The Spectacle and Politics of Nudity in Blood Sisters

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Blood Sisters, the latest offering from EbonyLife Studios and NETFLIX's first Nigerian Original Series, is, at its best, a performance of cinematography. I have this image in my head of the filmmakers as peacocks, preening in anticipation of audiences' reaction; I imagine them thinking, "their jaws will drop!" This is not a bad thing, creating compelling imagery seems to be the ultimate aspiration of the so-called "New Nollywood." If we think of film as "visual storytelling", *Blood Sisters* certainly gives us the "visual" even if it sometimes leaves us wondering about the "storytelling."

The film is your standard-fare crime thriller with criminals on the run and law enforcement on their heels; think *Thelma & Louise* in a colourful, multilingual, Nigerian environment, with a surprisingly efficient — if occasionally corrupt — police force. When a groom disappears on his wedding day, last seen by his fiancée and her best friend, the audience is invited into a complex world of human relationships and high-stakes drama. But this essay is not intended as a film review. Rather, it takes one aspect of the film's quest for spectacle, its exhibition of the naked human form, to explore the filmmakers' politics around gender and social class.

I watched the series on the day it was released, and a few times after for this essay. I remain surprised by how much of the naked female form is on display while male characters get to keep their clothes on. I do not take issue with the fact of nudity itself; the series is rated "MA" for "Mature Audiences" after all. It is the choice of whose body is stripped that gives me pause, something about how gender and professional prestige seem to have played into the decision of whose naked body is put on display. I wasn't the only one struck by the film's politics around nudity. In a Twitter Spaces conversation hosted by @IrokoCritic on the 8th of May, 2022, a contributor – @MeLabia – noted that the bodies that the audience gets to "gawk at" (her words) belong to women of a "lower class" (again, her words.)

To be clear: I recognize that nudity can be a potent vehicle for expression in art, especially film. There is artistic value in the naked human form, and the aesthetics of nudity – the emotions that can be drawn out by a carefully positioned naked human form – has long been exploited by filmmakers

around the world. For example, a combination of anger, grief, shame, and pity is invoked when we see the naked bodies of the enslaved people in Steve McQueens's *Twelve Years a Slave*. In Ridley Scott's *American Gangster*, we are prompted to feel disgust as we watch a team of naked women packaging cocaine for Frank Lucas's (played by Denzel Washington) successful but debaucherous drug empire. In Michael Cristofer's *Original Sin*, Angelina Jolie's Julia drums up vulnerability when we see her, an apparent mail-order bride, stripped for matrimonial consummation with her strange new husband. There are also several films that strip the human form for sensual titillation, no examples are needed of these. I have selected the films above because in these movies, like in *Blood Sisters*, female characters are stripped under the lens of male directors. However, where these films treat nudity equitably (In *Twelve years a Slave* and *Original Sin* there is male and female nudity) and productively (in all three movies there is a clear storytelling purpose for the nudity and *American Gangster* specifically explains that the girls are naked to prevent theft), the nudity portrayed in *Blood Sisters* is neither equitable nor productive.

The (lack of) equity in *Blood Sisters'* exploitation of the naked human form is easily demonstrated: there is ZERO male nudity in the film. And this is not for a want of opportunity. There are several sex scenes between Fẹ́mi (played by Gabriel Afọ́láyan) and Ọ́láyínká (played by Kẹ́hìndé Bánkọ́lé). What we are offered is Fẹ́mi's fully clothed body while the camera lingers on Ọ́láyínká's naked thighs. We do get that one scene cast in silhouette when we see the shadow of two presumably naked human bodies in sensual movement.

Bíyi Bándélé, one of the series' directors has defended the choice to include graphic sex scenes: "why would you censor the portrayal of sex on screen? It is pure hypocrisy." Except the sex scenes in this film *are* censored to protect male bodies, and this is a type of hypocrisy. The need for explicit sexual content feels contrived if only one type of body is made to bear the burden. However, the variation in how the filmmakers treat different bodies is not split along gender lines alone. In its exploitation of the naked female form, the directors are also selective about whose intimate parts the audience gets to glimpse in an artistic shot and whose is bared in stark nudity. I'll use the film's shower scenes to discuss this point.

