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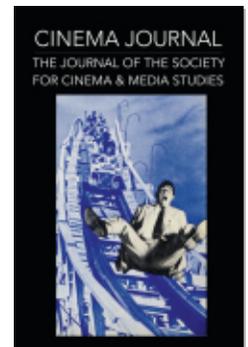
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The “Monumental” Heroine: Female Agency in Joseph Gai Ramaka’s *Karmen Gei*

by ANJALI PRABHU

Abstract: *Karmen Gei* presents itself as a feminist African film with a scandalously revolutionary central character. These aspects of the film are reconsidered by focusing attention on the totality of its form, and by studying the politics of monumentalizing the heroine.

The Senegalese filmmaker Joseph Gai Ramaka’s chosen mode for representing his heroine in the film *Karmen Gei* (2001) is that of the “monumental.” This has several consequences for the heroine’s possibilities within the diegesis. For example, the entire *mise-en-scène* makes the monumental heroine impermeable to interpretation and resistant to critical discourses. This invites further evaluation of the film’s political meanings, which have been much touted by critics. Critics and the filmmaker himself tend to agree on the film’s political valence, primarily because of its unconventional, revolutionary heroine, and particularly because the film is identified as specifically African. My argument is twofold. First, I argue that *Karmen Gei* proposes what I am calling a monumental (and therefore an impossible) version of female identity and therefore also eschews many moments of plausible feminine agency. Second, I consider more substantive possibilities for teasing out political meanings (particularly those concerning African specificity) beyond those identified by critics and the filmmaker. Furthermore, it should be clear that although it is possible and important to speak of real spectators and their contexts (which I do), the spectator is also evoked in this article as a construct or position that can be multiply configured. The spectator is thus constructed through different pathways of desire by the film in its dialogic totality.

Joseph Gai Ramaka is no doubt a politically nuanced thinker whose other films provide solid indications of his political sensitivity. His *So Be It* (1997), an adaptation of Wole Soyinka’s play *Strong Breed*, tackles the conflict between the proverbial Western medical doctor and traditional beliefs in rural Senegalese settings. More recently, with *And If Latif Were Right* (*Et si Latif avait raison*; 2006) he directly critiques

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President Abdoulaye Wade, who defeated Abdou Diouf in the 2000 elections. Yet although political intent might certainly be behind his creation of Karmen (Djeneïba Diop Gaï), it is important to probe further the particular mode the director chose for representing the female protagonist in this film. Karmen is carefully crafted by Ramaka as an all-powerful heroine who escapes from prison, where she leaves her lover—the female prison guard Angélique (Stephanie Biddle)—to languish without her. Angélique, as a consequence, commits suicide. Karmen then takes a male lover, Lamine (Magaye Niang), who is presented as exceedingly weak. His maleness hinges on his position as a police officer and thus vaguely calls up the national structure. Lamine is forced to take Karmen prisoner when she disrupts his wedding to the commissioner's daughter by accusing Lamine and the establishment of corruption and inattentiveness to the people. Lamine later becomes her accomplice, and his fatal attraction to her prompts him to abandon everything in pursuit of her love. Karmen's refusal to submit to him or to any acknowledged relationship between them causes Lamine to finally kill her.

California Newsreel, the distributor of African films for the US academic market, suggests that, "since this is an African Carmen, freedom necessarily has a political dimension."¹ According to Saya Woolfalk, who reviewed the film for a New York film festival, Karmen uses "her sexual power to obtain not only personal pleasure, but to stimulate cultural subversion and incite political dissent."² A slightly less perspicacious statement on the other side is that Karmen "never frees herself from the male gaze of the camera."³ This is to ignore the quite ingenious creation of Karmen by Ramaka, who does in fact avoid fetishizing the female body; Ramaka also avoids the classic voyeuristic camera whereby the woman's agency is thwarted by objectification. In fact, as we shall see, surveillance is explicitly defied and denied by his heroine's agency both diegetically and cinematographically. For Karmen, Ramaka resorts to something different by privileging a particular aesthetic that I refer to as the monumental mode of representation. The monumental mode, simply stated, "monumentalizes" the heroine by making of her a magnificent, impenetrable entity which, beyond disallowing recuperation by the now-notorious cinematographic male gaze, simultaneously resists access to itself by means of discourses given coherence by feminist criticism, political engagement, or other such particular forms of rationality. So, although this does relieve the heroine from the more limiting "male gaze" of the camera, her cinematic possibility actually remains constricted in other interesting ways.

Building the Heroine. In the context of African filmmaking, and Senegalese films in particular, women-centered filmmaking immediately might evoke Ousmane Sembène for his indefatigable support of women in African society or the lesser-known Safi Faye for her scrupulous focus on women. Although there have been strong female

1 California Newsreel, "Karmen Gei: About the Film," <http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0134> (accessed December 28, 2011).

2 Saya Woolfalk, "Karmen Gei: Political Sex Icon," New York African Film Festival, 2003, <http://www.africanfilmny.org/2011/karmen-gei-political-sex-icon/>.

3 Carmela Garritano, "Troubled Men and the Women Who Create Havoc: Four Recent Films by West African Filmmakers," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 159.

characters in Sembène's films, perhaps none comes closer to being monumental in the sense developed here than Fatou Kine (Venus Seye) in *Faat Kine* (2000). However, Kine's heroism remains heroic rather than monumental because the entire film presents her in her particularity, providing detailed and judiciously edited flashbacks, for example, to justify particular actions or to explain the subtlety of an emotion that the spectator must understand to identify with her in her very knowable struggle. In contrast, even when a sequence develops Karmen's irresistible sexuality as a form of power for the character, its meaningfulness as agency beyond the specific sequence remains brittle at best. Karmen's character seems to permit only phenomenological description of a particular kind: description that restricts itself to the synchronic, that is, the moment of its occurrence. Whenever an attempt is made to link sequences through any type of logic, the linkage is thwarted in favor of an emerging image of monumental status, which disallows any other logic but itself. Thus, in critic Lindiwe Dovey's otherwise sensitive and persuasive reading of *Karmen*, she tries to link two dance sequences by Karmen (involving, respectively, the female warden and her lover Lamine's wife at their wedding celebration); the distinction Dovey establishes (a dance "with" versus a dance "against") does not prove terribly meaningful when pressed further and placed within the totality of the film. In taking into account the story, the seduction of the uniformed Angélique is directed to a specific diegetic end: to overpower her authority in order to escape from prison. It has little to do with any emotional bond. Similarly, the animosity Karmen displays for Lamine's wife proves completely gratuitous. There is no development of any kind of motivation such as jealousy, for example. The purpose is to insult Lamine and to get him into a position of submission so that he will assist her band in their thievery. The two sequences are thus not as different as it might appear: the submission of the bride Majiguène is achieved by throwing her to the ground, whereas the submission of Angélique is achieved by seducing her to dance away the authority derived from her official position. The result of both is "winning" in the moment by Karmen: in the first, by raising Angélique out of her chair and into the dance; in the second, by defeating Majiguène (Aïssatou Diop) by literally throwing her to the ground. This results in monumentalizing Karmen's image rather than much else in the moment. In other words, neither "win" leads to any development that one might term radical in any political sense within the diegesis: unwilling to follow Karmen, Angélique commits suicide so that dance sequence leads to nothing further in the relationship. In the second case, Karmen remains indifferent to Lamine and lacks any true interest in his wife, Majiguène. Thus, even the animosity developed in the second sequence just fizzles out. Nor is there any victory beyond defying the male gaze. In both dance sequences, cuts from Karmen to the other female character are privileged to establish a dialectical relationship that builds to a culminating two-shot. In each case, the latter occurs close to victory, whereas both sequences work for Karmen to come off as the uncontested winner of the moment.

