



Theatricality, cine-choreography, and kinaesthetic empathy in Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le Mulet*

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Abstract

This article explores the bodily and affective dimensions of Hafsia Herzi's belly dance performance in Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le Mulet*, as a way of trying to understand how the sequence facilitates a sensuous and mimetic experience for the spectator at the level of reception. Drawing upon key concepts such as cine-choreography and kinaesthetic empathy, the article argues that Kechiche's approach to filming the dancerly body in *La Graine et le Mulet* brings into relief an understanding of theatricality conducive to embodied and tactile spectatorship. Such an affective and multisensory awareness of theatricality in filmic dance performance demonstrates the actress' corporeal empowerment, technique, and expressive range in ways that directly contest objectification or exoticisation of the female body.

Keywords

theatricality, dance performance, Abdellatif Kechiche, Hafsia Herzi, cine-choreography, kinaesthetic empathy, haptic visuality

Rethinking the relationship between theatricality and spectatorship: A sensory and bodily apprehension of Hafsia Herzi's belly dance performance

Hafsia Herzi's portrayal of the young Maghrebi-French woman Rym in Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le Mulet* (2007) is arguably the most acclaimed performance of the actress' career. For her depiction of the resilient and energetic Rym, Herzi won several awards, including the César Award for most promising actress and the Marcello Mastroianni Award at the Venice International Film Festival. The film explores Rym's relationship with her adopted father, Slimane (Habib

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Boufares), as they look to transform a broken-down boat in the Southern French port of Sète into a floating couscous restaurant. Prior to the role, Herzi had appeared in marginal roles that emphasised her Arab ethnicity. *La Graine et le Mulet* opened doors for the actress professionally, and she has since appeared in over 20 feature films, many in leading or supporting roles (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2018).

Perhaps the most physically demanding aspect of Herzi's role is her lengthy belly dance performance in *La Graine et le Mulet*'s final scene. Slimane has invited prospective sponsors and members of the public to a soirée on the newly renovated boat. But when Rym realises that one of the dinner's main ingredients, the couscous, has gone missing, she performs a belly dance routine to entertain the increasingly impatient guests. While Rym dances, Slimane exits the floating restaurant in search of the cauldron that contains the missing grain of couscous. The emphasis given to exhausted bodies in this climactic sequence – through Rym's dancing and Slimane's running – encapsulates the intergenerational linkage between stepfather and stepdaughter, and this bond is also symbolically shown by the film's title, where 'la graine' refers to Rym, while 'le mulet' represents Slimane (Mrabet, 2018: 73).

Despite Herzi's accolades for her performance in *La Graine et le Mulet*, her improvisation of this oriental belly dance in the film's final scene polarised scholars, some of whom associated the dance with objectification and Orientalist stereotyping of Arab culture and femininity. While heralding Herzi's presence in the film as 'a forceful, uncompromising and fiercely independent, young female voice', Will Higbee (2013: 119) commented disparagingly upon the belly dance sequence due to Rym's sexualised performance and the camera's fetishisation of her body through extreme close-ups. Taking a somewhat different interpretation, Sylvie Durmelat (2015: 118) posits that Kechiche engages in 'a critical use of exoticisation', whereby the presentation of Rym's body as a 'sacrificial spectacle' in place of the missing couscous, combined with the lascivious reactions of the male diners, encourages the viewer to distance themselves from her dance performance. In a similar vein, Carrie Tarr (2015: 301) points out that the function of Rym's dance is to evoke discomfort in the spectator, who is required to watch Rym intentionally enact a stereotypical and objectified role as she conforms to the expectations of the predominantly white French guests. By contrast, Jim Morrissey (2013) suggests that Rym exercises agency by choosing to dance. Yet despite her devotion to Slimane, Morrissey (2013) concludes – echoing other theorists – that Rym's dance does not reveal her underlying subjectivity; instead, she adopts a predetermined and objectified identity (p. 314).

In contrast to these viewpoints, I would argue that the positioning of Herzi's performance within an objectifying discourse ignores the actress' corporeal presence, dancerly technique, gestures, and movements, while also overlooking the multisensory and affective experience that the sequence generates for the spectator. Kaya Davies Hayon (2018) adopts a similar argument in her evaluation of Rym's belly dancing performance in the film. Davies Hayon proposes that the sequence illustrates female empowerment and corporeal expression rather than objectification. According to Davies Hayon (2018: 80), Kechiche's use of cinematic techniques, most notably close-ups and long takes, results in 'an embodied and non-objectifying gaze' that provides 'ethical ways' of representing the female belly dancer's body.

On another related level, associating belly dancing with objectification does not take into consideration the transformative potential of the belly dancer's body. In writing about belly dancing more generally, Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2005: 280) makes a distinction between the marked body of the performer in terms of their gender and ethnicity, and how the dance can instigate 'the modificatory potential of the belly dancing body'. As Keft-Kennedy (2005: 280) explains, 'rather than focus on the marked body as text, a concentration on the transformations constituted by and through the female body of the belly dancer in performance reveals alternative ways in

which bodies may be modified'. For Keft-Kennedy, these transformations and modifications of the female belly dancer's body – for example, the dancer's manipulation and control of different muscles – are effectuated through movement, as opposed to display. While she acknowledges that 'the figure of the belly dancer operates as an evocative model of female spectacle-making' (Keft-Kennedy, 2005: 281), she adds that their body can resist objectification by remaining mobile.¹

Keft-Kennedy (2005) is referring here to the live performance of belly dance, including the techniques the dancer employs. Nevertheless, the mobilisation of dancerly technique and bodily energy takes on new significance from a cinematic perspective. To be sure, belly dancing in film brings into play, not just the body of the dancer, but also an imbrication of bodily performance and cinematic techniques (Stern, 2002b: 43). In the case of *La Graine et le Mulet*, while Rym may be marked by her Maghrebi appearance, her performance is embellished cinematically through the sinuous camera-actress relation. How do cinematic elements such as camera movement, framing, and long takes accentuate the bodily and affective dimensions of Herzi's dance performance? To what degree does the belly dance sequence influence the embodied spectator? And to what extent does the viewer's bodily and tactile awareness of Rym's performance contribute to an understanding of the relationship between theatricality and spectatorship in cinema?