In the first shower scene, Sarah (played by Ini Dima-Okojie,) is washing up the day after her non-wedding. The scene is filmed in a close-up, the camera stays on Sarah's face and shoulders, and does not venture southwards. In another scene, Kẹ́mi (played by Nancy Isime) is washing up after a hectic few days on the run. Another close-up of the character's face and shoulders, the camera pans downwards briefly to the character's back but all intimate parts remain unseen. In the after-shower scene, Kẹ́mi clutches a towel to her chest as she fends off an attack and she eventually falls, chest hidden, into the bed. She is wearing modest panties that cover her buttocks even if it leaves her thighs bare. (It should be noted that Kẹ́mi's face remains hidden while she lies on the bed, which brings up the possibility of a body double.)

The third shower scene, which I think is most instructive in this discussion, is set in a rehab center. A group of women are cleaning themselves in a communal space, and then a fight breaks out. While all the patients are supposedly naked in the scene – this *is* a shower scene – the audience is only shown the naked bodies of film extras with unfamiliar faces. Although the camera moves rapidly and supposedly haphazardly, consistent with a chaotic fight scene, Tìmílẹ́hìn's (played by Genoveva Umeh) naked body is avoided, the camera stays on her face and barely pans past her shoulders.

However, from the silent film extras, we are shown full frontal nudity and exposed buttocks; these women are in this scene solely to exhibit their naked bodies as props under the director's gaze. As the camera lingers lasciviously on naked female forms the audience is left wondering: "What am I supposed to feel looking at this nipple that the camera refuses to pan away from?" "What value do the naked bodies add to this scene that is lost if the bodies are shielded?" "In fact, what value does

this scene of naked women fighting add to the movie's plot?" The answer to all three questions is nothing, or at least, nothing useful. The naked bodies in this scene carry no emotional charge and add nothing to the plot. They might as well be shower-heads or buckets, except they are people who have been stripped naked for prop-value.

I explain the details of these scenes to emphasize how much thought the filmmakers invested into protecting the nudity of its main characters, and how little thought is shown in the film's exploitation of the naked bodies of its "extras" characters. Which begs the question: "what about the actors cast as extras make them especially vulnerable to the film's exhibitionism?"

The only answer I can come up with is their lack of prestige in Nollywood. Other casting decisions by the filmmakers also support this conclusion. *Blood Sisters* inexplicably casts several Nollywood legends and well-known actors in small, "waka pass" roles – Zack Orji in his role as David, Jọkẹ́ Sylvia in her role as "granny", and Tóyìn Abraham in her role as "village woman" are a few examples of big Nollywood names in small roles. However, it is telling that characters for whom the filmmakers shelve their instinct to reach for the stars are the characters exploited for crass nudity. Put differently, the characters protected from the film's salacious gaze are played by well-known/prestigious actors, and the characters stripped for cheap exhibitionism are played by unknown faces. And this sums up the politics of nudity in the film. *Blood Sisters* takes one of the most vulnerable groups in society – unknown, unnamed women – and strips them naked to score points for spectacle, never mind that the nudity adds nothing to the film's story.

As I see it, there are two legitimate reasons to include a spectacle of the naked form in film – to create a hyper-realistic story world or to exploit the evocative power of the naked human form for storytelling purposes. I struggle to place the nudity in *Blood Sisters* in any one of these two categories. There is a third, far less legitimate reason for onscreen nudity: to impress a presumably prurient audience. This is where the nudity in *Blood Sisters* best fits. The film's exploitation of the naked female form in this way brings me to the concluding point of this essay. At the risk of sounding precious, I cannot ignore the male directors (Kenneth Gyang is the second co-director) behind the decision to exhibit the nude female form while protecting the male form from such treatment. For all that it is, *Blood Sisters* is also the male gaze leering at the naked female form and demanding that we regard this lecherous exploitation as high-art. No.

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