We shall now pursue in greater detail the specifics of development of the monumental mode. In the early "competitive" dance scene, between Karmen and the wife of her obsessed lover, Lamine, camera work effectively presents Karmen in the form of an irresistibly powerful woman. Karmen bursts in on the nuptial celebrations



Figure 1. Almost always situated in the foreground, Karmen is effectively presented in the form of an irresistibly powerful woman (California Newsreel, 2001).



Figure 2. Even roped and bound, Karmen is presented as a powerful figure, dominating the frame while her captor is beheaded by the framing of the shot (California Newsreel, 2001).

dressed in a stunning bluish-white boubou that stands out against both the darkness of the evening and the darkness of her own skin. Karmen is almost always in the foreground, sometimes with the background losing focus, other times in shots marked by considerable depth of field (Figure 1). At this point, she insults Lamine for being powerless, to which his bride responds in a dance “against” Karmen, as Dovey has noted. In the ensuing “battle,” Karmen overpowers the wife in a terrific scene of drumming and traditional *sabar* dances. She ends up being arrested by Lamine. What is interesting is the way in which camera work mitigates the arrested heroine’s helpless position (Figure 2). Karmen is bound with ropes and is dragged along the street



Figure 3. Shot at Karmen's eye level, even scenes of the heroine's subjugation frame her as a powerful, monumental, subject (California Newsreel, 2001).

of the frame and looming up against the length of the alley, which stretches out behind her, as if it were the train of her gown. The camera angle also reinforces the centering effect, contributing to the building of the monumental heroine. Karmen has to look up to speak to Lamine; however, the position of her neck and head suggests that she is speaking to someone who is also sitting or kneeling, and the camera contributes to this illusion (Figure 3). It is interesting also to note the unusually high position of the eyeballs that is essential for her to focus on Lamine's face, an effort that a slight upward tilt of the chin by the actress would have remedied. Instead, what is eliminated is the bodily acknowledgment of Lamine's higher spatial position. At this moment, she is kneeling down in the street and speaking to Lamine, who is standing before her. Nothing in the body positioning or angle of the heroine's head suggests he dominates her from above, and the camera's preferred angle does not adopt Lamine's perspective to result in a downward tilt shot but rather naturalizes Karmen's physical position by matching itself to her eye level. This produces what we might call a phenomenological lie that goes to the heart of the monumental image created by the film. It is only the lifted eyes that give away the perspectival angle between her and Lamine above. The shallow focus prepares for the series of shot-reverse shots between the two characters in which Karmen will once again come off as the "winner."

The use of shot-reverse shots soon after the wedding scene privileges the powerful figure of Karmen. The latter is now Lamine's prisoner and is being led away in ropes to be jailed. Although these shots vary between Lamine and Karmen, according each, ostensibly, the same space and position in the scene, when the camera is focused on Karmen, what we see of Lamine is the side of his face. When Lamine speaks, the shot is reversed to capture him while we supposedly see a similar angle of Karmen. However, it seems as if Karmen's bare shoulder jumps out of the screen as it appears in the angle, providing not simply a view of her skin but also a form of subtle continuity between the shot and its reverse. In fact, the line between the camera and her shoulder acts like a lever, with the shoulder being the pivot point, skewing the image in favor of the heroine while simultaneously displacing the image of Lamine such that, although his white attire stands out against the dark background as well as in contrast against the actor's hair, skin, and the dark tie, he is virtually pushed

by Lamine, yet Lamine's head is severed by the frame, thus making him a foil in the foreground. He simply functions to hold the coil of rope in the foreground, suggesting, as does much of the diegesis, that Karmen is a willing prisoner to herself rather than to anyone else. In fact, although Karmen is at Lamine's feet, she commands the space, occupying the center

off screen in the shots that privilege Karmen (Figures 4–7). A close look at the first shot in this series, and at the earlier shot of Karmen on her knees in the street, reveals that the camera angle remains almost exactly the same relative to the actress, regardless of her physical positioning vis-à-vis the actor, whether kneeling in Figure 3 or standing head to head with him as in Figures 4–7. The shot–reverse shots show Karmen’s body from slightly below shoulder level to the top of her hairdo. Even when the shot reverses to show Lamine, Karmen’s shoulder, glistening with sweat, occupies the foreground to the front left of the frame, thus providing an eroticized distraction from the figure of Lamine. These tactics allow Karmen to literally emerge through the *mise-en-scène* (rather than be captured by it) as the monumental heroine.

The most striking example of monumental form is that Karmen rarely shares the frame with any other character. The film privileges medium shots when depicting Karmen with others, and Ramaka uses constant camera movement, shot–reverse shots, and editing to eschew two-shots for the most part. In the rare moments when the frame includes her with another character, Karmen’s domination of the image is unmistakable. The two-shots that occur at the victorious ending of each dance scene have already been noted. In the scene preceding the climactic lighthouse scene, in which Karmen warns Lamine to be careful around her, her bright-red knotted blouse ensures Karmen central attention, whereas Lamine is shown from behind; in addition, he is wearing black. The one scene with Lamine’s bride, which comes later, attempts to equalize the power play between these two female characters after the dramatic dance-duel. In this surreal scene with Majiguène, the two women have a conversation in which Karmen is generous to her rival, telling her she is a “good” person and that she should embrace Lamine. They both wear striking colors, the wife is in royal blue, and Karmen, once again, is in red. This is a moment when the frame is,



Figures 4–7. A shot–reverse shot sequence of Karmen and Lamine reveals more ways in which the camera privileges Karmen (California Newsreel, 2001).