In addressing these questions, I will attempt to analyse how Herzi's belly dancing body cinematically transforms the performative space in ways that highlight corporeal empowerment rather than 'self-orientalisation' or 'self-exoticisation' (Durmelat, 2015: 119). Such a focus on Rym's bodily performance, and the energetic and material connection to the camera, the other performers, the diegetic audience, and the spectator, highlights an understanding of the sequence's sensuous, performative, and affective charge in fluid and dynamic ways that far exceed the constrictions of the objectifying gaze. As I will argue, the viewer is unable to maintain a critical distance from the body of the actress; instead, they are encouraged to participate in the actress' performative space with their own body.

Lesley Stern (2002a) sheds light upon this embodied encounter between the performer and the viewer, through her understanding of theatricality in film performance. Referring to those moments in performance when an actor adopts expressive, abstract, or highly stylised gestures, Stern (2002a: n. p.) writes of how this resultant 'gestural inflection has the capacity to move us (viewers) in ways that involve less semantic cognition than a kind of sensory or bodily apprehension'. Stern's (2002a) point about how the performer's theatricalised gestures and movements facilitate a corporeal understanding for the spectator provides a basis for how we might experience Rym's dance routine. Here, the engagement between performer, film and viewer brings into relief a model of embodied and tactile spectatorship that extends beyond psychological identification with a character (Donaldson, 2012: 160; Wood, 2016).

Stern's (2002a) awareness of the bodily potential of theatricality in film performance reimagines how scholars have conceptualised the relationship between theatricality and spectatorship. André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron (2012: 5) define cinematic theatricality in terms of artifice, wherein cinematic devices such as formal staging, histrionic performances, and fragmentary montage, as well as narrative elements such as *mise en abyme*, serve to rupture the illusionism or 'seeming naturalness' of realism. According to Loiselle and Maron (2012), this ostentatiousness at the level of both style and story prevents narrative absorption, instead encouraging the spectator to develop a reflexive awareness that they are watching a film. In this vein, Loiselle and Maron (2012: 8) highlight theatricality's political and subversive potential, because it undermines the 'putative "transparency" of performance as a neutral medium of identity'. Although Stern (2002b: 41, 48) also sees theatricality as non-naturalistic and self-conscious in its

deployment of cinematic codes and performance modes, she argues, nevertheless, that it provides the viewer with a sensory and affective experience. For instance, Stern (2002b: 41) mentions how she was ‘moved somatically’, her ‘senses tickled’ when describing her viewing response to *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Powell and Pressburger, 1951), a film based upon Offenbach’s opera. She contends that ‘in dance or opera, if the movement is successful, it operates kinaesthetically, entering into us, so that we encounter the sensation of moving’ (Stern, 2002b: 47). Thus, a strength of Stern’s (2002b: 41) model of theatricality is that it avoids the binary in Western performance studies between Stanislavskian identification and illusion on the one hand and Brechtian alienation and contemplation on the other.

Theatricality, staging, and language in Kechiche’s early films

The connection between theatricality and its reception by an audience in Kechiche’s films is complex, sometimes veering more towards estrangement than affect and embodiment, as evident in how the viewer experiences Saartjie Baartman’s (Yahima Torres) stage depiction of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ in *Vénus Noire* (2010). Nevertheless, in parallel with Stern’s viewpoint, theatricality can also transform everyday spaces in Kechiche’s films through stylistic and performative excess in ways that enhance the bodily and multisensory nature of spectatorship. However, that scholars have commented upon the spectacularising of Herzi’s body in *La Graine et le Mulet*, at the expense of an embodied awareness of the viewer’s engagement with the performer, highlights a focus upon theatricality that is predisposed to visual excess, spectacle, and display. Referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for his understanding of theatricality, Richard Rushton (2004: 228) defines the term ‘theatrical’ as ‘extravagantly or irrelevantly histrionic; “stagy”, calculated for display, showy, spectacular’. Likewise, Aaron Taylor (2012: 188) argues that theatricality in film acting encourages a ‘presentational’ style that showcases the performer’s ‘ostensiveness’: ‘the degree to which it signals the contextual bracketing of a subject as an object for our demand’.

Such a presentational and self-conscious performance style is embellished by a theatrical approach to staging, production design, and mise-en-scène that favours stylistic exorbitance. For Loiselle and Maron (2012: 4), cinema’s ability to evoke its older sibling, theatre, through ‘representations that call attention to their own representationality’, highlights theatricality’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.² Following a similar line of reasoning, Murray Pomerance (2012: 68) draws from Erving Goffman’s notion of ‘gaudiness’ to highlight how a play-within-the-film is staged perceptually different to narrative scenes, often resulting in ostentatiousness, outlandishness, and hokiness – including more striking costumes – that demarcate the theatrical space from other settings in the film. Writing about *La Graine et le Mulet*’s final scene, Higbee (2013: 117) notes how the theatricality at play in the film’s extended meal scenes transmutes into a ‘sense of spectacle and performance’ on the boat. Higbee (2013: 117) describes the Orientalist-themed walls that are ‘decorated with drapes, palm-trees and clichéd paintings of camels resting by an oasis’.

It would be tempting to draw parallels between the artificiality and conspicuity of the floating restaurant in *La Graine et le Mulet* and the exhibitionistic nature of belly dancing to conclude that the ensuing dance sequence spectacularises and exoticises the female body to accommodate the neocolonial gaze of the male spectator. Yet despite Rym’s presentational performance style that harnesses the erotic and sensual quality to her dancing – an eroticism also made visible through her revealing, bright red sequined costume – such a reading of Rym’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ underestimates Kechiche’s sensuous and corporeal theatricality that affords greater fluidity between cinematic techniques, bodily performance, and the audience in

ways that subvert theatrical conventions such as frontal perspective, direct address, and long shots (Dunagan, 2015). Rather than maintaining spatial distance between the viewer and the onscreen performer for the purpose of highlighting a reflexive awareness of a performance's 'constructedness' (Taylor, 2012: 188), Kechiche's subversion of theatrical conventions through the privileging of tighter compositions and camera movement enables the viewer to become immersed in a bodily way to the actress' gestures and movements, thus heightening their embodied viewing experience.

