

Haiti According to Eisenstein

The title of this essay follows that of Inga Karetnikova and Leon Steinmetz's 1991 publication *Mexico According to Eisenstein*, which brings together a selection of Sergei Eisenstein's script, essays, and letters to render the lasting impact the Soviet film director's exposure to Mexico had on his oeuvre.¹ While the present paper does not seek to be an anthology of Eisenstein's writings nor a chronicle of his interest in Haiti,² the rationale behind the title is to address the particularity of his engagement with Haiti, that is, how Eisenstein consulted relevant sources published between 1928 and 1932, and how he adopted Haiti time and again as an object of intellectual inquiry and a tool for pedagogy. Previous accounts of Eisenstein's turn to Haiti in the 1930s have overlooked such considerations due to their emphasis on the unrealized collaboration between Eisenstein and Paul Robeson, depicting it as a failed endeavor that represents the beginning of a "tragic" and "abortive" period in Eisenstein's career.³ Rarely questioned in this narrative are the assumption of Eisenstein's inactivity during the years of adversity and interference from Soyuzkino, and the ways in which Haiti—a subject that emerged as an idea for a film based on an American novel about the Haitian Revolution that he encountered in Hollywood⁴—took on an alternative course in his career as a heuristic to expound the concept of inner monologue in narrative cinema as well as to evince the importance of montage as an aesthetic principle prevalent in various cultures.

Probing into Eisenstein's heuristic uses of Haiti, with a focus on key moments in 1932 and 1947, this paper discerns a relationship between texts on Haiti and the malleable potential Eisenstein saw in the versatility of the country's complex historical reception. Contrary to some previous scholarship which assumed that Eisenstein's Haitian interests derived primarily from his

¹ Karetnikova and Steinmetz, *Mexico According to Eisenstein*.

² A comprehensive study of Eisenstein's Haiti project was attempted by Forsdick and Høgsbjerg in 2014. However, their article, "Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution," relied solely on sources that were available in English at the time it was written. Since then, recent translations and archival findings have made available new material that sheds light on Eisenstein's research on Haiti.

³ See, for example, Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein*, 311-352; Leyda, *Kino*, 299; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 182-222; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 127-128; Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 213-246; Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 143-145; Forsdick and Høgsbjerg, "Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution."

⁴ Eisenstein, "Bookshops," 369-370.

political views on racial solidarity, I aver that it is rather in the intertextual realm of his omnivorous readings and selective synthesis of narratives that his motives are most discernible. Eisenstein's textual-literary encounters with Haiti, while clearly bearing the imprint of his specific context as a leading Soviet intellectual, nevertheless illuminate a chapter in the broader story of how ideas of Haiti were passed on and reinvented over time through texts.

As a rich body of scholarship has shown, Haiti has long been a recurring subject of “cultural conscription.”⁵ Since the republic's founding, varying visions of Haiti were deployed by Western authors through diverse media ranging from travelogues and histories to political pamphlets, photographs, and audiovisual records to propagate competing ideologies to their respective audiences.⁶ Representations underwent notable transformations between the late 1920s and early 1940s, overlapping with the period of US interventions in Haiti from 1915 to 1934. The crucible of US occupation catalyzed, per David Scott, “a veritable explosion of writing by white Americans in which Haiti was constructed as a sort of ‘looking glass’—as the primitivist scene of a racialized and sexualized desire.”⁷ Counternarratives emerged from intellectuals and activists who sought to recuperate Haiti's legacy of abolitionism and anticolonialism, and to expose the exploitations and injustices of US occupation. Works such as Langston Hughes's *Scottsboro Limited* (1932) and George Padmore's *Haiti, an American Slave Colony* (1931)—both translated into Russian⁸—epitomize Haitian liberation as a globally entwined issue, connecting it with domestic racial tribulations in the US while also situating it at the nexus of a worldwide workers' revolution. Post-occupation, however, foreign interest in Haiti shifted towards artistic and scholarly pursuits, fueled by discourses of moral relativity

⁵ The concept of “conscription” in relation to Haiti, as examined by Renda and further explored by Scott and Jenson, illuminates the enduring pattern of cultural forces that repressively shape Haitian agency through the imposition of externally conceived imaginary constructs. For representations of Haiti in the context of US imperialist projects, see Renda, *Taking Haiti*. For a discussion of aesthetics in the postcolonial historiography of the Haitian Revolution, see Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*. On the “kidnapped narratives” of Haitian revolutionary figures by their Western contemporaries, see Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*.

⁶ For an examination of Haiti within literary and narrative cultures, see Renda, *Taking Haiti*; Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*; Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*. For insights into visual culture, see Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture*.

⁷ Scott, “The Theory of Haiti,” 127.

⁸ Hughes, *Skottsboro*; Padmore, *Gaiti—rabskaïa koloniïa Ameriki*.

and cultural pluralism and funded by philanthropic institutions. These pursuits coincided with the Haitian government's short-lived initiative to bolster its tourism industry.⁹ Efforts during this period retraced Haiti's cultural heritage back to its pre-slavery African roots, highlighting the anthropic significance of the black republic as an exemplar of alterity to the modern industrialized world order.¹⁰ But such discourses exclusively privileging Haiti's anthropological value neglected the republic's deep-seated political tradition and its legacies.¹¹

It was in this shifting context that Eisenstein took interest in Haiti as a topic and idea. His work and thoughts on Haiti, informed by such contemporary trends that have laid competing claims to the country's racialized aesthetic and ideological register, offer an example of a use of Haiti that is simultaneously enmeshed with the turbulent political, institutional, and technological dynamics of the Soviet cinema industry at the time. However, this intricate relationship between Eisenstein's Haiti and his manifold involvements within the Soviet Union—what Haiti was meant to exemplify in his teaching at Soviet film academies, and how he deemed the varied conceptions of Haiti produced and circulated at the time to accord with his own thoughts—has not been examined in the literature. Whereas existing studies have focused on the absence of a Haiti film¹² by Eisenstein as a way to link this lacuna to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's meta-historical framework of “silencing the past,” none have adequately addressed the forces of silencing

⁹ Twa examines the combined influence of multiple factors—the former US presence in Haiti, Haiti's post-occupation diplomacy, and the philanthropic enterprise such as the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenwald Foundation—on the emergence of creative and ethnographic projects exploring Haiti in the 1940s in *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture*, 101-150.

¹⁰ For instance, Herskovits notably frames Haiti as a controlled case study, considering it a microcosm in which problems of race can be scrutinized within the island's naturally isolated conditions. See Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1-32.

¹¹ For Scott's discussion of Herskovits' ideological motivations in demonstrating African inheritance in the Americas, as well as the implications of this discourse, see “The Theory of Haiti,” 116-118.

¹² Although this film project was variably referred to as “The Black Consul” (“Черный консул”) and “Black Majesty” (“Черное величество”) after the novels he consulted, it appears that Eisenstein also employed the shorthand “Haiti” to refer to this work, a practice that also applied to his other unmade film, “Moscow.” See Eisenstein, “К предисловию для несделанных вещей” (“Towards a preface for the things not done”), 7.

that permeate even those narratives in which Haiti is made overtly visible.¹³ The dynamics unveiled by the documentary sources of Eisenstein's workings with Haitian themes in propaedeutic settings exemplify how transnational discourses that converged on ideas of Haiti were abstracted into useful aesthetic elements for the Soviet context. Understanding Eisenstein's adaptation of Haiti, sourced from multiple languages for a specialized coterie of filmmakers, thus requires a closer examination of the particular domestic context in which world-cultural discourses operated within a nationalist framework—resulting, as Katerina Clark notes, in a distinct cosmopolitanism of the high Stalinist period that was not at odds with patriotism.¹⁴ And yet, preexisting narratives disregard this performative and localized nature of Eisenstein's engagements with Haiti. What accounts for such interpretations warrants deeper exploration.

This essay traces the recurrence of Haiti in Eisenstein's cinema pedagogy as a way to assess his oft-understated role outside Soviet institutions of film production, and to reevaluate his Haitian engagement, deemed by previous scholarship as a “frustrated venture,” a project “too avant-guard [*sic*]” for the political context in which it was envisioned, and an untimely dream that was ultimately “silenced” by an ensemble of external forces.¹⁵ As Joy Gleason Carew's deliberate spelling of “avant-guard” exemplifies, the conflation of aesthetic and political categories comprising the term highlights a tendency among scholars to presume a consistent alignment between Eisenstein's purported resistance against artistic conformity and the radical narrative of the Haitian Revolution.¹⁶ Carew, for instance, suggests that even if Eisenstein had circumvented the party's astringent aesthetic censorship, a story of emancipated black subjects governing themselves as a sovereign nation after a successful rebellion against their oppressors would have implicitly challenged the Soviet state's vision of who counted as legitimate

¹³ See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. See also his earlier essay, “The Odd and the Ordinary,” which cautions against taking the notion of Haitian exceptionalism for granted—that its singular status somehow evades conventional analysis.

