

# Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution: ‘The Confrontation Between Black and White Explodes Into Red’

by Charles Forsdick and  
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Hollywood, Paul Foot once noted, ‘made a film about Spartacus, the leader of the Roman slave revolt, because Spartacus was beaten. Toussaint L’Ouverture was victorious, so they haven’t made a film about him’. Indeed, Foot continued, ‘the story of the San Domingo slave revolt – perhaps the most glorious victory of the oppressed over their oppressors in all history – is hardly ever told’.<sup>1</sup> The Haitian Revolution, which erupted in what was then the French colony of Saint Domingue in August 1791 and led to the country’s subsequent declaration of independence in January 1804, is undeniably and increasingly recognized as a world historical event, but the ability of the rest of the world to understand and assimilate the implications of this incendiary and in many ways deeply challenging revolutionary process has systematically been characterized by ‘silencing’ or ‘disavowal’.<sup>2</sup> Even the recent historical film about the life of William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace* (2007), made to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807, managed to avoid too much mention of this most epic of struggles against slavery in the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

While the English Civil War, the American War of Independence, the Great French Revolution and the American Civil War have long been – and with films like Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012) continue to be – commemorated in film (in multiple versions), the Haitian Revolution arguably still awaits its moment of cinematic glory.<sup>4</sup> The film that has so far come closest to recognizing the revolutionary spirit of the enslaved men, women and children who made the Haitian Revolution is *Quemada/Burn!* (1969), directed by the Italian socialist film-director Gillo Pontecorvo, best known for his anti-colonialist masterpiece, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The film, starring Marlon Brando, portrayed a failed slave revolt on a fictional colonial Caribbean island. It was a glorious fusion of Black Power, anti-Vietnam war sentiment, and hardened anti-imperialist politics – reflecting the impact of

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the current international explosion of struggles including those for independence in the Third World.<sup>5</sup> The Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976), also deserves attention. This was based on *The Sugar Mill*, a prize-winning book by the historian Manuel Moreno Fragnals, and portrayed a 1790 revolt by enslaved black labourers working during Holy Week in a Havana sugar-mill on the plantation of the Count de Casa Bayona.<sup>6</sup> The Haitian Revolution clearly inspired both *Quemada! Burn!* and *The Last Supper*. The former crystallized the concept of universal emancipation – which the Haitian Revolution with its abolition of slavery went further towards achieving than any of the other world-historical revolutions in the ‘the age of democratic revolution’. It also produced what Marcus Wood has called ‘the vast bewilderment of the colonizer when finally faced with the rejection of the power to liberate’.<sup>7</sup>

Making a film about the Haitian Revolution was, as Foot noted, ‘the lifetime ambition’ of one outstanding film director: Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), responsible for such classic Soviet films about the Russian Revolution as *Strike* (1924), *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927).<sup>8</sup> That the Haitian Revolution stirred Eisenstein’s powerful imagination has long been known. Without claiming to be a definitive examination of that intriguing aspect of Eisenstein’s oeuvre, this article explores his investment in the unmade project. It offers the first comprehensive account of the genesis and evolution of Eisenstein’s dream, possibly ‘one of the great unmade movies of the twentieth century’ by one of the outstanding creative artists of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Study of Eisenstein’s ‘Haiti project’ illuminates an under-explored element of the transnational engagement with the Haitian Revolution across a range of cultural forms in the interwar years; it also enhances understanding of the often complex engagement of Soviet cinema with subjects of Black history and culture in the same period.<sup>10</sup>

#### BIRTH OF A DREAM: EISENSTEIN AND *BLACK MAJESTY* IN HOLLYWOOD AND MEXICO

Sergei Eisenstein had long been fascinated, since his childhood in Riga, with the French Revolution. After the 1905 Russian Revolution, he had been taken to Paris aged eight on a family holiday, because his conservative parents thought it too dangerous to go to their country dacha, and he remembered seeing Napoleon’s tomb.<sup>11</sup> He recalls how it was ‘a dream come true’ when at Christmas time aged twelve he was presented with the *Histoire de la révolution française* by François Mignet, the great French Romantic liberal historian.<sup>12</sup> He describes an early attraction to French revolutionary history, predating any interest in the Russian past, and linked in particular to his reading of the adventure novels of Dumas: ‘The history of France was one of the first things to make an impression on me and when further layers of impressions settled upon the first, this first chance happening virtually became the rule’. Recalling an account of the Commune that shared a shelf with a life of Napoleon, Eisenstein continues: ‘My fascination with

revolutions, especially French ones, dates from that tender age. First of all of course it was because of their romance. Their colour. Their rarity'.<sup>13</sup>

Such early memories were doubtless stirred again when in 1929 Eisenstein left Soviet Russia for a tour of the West and was shown around France and its capital by Léon Moussinac. It is unclear when the director first became aware of the Haitian Revolution and began to imagine making a film about it, but in January 1930, while discovering 'Black Paris', he declared an interest.<sup>14</sup> He was probably not aware of an earlier plan for a silent film by Clarence Muse on the life of Toussaint (Blue Ribbon Films, 1921), which may never have been produced.<sup>15</sup> However, by the 1920s, films set in the Napoleonic period were now being made. *A Royal Divorce*, Alexander Butler's 1926 British historical drama, focused on the relationship between Napoleon and Josephine. Bonaparte's first major screen portrayal came with Abel Gance's 1927 silent film *Napoléon*, a work noted more for its technical innovation than any historiographic engagement with the period it portrays.

In May 1930, having signed a contract with Paramount, Eisenstein left for the United States together with Eduard K. Tisse (1897–1961), his loyal cameraman, and his assistant Grigori Alexandrov. They arrived in Hollywood in June 1930. Here he acquired the dramatic novel *Black Majesty: the Life of Christophe, King of Haiti* (1928), by American writer John W. Vandercook. 'I picked up a cheap reprint of Vandercook's *Black Majesty* for a dollar; it was about the Haitian Emperor, Henri Christophe, and its potential as a film had long intrigued me.'<sup>16</sup> While in Hollywood working on a proposed Paramount film based on Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Eisenstein was excited by the possibilities presented by Vandercook's *Black Majesty*. Helping the Soviet director with the script for *An American Tragedy* was the British socialist film-maker Ivor Montagu (1904–84), author of a short pamphlet on *The Political Censorship of Films* (1929).<sup>17</sup> As Montagu recalled of the *Black Majesty* project, Eisenstein 'talked about it then, and corresponded both with the author (I think) and (certainly) with Paul Robeson' – simply, he concluded, 'as an attractive subject that might become possible under other circumstances'.<sup>18</sup>

Black people were rarely shown in any films made in America at this time. Films where they did figure portrayed them in a deeply racist fashion: either as servants or, in the 'Jungle pictures' of the 1920s, as savages from 'Darkest Africa'. As Paul Robeson noted in *Film Weekly* in 1933, 'Hollywood can only visualize the plantation type of Negro – the Negro of "Poor Old Joe" and "Swanee Ribber"'.<sup>19</sup> Léon Moussinac claimed that on 23 October 1930, 'Paramount definitively rejects the scenario for *An American Tragedy* – the project which was most fully developed – as well as the proposal to do *Black Majesty* (with Paul Robeson...)'.<sup>20</sup> As Montagu recalled, 'when Paramount dropped *An American Tragedy* and terminated our contract... various projects, including *Black Majesty*... were peddled by us all over the place. No one nibbled at the Haiti revolt'.<sup>21</sup> However,