This tendency towards actively immersing the spectator in the theatrical spaces inhabited by the performer on a corporeal register is a defining feature of Kechiche's early films. Discussing the connection between theatricality and performance in *L'Esquive* (2003), Colin Nettelbeck (2007: 316) observes how the high school students' rendition of Marivaux's play, *Le Jeu de l'Amour du Hasard*, re-enlivens this classical French work in a contemporary setting that is engaging for both the participants and the audience. Such a dynamic reimagining of literary traditions in *L'Esquive* is not achieved through a transposition of theatre into cinema, though. Rather, as Nettelbeck (2007: 317) puts it, Kechiche's 'representation of the theatrical is itself very cinematographic'. Nettelbeck (2007: 317) draws attention to Kechiche's deployment of cinematic devices such as camera movement, angles, framing, and non-diegetic music that enables the spectator to participate in the space and become engaged in the energy and excitement of the film's theatrical sequences, thus creating an intimate and proximate relationship between the performers and the viewer that differs from the perspective of theatregoers.

Nettelbeck's (2007) observation about the cinematic treatment of the play-within-the-film in *L'Esquive* draws attention to a relationship between theatricality and staging in Kechiche's early films that is characterised by a tendency to shoot closer than the size of the actor's performance. In her assessment of the distinction between acting in film and theatre, Sharon Marie Carnicke (2012: 193) argues that actors in live theatre often utilise large gestures 'to carry the character into the furthest reaches of the balcony'. Film actors, on the other hand, 'adjust their means of expression from theatrical full-body gestures in long shots to subtle facial motions in the close-up' (Carnicke, 2012: 193). Robert Knopf (2003: 10) also notes the 'vocal power and performance stamina' that stage actors require to 'fill the house', whereas in film, the same performance 'can be smaller yet still be captured by the intimate intrusion of the camera'.

Contrary to Carnicke's and Knopf's viewpoints, Kechiche's cinematographic method often frames the actor in closer compositions than are warranted by the grandness of their gestures or the loudness of their dialogue, and this proximity to the performer impresses upon the spectator a somatic and sensory awareness of screen acting, for instance by teasing out the material weight and performative dimension of speech. Such an approach to staging overlooks certain cinematic devices that have been associated with theatre, including the deep focus cinematography utilised by filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and Tsai Ming-liang; by the same token, Kechiche's use of long takes, and a tendency towards a practice of overshooting, provides the actors with the freedom to be expressive in their gestural and vocal range. Consider, for example, Jallel's (Sami Bouajila) impassioned recital of Ronsard's poetry on the Parisian metro in *La Faute à Voltaire* (2000). Filmed in a medium close-up, Jallel's emphatic gesture of raising his right arm, combined with the rise in volume and pitch of his voice, carries his performance delivery to the passengers at the opposite end of the carriage. But Kechiche's decision not to use a wide-angle composition means that the camera does not capture the full range of the actor's fulsome arm movement. Instead, the long take and medium close-up draw the viewer's attention to the timbre, volume, and cadence of Sami Bouajila's idiolect.

An even greater discrepancy between the compositional arrangement and the performer's gestural and vocal expressivity takes place in *La Graine et le Mulet* in the scene that showcases Julia's (Alice Hourie) melodramatic outburst as she complains vehemently to her father-in-law,

Slimane, about her husband, Majid's (Sami Zitouni), adultery. This scene, which prefigures Rym's belly dance, utilises several medium close-ups and out of focus close-ups, combined with a jittery mobile camera, to emphasise Julia's sense of entrapment and powerlessness in her failed marriage to Majid. Moreover, the sheer volume of Julia's high-pitched voice, the erratic and fast-paced rhythm of her words, and the materiality of her sobs and panting, coupled with the tight, blurry facial close-ups, pierce the viewer's auditory response, while close-up reaction shots of Slimane exacerbate the toxicity of the environment. Like the bemused and speechless Slimane, the viewer is not provided adequate distance from Julia's tirade. Although she remains anchored in her position on the couch, Julia's melodramatic theatricality is complemented by expressive facial expressions that become magnified by the tight framing, while her excessive and uncontrollable movements of the arms exceed beyond the frame to make her performance appear even more overwrought and oversized.

Cine-choreography: A dancerly choreographic approach to filmmaking

The aforementioned examples illustrate how theatricality, bodily positionings, and framing serve to foreground the performative and material registers of the voice, while simultaneously amplifying gestural expressions and movements through the camera's proximity to the actor; however, the dance sequence in *La Graine et le Mulet* marks a shift in the director's oeuvre towards the theatricalisation of female bodily performance. Nevertheless, just as cinematic techniques serve to catapult the spectator into the performative spaces of the characters and the audience, as evident in the play-within-the-film in *L'Esquive*, so, too, does *La Graine et le Mulet* establish a sense of intimacy in the relationship between the camera, the actress, and the spectator in ways that differ from watching live dance performance. But to appreciate the embodied and affective intensity of Hafsia Herzi's performance in *La Graine et le Mulet's* dance sequence, and to discuss its impact upon the spectator, it would be useful, first, to consider how film and dance scholars have addressed questions of corporeal presence and movement in screen performance. Douglas Rosenberg (2012: 6–7) points out how dance and film have often been seen as separate, autonomous entities, meaning that scholars have not paid adequate attention to 'disciplinary hybridization'. That said, a multidisciplinary and exploratory approach that draws from both film and dance studies could provide new inflections in the assessment of bodily performance in dance sequences.