¹⁴ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 1-41.

¹⁵ Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*, 8; Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 144; Forsdick and Høgsbjerg, “Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution,” 179.

¹⁶ Carew's use of the phrase “too avant-guard” builds on her earlier characterization of Eisenstein as a filmmaker acclaimed for his “avant-garde style.” By employing such a term and recasting it to imply the overly progressive nature of his intended film, Carew posits a continuity between his radical aesthetic and his political agenda. Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 144.

agents of universal self-realization.¹⁷ In the same vein, scholars have understood Eisenstein’s motives as inextricably tied to his endorsement of the enduring and unresolved project of black resistance and empowerment, thereby interpreting his artistic vision as an attempt at “radical recuperation” of Haitian history,¹⁸ and the inconclusiveness of his exploration as an unfruitful effort to forge an alliance with black intellectuals amid an increasingly inhospitable political climate for internationalist projects in the Soviet Union.¹⁹

However, this interpretation not only leans on the tragedy-focused narrative of the conflict between Eisenstein’s personal aspirations and the state’s conservative constraints—a narrative often perpetuated in anglophone scholarship of the Cold War era²⁰—but also overlooks the complex ways in which Eisenstein formulated his aesthetics, which at times embraced, and at other times intervened in, the sanctioned framework of Soviet intellectual and artistic endeavors. To assess, then, whether Eisenstein’s vision can truly be classified as “radical” or “revolutionary” in light of recent findings that reveal his more active and important role within the Soviet cultural-academic establishment,²¹ and to discern the extent to which his intellectual engagements reflected the transformative potential of the Haitian Revolution as some scholars have argued to be implicit in its story, it is necessary to examine closely the concrete instances and expressions through which he brought these elements into his work.

In this regard, Jeremy Matthew Glick’s analysis of Eisenstein’s seminar on directorial treatment, two segments of which centered on the story of Haitian revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines, deserves particular consideration. While Glick adopts the lens of “rehearsal” to examine

¹⁷ Part of this assumption stems from her misattribution of Eisenstein’s source of inspiration as James’s play about Toussaint Louverture, not Vandercook’s novel. This confusion over the source reinforces my point that the period was marked by a cacophonous abundance—rather than lack—of Haiti. *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸ Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*, 2.

¹⁹ Forsdick and Høgsbjerg, “Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution,” 164-165.

²⁰ Among these, Seton’s 1952 biography of Eisenstein stands out. Her tragic portrayal of Eisenstein’s life in Moscow after returning to the city in 1932—steeped in nostalgia and briefly animated by genuine joy only upon meeting Robeson—remains widely cited in these narratives, despite its criticized inaccuracies in its depiction of Eisenstein’s oppressive treatment by Soviet cultural authorities.

²¹ For the latest edited volume of essays on Eisenstein, see Christie and Vassilieva, *The Eisenstein Universe*.

Eisenstein's lessons on Dessalines, thereby reading Eisenstein's pedagogic interactions as possessing aesthetic merit in and of themselves, his study is limited in presuming that Dessalines's legacy as a radical proponent of Haitian self-determination and racial justice would have been apparent to Eisenstein, and that Eisenstein would have unconditionally accepted this interpretation of Dessalines as he engaged with the latter's stories. In what follows, I question the assumption underlying Glick's categorization of Eisenstein among African diasporic artists and intellectuals, namely that the Haitian Revolution had appealed to Eisenstein in a way comparable to how seminal works in the anti- and postcolonial traditions have embraced the event and its afterlife as an "unfinished" revolution. Instead, by turning to the sources through which Eisenstein had encountered the stories of the Haitian Revolution, I aim to uncover the negotiations, motives, and agenda present in his formulations of Dessalines and, more broadly, Haiti as he configured them as part of his theoretical and methodological work intended for his domestic Soviet audience. From this angle of analysis, a picture of his dealings, rather than of mere reception, will emerge more clearly.

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Reading Vladimir Nizhniĭ's account of Eisenstein's classes on *mise-en-scène* (*mizanstsenā*) and storyboarding (*raskadrovka*) at the State Institute of Cinematography in the academic year 1932/3,²² Glick discerns significance in the way Eisenstein's distinctive approach to instruction fostered a uniquely sustained focus on the figure of Dessalines, whose invocation (much like invoking the revolutionary history of Haiti) Glick deems inherently political.²³ The linchpin of the seminar's exercise was a portrayal of Dessalines as the "positive hero" of the revolutionary drama of Saint-Domingue, the continuing significance of which Glick derives from political activist Dhoruba Bin Wahad's affirmation of Dessalines as the "true Haitian hero of the Black liberation movement."²⁴ Glick observes that the seminar's "painstaking rehearsal" and parsing of even "the smallest detail [...] for its theoretical consequences" in view of the whole prompted the students to repeatedly return

²² Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eizenshteĭna*, 31-114.

²³ Taking a cue from Badiou's work on Robespierre and Saint-Just, Glick regards names as important sites of knowledge that grant access to the profundity of the individuals they evoke. Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic*, 5-6.

²⁴ When quoted in full, Bin Wahad's remark on Dessalines further highlights the tacit nature of his importance: "Quiet as it's kept, Dessalines is the true Haitian hero of the Black liberation movement." *Ibid.*, 71.

to Dessalines, to recalibrate and consolidate their views of him vis-à-vis their aesthetic choices as they debated the appropriateness of their solutions to “focus, angle, set arrangement, and tempo.”²⁵ From this, Glick infers the possibility of subversive politics embedded in the figure of Dessalines permeating the classroom, through Eisenstein’s and his students’ “protracted attention” to this controversial personage, whose forceful embodiment of black political agency has elicited enduring debate and diverse interpretations.²⁶ With a subtle yet recurring nod to Eisenstein’s own presumed radical leanings, Glick contends that Dessalines may not have been simply an instrumental subject of study for the sake of practice, but rather a conscious choice on Eisenstein’s part to imbue politics into his curriculum. To this end, Glick writes, “Eisenstein’s revolutionary pedagogy prioritize[d] rehearsal,” and that “[e]very preparation, every rehearsal, every spoken utterance” devoted to resolving the cinematic composition of the Dessalines drama served as “grist for political reflection.”²⁷

For Glick, Eisenstein’s sympathetic treatment of Dessalines as a heroic protagonist—rescuing him from traditional narratives that have consistently antagonized him in favor of Toussaint Louverture—is both an emphatic testament to the Haitian Revolution’s universal resonance and an unwitting precursor of subsequent efforts to rehabilitate Dessalines’s role in black history. Such an assessment, however, overlooks the fact that Eisenstein’s depiction of Dessalines emerges from his selective reading of and oscillation between two sources that divergently portray the man, one of which already presents him as conforming to the Soviet literary trope of the positive hero (*polozhitel'nyĭ geroĭ*). While the central episode of Eisenstein’s lessons is based on American writer John W. Vandercook’s dramatization of Dessalines’s flight from the presbytery of Crête-à-Pierrot, the character of Dessalines derives largely from the “historical” account of the revolutionary elites of Saint-Domingue by the Soviet-Russian writer Anatolĭi Vinogradov, who, for reasons intricately tied to domestic politics, reversed many of the trends offered in popular histories of the revolution.²⁸ Crucially, in Vinogradov’s *The Black Consul*, it is Dessalines (the realizing, fulfilling heir of the revolution’s ideals and spirit), not Toussaint (the tragic revolutionary, the retired father

²⁵ Ibid., 71, 72.

²⁶ Ibid., 71. As to how the myth of racial purity played into Dessalines’s politics and shaped his political legacy, I will return to it in the later section.

²⁷ Ibid., 75, 72.

²⁸ Vandercook, *Black Majesty*; Vinogradov, *Chërnyĭ konsul*.

figure of the revolution), who is portrayed as the embodiment of rational clarity and passionate impulse, constrained by neither excessive idealism nor nostalgia.²⁹

Seen in this light, Eisenstein's portrayal of Dessalines as a positive hero, which for Glick seemed to address the "Dessalines question" regarding his valorized representation, is turned on its head to reveal a more immediate concern for Soviet cultural workers: the depiction of a positive hero that would accurately and stirringly capture the party's new literary aspiration of socialist realism, ill-defined though it was at its inception. Since the emergent discourse of socialist realism (unofficially coined already in the spring of 1932³⁰) concerned not only prose writers but increasingly also the adjacent domain of filmmakers—wherein the advent of synchronous sound enriched film's ability to narrate through inter-character dialogues—Eisenstein's instructional use of Dessalines can be seen as his response to such contemporary conversations which had aimed to probe the affective potentialities of literature and cinema, and to simultaneously codify the narrative possibilities of these storytelling media.