Montagu also expanded elsewhere on what he called ‘the Haiti idea’, claiming it represented little more than ‘a wild possibility for independent finance when we were clutching at straws after Paramount had given us the sack’.<sup>22</sup> Montagu therefore asserted, contrary to some later claims in Soviet publications, that in Hollywood

... the project never was, nor could it have been, ‘categorically forbidden’. Things do not work out so crudely in our ‘Western’ neck of the woods. Those who control the essential sources of production here (finance, studios, distribution, etc.) just see to it that such ideas do not jell, that’s all.<sup>23</sup>

However in Hollywood, there were not only concerns about commercial viability (would the idea ‘jell’), but also the glaring fact that Haiti itself had been under American military occupation since 1915, as it was to remain until 1934. As Eisenstein would tell his Russian film students in 1932, ‘when I was in America I wanted to make a film of this rising, but it was impossible: nowadays Haiti is virtually a colony of the United States’.<sup>24</sup>

Eisenstein’s interest in the Haitian Revolution was shared internationally by many other artists, similarly disgusted by the neo-colonialism of the American occupation of Haiti. Indeed the interwar period, not least because of the military occupation, was to be an especially intense time in the representation of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>25</sup> In the two centuries of external engagement with this event and its principal actors, it has been deployed regularly, in a variety of contexts, for its figurative value as inspiration, warning or threat. After the First World War, the Haitian Revolution was a vehicle for the debate of socio-political phenomena that transcended the confines of its island space, particularly in America. The U.S. occupation of Haiti provided a framework for discussions of race and ethnicity, and the history and politics of the Caribbean nation also permitted an assertion of African-American identities in ways previously unimaginable.<sup>26</sup> Haiti played a prominent role in the artistic production of the Harlem Renaissance, most notably in the work of the artist Jacob Lawrence; it also inspired key texts by authors such as Langston Hughes.

At this early stage, Eisenstein’s main concern was with the portrayal of the character of Henri Christophe, central to the narrative of *Black Majesty*, and he envisaged that Robeson would play this role.<sup>27</sup> Eisenstein’s approach to Paul Robeson is also significant, for in 1930, Robeson had starred in *Borderline*, a film written and directed by Kenneth Macpherson, a member of the avant-garde group surrounding the magazine *Close-Up*. This magazine had close links not only with the Harlem Renaissance and other progressive and radical literary and artistic currents of modernism, but also with formalist film theory; and it had published the first translations of Eisenstein’s own work. Eisenstein’s connection with the collective behind *Close-Up* meant he was therefore doubtless aware of Robeson’s role in

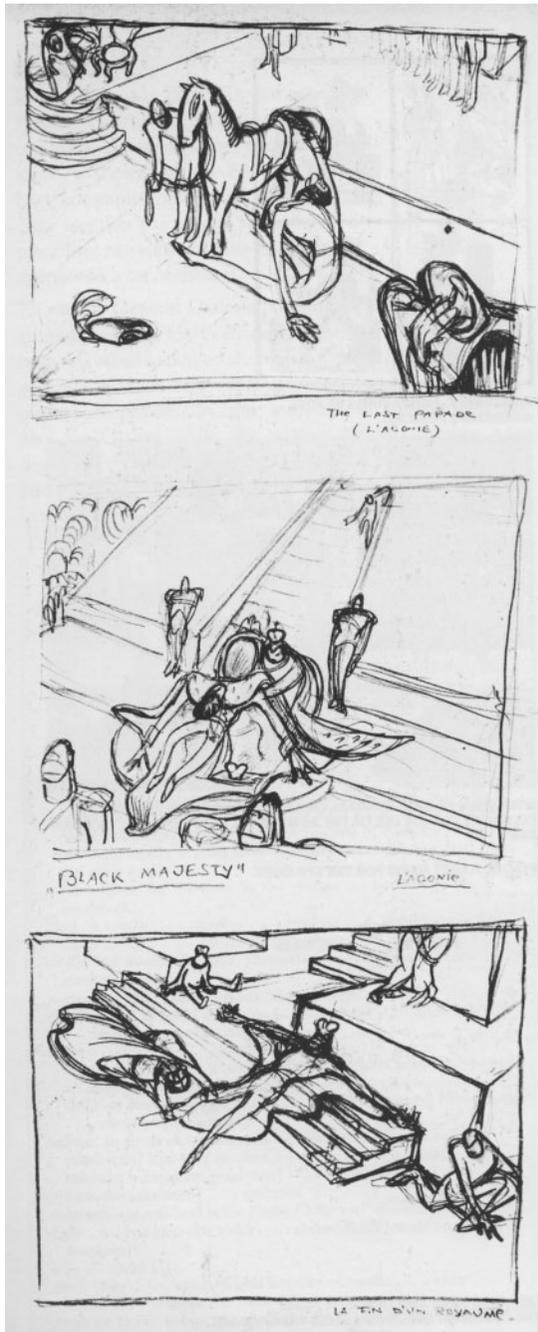
*Borderline* – a film whose underlying theoretical position was ‘derived from Soviet theories of montage’.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the impossibility of filming *Black Majesty* in Hollywood, as Jay Leyda and Zina Voynow note, ‘Eisenstein could not let go the story’s great potentialities’.<sup>29</sup> In 1931, according to Yon Barna, while Eisenstein was in Mexico trying to make the film *Que Viva Mexico!*, ‘the theme had recurred to his imagination, as a series of sketches made at the time attest’.<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 1) Leyda and Voynow describe how, ‘on March 21, 1931, while waiting for bright sunlight in Mérida, Eisenstein began to sketch key scenes for a film of the Haitian Revolution’.<sup>31</sup> Montagu saw Eisenstein’s ‘production sketches’ of *Black Majesty* as simply ‘a relaxation’, and thought that to read anything more serious into these early attempts was a mistake. ‘All else is romance’.<sup>32</sup> However, in a passage from Eisenstein’s *Notes of a Film Director* entitled ‘Why I Draw’, we see the importance of his making sketches in general for his method of film-making. ‘It is impossible to arrange characters without a concrete vision of actions, gestures, and spatial arrangement. . . . So I try to fix the most essential things on paper’.<sup>33</sup>

The *Black Majesty* sketches were to play a critical role in how Eisenstein came to imagine filming the Haitian Revolution over the next few years. As Yon Barna notes, Eisenstein envisioned *Black Majesty* and *An American Tragedy* as being in essence about ‘the tragedy of individualism’, as opposed to the ‘harmonious unity’ he saw as the over-riding theme of all his work.<sup>34</sup> Soon, however, Eisenstein was engulfed by his very own individual tragedy as *Que Viva Mexico!* proved impossible to make in Mexico, and he was ordered to return to the Soviet Union. As he did so, Eisenstein travelled through America in March 1932, delivering a lecture on the theory of cinema and Soviet cinema at a black college and at a black Baptist church in New Orleans.<sup>35</sup> On 28 March 1932, Eisenstein wrote to a friend, Esther Shub, about his travels in the U.S., describing his travelling ‘four-hundred to five-hundred kilometers a day, racing across the most interesting part of America – the Negro States’.<sup>36</sup>

#### BACK IN THE U.S.S.R.: THE BLACK CONSUL

News of the premier Soviet film-maker’s interest in Haiti had already preceded his return to the Soviet Union in 1932. It was one of the lowest points in his career as a film-maker, back having failed to make *Que Viva Mexico!*. Nevertheless, Leyda and Voynow note, ‘with the hope of Paul Robeson’s participation, Eisenstein was delighted to hear that Anatoli Vinogradov, learning of Eisenstein’s interest in the subject, had written a novel about Haiti, *The Black Consul* [Chernyi konsul]’.<sup>37</sup> Rather than tell the story of Henri Christophe, the revolutionary who became a king, Vinogradov’s novel centred on the less politically compromised figure, Toussaint Louverture, the heroic leader of the Haitian Revolution who seized power to become ‘black consul’ in Saint Domingue. Yon Barna notes ‘Vinogradov suggested a screen version of his novel *The Black Consul*’ to Eisenstein directly.<sup>38</sup> The fact that a proposed film on Haiti would now be based on the



Eisenstein Archives at TsGALI (State Archives of Literature and Art) and Eisenstein Kabinet, Moscow.