In her book, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, Erin Brannigan (2011: 6) posits that dance writing has been predominantly concerned with the 'choreographic profilmic content' and theatrical concepts of liveness. To capture a more enabling and heterogeneous understanding of dance performance in film that extends beyond the choreographic preservation of the dancer's body within a profilmic space, Brannigan (2011: 6) suggests that film theory could provide a useful starting point, particularly those models that draw attention to questions of cinematic presence, gestural expression, framing and editing, and embodied spectatorship. Brannigan synthesises the viewpoints of Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros, André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, Stephen Heath, and others in terms of how they distinguish between the actor's corporeal presence in cinema as opposed to theatre. A point of commonality amongst these theorists is 'the theme of filmic genesis', whereby the actor's body is transformed and converted through the cinematic apparatus (Brannigan, 2011: 11). Laleen Jayamanne's definition of filmic performance gives an eloquent impression of this genesis and conversion:

In film the lighting, editing, camera distance, and movement are equally potent "performers," so that one could talk of filmic performance as including all these technical elements. These elements can transform the

phenomenal body to such an extent that one could say that the body that cinema materialises did not exist prior to the invention of film. (Brannigan, 2011: viii)

Jayamanne's description of how cinema materialises the actor's body in her model of performance is useful for an appraisal of screen dance performance because, as Brannigan (2011: 10) attests, the dance body often militates against classical storytelling conventions of dialogue or character development, instead allowing the viewer's attention to be drawn to the dynamics of gestural expression, movement, and action. At the same time, Brannigan (2011) extends Jayamanne's understanding of film's capacity to mobilise and transform the profilmic body into a cinematic body, through the concept of cine-choreography. According to Brannigan (2011), cine-choreography engenders a dynamic interplay between bodies and cinematic elements such as camera movement, lighting, and editing. By adopting "a dancerly choreographic approach to filmmaking" (Brannigan, 2011: viii), creative screen practitioners – e.g., directors, choreographers, cinematographers, editors, and dancers – can create performances that harness the corporeal and rhythmic potential of the dancer's body within a profilmic space, as well as the cinematic possibilities that emerge through production and editing. Exploring the energetic and multisensory capacities of this type of filmic body could facilitate a greater awareness and appraisal of 'new choreographic practices specifically for the screen' (Brannigan, 2011: ix).

It is worth mentioning at this point that the reconfiguration of a theatrical context through cine-choreography need not result in a diminishment of cinematic theatricality. Stern (2002b: 41) explains how 'an amplification of actorly codes, registered particularly in a pronounced gestuality, triggers an ostentatious display of all the other cinematic codes'. A striking example of how a performer's heightened expressivity instigates stylistic excess is evident in *La Graine et le Mulet* when the final scene crosscuts from the frenzied atmosphere of the floating restaurant (as Rym is performing abstract circular movements with her hips, arms, and torso) to the deserted surroundings in the port of Sète. Out of nowhere, an oversized silhouette of Slimane fills the frame, and floats across a wall. The expressive, low-key lighting, in concert with the gigantic, hovering image, exaggerates Slimane's cumbersome movement to dramatise the exhausted man's ineffective pursuit of his stolen moped. As this example exemplifies, cinematic codes such as lighting, camera distance, and parallel editing become additional performers, and their ostentatious arrangement illuminates the stylised and abstract movements of a belly dancer and her ageing adopted father.

Another way in which cine-choreography constructs a screen dance body is through its inventive use of the close-up. Brannigan (2011) discusses how film theory has often privileged facial acting and character psychology in discussions of the close-up.³ Conversely, the close-up in dance films often gives equal weight to other parts of the performer's body, thus resulting in a 'non-hierarchical dancing body' (Brannigan, 2011: 51). This cine-choreographic method generates expressivity, feeling, intensity, and affect through the dancer's body in ways that are usually associated with the face. In this vein, recognising alternatives to the facial close-up demonstrates cinema's capacity to generate 'micro-choreographies' of the dancerly body that do not exist in the choreography of live dance performance (Brannigan, 2011). A consequence of this approach, for John White (2017: 31), is how the camera can capture subtle movements that would not be noticeable for the spectator in conventional theatre. Though not referring specifically to the close-up, Rosenberg (2012: 161) makes a similar point: 'in the presence of the camera, dance becomes less kinesthetic and more concerned with nuance, minutiae, and a kind of exploration of tactility and surface'. However, this is not to downsize theatricality's expressivity: indeed, a micro-choreography could also make a performance appear over-the-top, for instance by enlarging or hyperbolising stylistic or abstract gestures through the proximity of the composition.

Micro-choreographies and kinaesthetic empathy in *La Graine et le Mulet*

An understanding of how cine-choreography foregrounds and embellishes the somatic presence and mobility of the performer in dance numbers, such as through micro-choreographies, provides a pivotal theoretical framework for an appreciation of the rhythmic, affective, sensuous, embodied, and tactile relationship that emerges between the actress, the camera, and the spectator in *La Graine et le Mulet*. Rather than filming the dancerly body through static long shots or a frontal perspective akin to theatre's proscenium arch, Kechiche utilises cinematic techniques such as close-ups, extreme close-ups, camera movement, and framing to showcase Rym's dancerly technique, as evident in the opening of the sequence. We commence with a close-up of Rym's midriff. The camera remains static, and the shot is held, which allows us to take in the circular and rhythmic movements of her hips, as well as the undulations of her torso. The camera then tilts up, caressing her chest and neck until it reaches her face. Cut to several reaction shots of intrigued diners. Cut back to a medium, side-on shot of Rym, who turns to face the audience. The camera tracks back slightly to showcase Rym's presentational performance style, as she raises her arms while simultaneously exercising rhythmic pelvic movements. Following several cutaway shots to Rym's extended family and the guests, we cut back to a medium shot of Rym, whose movements now become more intense, her abdominal muscles rapidly pulling in and out to the beat of the drums – a technique called the 'flutter' (Keft-Kennedy, 2005: 294). At this point, the camera zooms in to a close-up of Rym's belly, to emphasise her trembling flesh.