Certainly, the era's skepticism toward "documentarism" and "formalism" barred certain artistic paths. Paradoxically, however, the dissolution of RAPP also engendered new avenues for creative exploration beyond rigidly proletarian themes and narrative simplicity.³¹ Within this milieu, Eisenstein's portrayal of Dessalines serves as a prism through which to observe the effects of two concurrent shifts in Soviet culture that fueled ongoing discussions: reorganization and centralization. Though these shifts are often oversimplified in general narratives as measures that curtailed creative freedoms in Soviet cultural life, Eisenstein's contribution through the Dessalines example in fact reveals the initial plasticity that reorganization and centralization afforded to artists in vying for methodological authenticity with different visions of what cinematic work in the service of socialist

²⁹ Both figures are characterized by their calm, wisdom, and erudition. Yet, melancholy, illness, and confusion persistently shadow Toussaint. For a scene of their confrontation which exemplifies the contrasting dispositions of the two characters, see Vinogradov, *Chërnyĭ konsul*, 287-289. For conventions of the positive hero figure in socialist realist novels of the high Stalinist period, I refer to Clark's studies, *The Soviet Novel*, "Socialist Realism with Shores," and *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*.

³⁰ Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 162-165.

³¹ See Party Central Committee Decree, "The Reorganisation of Literary and Artistic Organisations [23 April 1932]," 325.

construction might look like in the new phase of Soviet sound cinema.³² Embracing the task of theorizing biography-centered films endowed with affective force to move viewers, Eisenstein vehemently rejected the mechanical unfolding of character development through scripted, spoken words.³³ Instead, he proposed a model of cinematic realism that conveys the hero's subjective transformation by compositionally recreating the psychological experience of internal conflict, as if the dramatic apogee of emotions experienced by the hero were to unravel on screen through graphics and audio.³⁴ From literature, Eisenstein mined such enrapturing moments of subdued dialogue which he considered more suitable for filmic expression, drawing examples from Joyce, Balzac, and Dostoevsky for his students to study.³⁵ When furnishing an exemplar scenario of Dessalines, Eisenstein introduced this moment of high conflict with specific parameters by synthesizing the two aforementioned books he had read on the Haitian Revolution, molding the scenario to fit the archetype of a moment of intense feelings and contrastingly muted dialogue. In this way, Eisenstein procured a method of compositional dramaturgy that once again put form in dialogue with realism.³⁶

Given that Eisenstein's illustration of world examples was anchored in his pursuit of "film-science" as a means to systematically explore the filmic medium and to establish film as its own academic discipline,³⁷ it is difficult to view his engagement with Haiti as substantially concerned with the nation's real political and historical complexities. Binding all of Eisenstein's dispersed encyclopedic explorations, including Haiti, was a centripetal effort to demonstrate varied realities as belonging to "different spheres and stages" of

³² For a detailed discussion of the transformative impact of reorganization and centralization on the Soviet intellectual scene, see Clark, "The 'Quiet Revolution' in Soviet Intellectual Life."

³³ Eisenstein, "Help Yourself!" 227, 237.

³⁴ Ibid., 234-236.

³⁵ Tall, "Eisenstein on Joyce"; Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eizenshteĭna*, 13-30, 114-168.

³⁶ On the Soviet aesthetic debate that emerged over the dichotomy between "form" and "life" during the influential years of RAPP, see Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life."

³⁷ See Eisenstein, "Granit kinonauki" ("Granite of Film-Science").

“one and the same law and process.”³⁸ The “world” he presented to his students through lessons and writings was the result of reinterpretations carried out at his desk, intended to tease out the general meanings of specific phenomena.³⁹ Yet, something about Eisenstein’s indifference to historicity and his keen eye for poetic form makes his engagement with Haiti an apt place to examine what David Scott calls the “figure” of Haiti, or what Gregory Pierrot describes as “the utter literariness” of the ways some stories about Haiti are penned and perpetuated without sufficient awareness of their own indebtedness to recurring narrative patterns and tropes, which continue to determine the country’s discursive possibilities.⁴⁰ The task of this essay, then, is to investigate how the manifold discourses surrounding Haiti in this period aligned with the possibilities Eisenstein pursued in his own work, and how their entwinement in the cinematic imagination of a twentieth-century Soviet filmmaker can, in turn, reveal the underlying influences that have abstracted Haiti as an idea throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I will focus on the dialogues arising from the complicated historical reception of Dessalines, Eisenstein’s sustained ruminations on sound in film from 1928 to 1947, and his less examined notes on the Haitian earth bow in 1947 prepared for his project to write a general history of cinema at the Institute of Art History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. By uncovering the layers of textual transmission and agencies that shaped Haiti’s varied representations, as well as analyzing Eisenstein’s role in interpreting and repurposing them, I aim to offer a new perspective that resists assumptions of alignment between Eisenstein’s visions—aesthetic, political, ideological—and contemporary conceptions of Haiti. Instead, I propose that his fascination can be squarely situated both within the literary realm that

³⁸ Eisenstein summarizes his curriculum as follows: “[К]аждый комплекс, раздел и тема [...] предстают перед студентом дважды. Первый раз энциклопедически [...]. Второй раз—сознательно опознавая все эти отдельные признаки и черты как частичные виды и проявления одного и того же закона и процесса по разным сферам и этапам его.” (“Each complex, section, and topic... appears before the student twice. The first time encyclopedically.... The second time, consciously identifying all these individual attributes and features as partial types and manifestations of the same law and process in different spheres and stages of it.”) *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁹ Anecdotes from Eisenstein’s former students about their experiences with his pedagogy can be found in Nizhniĭ’s *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eizenshteĭna*, 112-113, 116-117, and in Vasiliev’s 1935 speech “Я не хочу быть иконой” at the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers.

⁴⁰ Scott, “The Theory of Haiti,” 115; Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*, 109.

presented Haiti as a malleable potentiality, and against the cultural backdrop of the early 20th century in which Haiti emerged as a dynamically adaptive and shifting figure in Western discourses. The purpose of this essay is therefore to provide a richer understanding of how Eisenstein's general theories about cinema found specific expression in his Haitian exemplars.

Reading Dessalines in *The White King of La Gonave*

In a note dated 2 July 1947, Eisenstein wrote:

I saw one of the most rudimentary types of “bowed” instruments from the depths of Haiti. (I believe, in the book: Wirkus, *The White King of La Gonave*.)⁴¹

This quote, drawn from his notes on the origins of cinema's expressive means, raises two questions. Firstly, how did Haiti, once a place where the revolutionary logic of the French Revolution culminated in the Atlantic world, come to represent in Eisenstein's thinking the “innermost place” (another possible translation of “недра”) of human culture, where the primitive roots of human creativity are preserved uninterrupted? The second question, then, is whether the book he cites for his reference to the Haitian earth bow (what he refers to as the “bowed” type of musical instrument) could shed light on this initial query.

Regarding this latter question, the trace of hesitation in his writing (“Кажется”) suggests that the book was indeed a miscitation. It neither contains any information about this musical instrument nor presents Haiti as a sanctuary of premodernity. But in Wirkus's *The White King of La Gonave* appear many incarnations of Dessalines, which not only helps to contextualize Eisenstein's encounters with this historical figure—one who is portrayed so differently in the two books he read for the story of the Haitian Revolution—but also corroborates my thesis: that from the multitude of ways in which Dessalines is depicted and his name invoked, Eisenstein appears to have gleaned the malleable potential of the figure for his own use, drawing his own synthesis from these varying portrayals of Dessalines. Leaving aside for now the question of the discursive shift in Eisenstein's treatment of Haiti in this note from 1947, I shall focus on the bibliographical connections that this erroneously cited book reveals as a way to provide new insights into his

⁴¹ “Один из рудиментарных видов инструмента ‘смычкового’ порядка я видел из недр Гаити. (Кажется, в книге: Wirkus, ‘The White King of La Gona[v]e’.)” Eisenstein, “Otkrovenie v groze i bure,” 195.

distinctive emphasis and interpretation of Dessalines for his 1932/3 lessons at the State Institute of Cinematography. On the question of the book's influence, it seems to me that the recurring presence of Dessalines in Wirkus's memoir may have occasioned Eisenstein to derive a certain sense of Dessalines's historical prominence, while the absence of a unified narrative around the figure also rendered him amenable to interpretation.