Fig. 1. Sketches by Eisenstein for scenes from *Black Majesty*, c. 1931.  
 THE LAST PARADE (L'AGONIE); "BLACK MAJESTY" L'AGONIE; LA FIN D'UN ROYAUME.

writings of a Soviet novelist (Vinogradov) rather than an American (Vandercook) would, Leyda and Voynow note, 'give more weight to Eisenstein's proposal to the Film Committee'.<sup>39</sup> In October 1932, in an article in *Pravda*, Eisenstein declared that Toussaint Louverture was going to be 'the hero of my next film *The Black Consul*'.<sup>40</sup>

Vinogradov's historical novel has not in general been taken particularly seriously as a work of historical scholarship, and drew criticism from the Trinidadian writer and historian C. L. R. James in his classic account of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938).<sup>41</sup> Yet Eisenstein was now reading more widely about Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution, including [Karl] Otten's play *Der Schwarze Napoleon* and Percy Waxman's *The Black Napoleon: the Story of Toussaint Louverture* (both 1931).<sup>42</sup> Waxman's *The Black Napoleon* effectively evoked the dramatic clash of personalities involved and even the Haitian Revolution's world-historic significance: 'for the first time in the world's history an enslaved people had succeeded in gaining their own freedom'.<sup>43</sup>

Marie Seton has written about how Eisenstein imagined Toussaint Louverture as 'not only one of the most dramatic and noble of historical figures, but also a man in whom a stage in cultural evolution was reflected'. According to her,

'If a race is biologically and psychologically inferior in its roots such a man could not appear in its midst', Eisenstein said.

Toussaint L'Ouverture held great appeal, because Sergei Mikhailovich desired to express his admiration of the Negro people, whom he had studied while he was in America.<sup>44</sup>

In 1932, Eisenstein had received the encouraging news that his classic *Battleship Potemkin* had been praised by Jean Cocteau, whom he had previously met in Paris. As Cocteau declared: 'Alexandre Dumas, Michelet, Eisenstein, the only true historians'.<sup>45</sup> Eisenstein, as we have seen, had long been fascinated by Dumas, author of such classic historical novels as *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.<sup>46</sup> In a fascinating article in the film journal *Close Up* in March 1933 ('Cinematography with Tears! The Way of Learning'), Eisenstein discussed the black heritage of Dumas, who 'was actually sprung from the negro natives of Haiti, like Toussaint L'Ouverture, the hero of our coming film, "*The Black Consul*". . .'.<sup>47</sup> In April 1933, the Communist *Negro Worker*, then edited by the black Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore, excitedly reported that the life of Toussaint and the story of the Haitian Revolution would finally be brought to film: '[Eisenstein] plans early production' of *The Black Consul*. 'Eisenstein's picture will serve as a great inspiration to the Negro masses of the world who are today faced with the task of carrying on the militant traditions of the Great Haitian Liberator if they are ever to be freed from the yoke of white imperialist oppression'.<sup>48</sup>

The project has to be situated in the context of a more general Soviet interest in filming Black subjects, evident in the presence in the country of the twenty-one members of the *Black and White* film group (including Langston Hughes), recruited to act in a propaganda film about cross-ethnic solidarity between black and white workers in a steel mill in the American South.<sup>49</sup> Eisenstein gave a party in his apartment in the visitors' honour. However, the film was never made. According to C. L. R. James, Soviet officials capitulated to pressure from the American government: 'Washington was at the time engaged in negotiations with Moscow over recognition of the Soviet government, and made it quite clear that if the Russians made any such film, it would be regarded as a serious obstacle in the way of an understanding'.<sup>50</sup>

From October 1932 to early 1933, Eisenstein – employed teaching film at the Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) – pursued the Haiti project, and brought the vision of his Mexican sketches of *Black Majesty* into play in order to imagine with his students how some of these dramatic scenes might be presented on screen. Though ostensibly now focusing on the 'black consul' Toussaint, Eisenstein clearly saw another leading figure in the Haitian Revolution – Jean-Jacques Dessalines – as a dramatic character deserving of careful attention in his own right. Yon Barna describes a period of intensive activity for Eisenstein: for days and nights on end he elaborated the scenes, reading, sketching, making notes and lecturing at the Institute.<sup>51</sup> In his classes – as the stenographer of these lessons, Vladimir Nizhny, carefully records:

S. M. [Eisenstein] shows us photographs of Robeson, saying how sorry he is that they can only inadequately convey the rich temperament of this splendid actor. He recommends the students to imagine Dessalines as looking just like this, with just such a physique and marvellous face.<sup>52</sup>

Leyda and Voynow note Eisenstein's own imaginative use of a candelabrum as a makeshift prop and/or weapon for Dessalines, and his 'sketch for the candelabrum scene ("scene with the luster") which he transformed into a lesson for his students at VGIK in 1933'.<sup>53</sup> Vladimir Nizhny's notes give a sense of these lectures. The description of Dessalines's escape from a trap laid him by Bonaparte's officers in 1802 provides one of the few insights we have into how Eisenstein's film might have turned out.<sup>54</sup>

Eisenstein went on to read from Vandercook's dramatic account of these events in *Black Majesty*. Describing Dessalines's response to a servant woman whose 'lips and fingers moved in a signal of the secret code learned by all the faithful blacks in the months before the leaders met and drank the wild boar's blood at Bois Caiman', Vandercook details the general's escape to victory:

He wrenched his sword from his scabbard. With the sudden bellow of a wounded bull he jumped to the banquet table and in five great running

strides reached its further end, leaving a wake of smashed glasses and scattered silver. His horse was tied just outside the window. In a single leap he was in the saddle. Before the Frenchmen could recover from their astonishment they could see him, the window frame around his neck and his horse lashed to a frenzy, disappearing down the sunlit road. His roaring voice came back to them. ‘*Aux armes! Vive l’indépendance!*’ In an instant they could catch responses already echoing down the valleys.

A labourer in a field replied. A woman by the door of a wattled mud hut on the hill above heard and repeated the call. The Frenchmen paled and looked at one another. Everywhere around them faint but impassioned cries were troubling the sunlit silence of the tropic afternoon. Within two hours 200,000 voices had joined in and the news had spread to every acre where men lived amid all the vast extent of the colony of Saint Domingue. The blacks, at last, were ready.<sup>55</sup>

‘That’s something like a scenario!’, ‘That’s a scene to stage!’, came voices from the class.<sup>56</sup> In subsequent classes, Eisenstein drew attention to the critical role of the servant woman who ‘represents the Negro masses of the island’. His analysis then highlights the symmetrical movements that the scene betokens, reflecting what he sees as ‘two encirclements’:

At the beginning Dessalines is surrounded by the French and the link between them is the priest. At the end, when the servant links the people to Dessalines, the French themselves are as though surrounded by the Negroes, by the colony as a whole. . . . Thus the conflict in the first part of the episode – the conflict of a single individual with a group of officers – grows into a conflict between a group of colonialists and the mass of the people.