Countering the viewpoint that the fragmentation of Rym's body results in the actress' fetishisation or objectification, Davies Hayon (2018: 79) proposes that the close-up induces kinaesthetic empathy that results in a mimetic and somatic encounter between the performer and the spectator. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (2012: 18) define kinaesthetic empathy as an embodied and empathetic response to 'sensations of movement and position'. Dee Reynolds (2012: 123) links kinaesthetic empathy with discourses on 'affect', as opposed to emotion. As Reynolds (2012: 124) explains, 'affect denotes a stage where emotions are still in the process of forming and have not yet taken on a definable identity', meaning that the dance spectator's body is 'activated, "excited", in the process of responding'. Conceptualising affect as a relational process, Reynolds (2012: 129) goes on to argue that 'dance is a movement through and across bodies, rather than being an attribute of the dancer's body'. This fluid and relational potential of affective kinaesthetic empathy collapses the distinction between the dancer and the spectator, thus activating the viewer's sensory response through the flow and energy of choreographed movement (Reynolds, 2012: 129).

Reynolds's (2012) understanding of kinaesthetic empathy relates to the spectator's affective experience of live dance performance. However, as Rosenberg (2012: 159) points out, 'relatively less has been written about how that sympathetic, kinesthetic sensation is translated to the screen'. How might the new choreographic screen practices that emerge through Brannigan's (2011) notion of micro-choreographies augment this somatic and empathetic relationship between the spectator and the performer? White (2017: 30) proposes that kinaesthetic empathy can be intensified in screen depictions of dance, through the ways in which close-ups and editing rhythms allow the viewer to 'feel' the movement of the dancer. For Davies Hayon (2018: 70), this sense of corporeal proximity in *La Graine et le Mulet* that emerges through the camera-actress relation 'minimises the distance necessary for objectification, containment and/or objectivity'. Davies Hayon (2018: 79) observes how the camera zooms in to an extreme close-up that accentuates the character's rotating hips and quivering belly which in turn invites the viewer to "'sense" Rym's physical exertion and "feel" her bodily exhaustion'. In this instant, the camera movement augments the corporeal

characteristics of the performer. Here, the relationship between the viewer's body and that of the body on screen is intense, allowing little critical distance, to the point of almost manipulating or persuading the viewer into actively becoming an additional dancer.

Tactile knowledge and mimetic contact

By drawing the viewer's attention towards Rym's bodily technique through micro-choreographies, Kechiche enhances the tactile aspects of spectatorship in ways that downplay the importance of vision. Laura Marks (2000) explains how an aim of postcolonial cinema has been to critique objectification by pointing towards the limitations of ocularcentrism (vision) and representation. By acknowledging how vision has been associated with colonial power, Marks (2000: 138) suggests how filmmakers have explored the possibility of attaining knowledge through physical contact, which she defines in terms of 'tactile epistemologies'. One of the ways in which filmmakers can generate this tactile awareness in the spectator is through their deployment of the close-up. Marks (2000) explains how the close-up can encourage a haptic quality that draws the viewer in to the materiality of the image. For Marks (2000), the close-up reduces the viewer's optical mastery of the image, instead activating their sensory response in ways that encourage tactile awareness as opposed to a cognitive or narrative understanding.

An extreme close-up of Rym's belly, in combination with a long take, is one notable example of a haptic image because the proximity and duration of the composition foreground the materiality of her skin. Another example of haptic visuality occurs later in the sequence when a close-up glides across Rym's shoulder through the mobile camera. She then lifts her head back and flicks her hair. The texture of Rym's dark hair, in tandem with the materiality of the camera movement, evokes a delicate sensation in the viewer that can be likened to a tickling of the skin. This potential of haptic visuality to awaken the viewer's sensory and tactile response heightens their kinaesthetic experience, therefore resulting in what Karen Wood (2016: 258) calls 'the disappearance of boundaries between the screen and the viewer'. As a result, Rym's theatricality is not limited to visual display, to be watched by the spectator, but is repurposed to elicit their sensuous, mimetic experience at the level of reception.

That haptic visuality can generate a multisensory response brings into play film's capacity for mimetic contact in ways that transform kinaesthetic empathy beyond the viewer's imitation of the onscreen performer. As Marks (2000: 141) explains:

Mimesis shifts the hierarchical relationship between subject and object, indeed dissolves the dichotomy between the two, such that erstwhile subjects take on the physical, material qualities of objects, while objects take on the perceptive and knowledgeable qualities of subjects. Mimesis is an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it.

Establishing a tactile and mimetic engagement with the dance performer's body can also help to activate the viewer's sensory memory. For Marks (2000: 149), touch can be seen as the 'foundation upon which subsequent sensuous experience is built'. By encouraging the viewer to inhabit Rym's sensory and tactile perception, *La Graine et le Mulet* facilitates a sense of embodied anticipation in the spectator. According to Reason and Reynolds (2010: 64), dance initiates 'embodied responses linked with sensations and feelings of anticipation and suspense produced by choreographical progression and development'. The authors add that anticipation, tension and suspense are heightened by 'choreographical structure' which 'frames temporality and progression' (Reason and Reynolds, 2010: 66). In *La Graine et le Mulet*, the viewer is drawn somatically to the choreographic repetition

and progression of Rym's flutters and shimmies. Through proximity to the actress' body, the viewer can become more attuned to Rym's dancery technique and mobility, particularly when close-ups and extreme close-ups are filmed in long takes. In these instances, the duration of each shot draws out the rhythm and tension of Rym's vibrational movements of the pelvis, hips, and abdomen, therefore enabling the viewer to anticipate these tremors in their own body.