Considering that Wirkus's *The White King of La Gonave* was published in 1931, Eisenstein likely came across and acquired the book during his stay in North America between 1930 and 1932. He reminisces on this period in his memoir as a time of frequenting bookstores and collecting books on subjects ranging from Chinese theater to Paracelsian alchemy. He also recounts "pick[ing] up a cheap reprint of Vandercook's *Black Majesty*," a bestselling novel about the Haitian Revolution published in 1928, at a bookstore in Hollywood in the summer of 1930.⁴² Another book on Haiti that had similarly attracted a wide readership at the time was *The Magic Island*, an illustrated travelogue by William Seabrook that appeared the year before. *The White King of La Gonave* was published in response to the popularity of Seabrook's eponymous chapter that featured the story of US Marine Faustin Wirkus, "the sole white ruler, the benevolent despot of an island inhabited by ten thousand blacks" who was "crowned a king by the natives of that island [of La Gonave]."⁴³ Given the influence and popularity of Seabrook's book, one might have expected Wirkus's account to be more or less a continuation of *The Magic Island's* sensationalized, racialized caricature of modern Haitian life, teeming with derogatory language and imagery. Yet, under the co-authorship of Taney Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave* diverges from Seabrook's book in both its visuals and narrative. Gelatin silver prints documenting mundane landscapes and life replace the fantastical woodcuts accompanying Seabrook's "ethnography."⁴⁴ The stories, too, convey Wirkus's journey in a much more tempered, self-reflective manner through the intimate lens of one's experiences in a foreign—rather than an exoticized—land. In contrast to the gaze of a seasoned traveler like Seabrook, Wirkus and Dudley's is a story of encounters between one local and another, mediating their differences through the language of universals, serendipitously sharing each others' histories, and thereby expanding each others' horizons.

⁴² Eisenstein, "Bookshops," 369.

⁴³ Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 173, 171.

⁴⁴ For a detailed analysis of the illustrations in Seabrook's work, see Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture*, 73-100.

Of course, such narratives of Wirkus’s “benevolent” presence in Haiti were drawn to rationalize US foreign intervention in the country, which Eisenstein disapproved of, stating that “Haiti is now a US colony.”⁴⁵ But it is plausible that Eisenstein might nevertheless have taken special interest in the way the memoir conveyed Wirkus’s story in the style of a *Bildungsroman*, wherein anecdotal experiences artfully layer over the course of 333 pages to illustrate one man’s deepening convictions in serving his country by “protecting” the civilians of another.⁴⁶ Eisenstein took an interest in writing an autobiographical travelogue himself after completing his own three-year voyage, noting that “[a]broad is the severest test that biography can set a Soviet man whose development is automatically and indissolubly linked with the development of October.”⁴⁷ To him, the experience of expatriation was a reaffirmation of patriotism, but he also saw it as a necessity for a true “master of culture.” In signature style, Eisenstein reconciled Soviet patriotism with cosmopolitan desiderata: “Abroad is the severest test for a ‘master of culture’ to examine consciously ‘whom he is for and whom he is against’.” “Abroad,” therefore, is the ultimate “test for a creative worker as to whether he is on the whole capable of creation outside the Revolution and whether he can go on existing outside of it.”⁴⁸

If the story of a man “seeing the world” and consolidating his sense of national identity via immersion in a foreign context could have resonated with Eisenstein, then the book’s recurring invocation of Dessalines is another aspect of Wirkus’s memoir that may well have caught Eisenstein’s attention.⁴⁹ The book abounds with references to the figure’s name and legends. Yet, for all these mentions, the repetition is devoid of a central thread. As to what these references may mean in relation to Wirkus’s role as a foreign occupier, the gravity of their significance appears to have eluded the author’s grasp, even as he documented the uncanny pervasiveness of Dessalines’s legacy in the

⁴⁵ “Гаити теперь колония США.” Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eĭzenshteĭna*, 40.

⁴⁶ Wirkus’s duty—ostensibly framed as a mutually beneficial patriotic service—ironically entailed the preemptive extermination of potential rebels hiding among those he sought to protect. The moral quandary introduced by this mission gradually evolves into a source of conviction in his account. See Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, 56-71, 85-95, 102, 107.

⁴⁷ Eisenstein, “Through the Revolution to Art,” 245.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁹ Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, 106.

cultural landscape of Haiti during the US occupation years.⁵⁰ Examples of Dessalines's looming presence permeate Wirkus's account, from his tours of historic battle sites to the ammunition barracks (*Casernes Dessalines*) which the US Marines occupied to suppress native insurgencies.⁵¹ The name also resurfaces in Wirkus's interaction with a *houngan* named Dessalines, and even in the moniker of the native sergeant accompanying him, Sergeant Dessalines.⁵² Despite the name's conspicuous recurrence throughout the memoir, however, the sole elucidation provided by Wirkus is that “[i]ncidentally the [...] name, Dessalines, that of the great liberator, has been adopted by hundreds of the natives in gratitude for the freedom they thought he had permanently established.”⁵³ Thus, a discrepancy persists between Dessalines's symbolic prominence in Haitian narratives and Wirkus's interpretation. The deeper significance behind his frequent invocation and the timeliness of his historical legacy remain enigmatic to the observer. A further disjunction between Wirkus's understanding and the conferred local knowledge emerges when Wirkus patronizingly admits the bravado of the occupation resistance leader, Benoît Batraverse, after his assassination by the Marines, crediting him as “one of the ablest and most ambitious of the Haitian revolutionists since Dessalines.”⁵⁴

How, then, would Eisenstein have made sense of such a contemporary account of Haiti, in which Dessalines embodies a topos in the Haitian cultural imagination (albeit one rendered opaque by the memoirist's own entanglement in the fraught political situation)? While only so much can be inferred from Eisenstein's miscitation of the book alone, situating Wirkus's memoir alongside Eisenstein's contemporaneous readings of *Black Majesty* (1928) and *The Black Consul* (1932), which he drew on for his lectures, underscores the absence of both Toussaint Louverture and Henry Christophe in Wirkus's Haiti. Concurrently, the various capacities in which Dessalines appears in Wirkus's account, as well as his fluctuating representations across these works, undermine the possibility of a single authoritative interpretation of the figure. Instead, a tableau of tales ripe for reconfiguration surrounds the name. Eisenstein's engagement with Dessalines, as he mobilizes these conflicting

⁵⁰ Compare, for instance, with the account of the Haitian reaction to the American landing on the island presented in Renda, *Taking Haiti*, 85.

⁵¹ Wirkus and Dudley, *The White King of La Gonave*, 23, 39.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 135-147.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

interpretations for his own ends to address the question of film's relation to sound and affect's relation to form, reflects this tension.

To be sure, Eisenstein's primary interest in Dessalines was not so much in the synthesis of a historical figure as a way to weigh in on a particular political ideology or to make a critical intervention beyond the lecture hall, but it lay rather in the heuristic value found in his multifaceted, often contradictory characterizations.⁵⁵ Unknowingly, however, by constructing a character out of the incongruous descriptions attributed to the figure, Eisenstein touched on a key contention in the controversy surrounding Dessalines's background and literacy, a controversy that calls into question the legitimacy of political agency of someone perceived as illiterate and untrained in the Western system.⁵⁶ This bifurcated view of Dessalines's literacy and revolutionary authenticity, conveyed in both *Black Majesty* and *The Black Consul*, highlights a prevalent tendency to view literacy as a prerequisite for political authority.⁵⁷ This perception proliferates in contemporary narratives even in recent Western scholarship on the Haitian Revolution, which continues to exalt Toussaint as the genuine heir of the Enlightenment, on the basis of his participation in European letters,⁵⁸ whereas Dessalines and Christophe are dismissed as ideologically void, naïve political actors who couldn't possibly have understood the full import of their actions in the revolution and its aftermath due to their supposed lack of traditional (francophone) literacy.⁵⁹ For Eisenstein too, literacy and enlightenment were inseparable from one another. But in regards to the filmic capacity of making this known to viewers, signs of Dessalines's literacy had to be placed strategically as montage elements, with verbal indicators of his revolutionary consciousness saved for

⁵⁵ An example of this unconventional and evasive approach by Eisenstein to transform deeply political events into formal elements is when he references "the mothers and sisters of the Scottsboro Boys" to suggest a method for depicting maternal figures in film. See Eisenstein, "Help Yourself!" 232.

⁵⁶ It goes without saying that such a dispute over Dessalines's origins and literacy reduces the complexity of the figure and his involvement in the Haitian Revolution to a "simplified, convenient, and profoundly inadequate racialized discourse." Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*, 105. For further exploration of the issues concerning Dessalines's birthplace and their implications for his historical representation, see also Jenson, "Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the African Character of the Haitian Revolution."

⁵⁷ Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 5; Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*, 119.

⁵⁸ Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*, 91-119.

