

Dessalines in Eisenstein's Pedagogy of Socialist Realist Cinema¹

Thank you for the introduction, and many thanks to everyone for being here at this early hour. I join this panel today as an independent scholar still in my early stages of research. So I very much look forward to your feedback and the discussion to follow.

I. Eisenstein *and* the Haitian Revolution?

{*Slide 1*} In the spring of 1933, Eisenstein led a semester-long seminar at the Moscow State Institute of Cinematography, where he and his students dramatized the heroic struggle of Haitian revolutionary general Jean-Jacques Dessalines. As part of the inaugural curriculum Eisenstein had designed for the school's new program in film directing, the idea for this class stemmed from his apparent interest in the story of the Haitian Revolution as a potential film, which he pitched to Hollywood in 1930 and again to Mosfilm in 1934.

{*Slide 2*} The fact that Eisenstein was interested and artistically invested in the Haitian Revolution has already garnered the attention of many scholars. To some, the film's unrealized was due to a broader shift of Soviet culture towards conservatism in this period; it was therefore interpreted as a 'silenced' opportunity (echoing the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot) for Eisenstein's anti-racist and internationalist project to come to fruition. For other scholars, Eisenstein's Haitian interests held the promise of a revisionist recuperation of Dessalines as a positive hero, subverting his often negative portrayal in prominent writings from C.L.R. James's 1938 *The Black Jacobins* to recent studies like Sudhir Hazareesingh's 2019 *Black Spartacus: the epic life of Toussaint Louverture*.

{*Slide 3*} Indeed, Eisenstein's attention to this underdog of Haitian revolutionary historiography, so often cast in Western accounts as the embodiment of the Revolution's violent and authoritarian excesses, certainly warrants careful examination. Yet, I wish to revisit this history in a way that is distanced from an overly romanticized reading of Eisenstein as an outlier in his sincere devotion to the cause of black empowerment {*Slide 4*} at a time when the Kremlin's campaigns of 'anti-US racism' and 'Black American-

¹ This paper was prepared for a panel presentation on "Revolutions Redux." It is a condensed version of the research that I explore more fully in my essay "Haiti According to Eisenstein."

Soviet solidarity' were at their height. *{If he truly was, he was too reticent about it. The surviving evidence suggests his thinking was very much in line with the official party rhetoric.}*

I wish instead to focus on the aspects of Eisenstein's dealings with the figure of Dessalines which can indeed be circumscribed and explained by them. By this, I mean that I will pay particular attention to the way Eisenstein configured the historical character of Dessalines to present him to students in his class as teaching material. *{Slide 5}* Eisenstein navigates this character from two novels on the Haitian Revolution that divergently portray the man. These two books disagree outright on key biographical points about him, with the main controversy revolving around his literacy.

Yet, instead of producing schisms in Eisenstein's depiction, the choices available to him in rendering the character function rather as a productive means for suggesting a model of the positive hero that could resolve contemporary debates in the Soviet Union on the correct uses of sound and script in film. The image of Dessalines that emerges from Eisenstein's lessons thus reveals the more immediate priority of his pedagogy, which was to develop an appropriate method for sound cinema, and to establish what he believed was the socialist realist way of doing it.

A significant yet underdiscussed text revealing Eisenstein's imbrication in these debates is Anatoliï Vinogradov's 1933 novel *Черный консул* (translated into English as *The Black Consul*). The key reason for its lack of treatment in scholarship was the omission of its details in the English translation of Eisenstein's *Lessons* *{Slide 6}*, which seems to have been to maintain consistency within the narrative. Yet, this omission significantly downplays the role of this novel in Eisenstein's teaching, which I believe is key to explaining how he was able to conceive of Dessalines as a positive hero, and why he knowingly drew from conflicting sources on Dessalines to relay his lessons on filmmaking. A brief examination of this novel will therefore provide insight into the problems central to Soviet artists during this period, concerning not only narrative elements—namely the question of building and signaling tropes that would become the convention of socialist realist works, but also the form in which these stories should be conveyed.