This embodied anticipation is made possible because, as Reason and Reynolds (2010: 66) go on to argue, the experience of watching live dance performance can lead to 'changes in the postural condition of the muscles without actual movement taking place'. And such an embodied response is intensified through the specific demands placed upon the body in belly dance. Keft-Kennedy (2005: 283) writes of how 'the twisting, undulating, and writhing body is registered as a physical modification from the body's original or "normal" state' (p. 283). Moreover, these bodily contortions are written through temporally, rhythmically, and spatially in *La Graine et le Mulet* by the cinematic apparatus. For instance, tighter shots are sometimes used with the purpose of emphasising parts of Rym's body that display the most tension, such as her torso convulsions brought about through shimmies. This could explain why the zoom in on Rym's belly is a popular technique, suggesting cinematographer Lubomir Bakchev's own kinaesthetic intuition, his objective to bring the viewer closer to the body, while simultaneously promoting a temporal pressuring of the profilmic space. Hence, this attention given towards micro-choreographies of the body to capture micro-movements of the dancer results in an effective cine-choreographic method in *La Graine et le Mulet* because, as Keft-Kennedy (2005: 280) reminds us, the technique of belly dancing requires muscle isolation and the independent movement of body parts. Thus, while the plot instigates conflict for the viewer on a cognitive level when the characters realise that the couscous is missing, the cinematic realisation of Rym's belly dance routine builds suspense that is experienced through the spectator's entire sensorium.

Brechtian distanciation in *Vénus Noire*

If *La Graine et le Mulet* heightens the viewer's somatic and tactile awareness through their proximity to Rym's dancery body, then *Vénus Noire*, by contrast, relies upon the facial close-up to generate an affective and embodied viewing experience. This shift from micro-choreographies of the body to a focus upon facial acting in *Vénus Noire* demonstrates an alternative way in which Kechiche harnesses the haptic potential of cinematographic techniques to provide a spectatorial experience that resists a neocolonial gaze. But as I will argue in what follows, even if Kechiche deploys the facial close-up in *Vénus Noire* to challenge any correlation between theatricality, ocularcentrism, and colonialism, he does so at the expense of an exploration into how choreographed movement of dance performance can elicit an affective and mimetic impulse in the viewer. In his analysis of *Vénus Noire*, Jorunn S. Gjerden (2019) identifies a tension between the film's narrative and style: on the one hand, the historical plot objectifies and exoticises Saartjie Baartman's black hyper-sexualised body such as when she performs the role of the 'Hottentot Venus' on stage, or in the way that scientists study her body; on the other hand, Kechiche's utilisation of formal elements, such as camera movement and facial close-ups, encourages a bodily response in the viewer that militates against these objectified and scientific gazes. In contrast to her objectification by the audience on the stage, the facial close-ups of Saartjie exceed any narrative function, and diminish the viewer's visual mastery of the image through haptic visuality. According to Gjerden (2019), this privileging of affect and tactility over vision and narrative absorption results in spectatorial surrender. As Gjerden (2019: 195–196) asserts, Saartjie does not gain agency and control within the film's narrative; rather, the spectator loses their mastery of the image through how the formal elements

encourage a tactile – as opposed to scopic – engagement in Saartjie’s performance. A consequence of this aesthetics of closeness, for Gjerden, is a participatory approach to the protagonist’s physical mistreatment.

Although the close-up in *La Graine et le Mulet*’s dance sequence also takes on a tactile, affective, and haptic quality that deemphasises visibility, there are stark differences in the performance deliveries of both actresses. Rather than facilitating a mimetic encounter between performer and audience through Saartjie’s bodily performance, *Vénus Noire* often highlights disjunctions between the character and her stage persona, the Hottentot Venus. These disjunctions emerge through how the composition captures contrasts in Saartjie’s performance style, from a histrionic performance delivery on the one hand, which incorporates exaggerated, ‘animalistic’ gestures and vocals such as lunges at the onscreen audience and growling noises, to a more restrained, realist mode of acting on the other, characterised by subtle facial expressions. This discrepancy in style is accentuated through the juxtaposition between long shots (to emphasise Saartjie’s movement within the theatrical space) and close-ups (to delineate a more psychologised form of acting). Consequently, the close-up adds more psychological complexity to the presentationism that reduces her to a ‘savage’ stereotype. In this manner, the spectator is not taken in by the exoticisation of the Hottentot Venus; rather, they become attuned to Saartjie’s inner conflict, her reticence in playing the role, and sympathise with her predicament. Furthermore, the haptic close-up encourages the spectator to participate on a sensory level in her dehumanising experience (Gjerden, 2019). In contrast to how the performer in the nineteenth century melodramatic theatre emphasised their virtuosity, what Stern (1999: 282) refers to as a declaration: ‘I like to act’, there is an acute sense of defeatism and passivity in Saartjie’s vaudeville act, as if suggesting that her gestures become tired which in a way defeats the caricature she portrays.⁴

This is not to say that *Vénus Noire* overlooks the sensory and tactile possibilities of Saartjie’s dancing body. At one point in the film’s opening stage performance held in London, Saartjie’s ringmaster, Caesar (Andre Jacobs), addresses the audience with his trademark flamboyant vocal inflection: ‘And now ladies and gentlemen, to the high point of the show, as she demonstrates her real talent ... as she does the savage dance of AAAAfrica!’ In a hunched over position that showcases her buttocks to the audience, Saartjie shakes her body, while Caesar plays rapidly on the drums. The length of the performance builds an atmosphere of feverish intensity. Yet despite this affectively charged theatrical environment and the emphasis given to Saartjie’s shuddering movements of the hips, we could hardly describe her dance routine in terms of mimetic contact between the performer and the spectator. Put simply, the sequence alienates the viewer, who experiences discomfort due to Caesar’s callous mistreatment of Saartjie, as well as the cultural insensitivity of the boisterous European audience.

Pomerance (2012: 71) notes how an actor in a play-within-the-film adopts a mode of performance that is patently false, acted in a space that entertains ‘the locus of the unreal’. As Pomerance asserts, the onscreen audience are aware that the performer is ‘putting on a show’, but they willingly suspend their disbelief in the performance’s unfolding. What is confronting about the scene from *Vénus Noire*, however, is that the vaudeville audience believe that Saartjie’s theatricality is real. For example, when Venus creeps up behind Caesar, some audience members in the front row gasp in horror, while others point and exclaim, desperate to gain the entertainer’s attention. Thus, in place of a sensuous, mimetic encounter between the viewer and the performer, theatricality in *Vénus Noire* works more towards Brechtian distancing, leaving the viewer to critically reflect upon historical issues pertaining to race relations in Europe. Such a stark difference in viewing experience between the diegetic audience and the spectator also reveals how tactile epistemologies – including the ability to ‘see haptically’ – rely, in large part, upon ‘individual and cultural learning’ (Marks, 2000: 170).