Imagining the transfer of these tactical movements to the screen, he presents a cinematic interpretation of the tipping balance of power:

The sequence can then finish, either on the flood of Negroes in revolt bursting into the hall and surrounding the French, or on a dead pause, as in [Gogol’s] *The Inspector General*, with everyone on the stage frozen, and round them resounding horse hoofbeats, cries, shots, shouts, while the stage grows dark.<sup>57</sup>

For some commentators, such as Richard Dyer, such passages suggest that Eisenstein risked reducing not only the character of the servant woman, but also Robeson as a performer himself, to ‘a plastic element’, a symbol of importance only for their ‘emblematic blackness’. For Dyer, ‘the ideological-aesthetic justifications for this emblematic use of performers are well known – the desire to make crowds not individuals the hero of the (hi)story, the use of individual performers as types representative of social groups’.

Dyer even detects ‘the frisson of the white contemplation of the huge black man’ in Eisenstein’s discussion of how he might film Dessalines.<sup>58</sup> In his discussion of the use of the candelabrum, for example, Eisenstein not only drew on his rich sketches made in Mexico, but again evoked the figure of Robeson:

when such a candelabrum, with lighted candles to boot, sparks blazing and flickering from its pendants, is raised by a man of gigantic stature, with dark face and flashing eyes and teeth (remember Paul Robeson), this will be not only effective, but a veritable climax to Dessalines’ indignation.<sup>59</sup>

However, we see more behind Eisenstein’s discussions of Dessalines and Robeson than this. Marie Seton argues that while it is true that in his films *Potemkin*, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, and *Old and New*, and in the unfinished film, *Que Viva Mexico!*, Eisenstein had used ‘types’ and not ‘actors’, nonetheless given ‘what he had read and heard of Paul Robeson’ he wanted to give Robeson a role worthy of him.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, as Eisenstein himself later explained in 1935 when he addressed the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers, called to celebrate fifteen years of Soviet film, his ideas about characterization in film had evolved. While making *The General Line* (1929), and ever since his time in Hollywood in 1930, Eisenstein said, he ‘took a creative approach towards characterization and depiction’, and noted that ‘introducing Marfa Lapkina into *The General Line* could be seen as an “embryonic” demand for a “hero” in future works’. In the Caucasus in 1932, after his return from Mexico, he had developed new ideas ‘concerned [with] the depiction of important personalities and major characters, not merely “static” but undergoing very serious change’, and so in 1935 he told the conference that his screenplay for *The Black Consul* had evolved alongside his plans for two other films where individual characters were centre stage, *Sutter’s Gold*, about Captain Sutter of California gold-rush fame, and Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*.<sup>61</sup> In 1943 Eisenstein would reflect – evoking those films as well as *Black Majesty* – on ‘the tragedies of individualism planned during our Western tour’.<sup>62</sup>

Some of this concern with individual personality and character, including the observation that ‘Dessalines, as also other leaders of the Negro revolt, was a convinced atheist’, comes through well in Eisenstein’s 1932 discussions with his students at VGIK about Haiti’s revolutionary leaders, including their relationship to the Enlightenment.<sup>63</sup> Again, Eisenstein emphasized the politics implicit in any attempt to film the Haitian Revolution, noting that ‘if this episode had been produced, say, in America, produced by either conscious or unconscious – it makes no difference – servants of imperialism, the heroism we emphasize in Dessalines and for which we mobilize all expressive means would have been removed not only from the scenario treatment itself,

but also from the *mise-en-scène* and shots . . .<sup>64</sup> The thought and preparation that had already gone into Eisenstein's vision is clear from a final passage by Vladimir Nizhny at the end of the sessions dealing with the Haitian events, where he describes a visit to the director late at night:

Before me are hundreds of sheets of paper and diagrams and drawings. On every sheet, notes. The majority, concerning Dessalines. . . . On the last pages are a *mise-en-scène* and shots that in many respects coincide with those arrived at in the lessons. Much evidence shows they are the fruit of long reflection.<sup>65</sup>

### TOUSSAINT UNCHAINED? PAUL ROBESON AND *THE BLACK CONSUL*

In July 1933 Eisenstein signed a contract with Soyuzkino, the Moscow studio, to produce a script for a film adaptation of Vinogradov's *The Black Consul* in collaboration with the author.<sup>66</sup> Though Eisenstein had not yet met him,<sup>67</sup> Robeson was his first choice of actor to play a leading role in any such production. As Paul Robeson Jr later noted, 'Sergei had heard much about Paul as both a singer and actor. A music lover, he had heard some of Paul's records during a 1932 trip to New York'.<sup>68</sup> Later in 1932, Eisenstein had learnt more about Robeson from the English writer Marie Seton (1910–85), an actress turned theatre and art critic, on one of her visits to the Soviet Union.<sup>69</sup> Seton had first seen Robeson in a London stage production of Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* in 1928.<sup>70</sup> She had first met him in 1930, when Robeson had famously starred in *Othello* opposite the twenty-two year-old Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona at the Savoy Theatre in London.<sup>71</sup> Seton describes Eisenstein's initial reluctance (around mid 1933) to approach Robeson, even though 'it seemed to him that [the actor] was an artist whose qualities would respond to his own creative methods'.<sup>72</sup>

However, as Seton notes, that autumn in 1933, 'the moment Eisenstein's classes commenced at the Institute, he felt he was fulfilling himself. Every day that he taught was a pleasure, for he regarded his students as the hope of the future. One of them was the young American, Jay Leyda'.<sup>73</sup> Leyda joined Eisenstein's class at VGIK in October 1933, and wrote in his diary that he was set to work on the *Black Consul* project:

*October 13<sup>th</sup>* . . . Am to work with his assistants on a sequence of *The Black Consul*, regardless of whether it is to be produced . . .

*October 17<sup>th</sup>*. Finished E's copy of *Black Majesty* and my scenario assignment . . .<sup>74</sup>

It was soon clear to Leyda that Eisenstein was still haunted by his failure to complete *Que Viva Mexico!* As Barna notes, Leyda recalled

‘the reaction when he broached the subject of Eisenstein’s unrealized projects’:

He gave me the most genuinely anguished look I ever saw on his face and shouted at me: ‘What do you expect me to do! How can there be a new film when I haven’t given birth to the last one!’<sup>75</sup>

Eisenstein’s dream of filming the Haiti Revolution was nevertheless something that ‘he clung to stubbornly’.<sup>76</sup> Seton recalled that at the start of 1934, Eisenstein’s ‘thoughts turned again to *Black Majesty*. He re-read his books on Toussaint L’Ouverture. But this film could not be produced without Paul Robeson, who was completing a film in London and would soon be free. I suggested going to London to establish a contact... This idea pleased Eisenstein.’<sup>77</sup> On 10 March 1934, Seton convinced Eisenstein to write a warm letter of invitation to Robeson inviting him to Moscow to discuss filming *The Black Consul*.<sup>78</sup> In November Seton was able to present Eisenstein’s letter to Robeson in London, where he was working on *Sanders of the River*, and she remembers Robeson ‘read it, making no immediate comment’, then ‘started to talk about the Russian language’.<sup>79</sup>