⁵⁹ Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 5.

the very last element to be revealed in Eisenstein's distinct grammar of film composition.⁶⁰ Thus, he interweaves the contested portrayals of Dessalines. In doing so, he inadvertently addresses the issue of language central to Dessalines's postcolonial politics.⁶¹

Dessalines's Literacy and Inner Monologue

Language for Dessalines was not merely a reflection of one's background or character, but an important instrument of politics he actively wielded to assert the black Haitians' native rights to the island—a case emblemized in the 1804 Declaration of Independence, in which Dessalines addresses the popular sovereigns of the new republic as the “Indigènes d'Hayti.”⁶² Language also served as a means to distinguish his leadership from that of his predecessor, Louverture, who was renowned for his mastery of French prose and remained steadfast in his use of French to communicate with his army of formerly enslaved troops, even at the risk of miscommunication during wartime.⁶³ But prioritizing Kreyòl (the language of the revolutionary masses) over French (the language of the imperial enemy) did not stop at a symbolic display of Dessalines's allegiance to the lifelong struggle for the freedom of the *nouveaux libres*, the newly emancipated class of subjects who comprised the majority of his followers.⁶⁴ A rupture with French patrimony and its sympathizers remained a crucial task in post-independence Haiti, as threats of re-colonization persisted from the Spanish border, with French forces stationed there, luring the *anciens-libres* elites with propaganda to pit them against the *nouveaux-libres* regime.⁶⁵ To meet these challenges, extreme

⁶⁰ A similar example in which Eisenstein dramatizes the process of acquiring speech in another unfinished film is discussed in Clark, “Eisenstein's Projects for ‘Moscow’.”

⁶¹ Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 81-115.

⁶² “Liberté ou la mort. Armée indigène [1 January 1804].”

⁶³ Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 60, 65.

⁶⁴ Proclaims Dessalines, “[S]omewhat unlike him who has preceded me, the Ex-General TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE, I have been faithful to the promise I made to you, when I took up arms against tyranny, and whilst the last spark of life remains in me I will keep my oath. ‘Never again shall a colonist, or an European, set his foot upon this territory with the title of master or proprietor.’ This resolution shall henceforward form the fundamental basis of our constitution.” Dessalines and Chanlatte, “Communication of the Intentions of the Black Government on the Appointment of a Governor-General for Life [28 April 1804],” 266.

⁶⁵ Dessalines and Chanlatte, “Caution to the Spaniards [8 May 1804],” 267-268.

measures dressed in radical language were a matter of urgent necessity than of choice. Dessalines's political language therefore reflected broader aspirations to consolidate a sense of nationhood among freed citizens emerging from prolonged enslavement and warfare, and to defend the fledgling nation's precarious independence against external forces intent on subverting the liberty painstakingly won.

What prevailed in the realm of literature, however, was the influence of the anti-abolitionist European literary front that arose alongside the emergence of the Haitian nation, aiming to delegitimize its sovereignty and to rally European support against the Haitians and their British allies. Chiefly, French propagandist Jean-François Dubroca's slanderous depiction of the Caribbean republic's "African" leader circulated in French, Spanish, Dutch, and German within just a year of Dessalines's accession to the governor-generalship in 1804.⁶⁶ Dubroca's narrative capitalized on the recently deceased Toussaint's slightly more respectable Creole birth and his "less despicable" aspiration to "free himself from the state of deep ignorance" to which black people are "condemned" by acquiring literacy, to cast the African-born Dessalines as predisposed to irredeemable savagery.⁶⁷ Casting him as utterly lacking in both literacy and morality was a way for Dubroca to appeal to his European readers that:

Freedom, that first of all things good, and which man cannot enjoy unless he bears in his heart the seed of all virtues, and unless that seed has been developed by a sound and careful education, has shown itself, it must be said, in Saint-Domingue, only as a pitiless fury, raising terror and death on all sides, and marching only armed with torch and dagger.⁶⁸

Dubroca questioned whether a man born outside Europe and stranger to the traditions, values, and language of European civilization was capable of civil leadership, and whether the venerated ideal of universal freedom had truly served humanity's best interests given the massacre of white French

⁶⁶ Dubroca, *La vie de J. J. Dessalines*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁸ "La liberté, ce premier des biens, et dont l'homme ne peut jouir s'il ne porte dans son coeur le germe de toutes les vertus, et si ce germe n'a été développé par une éducation saine et soignée, ne s'est montrée, il faut le dire, à Saint-Domingue, que comme une furie impitoyable, soufflant de tous côtés l'épouvante et la mort, et ne marchant qu'armée de la torche et du poignard." *Ibid.*, 11.

inhabitants in the immediate aftermath of Haitian independence.⁶⁹ This question, encapsulated in Dubroca's defamatory portrait of Dessalines, returned a century later with the historical imaginings of the early twentieth-century white American and Soviet writers Vandercook and Vinogradov, as they revisited and revived the stories of the Haitian Revolution, each tailoring Dessalines's literacy and origins to the predilections and expectations of their respective readerships.

Vandercook's portrayal of Dessalines not only perpetuates the racial pseudoscience found in Dubroca's writings but also refashions it for a 1920s American audience. In painting Dessalines pejoratively as a "restless" and "stiff-fingered" general of *bossale* origin who seems more adept at dance than governance, Vandercook panders to the curiosity of white American readers who may have imagined an alternative racial status quo by offering them a history suffused with tragic amusement over the supposedly innate inadequacies of vengeful black rebel leaders in establishing civil order for their own kind.⁷⁰ The implications of such a narrative extend beyond domestic racial tensions to resonate with US foreign policy in the late 1920s. The repercussions of Dessalines's distorted portrayal can be found in the realm of visual arts: the final piece in Jacob Lawrence's series on *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, produced between 1936 and 1938, entitled "No. 41. Dessalines was crowned Emperor, October 4, 1804," bears a striking resemblance to the cover illustration of *Black Majesty*, which depicts Henry Christophe standing firmly in a triangular stance, flaunting a sizable sword along the contour of his body. Similarly, in literature, C. L. R. James, while recognizing the significance of the uneducated and illiterate Dessalines's rise to rebellion as "the greatest lesson of the revolution," nonetheless portrays him as faltering in speech.⁷¹ Using racialized speech patterns, James implies a lack of moral and ideological clarity in Dessalines's character.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16, 8.

⁷⁰ Vandercook, *Black Majesty*, 89-93.

⁷¹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 336.

⁷² James contrasts Dessalines's direct, unsophisticated approach to revolution with the enlightened and forward-looking visions of Louverture: "Dessalines: 'No petition—we have to fight! (*Stir in the crowd.*) Not tomorrow but today—now! (*Crowd responds.*) No more work, (*response from crowd*), no more whip. (*There is almost a cheer.*) Black man eat bananas. Black man eat potatoes. White man eat bread. If white man want bread let white man work. (*There is a great laugh.*) If we kill the white we are free. (*The drums are beating faster, as if quickened by Dessalines' speech.*) I, Dessalines, will work no more. Liberty!" James, "The Complete Playscript (1934)," 55.

Vinogradov's *Dessalines*, on the other hand, requires contextualization within the distinctive conventions of the socialist realist novel. As Clark has pointed out, the epithets used to describe characters in this genre did more than merely depict individuals; they bore a discursive function.⁷³ Consequently, Vinogradov's *Dessalines* is delusive in its own right, as it wholly invents a new biography and vindictive motives for the historical figure to align him with the positive hero archetype that mirrors Soviet priorities and ideologies.⁷⁴ This portrayal imagines Dessalines as a university-educated intellectual versed in the revolutionary and atheistic doctrines of Abbé Raynal, and formerly owned by a colonial patron of the Massiac Club before fleeing to Paris.⁷⁵ Yet even this fictional account remains deeply tethered to issues of Dessalines's historiographic reception centered on the interpretation of his African identity and his literacy by negating both his enslaved origins and lack of formal education central to his revolutionary biography. And while Vinogradov overtly dismisses racist views and sensational depictions of Haitian culture (as captured in the book's dialogue in which Vincent Ogé characterizes Haiti dispassionately as "a small island on a distant ocean full of *not such* terrible mysteries and wonders,"⁷⁶ which the English translation later overturns as: "our small island in the far ocean is full of *more such* terrible mysteries and marvels"⁷⁷), his narrative, too, often slips into phantasmagoric, racially-charged descriptions of the black Haitian leaders' appearance and demeanor.⁷⁸ Vinogradov's *Dessalines* also curiously bears the name of "Яков (*Yakov*)," a Germanized version of the French name, Jacques. That this rendering of "Jakob" Dessalines is only traceable to Dubroca's 1805 German translation of his racist propagandistic biography further evinces the persistent influence of Dubroca's narrative legacy.⁷⁹

⁷³ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 116.

⁷⁴ Even Dessalines's tribal scarring, documented in many of his historical accounts, is transformed into a site of fiction in Vinogradov's writing. See Vinogradov, *Chërnyĭ konsul*, 285-286.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77, 289.

