a 'satiric French print of 1812', published in Paris even before Sara Baartman came to Paris. Even the most cursory inspection of the cartoon shows that it is entirely captioned in French. It is undoubtedly a French view of Sara Baartman, even if it portrays British soldiers. Given the considerable fascination of French women for Scotsmen in kilts in Paris in 1814 and a hundred years later in 1914, I even wonder if the attribution to 1812 rather than 1814 is correct. (There are also stylistic features in the portrayal of her body that suggest the cartoon was contemporaneous to anatomical drawings made in Paris in 1814.)

Why is the attribution of this cartoon so important? Because it is necessary to distinguish between the English and French periods of residence of the Hottentot Venus to better understand her place in the development of scientific racism in 19th century Europe. In England she was a living 'curiosity' such as had been displayed since Elizabethan times, a 'savage' from one of the ends of the world, demonstrating the lowest human and perhaps the highest non-human end of the Great Chain of Being. The main public fascination was with the backward thrust of her *derriere* which validated and presaged the past and future female dress fashion of big rear bustles. In France, by contrast, she was dressed in furs and accompanied by a black servant, in the manner of an expensive courtesan. Her fascination was private rather than public, for an elite versed in a long-established French literary tradition of pornographic curiosity with Khoe/ 'Hottentot' female genitalia. Was it really true that Khoe pudenda were distinguished by a *tablier* or 'apron' of distended labia minora? (In fact, as we today know, such distension when it occurred was a contingent product of childhood manipulation, not a necessary feature of immutable 'racial' biology.)

Hence the woman in the French cartoon is bending to try and spot the *tablier* between Sara's legs. Hence, as we see in the film, the anatomists Georges Cuvier and Geoffroire de Saint-Hillaire, whom we need to be told really were *the* crucial pioneer figures in the development of European scientific racism, tried by every means to get the modest, living Sara Baartman to part her legs as she stood naked before them. And later they flourished with such triumph her butchered pudenda in a glass bowl or bottle when she was dead.

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