It is doubtful Robeson took too much persuading to make a trip to Moscow to discuss Eisenstein’s plans for *The Black Consul*. Not only had he had a strong interest in the Soviet Union since his studies at Rutgers, but also, as the son of a former slave, he had brought his father to tears when, aged seventeen, he had given an impassioned oration of Wendell Phillips’s famous tribute to Toussaint in a statewide high school contest.<sup>80</sup>

My children, France comes to make us slaves. God gave us liberty; France has no right to take it away. Burn the cities, destroy the harvests, tear up the roads with cannon, poison the wells, show the white man the hell he comes to make!<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, one of Paul Robeson’s earliest stage roles had been as Brutus Jones, in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, a play about a black American who more by accident than design ends up ruling an unnamed Caribbean island not unlike Haiti. Though criticisms of a residual primitivism in the main character persist, making direct connections with the Haitian Revolution problematic, in 1933, Robeson had starred in the film version of *The Emperor Jones*, which had brought the work to wider audiences.<sup>82</sup>

The stage was thus set for a tremendous meeting of minds when Robeson, together with his wife Eslanda and Marie Seton, made the voyage to meet Eisenstein, arriving in Moscow in late December 1934. (Fig. 2) Robeson



*RIA Novosti, Moscow.*

**Fig. 2.** Film director Sergei Eisenstein (right) greets American singer Paul Robeson (left) at the Belorussky Railway Station in Moscow, 20 December 1934. The British film director Herbert Marshall (centre), then one of Eisenstein's students, looks on.

spent two weeks in the Soviet Union with Eisenstein, and Seton described their intense discussions:

After knowing Robeson for twenty-four hours, Eisenstein, who was a sceptical critic of great men, attributed human genius to Robeson because he was without falseness. Six days later Robeson, who had met many of the greatest artists and thinkers of the twentieth century, said that meeting Eisenstein was one of the greatest experiences of his life.<sup>83</sup>

Barna remembers that ‘Eisenstein was enchanted by this “black Mayakovsky”, as he nicknamed Robeson’.<sup>84</sup> Both men had been born in 1898, and, as Seton notes, ‘the international fame which had come to each in the same year – 1925 – at the same age, twenty-seven, had never chipped away or blurred their spirit’.<sup>85</sup> Both also shared a fascination with cultures and languages, and thanks to Eisenstein’s fluency with English they could talk freely without an interpreter. Accordingly, as Seton recalled, ‘from the moment he met Paul Robeson, Eisenstein found one more person with whom he felt at ease’.<sup>86</sup>

She goes on to describe the impact of the visit on Eisenstein, outlining the questions of race that Robeson’s visit raised but also the ways in which such questions were transcended in the ideological context of the 1930s Soviet Union:

Though Sergei Mikhailovich never discussed Paul Robeson as a Negro, he knew what it meant to any man’s inner feelings to be a Negro in America. He admired Robeson as a member of the Negro race, but he appreciated him most because he instantly discovered that he was like himself a raceless and classless member of that section of humanity who looked forward to a society based on equal opportunity for all.<sup>87</sup>

While in Moscow, Robeson told a reporter that ‘the most important development in Soviet culture I have seen is in the moving picture field’.<sup>88</sup> There is some debate in the literature as to the exact role Robeson was due to play in Eisenstein’s *The Black Consul*. According to Moussinac, ‘Paul Robeson was to play the title role [Toussaint]’, though he admits he ‘had to return to Paris at the very moment Paul Robeson came to visit Eisenstein’.<sup>89</sup> Montagu is less categorical regarding casting: ‘Robeson tells me that he was approached by S. M. [Eisenstein] on playing Toussaint l’Ouverture (in *The Black Consul*) and maybe Henry Christophe, but not, he thinks, Dessalines’.<sup>90</sup> For Leyda – one of the people closest to this project – and Zina Voynow, Eisenstein’s sister-in-law, ‘Robeson accepted the leading role (either of Christophe or Dessalines)...Robeson still wanted to play Christophe, and Solomon Mikhoels [a leading Yiddish and Soviet actor and director] was to play Toussaint...the Robesons remained in Moscow for discussions with the film authorities...without coming to any

decision'.<sup>91</sup> In a 1985 interview, Leyda recalled that Eisenstein thought Robeson physically too large to play Toussaint.<sup>92</sup>

Robeson remained optimistic that *The Black Consul* would now finally go ahead. As Seton recalls, 'when the Robesons left Moscow early in January 1935, Paul told Sergei Mikhailovich he would let him know as soon as possible when he would be free to return to Moscow and make the film...the matter appeared certain except for the date'. On 6 January 1935, the Robesons had left Russia with Seton to return to Britain, and 'Robeson told Eisenstein he could not work on the film...until the Autumn, because he had agreed to play the part of Lonnie Thompson in *Stevedore* during the summer'.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, it seemed that Eisenstein's dream was on the verge of becoming reality, and, as Yon Barna later noted, 'now, in the Soviet setting of 1935, the theme may have had a ring of actuality'.<sup>94</sup>

Eisenstein himself had perhaps not fully accounted for the hostile forces arranged against him among the Soviet film authorities, who did not now look kindly on *The Black Consul* project.<sup>95</sup> There had still been scope for artistic innovation in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. After 1934, and the imposition of the doctrine of 'socialist realism' on all artists, there was mounting, almost irresistible, pressure on Eisenstein to make more educational films with clear plot lines that would be of obvious value as political propaganda for the new ruling Stalinist bureaucracy. Eisenstein had been criticized in 1931 for his idea of the 'montage of attractions' ('vulgar-materialist, mechanical theory' seen as too confusing for worker audiences and so declared 'formalist' and 'reactionary'), and 'his other ideas that are alien to Marxism'.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, as Joy Carew explains, by the 1930s the Soviet authorities' commitment to Black film projects was unpredictable. The *Black and White* film group had not been supported, and there was a question as to whether, in Carew's terms, 'a film highlighting a successful slave rebellion might not have shown blacks as having too much liberty and as being able to overthrow their oppressors by themselves', accordingly challenging any paternalistic sense that the success of Black liberation movements would depend on Soviet support.<sup>97</sup>

Two days after Robeson left, Eisenstein – presumably after the position of the Soviet film authorities on the matter of *The Black Consul* had been made clear to him – addressed the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers, called to celebrate fifteen years of Soviet film. Though chair of the conference, Eisenstein's own comments on *The Black Consul* were now distinctly reflective and retrospective in their nature, informing the conference in his address that he *had* planned to produce as a film recounting:

the *best* episodes from the Haitian Revolution, what was to have been *The Black Consul*, and which was at the outset based less on the figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture than on the character of another revolutionary general [probably Christophe], who went on to govern the Republic of

Haiti. His story developed like a Shakespearean tragedy, however: there followed a breach between him and the Haitian revolutionary masses, and the death of the erstwhile leader, caused by his increasing remoteness from the revolutionary masses. This role was created for the remarkable black actor Paul Robeson, whom we welcomed here as our guest not so long ago.<sup>98</sup>

Such a shift in Eisenstein's emphasis from the figure of the revolutionary 'black Consul' Toussaint towards the 'black majesty' of King Christophe and 'his increasing remoteness from the revolutionary masses' after the victorious revolution should be seen in the context of developments in the Soviet Union. In December 1934, Sergei Kirov, leader of the Communist Party in Leningrad, had been assassinated, leading to a wave of Stalinist state repression (including the arrest of Zinoviev) in the Soviet Union, and smears against the exiled Trotsky as one of those implicated.<sup>99</sup> Eisenstein's interest in exploring among other matters the question of the degeneration and death of a one-time revolutionary leader was hardly now likely to endear him to the Stalinist bureaucracy, especially in the immediate aftermath of Kirov's assassination.