Figure 8. Sand falls between Massiguène and Karmen, splitting the screen (California Newsreel, 2001).

in fact, shared. However, in this scene an unexplained stream of sand falls ceaselessly between the two female characters and contributes to the scene's dreamlike quality (Figure 8).

This scene initiates Karmen's overt rejection of Lamine. The falling sand visually splits the frame in two, separating the two women and suggesting the impossibility of an alliance. Although the scene seems to mitigate female competition, as it could be seen as a reconciliatory effort after the competitive dance, the film does not manage to go beyond it to gesture to any female alliances, and the split frame exemplifies their separation. In the brief scene in which Massigui embraces Karmen after her band of outlaws is victorious, Karmen is framed by the vast ocean behind her, whereas Massigui's back is toward the camera. In the next scene, with Samba (Thierno Ndiaye), shots and reverse shots are preferred to the two-shot for the nostalgic exchange between Karmen and Samba, who relive their past in a conversation, thus framing them separately even in this intimate moment. This is followed immediately by a cut to Karmen entering her mother's bedroom with a cup of coffee. She wakes her mother by singing to her. Apart from two fleeting moments, the first when Karmen straddles her mother to sing and wake her and the second when Massigui (El Hadj Ndiaye) is announced and the two women sit side by side and laugh, it is remarkable that they don't share the frame in any significant way. This type of filmic separation complements building the monumental image of Karmen and reinstates the impossibility of any social and emotional ties for the character through *mise-en-scène*. In fact, Karmen stands as a direct response to and correction of the statement, "Often women in particular appear ineffectual, and *incapable of standing on their own*" in African films of the past.⁴

The "feminist argument" advanced by Dovey about the "nationalization" of women's bodies through *sabar* dance can be probed further when we consider more specifically the side of *sabar* that Ramaka chooses to privilege through Karmen's dance. In any case, the idea of an actual female society beyond the enclosed and forced contiguity of women's bodies within the prison is not raised in this film. There is no gesture to indicate any meaningful female society in terms of reality or myth. Karmen leaves the prison and does not organize her sisters, whom she stirred up through dance—nor does her energy carry the collectivity to action. Therefore, a link between that group of wanton dancers and the mutual aid societies in Senegal, or *mbootaay*, which is offered in Dovey's attempt at a feminist interpretation, is not really plausible.⁵ It is also

4 N. Frank Ukadike, "Reclaiming Images of Women in Films from Africa and the Black Diaspora," in *Redirecting the Gaze: Gender, Theory, and Cinema in the Third World*, ed. Diana Robin and Ira Jaffe (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 127. My emphasis.

5 Lindiwe Dovey, "African Incar(me)nation: Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001)," in *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 244–245.

not surprising that Dovey in fact undoes her argument regarding what she calls the nationalization of the female body and its relevance to a feminist interpretation of the heroine by ending her essay with the claim that this film “renders the very idea of indigenization irrelevant.”⁶ In fact, the indigenization—through the name “Karmen Gei”—that both Powrie and Dovey suggest is not quite as effective as it may sound. However, Dovey’s conclusion is quite insightful because, in fact, the monumental mode of representing the heroine disallows any form of particularity, such as the national, that would yoke her to any form of reality. This study reveals how Karmen as character articulates “a visual style (as well as a visible content) of being that has not been allowed to fully become, that has to contest and overcome its delimitation.”⁷ Thus, as we will see, Karmen emerges as an alternative style rather than as a character to be grasped in psychological, realist, political, or other terms. This suggests that Ramaka’s intervention, political or otherwise, is thoroughly cinematographic.

Karmen as “African” and “Woman.” Probing further the cultural specificity of the *sabar* dance in West Africa might offer greater scope to subvert the interpretive tightness of the film while simultaneously questioning previous overwhelmingly celebratory critical readings of it. This reading extends interpretive possibilities beyond the authority of the filmmaker. Although today *sabar* is often performed in the streets by men, particularly for tourists, and has become a source of income for many city dwellers, it is traditionally a dance performed by women to the drumbeats of the male *sabar* percussionists. In the aesthetics of *Karmen Gei*, the dramatic aspect of the *sabar* is appropriated, much as is the case for the performances seen in the streets today, whereas the subtler *laasu* (the poem that inspires the dance, often characterized by multivalence and an indirect style),⁸ is waylaid by the monumental mode. Powrie locates the “subtlety” of the film in the character of Angélique and the lesbian relationship, and he finds therein deep political meaning for the representation of African womanhood. He suggests, “Karmen’s gaze invites the spectator to enter . . . the possible and questing authenticity of the African woman.”⁹ The reception of the film was politicized when the Mouride Brothers, a strict Muslim group in Senegal, contested the use of the *khassáide* (a Muslim chant) in the church scene for the Christian, and more significantly, the lesbian character Angélique. Lesbianism in the film was also further attacked on religious grounds because it was considered a representation of deviant behavior.

However, the “politics of embodiment” that Powrie signals in the title of his essay remain unclear because of his reluctance to indicate what exactly Karmen is taken to embody, although the suggestion seems to be that it is African womanhood. Dovey begins her argument by referring to embodied forms of knowledge and makes a similar

6 Ibid., 251.

7 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 162.

8 Deborah Heath, “The Politics of Appropriateness and Appropriation: Recontextualizing Women’s Dance in Urban Senegal,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (February 1994): 97.

9 Phil Powrie, “Politics and Embodiment in *Karmen Gei*,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21, no. 4 (October–December 2004): 286.

move to anchor embodiment in Senegalese specificity by evoking *mbootaay* and the chanting of Karmen's glory amid that of various local heroines.¹⁰ Such a notion of embodiment, if located in the character of Karmen, gestures toward a particular politics that is embodied: an accounting of what Laura Mulvey has cogently called "the question of reference" without "deny[ing] the place of the signifier."¹¹ My argument is that the film resolutely disallows Karmen to embody, or present allegorically, the African woman, let alone anything beyond, even in utopian form. Embodying the idea of a masculinized collectivity of "the people" against "the system," she represents no ultimate triumph for either. Her gratuitous death and lack of any social or emotional ties deprive her of revolutionary possibilities and deny her the status of organic intellectual, in the Gramscian sense of being able to articulate the feelings and aspirations of an entire group. Dovey suggests that the characters of Karmen and Angélique represent embodiment and rationality, respectively, but as far as plot goes, Karmen's relationships to Angélique and to Lamine, respectively, hardly seem to "challenge rationality." In fact, both these relationships fit seamlessly into rational ideas of motivation and plot in terms of Karmen's motivations to seduce those characters, however much they might also incite reflection about gender and power beyond the plot.¹² In contrast, it might be more plausible to view two of Karmen's lovers, Samba and Massigui, as providing space for relationships outside the more easily explicable ones: the first combining the sexual and the paternal and the second combining the sexual and the fraternal, as it were. But the reason such reflection cannot go much further is precisely because Ramaka shows little interest in developing either of these relationships beyond Karmen's monumental status in the film. The fragmentation of the central character herself lends itself very well to building her up to monumental status without requiring continuity, development, or realism of any kind. Even if the relationship with Angélique is privileged in the diegesis through Karmen's mourning, there is not much left to ruminate on regarding the relationship and its cinematic representation, apart from a nostalgic evocation of the warden's death. The scenes of Karmen and Angélique together are restricted to the dramatic dance of seduction and victory for Karmen, which leads to a brief, highly eroticized sexual encounter that assures Karmen's escape from jail.