⁷⁶ "...маленький остров на далеком океане полон и не таких страшных тайн и чудес." *Ibid.*, 15. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁷ Vinogradov, *The Black Consul*, 19. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁸ In one among numerous instances throughout the novel, Vinogradov describes Dessalines as "a huge black man with bulging eyes and short black hair curled in tight ringlets," only to then immediately challenge the racializing trope he employs by adding, "He did not look like a slave." Vinogradov, *Chërnyĭ konsul*, 14.

⁷⁹ See Dubroca, *Leben des J. J. Dessalines oder Jakob I. Kaisers auf Hayti*.

Turning to Eisenstein's interpretation of Dessalines from these two books, the Soviet director navigates a path between these two interpretations to present his own. He adopts the biography of Vinogradov's Dessalines—the Haitian delegate returning from Paris—and carries this “Enlightenment literacy narrative” even further,⁸⁰ alerting his students to the obvious resonance of Dessalines's name with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although this connection is not traceable to either source, Eisenstein affirms that Dessalines had indeed read the Swiss philosophe and named himself after him.⁸¹ Reluctant to reduce theatrical cinema to mere “canned theater,” however, Eisenstein renders Dessalines's literacy less obvious in his hypothetical scenario.⁸² He introduces the Haitian plenipotentiary—a representative of the people, a reader of Rousseau—and incorporates this figure into the scene illustrated by Vandercook, wherein Dessalines is engaged in a tense, non-verbal exchange with a priest poised to betray him, a scene that dramatizes the oral testimony of the 1802 encounter that the Haitian historian Beaubrun Ardouin had recorded in his 1854 account of the Haitian Revolution.⁸³ Vandercook's condescending illustration of Dessalines's instinctive, almost animalistic tendencies (e.g., his refusal to make eye contact with his French adversaries) had given way for Eisenstein to reinterpret as subtle signs rather of Dessalines's interiority.⁸⁴ Distinguishing the essence of drama from its verbal articulations and emphasizing the potential of sound film to transcend its role as a mere vehicle for spoken lines, Eisenstein weaves

⁸⁰ For a detailed discussion of the narrative trope that associates the Haitian Revolution with the importation of European literacy and philosophical ideas, see Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 49-72.

⁸¹ “[С]ледует оговорить, что Дессалин, как и другие вожди восстания негров, были убежденными атеистами, воспитывались на идеях философии XVIII века, на Вольтере, Руссо и т. д. Обратите внимание на имя Дессалина—Жан-Жак; оно взято у Руссо. Сопратник Дессалина, Туссен Лювертьюр, был человеком с хорошим философским образованием. И другие вожди восстания были также людьми высокого культурного уровня.” (“It should be noted that Dessalines, like the other leaders of the black rebellion, was a convinced atheist, brought up on the ideas of eighteenth-century philosophy, on Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. Pay attention to his name—Jean-Jacques; it is taken from Rousseau. Dessalines's comrade-in-arms, Toussaint Louverture, was a man with a good philosophical education. And the other leaders of the uprising were also men of high cultural level.”) Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eĭzenshteĭna*, 39.

⁸² Carroll, “Eisenstein's Philosophy of Film,” 318.

⁸³ Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti*, tome 5, 312.

⁸⁴ Vandercook, *Black Majesty*, 67; Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eĭzenshteĭna*, 35, 38, 69-70.

these two conflicting representations together. As a result, the internal narrative of Dessalines propels the overarching plot without overt dialogue.

In Eisenstein's retelling, Dessalines's inner monologue—a term Eisenstein employs to denote a character's unvoiced thoughts, motivations, skepticism, and worldviews—enters into a conflictual exchange with that of the priest (the antagonist), who, beneath his congenial façade, harbors a hidden motive to lure him into the hands of the French. This dramatic interaction is then intensified through the introduction of a third character, Madame Pageot, the house servant of the presbytery, who *gestures* to Dessalines in a way, as Eisenstein points out, that only a fellow Haitian could discern, in order to warn him of the imminent danger.⁸⁵ Outlining such a scenario, Eisenstein asks his students: “What about those scripts and plays in which there is no such external action? Let's say, two people are sitting motionlessly.... What can be staged there?”⁸⁶ This focus and creative constraint he articulates in his question had in fact already been rehearsed in the preceding exercise with the cinematic recreation of Vautrin's arrest, for which the class collectively parsed Balzac's writing for imagistic details of Vautrin's true nature.⁸⁷ And it is to be rehearsed again in the ensuing exercise following the sessions on Dessalines, with the scene of Raskolnikov's silent contemplation of murdering the old moneylender, Alyona Ivanovna.⁸⁸ The crucial scene, as crafted by Eisenstein, similarly restrains the speech of Dessalines, the priest, and the house servant amidst the protagonist's successive awareness of his peril, anger, and resolution. It is only after this dramatic tension is resolved that Dessalines finally shouts his first revolutionary words on screen: “*Aux armes! Aux armes! Vive*

⁸⁵ “Дессалин заметил, что глаза старухи с лихорадочной напряженностью ловили его взгляд. Дессалин посмотрел на нее. Ее губы и пальцы шевелились; она говорила с Дессалином знаками тайного кода, известного всем черным—будущим повстанцам...” (“Dessalines noticed that the old woman's eyes were catching his gaze with feverish intensity. Dessalines looked at her. Her lips and fingers were moving; she was speaking to Dessalines in the signs of a secret code known to all blacks—the future rebels...”) Ibid., 35.

⁸⁶ “[А] что делать с теми сценариями и пьесами, в которых нет такого внешнего действия? Скажем, сидят два человека неподвижно [...]. Что здесь можно ставить?” Ibid., 36.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 13-30.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 114-168.

l'indépendance!"⁸⁹ Eisenstein thus reserves Dessalines's vocal proclamation for the revolutionary climax, allowing drama and speech to remain distinct until they converge for the most sonorous effect.⁹⁰

In keeping with his definition of montage as "a purposeful, socially conditioned, ideologically tendentious *rearrangement of reality in images*," Eisenstein crafts an image of Dessalines that is not bound to any one of his interpretations.⁹¹ He is seemingly unperturbed by the disparate depictions of Dessalines that differ not only in the interpretation of his traits but also in his biography. Reversing the escalation toward the unveiling of Dessalines's speech, the plot then reverts to a field of indistinct noises—a "reversal, but on a grander scale," as Eisenstein describes this dramatic structure.⁹² He illustrates how the episode might culminate with the collective uprising of the island's inhabitants, but this conclusion is meant to be implicitly insinuated rather than explicitly depicted using only cinematic means. For the end, he suggests a deadening pause of all actions on stage as the screen fades, with the darkness contrapuntally pierced by the pulsating rhythm of native drums and the thunder of hooves.⁹³

⁸⁹ Vandercook, *Black Majesty*, 81. Eisenstein translated this call to arms in Russian for his students: "К оружию! К оружию! Да здравствует независимость!..." Ibid., 36.

⁹⁰ Though Leyda's translation omits this crucial detail, Eisenstein had in fact further elaborated on how the shift in mood from restrained rage to explosive anger would manifest in Dessalines's speech: "[Т]ут Дессалин даст выход своей ненависти и начнет громить французов словами, речью. Не забывайте, что Дессалин— крупная политическая фигура и страстный оратор. Основания для обличения у него налицо, и от такого эмоционального взрыва французы на мгновение форменным образом столбенеют." ("Here Dessalines will give vent to his hatred and begin to lambaste the French with words, with his speech. Do not forget that Dessalines is a major political figure and a passionate orator. His reasons for his denunciation are clear, and from such an emotional explosion the French will momentarily be stunned.") Ibid., 75.

⁹¹ "Монтаж как целенаправленное (тенденциозное), соц[иально] обусловленное, идеологически тенденц[иозное] *перестроение действительности в образах*." Eisenstein, "Naslednik," 116.

⁹² I paraphrase from: "В самом эпизоде заложен момент «патетического» построения—ход событий нарастает до какого-то взрыва и после него переходит в противоположный ход, но расширенного диапазона." ("The episode itself contains a moment of 'pathetic' construction—the course of events builds up to some kind of explosion and after that moves into the opposite course, but of an expanded range.") Nizhniĭ, *Na urokakh rezhissury S. Eizenshteĭna*, 39.

⁹³ Ibid., 39.