II. Between *The Black Consul* and *Black Majesty*

Published in 1933 by the Stalin-backed State Publishing House of Fiction, *The Black Consul* sets an early example of how positive hero tropes operated in socialist realist novels in the Soviet Union. {Slide 7} In this novel, Toussaint carries with him a recurring set of epithets that indicate his wisdom, of the kind that one could achieve at the age of 46, the author adds, drawing an analogy with Lenin at the time he assumed leadership. But Toussaint's wisdom is also negated by his melancholic and dependent nature. He is repeatedly shown being rescued by Frenchmen like Jean-Paul Marat {Slide 8} and even by the young Napoleon Bonaparte {Slide 9}. He presides over his fellow Haitian revolutionaries as a father figure of the masonic lodge {Slide 10}, but even this is founded on the teachings of Abbé Raynal. {Slide 11} Dessalines is similarly portrayed as 'wide-eyed,' an adjective often used in socialist realist novels to signify the protagonists' intellectual acuity.² Yet he is shown to possess a more firm and decisive disposition than Toussaint; he is therefore positioned as the eventual inheritor of the revolution, as Toussaint's nostalgic and naïvely optimistic tendencies will lead to his capture by the French.

The novel was used to legitimize the transition of leadership, but also to facilitate ideological programs, extolling literacy as the cornerstone of both individual and collective enlightenment. Louverture, in moments of delirium, bursts out in eloquent Latin {Slide 12}. Dessalines is portrayed as born a slave but educated by the plantation's colonial patron. Becoming an inventor, he devotes more time to his studies, as his inventions expedite his labour. However, oppressed by harsher labour conditions, Dessalines is shown escaping his enslavement and pursuing university education in Paris before returning to the island to join the revolution {Slide 13}. This convoluted depiction of Dessalines's biography reflects the complicated Soviet attitude towards their own position of anti-racist solidarity—just as the novel, while intending to criticize racism, constantly draws on racist tropes throughout to undermine the historical actors of color.

The novel also illustrates the controversy surrounding the ideal form of these narratives. The central question was: what expression of realism was most adequate for art to serve in accelerating the process of history towards socialism? Although certain narrative tropes of the positive hero like the fatherly mentor and filial disciple emerged early on, stylistic opinions were

² See Clark, *The Soviet Novel* and "Socialist Realism with Shores."

still divided and far from monolithic. Vinogradov's *Black Consul* exemplifies this division by avoiding a firm stance, instead vacillating between two rival tendencies of interpreting the realist novel form. The narrator intervenes, employs adjectives, creates fictive dialogues when signaling a character's role, inserting programmatic discourse, or passing value judgements about certain representative events. The narrator also withdraws significantly in the novel, relaying the story solely through items that resemble pieces of journalism, documents, diaries, and letters to situate the reader in the narrative. This occurs notably towards the end of the novel {*Slide 14*}, when the Haitian campaign against the Napoleonic expedition is told almost entirely through Leclerc's letters to Napoleon; the Haitian actors themselves are removed from the story. Only in the epilogue does the author-narrator return to recount the Haitian generals' victory over the French colonists. But this voice also tells the reader that the outcome was nevertheless regrettable because, without guided leadership, the Haitian Revolution degenerated into nothing but a poor imitation of the French {*Slide 15*}.

Returning to Eisenstein's own treatment of Dessalines, he embraces the literacy enlightenment narrative of Vinogradov, suggesting that the revolutionaries who arrived in Saint-Domingue from Paris belonged to Europe's learned tradition. Eisenstein also emphasizes to his students that Dessalines named himself after Rousseau out of admiration for the Swiss philosophe, although this is not found anywhere in the book. The plot he constructs for his students to recreate, however, is a scene drawn from John Vandercook's 1928 *Black Majesty* {*Slide 16*}, an American novel written during the US occupation of Haiti. Vandercook's book depicts Dessalines as a vengeful and illiterate brute lacking in morality, and only capable of crudely mimicking the civil statecraft of the Europeans whom he despises so much.

Merging these two depictions together, Eisenstein introduces a specific kind of mutism into his version of Dessalines. The episode of his confrontation with the Frenchmen is tension-laden and mostly without speech on Dessalines's part. This is not exactly the mutism that Vandercook in his book describes as an intemperate and uncivilized grunt, but rather a revolutionary type. Eisenstein stresses to his students that Dessalines's consciousness and intent must be expressed through the deliberately subdued facade of his muteness to heighten the scene's tension. Hints must be laid out for the viewers to perceive his acute awareness of the situation without being too explicit; his perception of impending danger should be staged delicately and tacitly, so as not to spoil the suspense for the viewers. Only when the dramatic tension has been

sufficiently developed and can rise no more, does Eisenstein instruct his students to have Dessalines break his silence. This unmasking of his speech would then stun both the Frenchmen in the scene and the audience experiencing the moment through the screen.

While this interpretation could be seen as an attempt to counter racist representations, Dessalines's mutism has specific implications aligned to Eisenstein's ruminations about the new challenges and opportunities of filmmaking. The paramount challenge for the director was twofold: setting an international example of Soviet cinema's successful transition from silent to sound, and implementing the new aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism in cinematography. In this context, I see Dessalines's mutism in Eisenstein's precepts as a device through which the filmmaker allegorically resolves the imperative aesthetic challenges of depicting realism and navigating the evolving role of sound in image art.