Bodily interactions through micro-choreographies

Whereas Saartjie's performance of the Hottentot Venus in *Vénus Noire* highlights a disjunction between character and stage persona because her caricatured poses and gestures are performed without conviction, a disparity between the character and the role does not exist in Rym's belly dance routine in *La Graine et le Mulet*. Rym's gestures and movements, in part, serve to emulate the traditions of the dance from a North African perspective (Green, 2011: 121), meaning that she rediscovers her cultural origins (Mrabet, 2018: 73). Freed from the constraints of the facial close-up, micro-choreographies add continuity and inflection to Rym's technique, rather than detracting from her dancerly corporeality. This amplification of gestural expression becomes evident through the ways in which the close-up augments the bodily, sensual, tactile, and energetic dynamics of the profilmic space through Rym's interactions with the first-generation North African émigré musicians. Earlier in the sequence, the musicians appear more distant from Rym, the violinist even stopping to play, as Rym's attention is directed towards the diegetic audience. But as the dance progresses, the compositions become tighter, which subsequently decreases the distance between Rym and the musicians, to emphasise a heightened sensory and intimate encounter. In this way, the profilmic space becomes affectively and performatively charged, but the proximity also allows the viewer to be drawn to subtle movements that the onscreen audience might not be privy to – movements that are reserved for the musicians, as they now huddle around her, captivated.

One lengthily held, low angle close-up captures Rym's jiggling belly as she stands on screen left, while the musician, Hamid (Abdelhamid Aktouche), kneels before her on screen right and bobs his head to the rhythm of her torso undulations. Unlike the violent intensity of Rym's vibrational movements and contortions, these undulations are gentler, more soothing, like the rising and falling of waves during low tide. This tight two-shot of a belly and a face exemplifies how new choreographic screen practices can open up character interactions to a focus upon bodily rhythm and tactile awareness rather than a more conventional (and hierarchical) approach that gives precedence to the actors' faces through dialogue or gazes. The shot recalls the working methods of John Cassavetes, a director who was attentive to discovering the unexpected tensions that emerge during filmmaking (Kouvaros, 2004: 14). Kechiche's attention to micro-rhythms in this shot makes apparent his interest in capturing those gestures and movements that would normally be seen as more incidental to a scene's dramatic action (Kouvaros, 2004: 98).

The emphasis upon a smaller range of movement in the intimate interchange between Rym and Hamid draws attention to the corporeal and affective registers of theatricality that can develop between scene partners, though in ways that do not rely necessarily upon grandness or ostensiveness. As a result, teasing out and illuminating this bodily interplay attests to the transformative potentiality of belly dancing, and so directly contests the view that Rym simply adopts an objectified and stereotypical identity (Morrissey, 2013: 313). Meanwhile, a cut to a close-up of another musician playing the flute emphasises his frenetic finger work as the tempo of the music increases, thus enhancing the sequence's tactile evocation. As these descriptions demonstrate, the role of the musicians is not simply to provide background accompaniment; rather, they join in the dance, matching their music and movements to Rym's dancing, thus effectively facilitating a bodily and multisensory exchange between each of the players. In so doing, the performers' somatic rhythms and synchronicity with the music heighten the viewer's kinaesthetic response (Wood, 2016: 251).

The flowing and relational corporeal dynamics in this sequence differ significantly from how Saartjie's stage performances in *Vénus Noire* are often dictated by her ringmaster, Caesar. Choreographic and plot development are motivated by Caesar through his rousing narration –

for instance, brandishing a whip, he orders her to walk ‘like a European lady’, to which she obeys – which frames Saartjie as a female African ‘savage’ whom he has captured (she even commences the opening London show in a cage). Theatricality in *Vénus Noire* thus dramatises the question of colonial power through the subjugation of Saartjie’s body at the hands of Caesar; contrastingly, the familial and community-based environment of *La Graine et le Mulet* depicts Rym as an agentic subject, who develops the dance on her own terms, therefore engendering a fluid and intersubjective engagement with other performers.

A kind of kinaesthetic contagion

While the energetic and bodily connection that emerges in the exchange between Rym and the North African musicians teases out Rym’s subtle movements, she utilises the more ostentatious gestures of belly dance when addressing the diners. One notable example is when a medium shot emphasises Rym’s extended arms and vibrating frame as she swivels and propels her shimmies outward towards the audience. Reason and Reynolds (2010: 71) identify ‘a kind of kinesthetic “contagion”’ during moments of live dance when the spectator moves in sync with the performer and the music. A similar kinaesthetic experience of contagion is evident within the floating restaurant as some of the diners respond to Rym’s shimmies with actions such as clapping to the beat of the music and bobbing their heads to the rhythm of Rym’s vibrational hip movements.

Grounded in a slightly crouched stance to maintain balance, Rym’s trembling circulates up her frame to the arms and shoulders like an electric charge, and this transference of anarchic energy leads the audience to become even more vocal and responsive. And with an even greater zealotness than the diners, members of Rym’s extended family raise their arms and sway their bodies to the music as they attempt further to liven the atmosphere. These responses of the diners and Rym’s family indicate an understanding of mimesis as imitation, rather than the mimetic contact that emerges through the haptic close-ups of Rym’s performance. Hence, this dual focus upon the concept of mimesis leads to a more productive and multilayered understanding of theatricality in filmic dance performance than *Vénus Noire*. While *Vénus Noire* achieves tactile knowledge primarily through how the camera grants the viewer privileged access to Saartjie’s face, *La Graine et le Mulet* uncovers the tactile and sensuous nature of spectatorship through how bodily energy and affect circulate in the spaces between the performers, the viewer, and the diegetic audience (Stern and Kouvaros, 1999: 20–21; Reynolds, 2012: 127). To be sure, such an affective and mimetic exchange between onscreen bodies and the embodied spectator in *La Graine et le Mulet* produces a specific kind of theatricality that decentralises the colonial gaze in ways not accessible in *Vénus Noire* due to the latter film’s historical context, characterisation of the protagonist, unequal power relations between Saartjie and Caesar, and method of capturing the dancing body.