The Audiovisual Counterpoint in the Haitian Earth Bow

Inner monologue was a topic of sustained investigation by Eisenstein throughout the 1932/3 academic year and into 1934 during his tenure at the State Institute of Cinematography. The concept allowed him to draw a crucial distinction between drama and dialogue, namely that drama itself did not inhere in expressions of language but existed independently of specific textual incarnations as a mode of resonance operating within the depths of human emotions.⁹⁴ Not only did such a delineation illuminate cinema's capacity to realize dramatic narratives and expressions of unprecedented complexity, but it also vindicated his emphasis on compositional mastery in cinematography, demonstrating that this focus was not simply a slide into formalism—creating “art for art's sake”—but a striving toward the representation of life in art; in other words, the study of form not as an end in itself, but as a virtuous pursuit of expressive realism.⁹⁵

Yet, Eisenstein was also wary of being misconstrued as espousing inner monologue as the only viable “method” of Soviet cinema, as opposed to one among many materials ripe for filmic expression.⁹⁶ He took care to clarify his position in 1935 at the inaugural All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers, where he stressed that the primary merit of inner monologue lay not in exploring it *per se*, but in its instrumental “role in identifying the most fundamental structural particularities of the form of a work of art in general.”⁹⁷ For just as external language has its own syntax, so too, Eisenstein contended, does “inner speech”—the “imagistic” and “pre-logical” mode of thinking that underlies all expressive forms and composition regardless of time or culture—operate by its own set of particular laws.⁹⁸ Identifying what those internal laws are, and raising them to the level of formal intelligibility, were the conditions he proposed as foundational to the creation of affective, “genuine” works of art.⁹⁹ Thus, by expanding the concept of inner monologue into a broader

⁹⁴ See Eisenstein, “The Form of the Script,” 134.

⁹⁵ For insights into Eisenstein's views on the relationship between form and content, see Kleiman's essay “Rules of the Game,” which includes a translated excerpt from Eisenstein's diary on this topic. Kleiman, *Eisenstein on Paper*, 19-20.

⁹⁶ See Eisenstein, “Help Yourself!” 236.

⁹⁷ Eisenstein, “Speeches to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers,” 28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

theory of inner speech, Eisenstein unveiled a cinematic methodology that was both universal in scope and scholarly in aspiration. This theory of “inner speech” probed beneath diverging aesthetic tendencies by assuming a common basis in the laws of human sensory perception. Moreover, it sought to examine the aesthetic potential of cinema at its very roots by historically tracing and comparing the manifold manifestations of innate expressive forms across various cultures and traditions through time.

It was in this search for the poetic genesis of cinematic phenomena beyond modern Western paradigms of aesthetic currents and technological innovations, which persisted into the late 1940s, that Eisenstein once again turned to Haiti. Central to his endeavor was the phenomenon of “audiovisual counterpoint,” a concept he had espoused since the early days of synchronous sound cinematography.¹⁰⁰ Instead of merely subordinating one to the naturalistic representation of the other, it called for the use of sound and image that purposefully combined them in contrasting ways to create a generalized abstraction of the work for the viewer. If this had only been a theoretical possibility and a defense of the montage culture of silent films at the time Eisenstein introduced this vocabulary, then it was with the “historical-genetic turn” in his theory that the new challenge became articulating this concept as a ubiquitous technique of expression evident in human aesthetic cultures in palpable forms.¹⁰¹ In other words, he had to demonstrate that expressive composition defied the natural synchronicity of image and sound not only in practice but also in *principle*.

To elucidate the aesthetic principle underlying the dynamic combination of sound and image, Eisenstein turned to musical instruments as a source of insight. Explaining the pertinence of looking at the sounding object in this context, he wrote: “Herein lies the image, to which an internal sonic correspondence to its content and form has been found.”¹⁰² In his view, the visible material attributes of an instrument represented a juncture at which conceptual ideals (i.e., the imagistic essence that the instrument is designed to sonically mirror, including the social symbolic function it is meant to instantiate) embody their particular form in its unique acoustic qualities and the kinetic motion that it demands. The pool of examples he drew from is decidedly wide, reflecting his ambition to transcend national, cultural, and

¹⁰⁰ Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, “Statement on Sound,” 114.

¹⁰¹ I borrow the term “historical-genetic” from Shaitanov’s essay, “Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics,” 431, 436.

¹⁰² Eisenstein, “Otkrovenie v groze i bure,” 188.

epochal boundaries in outlining his *theory* of “the history of cinema’s expressive means.”¹⁰³ Still, his narrative imbues this history with a stadial, evolutionary character, which is reminiscent of Curt Sachs’s developmental approach to the historical study of musical instruments, wherein “history” is articulated not in terms of an instrument’s chronological date but in terms of its conceptual maturity relative to the sophistication extant in modern organology—a clear echo of Sachs’s evolutionary perspective on the genealogy of instrumental forms.¹⁰⁴ It is from this perspective that, despite Haiti being indisputably a modern nation, the musical instrument its peasantry purportedly continue to play—the earth bow—was illustrated in such a way as to represent the embryonic stage of bowed string instruments in Eisenstein’s notes drafted for a general history of cinema in 1947.

After drawing attention to the presence of this rudimentary bowed instrument nestled in the “depths of Haiti,” Eisenstein goes on to delineate its structure, mechanism, and symbolic connotations as follows:

[The earth bow] is interesting for its physically unseparated connection with nature itself: with the “pit” of the *earth*, the *air* that fills it, the tension taken from the trunk of a young *tree*, and the interaction of the bow within this “system.” On top of that, there is already a sinew or rope and (it seems) a board - the board covering the pit (i.e., the presence of a saw among the tools? - *Is there any doubt???*) A pantheistic-ritualistic connection with the primordial mother-earth here is more than evident. To make it hum and sing is amazing in itself.¹⁰⁵

His evident fascination with the sinew and the board component of the instrument in this excerpt has been underscored by a preceding note, where he speculates that the inception of such a bowed string instrument must have emerged at “a stage in the production of tools.”¹⁰⁶ There, he muses about the

¹⁰³ Eisenstein, “Zametki ko ‘Vseobshchei istorii kino,’” 67.

¹⁰⁴ See Sachs, *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente* and *The History of Musical Instruments*.

¹⁰⁵ “Он интересен своей физически не отделенной связью с самой природой: с ‘ямой’ *земли*, *воздухом*, наполняющим ее, напряжением, взятым от ствола юного *дерева*, - и взаимодействием смычка с этой ‘системой.’ Кроме того, здесь - уже жила или веревка и (кажется) доска - досчатое покрытие ямы. (Т.е. наличие среди орудий уже пилы? - *Dieses fraglich???*) Пантеистически-ритуалистическая связь с праматерью-землей здесь более чем наглядна. Заставить ее гудеть и петь - само по себе удивительно.” Eisenstein, “Otkrovenie v groze i bure,” 195.

¹⁰⁶ “Откуда же прообраз самого *звука* смычковых - неужели от ‘визга’ перерезаемой ножом - тупым! жертвы? Или от визга ‘пилы?’” Ibid., 194.

possibility that the “prototype of the very *sound* of bowed instruments” might stem “from the ‘squeal’ of a sacrifice being cut by a blunt knife” or “from the squeak of a ‘saw’.”¹⁰⁷ Extending this line of thought, he discerns a clearer indication of the “genetic” affinity between the two analogous activities, which he believes to be reflected in the very materials that comprise the earth bow: “the saw is a means for producing boards,” while the “strings are fashioned from the sinews and entrails of dead animals.”¹⁰⁸ Despite the apparent distance between the temporal context of the earth bow and the milieu of ideas he aims to convey through it, Eisenstein characteristically weaves together references as disparate as contemporary cultural studies and popular literature, combining them seamlessly into an undifferentiated web of thought. In so doing, he offers a generalized image of the emergence and evolution of audiovisual thought, positioning the Haitian earth bow as a kind of archaic forerunner to the modern mode of cognition later epitomized by cinema. Marveling at the layered meanings he finds inherent in the instrument, Eisenstein defines the earth bow as a distinctive “complex” that combines “the vital tension of the tree, the *nothingness* (emptiness) of the pit, the vibrating speech of the board, and the interaction between man and this natural-earthly edifice, among other elements.”¹⁰⁹ Accompanying his own drawing of the earth bow, his note concludes with an expression of avid wonder: “It is truly amazing.”¹¹⁰

Crucial though it was for Eisenstein to perceive the earth bow as a bowed instrument, this was, in fact, a misclassification. The error likely arose from the confusion caused by the term “bow” in its name, which was meant to denote the arc-like curvature of its wooden frame rather than implying the use of a bow. Although the exact source through which Eisenstein encountered the Haitian earth bow remains elusive, Jennifer Kyker’s recent study on the reception of the ground bow highlights similar misunderstandings that have arisen from the linguistic ambiguity present in several European languages where the term “bow” could refer to both the shape of an arc and a musical rod.¹¹¹ Notably, four scholarly works on the Haitian earth bow were published

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidl, 195, 194.