III. Allegorical Bearings of Dessalines's Mutism in Eisenstein's Sound Cinema

In contrast to Vinogradov's vacillation between contending interpretations/schools of realism, Eisenstein had a clearer stance on how realist art ought to be conceived. To him, the answer lay in the image {*Slide 17*}, at once formless and sensuous in the mind, and appealing to pathos and intuition before reaching the logical. For Eisenstein, adhering to this 'imageness' in conceptualizing formal solutions was the only way to balance the forces of naturalism and formalism into the right expression of realism.

Extending this consideration to scripting in narrative sound cinema, Eisenstein arranges speech and sound in a hierarchy centered on essential imageness. Only by ascertaining this imagistic sense could he identify the appropriate expressions of the work's original intention in its purest form.

The delaying of Dessalines's speech therefore exemplifies Eisenstein's placement of verbal elements in a clear hierarchy, all geared towards attaining the right moment of image and emotion. In Eisenstein's conception of socialist realist cinema, speech had to first and foremost resonate with pathos; it had to express transpersonal speech rather than merely describe events, so as to achieve the most compelling effect attainable in film sound art.

{Slide 18} Throughout his later career, Eisenstein experimented with the possibility of such a use of sound in film, envisioning a mode of cinematography that would recreate a lyrical expression akin to that of the chorus in ancient Greek theatre, thereby avoiding a purely epic or dramatic mode of conveying thought and action. {*His inquiry into “who gets to speak, what and how, in sound cinema?” is also intimately linked to the kind of communal experience he believed film art ought to restore.*}

{Slide 19} Shortly after delivering his lectures on Dessalines, Eisenstein was engrossed in a film project that would convey the kind of emotional development of speech he had explored with the Dessalines episode. Provisionally titled *Moscow*, the film would demonstrate the delayed yet gradual acquisition of speech through sound and articulation. The project was responding to state commissioning of artistic projects to aesthetically extol the capital city of the USSR.³ And Katerina Clark’s study of Eisenstein’s manuscript drafts of the unfinished script reveals that he had intended to begin the film with inchoate noises and non-Russian mots, then to culminate in the film’s final delivery of an articulate Russian speech. This speech, as Eisenstein envisioned, would be the crowning moment crystallizing Moscow’s liberation from centuries of foreign influence since the Tartars, and its central role in the construction of a new socialist order by declaring through a Comintern radio broadcast to the world, “Говорит Москва,” or “Moscow speaks.”⁴

IV. Dessalines’s Opacity

To end this talk, I would briefly like to return to Dessalines, who has been more of an object than a subject in my study so far. Dessalines’s assumed illiteracy in historiography, at odds with numerous legislations and decrees issued under his name, has long stirred speculation and questions about the true authorship of Haiti’s early independence documents. The contemporary French response to the Haitian Declaration of Independence encapsulates the underlying racist rationale of this doubt, as one journalist in 1804 asserted that, quote, “it couldn’t have been the work of Dessalines, who does not know how to sign his name, nor of any individual of his color,”⁵ end quote. Against

³ “Proletarskaia Moskva zhdet svoevo khudozhnika!” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 11 July 1933.

⁴ Clark, “Eisenstein’s Projects for ‘Moscow’,” 192, 200.

⁵ Jenson, “Dessalines’s American Proclamations of Haitian Independence,” 73.

this charge, Baron de Vastey in 1810 countered that it is in fact criminal to attribute a revolution to a “single author,” since it is necessarily the work of “many hands.”⁶

Yet, modern scholarship in the West continues to respond to the difficulty of attributing such authorship to Dessalines by elevating singular figures like Toussaint Louverture as the originator of the Haitian Revolution’s ideals. They tend to emphasize Toussaint’s participation in the elite European republic of letters, and often reiterate the myth that the writings of Abbé Raynal were singularly responsible for inspiring Toussaint to conceive of a revolution in Saint-Domingue.⁷

{Slide 20} A recent documentary by the Haitian filmmaker Arnold Antonin released in 2022 addresses some of these issues by delving into the complexities surrounding Dessalines.⁸ {Slide 21} Traversing various historical sites and interviewing experts and locals to trace the Haitian general’s legacies, Antonin’s film not only attempts to revisit overlooked dimensions of Dessalines in the historical discourse, but also sheds light on the significant heritage sites of Haiti. Faced with the country’s lack of agenda to preserve them, Antonin describes the fate of these sites and Dessalines as one of “damnatio memoriae.”⁹

And yet, the film also confronts the problem of Dessalines’s mutism when attempting to recover his voice through scenes of mimetic historical representation played by actors. {Slide 22} In these scenes, the actor portraying Dessalines focuses his eyes intensely on the paper declaration he holds in his hands, as he recites the famous decrees of 1804 and 1805. {Slide 23} Ostensibly present next to Dessalines are his closest educated camarillas, Boisrond-Tonnerre and Juste Chanlatte, whose signatures always accompany his in written letters {Slide 24}.