That said, it should be noted that not all the diners respond approvingly to Rym’s belly dance. Reason and Reynolds (2010: 50) acknowledge that a diverse range of kinaesthetic responses is possible due to the cultural capital of dance spectators. If dance is culturally specific and dependent upon the social context, then the audience’s experience of dance performance is shaped by their expectations, tastes, and expertise (Reason and Reynolds, 2010: 57–58). This could explain why some of the diners appear detached and bemused by the event that unfolds. Hence, the transformation of the boat into a performative space does not signal ‘some utopian site of unproblematic multicultural harmony’ (Higbee, 2013: 117). Nevertheless, the sense of contagion that the performance elicits for some diners helps to establish a bridge between Maghrebi and French cultures, while also signifying the function of Rym’s role as a kind of ‘interface and intermediary between Slimane and French society’ (Mrabet, 2018: 73). So, when Morrissey (2013) touches upon the ‘mobilisation

of ethnic otherness' emanating from Rym's dance (p. 313), he overlooks the possibility of exploring how this mobilisation might facilitate a cross-cultural dialogue. To this end, while Herzi's performance may be grounded in a local 'Marseillaise' identity associated with Southern France (Kealhofer-Kemp, 2018: 113), her belly dance routine also promotes the transnationalism of traditional Arabic dance and music that circulates to Western audiences (Shay and Sellers-Young, 2005: 25).

Relâchement

The cine-choreography of *La Graine et le Mulet* teases out and spotlights the bodily dynamics that emerge in Rym's interactions with the diners and the musicians in ways that elicit a multisensory and mimetic response in the spectator. However, the extended temporality of the dance sequence also brings into play a sense of Rym's loss of self, her absorption in the dance itself. In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Kechiche discusses the notion of a 'relâchement', which he defines as 'a necessary letting go of control and façade' (Gjerden, 2019: 212). Although his working methods, including a proclivity towards overshooting, have been publicly criticised for leading to the alienation of his actresses, Kechiche insists that his objective is to encourage a liberation of the actress and the viewer from the self (Gjerden, 2019: 212). Like the blurring of the boundaries between the self and the viewer that is brought about through haptic visuality, Kechiche's method of overshooting is designed to blur the distinctions between the actor, the character, and the spectator.

A desire for the release of the performer's control and façade becomes narrativized at a pivotal moment in *L'Esquive*. During a scene in the classroom when Krimeo (Osman Elkharraz) and Lydia (Sara Forestier) are rehearsing for a high school production of Marivaux's play, *Le Jeu de l'Amour du Hasard*, the French Professor (Carole Franck) becomes frustrated with Krimeo for his wooden delivery of the lines. The Professor's feedback to Krimeo is quite revealing here, in that it supports Kechiche's notion of a 'relâchement'. Filmed in a series of medium close-ups and close-ups that underscore her gesticulations, the Professor exclaims:


You're reeling off the lines without conviction. Try to play someone with power. Try to show off! Leave yourself to reach a new language. Go on, make an effort! More! More... ah!! You have to enjoy the fact of leaving yourself behind. Leave yourself. Have fun, find the pleasure in it. Change your language. Change the way you speak. Change the way you move. Have fun! Give yourself!

Here, the material effort of her words is matched by forceful, sweeping gestures with her arms. (How the French Professor describes the play to the students indicates her aliveness to theatre.) Krimeo is a 'bad' stage actor, not just because he struggles with the play's language, but more importantly because he is not able to invest and lose himself in the role.

In contrast to Krimeo's stilted and unimaginative performance, Rym's acting out of the belly dancer in *La Graine et le Mulet* takes up this sense of letting go – albeit without language – that the Professor in *L'Esquive* so emphatically demands, and thus affords new terrain in Kechiche's approach to performance and theatricality in his films. Rym loses herself in the character through her immersion in the music and the flow of her movement. Barbara Sellers-Young (2016: 29) identifies instances when belly dancing is not just about sensuality and exhibitionism, but can also direct the dancer's concentration inward, through kinaesthetic listening. Although she suggests that this form of listening is often absent from belly dancers who perform in ethnic restaurants and films (Sellers-Young, 2016: 29), the temporal elongation of the sequence in *La Graine et le Mulet* enables Rym to demonstrate an inner concentration that originates from the music. Towards the end of the sequence, Rym's upper body sways and her eyes are closed. She

neither directs her gestures towards the musicians nor the audience. Hence, while theatricality often takes on a reflexive aspect, where an actor is conscious of the audience, by ‘playing to the gallery’ (Pearson, 1992: 21), the duration of the sequence reveals moments when the actress is not self-consciously acting out, nor is her corporeal identity dependent upon the audience’s desire or approval. At the same time, the camera floats around Rym’s body in an equally liberating manner. Ultimately, this loosening up of the parameters of a live, theatrical context through a dancerly, cine-choreographic method allows the viewer to participate through their own musculature in this intoxicating, vertiginous movement of both the camera and the actress.

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Notes

1. A privileging of mobility over visibility is consonant with the views of other dance scholars such as Ann Daly (1992: 243), who states that ‘although it has a visual component, [dance] is fundamentally a kinesthetic art’.
2. This neologism is taken from Laura Mulvey’s (1975) seminal article on the male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema.
3. James Naremore (1988: 46, 40) adopts this viewpoint when he states that the close-up serves to ‘detheatricalise gesture’, while serving as a ‘mirror of the soul’.
4. A rare agentic moment that subverts the Hottentot Venus caricature is when Saartjie plays the string instrument, the ramkie, beautifully, as opposed to the audience’s perception of how a ‘savage’ might play it.

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