¹⁰⁹ “Как комплекс соединения жизненного напряжения дерева, *ничто* (пустота ямы), вибрирующей речи доски, взаимодействия человека и этого природно-земляного сооружения etc. etc.” Ibid., 195.

¹¹⁰ “Это очень удивительно.” Ibid., 195.

¹¹¹ Kyker, “Music under the Ground,” 328.

between 1933 and 1941, one in English and three in French.¹¹² Among these studies which document rural Haitian musical culture as an object of Western anthropological research, Harold Courlander's 1941 publication curiously omits a description commonly found in later ethnographies of the earth bow—namely that it is a ludic instrument devised and played by children at a young age.¹¹³ If this detail had been overlooked by the literature that Eisenstein consulted to learn about the instrument, then it may account for the primordial character he ascribes to his description of the earth bow in his writing. Regardless of the exact reason, Eisenstein's interest in the Haitian earth bow in 1947, much like his earlier engagement with Haitian revolutionary narratives in 1932, reflects the dominant hemispheric view of Haiti at the time. Not only does Eisenstein's study of the Haitian earth bow echo the semantic confusion prevalent in the Western reception of Haiti at large in this period, it also portrays the country in a particular narrative light.

Returning to the circumstances in which Eisenstein envisioned this project, one can only imagine the precariousness of championing such unequivocally comparatist work in 1947, when Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign was well underway. With its earliest formulations traceable to November 1946 and reaching the height of its astringency by 1948, this campaign vigorously denounced the self-abasing rhetoric previously deemed acceptable within the framework of striving for Soviet cultural superiority on the global stage.¹¹⁴ The campaign also advanced an antisemitic agenda to displace “non-Russian” (Jewish) intellectuals from educational and institutional positions.¹¹⁵ Given the temporal overlap between the campaign's emergence in the public sphere (initially in the form of cultural critique) and Eisenstein's concurrent development of a historical project highly evocative of the school of Veselovskii, who posthumously became a target in this campaign, a pressing question then arises: Was Eisenstein's “general history of cinema” knowingly conceived with an awareness of its potential conflict with the intensifying political climate? Was it a piece “written for the drawer” of dissenting sentiments in privacy? Or were its cosmopolitan undertones merely

¹¹² Kyker's digital project *Sekuru's Stories* provides a comprehensive list of sources that document ground bows, though with one minor error: Courlander's article was published in 1941, not 1951. See: <https://sekuru.org/ground-bow-sources>.

¹¹³ Courlander, “Musical Instruments of Haiti.” See also Kyker, “Music under the Ground.”

¹¹⁴ Azadovskii and Egorov, “From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism,” 68.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

vestigial remnants of a bygone aspiration unable to keep pace with the rapid shifts in Soviet discourse, lagging behind the swiftly changing cultural and political dynamics of the age? While there is room for various interpretations, an entry penned by Eisenstein on the eve of articulating his thoughts on the audiovisual counterpoint and the Haitian earth bow may provide some clearer insight. On 30 June 1947 he wrote:

As if *alea jacta est* - the lot has been cast. The Presidium of the Academy of Sciences the other day approved me to head the Department of Film History of the Institute of Art History of the USSR Academy of Sciences. I have never had the determination to take on such a job.... But if a considerable number of people “create,” then to reveal this process *as I do see it* is not given to anyone.¹¹⁶

The note reveals a distinct sense of self-awareness and pride. Entrusted with the leadership of the film department at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Eisenstein recognizes that it was due to his unique ability to see beyond the specificity of creativity that set him apart for the role. Reflecting further on his own intellectual journey that led him to contemplate the project of a general history of cinema, he writes:

And *history* is the third link: The practice of creativity. Theory of creativity. History (*Belegmaterial und Übersicht durch Jahrhunderte*). In essence, almost everything I have written over the last years (even in 1929 - about Japanese hieroglyphs) *in a certain basic way* is not only theory, but also history of the problems I am interested in - *theory being history*, sprung into the concept of phases, and in creativity - in the phylogenetic instantaneous re-creation of all these phases of development in the act.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ “Как будто *alea jacta est* - жребий брошен. Президиум Академии Наук на днях утвердил меня возглавлять отделение истории кино Института истории искусств АН СССР. Чтобы мне стать на эту - подобную работу, у меня никогда не хватало решимости. ... Но если “творит” немалое количество людей, то раскрыть этот процесс *as I do see it* не дано почти никому.” Eisenstein, “Otkrovenie v groze i bure,” 184.

¹¹⁷ “И *history* ложится третьим звеном: Практика творчества. Теория творчества. История (*Belegmaterial und Übersicht durch Jahrhunderte*). По существу почти все, что я пишу за последние /годы/ (даже с 1929 - об японских иероглифах) *in a certain basic way* не только теория, но и история интересующих меня проблем - *theory being history*, спружиненной в концепцию фаз, а в творчестве - в филогенетическом мгновенном воссоздании всех этих фаз развития в акте.” Ibid., 184.

“General (*vseobshchii*),” in Russian, also has the meaning of “universal.” Thus, the term “general” employed by Eisenstein for his project’s title is the same adjective as the one used for “world” in “world literature.”¹¹⁸ Given how freely he used the term in his notes over the following months, Eisenstein may simply have been unaware of the precarious turn that loomed behind invocations of the “general” and the “universal” in the Soviet Union when he embarked on this unfinished endeavor. From this perspective, then, Haiti for Eisenstein remained steadfastly in accordance with the Soviet question.

Conclusion

The first two sections of this paper discussed Eisenstein’s encounter with Dessalines through three narratives: *Black Majesty* by Vandercook, *The Black Consul* by Vinogradov, and the previously undisclosed third book, *The White King of La Gonave* by Wirkus, which Naum Kleiman later brought to light through his archival work on Eisenstein. By illuminating the ways in which the recurring yet varied representations of the figure in these sources conflict and contradict each other, I have uncovered the unique constraints that Eisenstein introduced into his own portrayal of Dessalines—a portrayal that both derives and yet deviates from the source of his readings. Leveraging the ambivalence surrounding Dessalines’s literacy to foster a discourse in cinema aesthetics, Eisenstein sought to elucidate the relationship between the poetics of form and drama in relation to the burgeoning sound cinematography. By these means, Eisenstein not only established his montage method as a technique aligning with the evolving demands of Soviet filmmaking but also positioned himself as an intellectual attuned to the reshaped landscape of Soviet intellectual culture.

The subsequent section underscored the continuation of these intellectual pursuits in Eisenstein’s unfinished magnum opus—a “general history of cinema” he envisioned to write for Soviet academia in 1947. Within this framework, Haiti’s discursive role emerges more distinctly, encapsulating Eisenstein’s reflections on primal structures of cognition and creativity. This perspective also aligned with the contemporary Western discourse on Haiti, wherein the nation symbolized a counterpoint to the prevailing moral, social, and racial hierarchies of the modern industrialized West. While the later sources Eisenstein might have consulted about Haiti remain uncertain, another significant event in cinema history demonstrates a remarkable thematic

¹¹⁸ I am referring to the term “всеобщая литература” which Veselovskii used to introduce an analogue to the German *Weltliteratur* for Russian literary scholarship.

continuity: Maya Deren's Haitian expedition. Initiated just two months after Eisenstein penned his insights on the Haitian earth bow and sound cinema, Deren's work in Haiti—conceived as a means to forge an alternative cinematic practice and experience by capturing the ritualistic essence of Haitian dance—further attests to the period's heightened aesthetic curiosity in engaging with the anthropological significance of the country within the Western cultural framework.¹¹⁹

Assessing the two instances of Eisenstein's engagement with Haiti may then be construed in two ways: as a reception of competing Western representations of Haiti during the 1930s and 40s, and as a distinctive response to the changing conditions and possibilities of filmmaking in the Soviet Union. Examining Haiti through Eisenstein epitomizes the multifaceted junctures previously overlooked in analyses that were either constrained by dichotomous assumptions—equating the absence of a produced film to a tragic failure or termination of interest—or overly consumed with a retrospective emphasis on Eisenstein's supposed 'discovery' of Haiti from obscurity. Both precluded the possibility that Haiti may have been for Eisenstein a prism conducive to refining his own cinematic aesthetics and methodologies. Recognizing this overlooked dimension provides deeper insight into the intricate role that aesthetics, narrative patterns, and racialized preconceptions played in shaping Haiti's representation. It elucidates how Eisenstein utilized these elements to navigate and bridge the shifting, polarized aesthetic debates of the Soviet Union in his time. The inverse of these pursuits, then, reveals the imprints, echoes, and trajectory of Haiti as conceptualized in the Western discourse throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹¹⁹ See Deren, "Film in Progress" and *Divine Horseman*.

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