Likewise, any glory in Karmen's own death can be understood only as residing at an extradiegetic level, because her burial by her lover and father figure, Samba, takes place in isolation and anonymity. This scene, coming immediately after the dramatic scene of death, reminds the spectator that the grandeur of the moment lies outside of the view of the audience depicted in the film, outside of the interpretation of the society from which Karmen is supposed to have emerged. This accords with my argument that Karmen's political possibilities within the diegesis itself are rather limited. In this context, it is useful to remember Stuart Hall's idea that "concepts can operate at very different levels of abstraction and . . . [that] the important point is not to 'misread' one

10 Dovey, "African Incar(me)nation," 248–249.

11 Laura Mulvey, "Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture," *October* 65 (Summer 1993): 9.

12 Dovey, "African Incar(me)nation," 241.

level of abstraction for another.”¹³ Karmen is murdered in the temporary scaffolding used to support equipment for the theater below while the audience remains oblivious to the dramatics going on above them. The singer (Yandé Codou Sène) entertains the crowd below the scene of the murder. Karmen’s death becomes dramatic only because of the knowledge the spectators of the film and the filmmaker share of her fate and because of their anticipation and participation in sustaining that myth at the extradiegetic level. At the level of story, Karmen virtually disappears: neither her death nor her burial is observed by anyone but Lamine, who commits the murder, and Samba, who buries her. Her death does not create even a ripple in the vague society evoked in the film. Samba’s care for her burial can be considered some sort of redemption offered by the film and is suggestive of a return to the safety (and authority?) of paternal love for the transgressive woman. It is worth noting that the isolated burial is also true to Prosper Mérimée’s tale *Carmen*, in which Don José buries Carmen after killing her.

Lamine lacks the virility associated with Mérimée’s Don José, which is replayed in his portrayal in Bizet’s opera. In fact, Lamine’s dramatic gesture in the death scene is hardly justified by the lackluster character he has been throughout *Karmen Geï*. One result for Ramaka’s Karmen is that the character subverts the facile masculine-centered interpretation of the woman being at fault for male violence and jealousy, an interpretation that is more readily available in a different African version of *Carmen*, the British-born, South African director Mark Dornford-May’s *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005). In that film, Jonghi (Andile Tshoni) delivers a credible murder of his Carmen from just such a masculinized perspective. Jonghi is tortured by the idea of not having her, and this emotion is developed scrupulously to lead to the final moment. Dornford-May’s film also presents a very different Carmen (Pauline Malefane) from *Karmen Geï*, even though defiance at the moment of death is also brought out there. In the final sequences of Dornford-May’s film, the heroine is shown to be confused and nervous at moments, vulnerable and human, while Jonghi begs for her love and to be given a chance. Thus, Dornford-May’s Carmen readily fulfills the role of the “bad” woman who causes the man to act in particular ways, and the character plays on European ideas of deviant femininity, which were certainly part of Mérimée’s tale. Although it is well known that in various colonial contexts colonized males were often effeminized to offset the colonizer’s virility, colonized females were also highly eroticized by male colonizers. *Karmen Geï* provides what is close to caricature if the characters are thought of in strict relation to postcolonial Senegal, with Karmen embodying the female “other” in relation to the European (ex)colonizer, who, though not depicted in the film, lurks in ideas of power and in a hazy image of the inherited state. Yet, I argue that the film does not sustain such an interpretation because it takes a more universalizing stance regarding absolute liberty or individualism. As the filmmaker remarks in an interview, “The integrity of freedom has been questioned more than once. In Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Tchechnya, everywhere on the planet. For basically political reasons, we have been willing to make compromises on the liberty of peoples, the liberty to live, to think.

13 Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 413.

Karmen is anything but a woman of compromise.”¹⁴ Although Ramaka uses the term “woman,” *Karmen Gëi* itself positions Karmen as a woman only in terms of an obvious physical iconicity, not in terms that can be understood through sustained reference to any networks of signification. In fact, the *sabar* performances by Karmen include many acrobatic moves associated with the recent influence of males giving *sabar* performances in the streets. Ramaka himself does not elaborate on Karmen’s Africanness other than in the most obvious manner: his statement is simply that the sources he used for various aspects of the film were drawn from his native culture, thus activating the mythical European Carmen’s African roots. Nor does he speak further on the notion of femininity for Karmen when he suggests that there is a feminine aspect that links Karmen, her mother, and Samba.¹⁵ In this association, Karmen seems less “woman” than “feminine” in the sense that French feminists of the 1980s used the term—a type of force that is uncontainable, libidinal, but not restricted to women. Although such readings might serve to politicize the film, any attempt at a feminine-centered reading has to contend with the ultimate masculinization of the totality of the film experience. Although such masculinization is seemingly questioned by subversion of the masculine gaze visually and undergoes destabilization through the desiring lesbian gaze of Angélique—as well as through Karmen’s monumental presence on screen, which defies classic notions of objectification—masculine privilege is ultimately reinforced through her foreordained death. The film not only condemns Karmen to death as a deviant woman, in keeping with the European myth, but also effaces masculine power in a postindependent African state through the character of Lamine. The cinematic construction of the heroine suggests that the politics at play in this film are not easily aligned with a liberatory position for “woman” as represented by Karmen and that one must also question the interpretation of Karmen’s “African” specificity.

As a female agent, Karmen’s character is an unlikely place to look for any kind of “real” politics. Although several critics (and even the filmmaker himself) point to Karmen as a political representation of female African identity, her monumentality leaves one skeptical of such a conclusion. We have seen how Karmen’s connection to a social fabric, whether real or invented, is subverted by the film’s avoidance of creating any type of meaningful link for her as a woman in the specific society represented. Once Karmen divides up the money from the bandit group’s spoils, asking Samba to make the division with just one pile to be shared between herself and Lamine, she rejects Lamine—after surrendering her share to him—and tells him that she wants nothing further to do with him. As spectators, we sense the beginning of the end. Shortly thereafter, we are provided with a magnificent image of Karmen, perched comfortably on a rock with legs spread apart, wearing an orange flowery dress. She is framed by the crashing waves for a scene in which she will welcome and embrace Massigui (as Lamine jealously observes their embrace from above). This segues to one-on-one scenes with Samba (in which Karmen performs *sabar* steps while Samba provides rhythm with his voice and by striking two stones against each other) and with

14 Rochelle Real, “Autour du film sénégalais ‘Karmen,’” *24 Images: Revue québécoise du cinéma* (2002): 47. My translation.