But instead of recasting Dessalines as a lone producer of stately writing in order to valorize him, Antonin employs a unique visual strategy that embraces Dessalines’s opacity. {Slide 25} This delicate dynamic, steering clear of

⁶ Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 218.

⁷ See Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*.

⁸ Antonin, *Jean-Jacques Dessalines*. Accessed through <https://youtu.be/EDK18yvY2Qo?si=Rl8eCt3IXt2U4UyX>.

⁹ Antonin, *Jean-Jacques Dessalines*, 1:23:30.

reductive synthesis, is exemplified in an edit where the screen fills entirely with numerous images of the archived proclamations issued during Dessalines's tenure. These documents, sourced from Parisian, British, and North American archives, initially obscure the visual landscape {Slide 26}. However, as their opacity recedes into semi-transparence {Slide 27}, they bring into sharper relief images of the present-day Haitian terrain {Slide 28} that bears witness to the Revolution's material historical vestiges. Thank you.

Description of Slides

{Slide 1} — Photograph of Eisenstein conversing with students at the G.I.K. (ca. 1934)

{Slide 2} — Eisenstein's hand-drawn sketch of the tragedy of Henry Christophe (ca. 1931)

{Slide 3} — Louverture and Dessalines, as depicted by Jacob Lawrence in his series *Life of Toussaint Louverture* (1936-8)

{Slide 4} — 1932 poster by Dmitrii Orlov, “Свободу узникам Скоттсборо!” (“Freedom to the prisoners of Scottsboro!”)

{Slide 5} — Juxtaposed book covers of Vandercook's *Black Majesty* (1928) and Vinogradov's *Черный консул* (1933)

{Slide 6} — Cover of Montagu and Leyda's translated edition of *Lessons with Eisenstein* (1962)

{Slide 7} — Portrait of Louverture with his signature below, featured in the 1936 Goslitizdat edition of *Черный консул*. Alongside it are excerpts from the book that describe Toussaint's physical features and character

{Slide 8} — Portrait of Jean-Paul Marat featured in the 1936 Goslitizdat edition of *Черный консул*

{Slide 9} — Page of a scene in *Черный консул* narrating Louverture's encounter with Bonaparte in Paris; both men represented as disgruntled subjects of the French colonial empire

{Slide 10} — Illustration from *Черный консул* that portrays Toussaint in his paternal role

{Slide 11} — Text excerpts from *Черный консул* that provide details of Dessalines physical attributes and character

{Slide 12} — Close-up of Latin passages from Ovid's *Tristia* and Persius's *Satires* reproduced in *Черный консул*

{Slide 13} — Various illustrations depicting agricultural labor and machinery from the 1936 edition of *Черный консул*

{Slide 14} — Pages from *Черный консул* that recreate the Haitian revolutionary war in epistolary form

{Slide 15} — Illustration of “the Haitian Constitution,” appearing just before the Epilogue of the 1936 *Черный консул*, which shows a neo-classical edifice guarded by Haitian soldiers in European uniforms

{Slide 16} — Book cover of *Black Majesty* (1928)

{Slide 17} — Two drawings by Eisenstein: “Veronica, mère des images d'Épinal” (20 May 1931) and “Mutterleib Versenkung” (1933)

{Slide 18} — Close-up of Eisenstein's sketches among his notes on the place of cinema within a general history of art (*ca.* 1946)

{Slide 19} — Full-page view of the July 1933 issue of *Literaturnáia gazeta*, headed “Пролетарская Москва ждет своего художника!” (“Proletarian Moscow awaits its artist!”) featuring Eisenstein's article, “Москва во времени” (“Moscow in Time”)

{Slide 20} — Poster of Arnold Antonin's documentary film, *Jean-Jacques Dessalines* (2022)

{Slides 21-23} — Film stills corresponding to the described scenes

{Slide 24} — Images of historical documents with Dessalines and his secretaries' names, photographed and uploaded to <https://haitidoi.com/dessalines-reader/dessalines-documents> by Julia Gaffield

{Slides 25-28} — Film stills corresponding to the described scenes