Throughout the 1930s the controller of the Soviet film industry, Boris Z. Shumyatsky (1898–1938), had tried, as Richard Taylor notes, 'to establish on the Hollywood model what he termed a "cinema for the millions" that combined ideological indoctrination with entertainment. In pursuit of this goal he had little sympathy with Eisenstein, whose previous films had appealed within the Soviet Union only to elite audiences and who had not finished a film since 1929'.<sup>100</sup> After Robeson had left Russia, Eisenstein 'realised he would have to make a film at once. He could not wait for Paul Robeson'. In March 1935 Eisenstein began work on a film about the forced collectivization of agriculture in Stalinist Russia, what would become *Bezhin Meadow*.<sup>101</sup>

#### THE FADING DREAM

Though Eisenstein's plans to film Vinogradov's *The Black Consul* had run into difficulties, Paul Robeson had succeeded in interesting James Whale, the film-director of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat*, in the possibilities of Vandercook's *Black Majesty*. While filming of *Show Boat* was underway, Whale, together with Kern and Hammerstein, bought the film rights to *Black Majesty* as a possible vehicle for Robeson (who by now had made the minor character of Joe in *Show Boat* his own). On 12 January 1936, Robeson told an interviewer from the *New York Herald Tribune* that 'the most interesting thing I can see ahead for next season is the musical play that Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein 2d [*sic*] may do, based on *Black Majesty*, the story of Emperor Henri Christophe, who built his great citadel in Haiti and defeated Napoleon's troops. It sounds like great material, doesn't it?'<sup>102</sup> On 25 February 1936, the idea of filming *Black Majesty* in

England was proposed to Robeson. It was to be directed by Alexander Korda,<sup>103</sup> described by Whale as ‘a man of taste and courage, untrammelled by the superstitions and the conventional convictions of Hollywood producers’.<sup>104</sup>

However, by 1936 Robeson himself had a less high opinion of Korda’s ‘taste and courage’. In 1935, Robeson had had the painful experience of playing African chief Bosambo in Korda’s screen adaptation of Edgar Wallace’s *Sanders of the River*, which despite the director’s assurances to the contrary while filming, turned out to be yet another glorification of the British Empire.<sup>105</sup> When Korda now invited Robeson to consider appearing as King Christophe in *Black Majesty*, Robeson seems to have turned down the offer in protest at *Sanders of the River* and with scepticism about the project: ‘Could you imagine a Black King being treated seriously in Hollywood?’<sup>106</sup> As Kate Baldwin convincingly argues, Robeson’s progressive disillusionment with the cinema was linked to the ‘editorial shaping and cutting that occurred without his consent’; he found greater autonomy in concert performances, where ‘the political message [could] be maintained from organizational start to performative finish’.<sup>107</sup> Korda and Hammerstein’s plans for filming *Black Majesty* were waylaid, and then shelved as early as May 1936.<sup>108</sup>

That very same month – May 1936 – the Soviet film industry officials also decided to cancel Eisenstein’s *The Black Consul* project formally. According to Leyda, in an interview he gave in 1985 with Martin Duberman, the project ‘was probably doomed even before it became a subject for discussion’ because of Shumyatsky.<sup>109</sup> After Robeson’s departure, Eisenstein had corresponded frequently with Marie Seton, and sent ‘love and regards for Paul and Essy’ on 5 February 1935. Eisenstein’s interests in the history, politics and culture of the African diaspora come through well in this correspondence, and he requested Seton send him a copy of Nancy Cunard’s monumental 1934 fusion of Pan-Africanism and Communism, *Negro Anthology*, on 23 February 1935, subsequently thanking her ‘immensely’ for doing so.<sup>110</sup> In August 1936 and then again in December 1936, Robeson again voyaged to the Soviet Union for concert tours and to visit Eisenstein. Writing in the Soviet paper *Workers’ Moscow* on 20 December 1936, Eisenstein publicly praised the ‘memorable treasure of Negro folk songs Paul Robeson brought us’, noting ‘the Bible from the lips of the Negro people is an unusual Bible... our concert goers should be able to evaluate the full power of the new class content in the folk tradition of Negro song’.<sup>111</sup>

For Robeson, as for many Communists, the Soviet Union was increasingly seen as the last bulwark against a world descending into Fascist barbarism. On his visit to the Soviet Union in December 1934, Robeson had been overwhelmed by experiencing a society which was apparently free from the kind of racism which blighted America and Europe. He desperately wanted to play his part defending this ‘new Civilisation’.<sup>112</sup> However, by

late 1936 the Soviet Union was well and truly embroiled in Stalin's Great Terror. In August 1936 the first of the Moscow Trials opened in order to prosecute a 'Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre', and even a genius like Eisenstein was under stricter censorship and control than ever. On his 1936 visit, Robeson had offered to return to the Soviet Union to work with Eisenstein from July to October of 1937.<sup>113</sup> Writing to the Robesons from Moscow on 1 February 1937, Eisenstein commented on Paul's appearance in the film *Show Boat*. While he thought Paul 'a marvel', he added: 'Picture pretty poor, considering all possibilities in it'.<sup>114</sup>

On the same day Eisenstein also wrote to his former student Jay Leyda in America that he now had plans to make a new film with Robeson about the Spanish Civil War, which had broken out in July 1936.

Primo: there are plans for Spain. Secundo: Paul Robeson who was with a concert tour here has put himself at my entire disposition for the time from July to October [1937]! Now both these things can fit marvellously together – taking the race and national problem within the poem about revolutionary Spain...<sup>115</sup>

Vsevolod Vishnevsky, one of the few Soviet film officials who had tried to defend Eisenstein, even sketched out a scenario about the Spanish Civil War, and Eisenstein devised a single set for the entire action of this project, to go into production in June 1937. Pera Attasheva, Eisenstein's wife, wrote to Ivor Montagu around July 1937, 'What do you think about Robeson playing the part of a Morocco soldier in Spain – that is the new idea, instead of "Black Majesty" (sweet dreams! while Shumyatsky sleeps!)'.<sup>116</sup>

Yet just as the Haitian film idea was blocked, so this Spanish Civil War project never materialized. By 1937, both Robeson and Eisenstein seemed to have recognized that their hopes of working together on anything – let alone making a film about race in the context of a revolutionary situation in either Haiti or Spain – were doomed. Paul Robeson Jr, then at school in the Soviet Union, remembers his father had dreams of making films in Russian based on the plays *Othello* and *Stevedore*, and he remembers going with his father to visit Eisenstein in his country retreat at Potylika, on the outskirts of Moscow, in 1937.<sup>117</sup>

Eisenstein's writings in 1937 reveal that Robeson continued to feature in his concerns, noting for example his 'charm' and his singing.<sup>118</sup> In a 1937 piece, 'On Colour', Eisenstein asked the following about the use of colour in black and white films:

How much further will the theme of the clash between black and white in my *oeuvre* take me? I hope that it may be the theme in which white and black take on the full-blooded forms of human beings, a theme that has long excited me, the theme of the racial problem, in which the "whites"

clash with the “blacks”, and where the “black” will be played by that incomparable master of the screen, Paul Robeson! I also hope that it will be a black-and-white theme, yet composed in all the multicoloured diversity of the colours of real life. It is now up to our scientists and technicians.<sup>119</sup>

In January 1938, the all-powerful head of the Film Committee, Boris Shumyatsky, an Old Bolshevik, was arrested and denounced as a member of the ‘Trotskyite-Bukharinite-Rykovite fascist band’; in July 1938 he was shot.<sup>120</sup> He was replaced by Semyon Dukelsky. Since Shumyatsky had taken a gleeful pride in blocking a whole series of Eisenstein’s projects such as *MMM*, *Moscow*, *The Black Consul* and banning *Bezhin Meadow*, his removal raised Eisenstein’s hopes he might make films again.<sup>121</sup> In April 1938, Eisenstein wrote to Robeson declaring that ‘all my troubles are over. New people are running the film business’, and he was ‘thinking in the direction of the brotherhood of nations and races’, and so if Robeson had ‘some fine ideas in that direction’, he should let him know immediately.<sup>122</sup>

Such an internationalist direction and vision ran counter to the rising mood of Great Russian chauvinism among Soviet officials and their growing demand for nationalist films, ideally set during the Russian Civil War. Still more significantly, Eisenstein’s thinking on the Haitian Revolution now centred (not surprisingly amidst the bloodshed of the Great Terror) on the question how a popular revolution had degenerated into tyranny. Eisenstein retained his central focus on the character of Christophe, though now it seems he saw him less as a figure of ‘black majesty’ and more simply as a ‘black tyrant’. As he later recalled, he wanted to portray the ‘tragedy of the transformation of leader into a despot’, in his memoirs writing that the film was to be about ‘the “Black Predecessor” (Henri Christophe as forerunner for Ivan)’. As long as either Joseph Stalin himself was in power and alive and well, or a ‘cult of personality’ around Stalin persisted in the Soviet Union, such a project was never going to be acceptable in the eyes of Soviet film industry authorities.<sup>123</sup>

### CONCLUSION

If the Haitian Revolution has been regularly occluded in the historiography of ‘the age of democratic revolution’, as well as in the national historiographies of Britain, France and the United States, references to the Haitian Revolution on film have remained even rarer. Robeson went on to star in the British film *The Song of Freedom* (1936), a ‘unique instance’, in Hannah Durkin’s terms, in which ‘a black performer was able to reframe dehumanizing representations of historical black experiences into a hopeful vision of an independent black future’.<sup>124</sup> The film constitutes a rare early representation of conditions on board a slave ship, and its director J. Elder Wills granted Robeson a degree of control by offering

him the chance to approve the script. Although, as Durkin argues, the film ultimately may be seen to dehumanize its black characters, Robeson noted on its release that that he had been allowed to play ‘a real part for the first time’.<sup>125</sup> Distributed only in black cinemas in the United States, the film’s potentially radical message was clearly acknowledged, but it was not a vehicle for the more incendiary message of black independence and subjecthood that would have been feasible with a film about the Haitian Revolution. (Fig. 3)

After Eisenstein died in 1948, others not surprisingly attempted to pick up the baton he had left. In 1950, for example, the black American novelist Richard Wright – like Robeson, a friend of C. L. R. James – had plans to make a film about Toussaint, the tragic hero of *The Black Jacobins*, after visiting Haiti itself in July that year. Wright took on responsibility for the dialogue and finding an actor to play Toussaint himself. He had secured local support for the project from the Haitian government and from General Auguste Nemours, a Haitian historian who had helped James with his research in Paris during the early 1930s. However, while Wright had permission to film outdoor scenes in Haiti, he was unable to secure a deal with either the Yugoslavian government or Alexander Korda (now the director of London films) to film the studio scenes in, respectively, either Yugoslavia or Kingston, Jamaica.<sup>126</sup>

In 1952, Jean Negulesco directed a film based on Kenneth Roberts’s popular historical novel *Lydia Bailey* (1947). Set in Haiti in 1802, when the country was preparing for the arrival of Napoleon’s troops under General Leclerc, this recounts the relationship between the eponymous heroine (played by a young Anne Francis) and the Boston lawyer sent to locate her, Albron Hamlin (played by Dale Robertson). Although openly sympathetic to the cause of the Haitian revolutionaries, and presenting probably the first cinematic portrayal of Toussaint (played by Ken Renard), the film version of *Lydia Bailey* truncates the narrative of Roberts’s novel. It restricts the action to the Caribbean alone, and contains none of the historiographic texture of the literary original, for which its author had conducted significant historical research.

More recently, in Raoul Peck’s *Molloch Tropical* (2010), a reflection in tragic mode on Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s removal from power, the contemporary action unfolds in Henri-Christophe’s citadel of Sans Souci, against the backcloth of the filming of a U.S. production company’s costume drama about the Revolution, with this framing device serving to highlight the current fictionality of any such epic treatment. A two-part French TV mini-series starring Haitian actor Jimmy Jean-Louis and directed by Philippe Niang was released in 2012. But the best hope of the Haitian Revolution finally making it to the big screen currently lies with *Toussaint*, the thirty-year-old planned project of Danny Glover and Louverture Films. In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2012, Glover once again reaffirmed his



Fig. 3. Film Poster, 'The Song of Freedom' (1936).

commitment to making sure the Haitian Revolution was portrayed on what he called ‘the epic scale these events require’.

In 2006, Glover assembled a cast including Wesley Snipes, Angela Bassett, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Mos Def, and planned to shoot his film in South Africa and Venezuela, thanks to \$18m (£11m) from one of Glover’s heroes, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Six years on, filming has not started. ‘We’ll get the film done’, says Glover. ‘We came so close so many times, you could almost taste it, man. We came that close and we’re going to do it.’<sup>127</sup>

The lack of such an epic film about Toussaint to date remains a particularly surprising omission given the epic treatment regularly granted to Louverture’s contemporary, Napoleon Bonaparte, who has now been portrayed, with varying emphases, by over 200 different actors, including Al Pacino, Marlon Brando, Douglas Fairbanks, Rod Steiger, Dennis Hopper and Danny DeVito.<sup>128</sup>

In such a context, Eisenstein’s ultimately unproduced project has acquired an iconic status, even if its importance has been dismissed in some of the scholarly literature. For Richard Dyer, there is little need to try to imagine how Eisenstein might have used Robeson to film the Haitian Revolution given ‘the emblematic approach’ towards Robeson’s blackness already taken by a group of Eisenstein-influenced film-makers in the short 1930 film *Borderline*. ‘*Borderline*’s use of Robeson might even be the same as Sergei Eisenstein’s would have been, had they made a film together as they planned’.<sup>129</sup> This seems unfair not only to Eisenstein’s skills as a film-maker and his changing appreciation of the importance of individual character during the 1930s, but also to his personal appreciation of Robeson as an actor, and more generally to the way in which the Haitian Revolution gripped Eisenstein’s imagination as an artist. Moreover, there seems little doubt that Robeson himself would not have consented to be used as a performer in a merely passive or emblematic way in such a film, given his own understanding and appreciation of the Haitian Revolution. In March 1936, Robeson had starred on the London stage in a production of C.L.R. James’s fine anti-imperialist play *Toussaint Louverture: the Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (1934).<sup>130</sup> In 1959, in Britain playing Othello once again at Stratford, in his last spell on the stage, Robeson told Jan Carew that ‘one of his greatest regrets in life was not being able to act the part of Toussaint L’Ouverture in a film’.<sup>131</sup>