15 *Ibid.*, 48–49.

her mother (an affectionate scene cut short by Massigui's arrival). Massigui whisks her away to the millennium celebrations in the marketplace. Once again she encounters Lamine when she wanders off on her own soon after she undoes her bracelet and it falls to the ground. After this, we encounter the masked ancestors, prefiguring her death. Lamine's vague presence around the more intimate moments of connection with other characters somehow casts a shadow on those already-tenuous links while also suggesting her impending death by his knife.

Karmen's escape from the prison, which is situated on the emblematic Gorée Island, ostensibly places the character in a position of resistance to exploitation and moral depravity. Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, was, as is now well known, one of the points of departure for slave ships bound for the Americas. Karmen escapes from the prison of the island, an iconic reminder of the slave trade, which suggests that succumbing to the overtures of the establishment (represented by Angélique or Lamine, who both wear uniforms) would be a form of willing enslavement. These overtly political gestures are somewhat unconvincing in their specific relevance to African reality or Senegalese postcolonialism because the film seems more invested in elevating Karmen to a monumental position that defies context.

The opening scene of the film activates the idea of visual pleasure that Laura Mulvey has called scopophilia.¹⁶ Here, the male spectator is posited as the viewer through a long take of Karmen seated in a sexually charged pose, keeping time to the drumbeat by slapping her thighs together. This shot is disrupted by a cut to the actual viewer within the diegesis: the light-skinned prison guard Angélique, who is wearing a khaki uniform. This subversion, or view from "elsewhere," might complicate the stability of the expected male spectator in ways that have been productively questioned by Teresa de Lauretis, and the subversion thus suggests at least a double desiring position for a potential spectator. Phil Powrie argues that "the spectator is thus 'lesbianized' by the opening sequence, and no amount of 'late-night TV' erotics can undo that lesbianization."¹⁷ For Lindiwe Dovey, this "prevents" a reading dominant in Mulvey-style criticism in which the "male look" of the spectator and camera dominates. According to Dovey, this sequence effectively "cut[s] the viewer out of the equation," thus weakening his or her power.¹⁸ Powrie takes note of what he calls the film's "subtlety," the purpose of which "is to underscore the fissures in the patriarchal structures."¹⁹ The scope Powrie wants to claim for *Karmen's* politics is problematized by sustained attention to cinematic form. The viewer's supposedly diminished power in that particular sequence is reinstated by the film's ending at the level of the unity of the film, as the acknowledged authority for the narrative. Powrie's optimism cannot ratify the patriarchal punishment in store for Karmen. The greater possibility Dovey wants to accord to Karmen by considering her as a properly instantiated philosophical argument for the notion of an embodied mode of being and knowing is seductive, but it remains unclear how this relates to the

16 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 8.

17 Powrie, "Politics and Embodiment," 287.

18 Dovey, "African Incar(mer)ation," 240.

19 Powrie, "Politics and Embodiment," 287.

feminist interpretation of the character of Karmen and the Senegalese specificity of the representation also advanced by this critic.

Respecting the film's own structure, we should not be too quick to jump to conclusions about the "lesbian" relationship quite at this point in the diegesis, even though subsequent scenes will encourage such an interpretation. Indeed, the lesbian relationship, often figuring within the heterosexual male imaginary, does nothing to undo, and in fact reinstates, the spectator's position, in Mulvey's terms, of having a voyeuristic relation to the eroticized female image.²⁰ Moreover, even though Karmen confesses to her mother and Samba that Angélique is the one she could have loved, the relationship's gratuitousness at the beginning of the film and its subsequent lack of development actually serve male-centered scopophilia. We can note additionally that *sabar* dancing has been, for the most part, a female domain in Senegal.²¹ Playfulness between women, who sometimes mimic male-female relationships and often perform risqué moves that are pushed further when the entire group is female, is central to *sabar* aesthetics. In fact, following the logic of the successive scenes, there is no immediate cause to unambiguously lesbianize the gaze, until Karmen and Angélique are seen in bed together. Still, it is important to acknowledge how this scene opens up possibilities for multiply configuring the desires of a potential spectator. However, this paradoxically does not endow the heroine with a very wide range of possibilities for action. The quick elimination (through suicide) of the woman who opens up these possibilities is typical of the way this film forecloses female agency.

Even if we accept provisionally the subversion of the masculine gaze early in the film by virtue of the cut to Angélique's perspective, the revenge of the social order in the end (Angélique's suicide and Karmen's murder) "insures a masculinisation of the spectatorial position."²² Powrie rightly remarks that Ramaka studiously avoids close-ups of Karmen. However, this does little in the way of realist representation or to place Karmen in a wider field of reference. If a singular principle is followed in the *mise-en-scène* of this film, it is monumentalization. The supposed decentering of heterosexual dominance as it pervades the Western Carmen myth does not pertain so directly to the development of the plot. Even though Karmen evokes Angélique well after the latter's death, the relationship even as a possibility remains empty, or vague at best. None of Karmen's actions in the story once she leaves the jail actually evoke Angélique in any meaningful way in terms of plot or cinematic motif. At best, Lamine's uniform calls up the uniformed Angélique and might serve as a marker of the impossibility of Karmen's engaging with either of them.

The choice of actors for Karmen's two male lovers—the hugely successful singer, El Hadj N'diaye, as Massigui, and Thierno Ndiaye Dos, who played a quintessential Sembene hero in *Guelwaar* (1993), as Samba—is also compelling in building the monumental heroine. Karmen plays on (and outdoes through the plot, dialogue, and camera work) the significant presence that these male figures represent for a West

20 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 6–18.

21 Deborah Heath, "The Politics of Appropriateness and Appropriation: Recontextualizing Women's Dance in Urban Senegal," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (February 1994): 92.

22 Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (1982): 85.

African and, arguably, more widespread audience somewhat familiar with the identity of these actors.

Situating the film momentarily within Western film history, the feminine mask is not transcended by this absolutely liberated woman who does not require it.²³ As Mary Anne Doane demonstrates, meekness, softness, and submission by female heroines, particularly in Hollywood cinema, can serve as a mask for gaining control within a patriarchal framework. Today's modern, liberated woman (African or otherwise) can no longer operate cinematically by stressing such traits in the same ways, as these traits have been utterly exhausted by a range of cinematic heroines, from Hollywood to Bollywood, and because the framework no longer corresponds to anything filmmakers or their audiences might find seductive through realism or fantasy. The moments in the film that depict Karmen less monumentally suggest, instead, that there is a yearning for that "true" space of vulnerability beyond the feminine "mask." Female vulnerability has been completely overdetermined by the mask, whereas its unfashionability in reality makes it doubly difficult to seriously pursue an "unmasked" and nonstrategic version of it in film. In *Karmen Gëi*, these moments of vulnerability occur when, for example, Karmen arrives at Massigui's home drenched in the rain, limping from being wounded in her escape; when Karmen is alone in the anteroom and cannot be present in the congregation at Angélique's funeral; and when she awakens her mother in the short tender scene before she goes to her death. All these moments are necessarily left incomplete because they are at odds with the central (and overpowering) logic of monumentalization that sustains the character of Karmen. While the monumental character of Karmen is left intact, her lack of social engagement at the individual or collective level disallows any moment of either vulnerability or strength to signify meaningfully in a cinematically constructed and validated context. Yet these are the moments that, by suggesting possibilities for "identification" beyond the spectacle of Karmen, open the door to a more critical evaluation of character.

Teresa de Lauretis clearly and succinctly posits a "movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centered frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out, or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable."²⁴ A male filmmaker here succeeds in intervening in the myth of Carmen precisely by seeking out what the male-centered myth has left out or, rather, made unrepresentable. In considering the Karmen character, Ramaka privileges her own desire rather than allowing the character to become a pawn of male desire. Yet it remains useful to recall de Lauretis's observation that "these two kinds of spaces are neither in opposition to one another nor strung along a chain of signification, but they co-exist concurrently and in contradiction."²⁵ This elaboration is brilliant for its utility beyond what de Lauretis was specifically writing about. It remains important to be alert to the possible contradiction between what is represented and what is rendered impossible in the actualization of particular representations, yet also to understand such possibilities as

23 Ibid., 74–87.

24 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 26.

25 Ibid., 26.

existing concurrently. In the case of *Karmen*, what has historically been unrepresentable is female desire, ambition, sexual liberation, and freedom from the many societal constraints on predefined roles for women. At the same time, the choices made for this representation fail to present her character as a political statement beyond an absolute, and thus impossible, fantasy. After all, “cinema is a place where one can stop the sun from setting, if one wishes.”²⁶

While the camera’s celebration of the film’s heroine continues uninterrupted, the story constructs an admonishment to the heroine for her ruthless individualism. Thus, *Karmen* must die at the hands of her lover as per the original story. Dressed in a sleek, red, European-looking evening gown, *Karmen* goes to her heroic death of her own accord. Like Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen*, she must die. Everything, then, works toward this end: from the character’s death wish to the spectator’s anticipation of it. This is heightened in the film’s brilliant penultimate scene, which is a scene within a scene. The viewer follows a slow panning shot of the audience from the back of an auditorium to a blind female singer (Yandé Coudou Sene) on stage. A shot of the shadows of the darkened auditorium cuts to a moving white screen that reveals *Lamine*’s presence as a shadow upon it. Crosscutting between *Karmen* dressed in red in the wings and the singer onstage is followed by a cut to *Lamine*’s shadow. The drumming onstage becomes more powerful until the dramatic moment when *Lamine* and *Karmen* come face to face above the stage as the music below is silenced, and no applause is heard. *Karmen*’s final scene occurs out of view of the depicted audience. We then hear *Karmen*’s poetic song (transposed faithfully into Wolof from the Bizet opera) with the actress captured in medium shot, inviting *Lamine* to kill her, until *Lamine* pierces her with his dagger. A high-angle shot shows *Lamine*’s knife approaching *Karmen*. His agency in the act is bypassed by focus on the instrument and by rapid camera movement upward at the moment it plunges into her body. The camera pauses over his shoulder to capture *Karmen*’s defiant look into *Lamine*’s eyes, once again not showing *Karmen* from his vantage point. At this moment, the music from below is heard once again, along with the wailing voice of the singer, as *Karmen*’s body drops to the wooden floor; the camera pauses on her body to reveal the vertical lines of light coming up through the cracks from the stage below all around her, thus reinforcing her distance from the stage and the society that never emerges in the story. Then ghostlike figures with painted faces are superimposed over the still body. These figures are already familiar to the spectator, as they were seen previously when *Karmen* wandered away from the New Year’s celebrations into the market. That is, the superimpositions recall the earlier scene in which *Karmen* glimpsed *Lamine* and dropped her bracelet, in a strange instance of premonition. At this earlier moment, the same figures appeared, ostensibly only visible to *Karmen*, right in the midst of the crowded market. In the death scene, one moving shot continues and traces the length of the alley, which is bathed in bright sunshine but punctuated by the shadows of the buildings on either side, capturing the “ghosts” with painted faces lining it on both sides. *Karmen* becomes one with the spectator’s gaze and literally seems to move invisibly as

26 Joseph Gaï Ramaka, interview with Michael Martin, “I’m Not a Filmmaker Engagé, I’m an Ordinary Citizen Engagé,” *Research in African Languages* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 207.

the spectator is transported by the swift pans that accompany the forward momentum along the length of the alley, from ancestral face to face, the effect suggesting the moving spirit. Next, there is a fade-in to a long shot that establishes the final context: we see crucifixes in the graveyard, the sea in the distance, and a black figure that we will soon recognize as Samba, apparently recovered from his beating, wheeling Karmen's encased body uphill to lay it to rest. Fittingly, Samba lifts up the body and walks uphill with his burden, finally disappearing out of the top left of the frame before there is a fade to black and the film ends.

The seamlessness of the music and the theatrical stillness at the moment of the heroine's death heighten the operatic sense of ending (the well-matched music suggesting a dramatic and satisfying ending) in the denouement. These elements serve only to remind us that the heroine's death has been the driving force of all the action of the film. What this does, consequently, is to disallow a plausible place for Karmen's own agency despite all the more obvious transgressions by the character and the subversion of the original plot. The shot that begins with Lamine plunging a knife into Karmen brings together the elements of composition in a dramatic moment of unity. The effect of the music before she falls to the floor, along with the affected stillness of Karmen's gaze, address the spectator directly in a language that is unmistakable for the universal recognition it offers after any discomfort or alienation during the viewing experience: the lengthy, held note of the singer's voice and the dramatic arresting of movement constitute the denouement of the myth of Carmen that the spectator shares with the creators of the film. The knowledge that binds the spectator to the creators undermines the subversive possibilities of the character while paradoxically liberating the viewing experience. It is a moment in which common knowledge unifies the spectator with the creator across cultural and linguistic divides by reverting to the original and well-known myth after various threats to its sanctity. The explicit interpellation of such an audience for "African" cinema is highly subversive of the expectation that has framed cinema from the continent since the Fédération Pan-Africaine de Cinéastes stated that African cinema should be created, at least ostensibly, for African audiences.²⁷ Moving away from the role of the storyteller or griot that Sembène reclaimed and which has, in some ways, trapped his films in a particular position, this film is daring in the way it rejects such a discursive position. In fact, its use of a quite faithful translation of Bizet's opera into Wolof (subtitled in English), its adaptation of *sabar* dance, and its specific Senegalese and African context put the onus on non-African and to some extent non-Senegalese spectators to occupy a lesser-knowing position than real or imagined "insider" spectators. Knowledge of the myth invites participation and appreciation, and various other elements simultaneously contest rather than simply establish the "local" or the "national."

If the local is to reside in the character of Karmen, then her appropriation of *sabar*, her impossible alliances, and her monumentality all make up the space for a utopian conception of a new local that would come from disjuncture with what exists rather than from simple continuity or correspondence with it. Blackness in this film becomes an issue at the extradiegetic level, placing the film in a global context, because in the

27 N. Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 254.

film blackness is natural and universal—despite what critics have noted about the significance of Angélique’s lighter skin. Formulaically, she is black and desires Karmen who is black. The actress, Stephanie Biddel, is of course Canadian, and therefore, once again, this might become significant at the extradiegetic level in conceiving the globalized context of filmmaking and, particularly, of reception. In these ways, what Ramaka does is to implicate the “globalized” spectator from home or abroad intellectually into the local precisely because it is ingeniously conjured up, but with a degree of deviance or inaccuracy that cannot “cohere” in terms of allegory or metaphor. This is one level of “politics” that criticism of the film has not touched upon.

Death Exposes the Masquerade. One is tempted to ask whether some of the risqué aspects of representing Karmen on the screen depend precisely on the safety net of her imminent and predetermined death, which functions strongly at an extradiegetic level because of spectators’ likely knowledge of the story from Pushkin’s *Gypsies* and particularly Mérimée’s *Carmen* celebrated in Bizet’s opera. In this case, the obvious statement that the myth calls for Karmen’s death becomes less a constraint than a freedom. What I am suggesting is that the apparent flirting with what Roland Barthes called *jouissance* (that form of pleasure that unsettles the reader’s historical and cultural assumptions) in the film—the lesbianism of Karmen in her relationship with Angélique, Karmen’s illegal activities, or even her spiritual and sexual abandon before her lovers—is then reined back quite simply into the realm of *plaisir* (that which grants euphoria but is linked to a comfortable practice of reading) by the knowledge that these transgressions are expected to be cut short by her imminent death.²⁸ Perhaps it is the fact that her punishment is ensured that allows the transgressions to be extreme. Thus, there is no demasculinizing of the interpretive position, which remains dominant. Karmen as *kilifë*, or “master,” in Wolof, is only a masquerade for the eventual reassertion of male domination by the doomed-to-die heroine. As Deborah Heath notes, “The Wolof word *kilifë* (master) is used to refer to the dominant entity in a wide range of social relationships, including both husband in relation to wife and Islamic cleric in relation to disciple.”²⁹ The effect of Karmen’s lesbianism, so fleeting and underdeveloped in the film beside her ultimate death, is less convincing of the “film’s excessive decentering [which] therefore destabilizes spectators who would have been expecting a ‘straight’ (in both sense of the word: heterosexual, and faithful to the Mérimée-Bizet narrative) rendering of the Carmen story.”³⁰

Karmen’s monumentality renders her death less plausible as subversive. The excess of her screen presence and the many victories for Karmen as cinematic heroine might build up the monumentality but only as a masquerade—the masquerade of subversiveness attributed to a female character.

Doane cautions that the central problem in certain theories of the image and of femininity need to be exploded from “the *episteme* which assigns to the woman a special

28 Roland Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 14.

29 Heath, “The Politics of Appropriateness and Appropriation,” 96.

30 Powrie, “Politics and Embodiment” 287.

place in cinematic representation while denying her access to that system.”³¹ Karmen has “a special place in [the] cinematic representation” as a larger-than-life heroine, but the film ultimately answers to male-centered interrogation by its very choice of this particular myth and by virtue of the way its denouement prevails as the driving force of the narrative. My critique differs from critical reception of the film which, as Phil Powrie notes, focuses on “the mismatch between music and narrative, and the trap of exoticization.”³² The moment of Karmen’s death brings a masculinized spectator together with the essentially masculine-centered creative force of Karmen in a troubling way. What if we were to see the overpowering presence of Karmen as masking the absence of a “real” woman? Then this moment becomes what Freud called a dirty joke. As Doane writes, in her well-known analysis of a Doisneau photograph, “the operation of the dirty joke is . . . inextricably linked by Freud to scopophilia and the exposure of the female body.”³³ Doane explains that, “for a dirty joke to emerge in its specificity in Freud’s description, the object of desire—the woman—must be absent, and a third person (another man) must be present as witness to the joke.”³⁴ If the creative position of the myth and film is the transhistorical, masculine teller of the joke, then the ultimately masculine-centered spectatorial position is the third “person,” and Karmen herself is rendered absent as woman because of the mythification and/or mystification that monumental representation accomplishes. To explode the possibility of this dirty joke, Karmen’s death might be seen differently by returning to the subversion of the plot that Angélique provides. No equivalent of Angélique is, of course, present in Mérimée’s tale. In this sense, to be subversive, Karmen’s death should not be viewed within the traditional Carmen narrative but rather in the specificity of repeated death (after Angélique’s suicide). In thus bringing together Angélique’s equally lonely death (suicide by drowning in the sea surrounding the prison) and that of Karmen’s chosen one, it is possible to construct, against the diegesis, some ways of linking their deaths to their status as nonconforming women. Whether embracing homosexuality to the end or rejecting heterosexual possibility, both heroines choose death, thus giving Karmen’s death some meaning beyond that stipulated by the myth. It is the link to Angélique’s death rather than the latter’s homosexuality that gives Karmen’s death an iterative quality unique to this version of the myth and, arguably, provides a critique of patriarchal heterosexuality. The deep pessimism that could be read as a strong and unambiguous political statement is not so easy to evince. Resistance to such linkages comes not only from the plot but also from the logic that monumentalizes the heroine even as it isolates her from a context that would permit something akin to political meaning within the film.

There is no extended female community whose support Karmen draws on. In Mark Dornford-May’s version, Carmen is always in the company of her little entourage, and the strong bonds among its members allow for the mourning of Carmen first by the women and then by the men of the outlaw-gang who join them in horror.

31 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 76.

32 Powrie, “Politics and Embodiment,” 285.

33 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 85.

34 *Ibid.*, 85.

As for *Karmen Gëi*, earlier I suggested that (along with the scenes with Massigui and Samba) Karmen's short and barely glimpsed closeness with her mother does not provide convincing cinematic development of Karmen as a social being. However, the scene serves to enliven the link between female characters, something the film does not really pursue—the vagabond subversive Karmen, the lover who chooses death over continued adherence to the rules of her uniform that signify duty to the state, and the mother who provides great latitude to her daughter's comings and goings. These moments might be viewed as bringing to the fore failed attempts at (or rejection of) female collectivity. Envisaging a female-centered spectator who pressures the logic of monumentalization to acknowledge female sociability, or at least some possibility of an imagined social fabric in which differently positioned women might be connected, makes certain demands on this cinematic reality that is the film. Even Karmen's relationship with Majiguène, Lamine's wife, would have to be examined through the resolute separation that the screen image promotes. These remarks are meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive, exactly in the spirit of Ramaka's brilliant film. What I have suggested is that, while the film presents a monumental heroine, it is by acknowledging and perhaps enabling the space of the (globalized and thus inclusive of an African) spectator that one might potentially locate the politics critics have touted for this film. African cinema thus reclaims an African audience, which in turn retains its right to the global as much as it does to the local. Going further, the film Africanizes a global audience that it implicates precisely by its resistance to easy correspondence with African reality even in its most recognizably African aspects. Yet it is clear that the politics of the film are strongly anchored in a *mise-en-scène* that resists our instincts as critics. Thus, feminism or Afrocentrism or third worldism or postcolonialism can function as little more than points of entry into the film, and therein lies the brilliance of the film's aesthetics.

It thus continues to be clear that female-centered spectatorship has to be born in opposition to male-centered filmmaking and spectatorial positioning, where the tactics misleadingly might include the monumental framing of feminine heroines only to result in the joke being on women. Inserting female presence beyond the image as a method for interrogation might be a means to usurp the male position that can otherwise have the last laugh, so to speak. But, as spectators, we must break through the image if female presence is to be "rescued" from functioning merely as an object of the male gaze. We have seen that the image itself within the totality of *Karmen Gëi* impedes a developed narrative of any kind. Pushing beyond the limits and the authority of the image allows for pathways of resistance and interpretation that could become meaningful for African cinema in the globalized context within which it is created and disseminated. It also enlivens the "global citizenry" of which Ramaka sees himself as being a part.³⁵

Taking this idea further, in Senegal, the idea of female sociability has been evoked in the context of *dirriankhé*, referring, as it can, to the seductive gait of Senegambian women or at least their aspiring to that emblematic image of female attractiveness through presentation and attire. This concept evokes the "corpulent body" of a

35 Ramaka interview, Martin, 210.

woman, the quantity of cloth in her attire, its density and ornamentation, as well as the two-meter head scarf.³⁶ Karmen, on the contrary, has a very sleek body, and her dress is often minimal and simple. She almost never wears a head scarf. In fact, the subtle interactions of women in conceptualizing *dirriankhé* presuppose value and attention to women's collectivity as a forum for engagement, which the other recent *Carmen* explores more explicitly, something that is rejected in *Karmen Gëi*. Relying as it does heavily on the *sabar* subtext, the film also bypasses the possibilities for representing and exploring collective feminine agency by overshadowing the *taasu* or poem part of the dance tradition in favor of the more dramatic *sabar* steps. Karmen's politics are all about casting out accepted hierarchies and societal interactions, and not merely those pertaining to women. But in the bargain the social fabric of interrelationship is stripped bare to the point that it is impossible for the politics to signify diegetically.

Laura Mulvey's now-classic essay on the death drive is also apposite here. Mulvey argues, following Peter Brooks's appropriation of Freud, that different classical (and some avant-garde) endings—marriage, dying together, the final kiss—reenact both the stasis on which movement in cinema depends and the ultimate desire to move toward death that Freud describes as the death drive.³⁷ In experiencing *Karmen Gëi*, the spectator already knows and anticipates Karmen's death with her. That final moment of stasis that is Karmen's death is indeed a wish shared by spectator and character. What I am arguing here is that the entire grand movement of the heroine from start to finish, including her various transgressive, revolutionary acts, all depend on this known desire for death: without that redemptive death, it seems unlikely that Karmen's monumentality could have been conceived in the terms exposed in this essay. Although on the one hand, Karmen's death can be seen as inevitable because of the film's dependence on the myth of Carmen, on the other hand, adherence to this part of the myth neutralizes what could have been her most revolutionary moments. Similarly, Karmen's monumental screen presence is subversive in its enormity, perhaps, but in and of itself it is unable to provide reflection on revolutionary possibilities for African women more specifically.

The restraining hand of male-centered conceptualization is seen when pressure is put on what is generally considered the most subversive element of *Karmen Gëi*. The Karmen-Angélique couple is doomed less because of forbidden homosexuality than by the refusal of each woman to privilege the female-female relationship. Karmen chooses escape over life in prison, even though the latter might include the favors extended to her by Angélique and conceivably a long-term relationship. Angélique prefers suicide to stepping out of her position as prison guard and following Karmen. Karmen as "character," then, does not reveal, at the level of story, the realities that a "woman" would have to overcome to be subversive, even momentarily, within her own story. If we take Karmen as a symbol of womanhood, the vulnerable moments mentioned earlier in this article become slippages in the smooth monumentality with which she is endowed from the opening scene examined previously. Despite such slippages, there is no doubt that Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen* holds the spectator's eyes, even if

36 Hudita Nura Mustafa, "Eros, Beauty, and Crisis: Notes from Senegal," *Feminist Africa* 6 (2005): 25.

37 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 71.

the spectator is not constructed as a fetishist in the sense Mulvey described. But here, too, the particular gaze the spectator is seduced into adopting does end up “guard[ing] against the encroachment of knowledge.”³⁸ This willingness to be seduced into belief in the monumental Karmen is here entrenched in the ultimate comfort that the myth’s denouement provides. Breaking through it and through the formalism of Karmen’s monumental image allows a different form of knowledge, one which, though couched in the certitude of the myth’s ending, leads beyond it. For a feminist or female-centered interpretation of *Karmen*, the film brilliantly creates an Africa-oriented spectator who is actually seduced into questioning the authority of the European myth against the film’s definitive adherence to it. The same spectator might become an “Africanist” in intellectualizing what is and is not recognizably African in this character, or a “feminist” in interrupting the monumental style that is Karmen to recast her subjectively—and beyond the plot—as a fully desiring subject. *

This essay is for Laura Mulvey.

38 Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism,” 12.