Dyer also suggests that the ‘dispute over what part Robeson would have played’ has little to interest scholars as ‘it is not a question of what Eisenstein did or did not think, but rather of the way Robeson figures in the discourse of Soviet montage theory’.<sup>132</sup> Yet the significance of Eisenstein’s ‘Haiti project’ goes far beyond the potential presence of Robeson as a performer – important as that is. It raises questions about

its place among the various artistic representations of the Haitian Revolution (from the novel and poetry to theatre and the visual arts) in the crisis-ridden 1930s, when Haiti was forced into the international spotlight by the brutal U.S. occupation. In 1930s America, Michael Denning points out, while the black insurrection on Haiti had ‘long been part of African-American culture’, ‘the narrative of Haiti’s “black Jacobins” ran through Popular Front culture’ on the American Left more generally. At the Lafayette Theater, Harlem, in 1936, Orson Welles ‘turned the Scotland of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into the Haiti of the years following the Haitian Revolution, casting Macbeth as the black Haitian emperor Henri Christophe’. After the success of this so-called ‘Voodoo’ or ‘Haitian *Macbeth*’, black companies of the recently established New Deal Federal Theater Project went on to perform *Black Empire* (Los Angeles 1938) and *Haiti* by William Dubois (New York, 1938). Meanwhile Langston Hughes wrote a play, *Emperor of Haiti*, and began work on the libretto for *Troubled Island*, an ambitious three-act opera about Haiti’s Revolution by William Grant Still. (Hughes went off to Spain and the libretto was completed by Verna Arvey.)<sup>133</sup> Through such productions American audiences were exposed to the drama of Haitian revolutionary history and invited to make connections with contemporary racial segregation at home or with the rise of fascism abroad.<sup>134</sup> Interwar representations of Haiti show how the nation-state acquired the status of a Black Atlantic phenomenon. The implications of the Haitian Revolution and its post-revolutionary history resonated from America to Europe, and from sub-Saharan Africa (especially with international responses to the invasion of Ethiopia by Fascist Italy in 1935) to the Soviet Union.

Eisenstein’s understanding of the Haitian Revolution and its meaning, and of how it might be portrayed on film, has also to be placed in the wider context of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into Stalinist counter-revolution. As this article suggests, Eisenstein’s views on what was most significant about the Haitian Revolution seem to shift in the wider circumstances of an ever-changing Soviet reality. That both the Hollywood establishment and the Stalinist bureaucracy blocked Eisenstein’s plans to film either *Black Majesty* or *The Black Consul* illustrates the process by which the Haitian Revolution became, in the words of the late Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot, an ‘unthinkable’ event, and so silenced. The precise reasons for this ‘silencing’ might differ: neo-colonialism in the case of America, revolutionary degeneration in the case of the Soviet Union. Yet for all the differences between the capitalist West and the ‘new civilization’ of Stalinist Russia, between the rich owners of the film studios in Hollywood and the bureaucratic controllers of the Soviet film industry, there were clearly some films that those in power always thought were best left unmade.

Nonetheless, Eisenstein’s dream remains an inspiration for future filmmakers. One of the last glimpses of what might have resulted is in a piece of his writing from 1946–7, entitled ‘Pathos’. Here, Eisenstein recalled that the

great Soviet poet Mayakovsky visited the US in 1925, and wrote a poem entitled 'Black and White', about 'an old Negro who works as a shoeshine boy in Havana'. As Eisenstein noted: 'It depicts the racial prejudice in the United States which had so infuriated Mayakovsky'. He continued:

From the Negro's, Willie's, point of view the entire world is differentiated into two colors: black and white:

The white  
eats  
    the pineapple ripe,  
the black –  
    rotten and specked.  
Clean white work  
    is done by the whites  
dirty black work –  
    by the blacks.

However, only one factor, incomprehensible to the Negro, Willie, throws this sharp demarcation off balance.

Why must sugar also,  
    whiter than white,  
be made by  
    a blacker than black?

In answer to his question, he is given a slap across the face by the pure white sugar king, who is 'whiter than a herd of clouds'.

Eisenstein then went on to imagine how this act of discipline and punishment might be filmed with the use of colour to signify not only exploitation and oppression but also the potential possibilities of resistance and revolt:

Scarlet blood floods the black face and oozes onto the white clothes.

Thus, the confrontation between black and white in a social conflict explodes into a red color – the color of blood, inflamed by the color of social protest – the color of revolution.<sup>135</sup>

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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13 Eisenstein, ‘The Christmas Tree’, pp. 59–61.

14 An early record he left of his interest is dated in Paris [January 1930], before the signing of the Paramount contract (April 1930). Jay Leyda and Zina Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, London, 1982, p. 74. For interwar ‘Black Paris’, see Jonathan P. Eburne and Jeremy Braddock, ‘Introduction: Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 51: 4, 2005.

15 There remains some uncertainty regarding this film’s likely content given criticism of Muse later in his career (despite key works such as *Way Down South*, the 1939 project with Langston Hughes) for playing what have been perceived as stereotypical black roles. See Larry Richards, *African American Films Through 1959: a Comprehensive Illustrated Filmography*, Jefferson NC, 1998, p. 174. See also Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War 2*, Chapel Hill, 2007, p. 233.

16 S. M. Eisenstein, ‘Bookshops’ [c. 1946], in *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 4*, ed. Taylor, p. 369. On Chicago, see Marie Seton, *Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein: a Biography*, London, 1952, p. 164. See also Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 154, and Sergei Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories: an Autobiography*, London, 1988, p. 192.

17 Montagu was the third son of second Baron Swaythling and a leading light in British table-tennis between the wars. On Montagu, see ‘Interview: Ivor Montagu’, *Screen* 13: 3, 1972. Eisenstein later recalled Montagu as ‘a particularly outspoken Englishman from Cambridge’. See *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 4*, ed. Taylor, pp. 690, 841, n. 6.

18 Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*, Berlin, 1968, p. 346.

19 See Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films*, London, 1948, pp. 48, 56.

20 Léon Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein: an Investigation into his Films and Philosophy*, New York, 1970, p. 207.

21 ‘Notes by I.M. [Ivor Montagu]’, in Vladimir Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, transl. Ivor Montagu and Jay Leyda, New York, 1962, pp. 165–77 (p. 170).

22 Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*, pp. 101, 346; and *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 4*, ed. Taylor, p. 369.

23 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 170.

24 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 27.

25 On the occupation, see Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940*, Chapel Hill, 2001. See also Kate Dossett, ‘Commemorating Haiti on the Harlem Stage’, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 22: 1, 2010.

26 See Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, ‘Fever and Fret: the Haitian Revolution and African American Responses’, in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, London, 2010.

27 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 171.

28 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, New York, 1986, p. 130.

29 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.

30 Yon Barna, *Eisenstein*, London, 1973, p. 189. On Mexico see Inga Karetnikova in collaboration with Leon Steinmetz, *Mexico According to Eisenstein*, Albuquerque, 1991.

31 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, pp. 74, 157. In 1982 the Haiti sketches – some of which are reprinted in the Leyda and Voynow volume – were in the Eisenstein Archives at the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art (TsGALI), and the Eisenstein Kabinet in Moscow. There is also material in the Lic. Xavier Campos Ponce Collection, Mexico, including photographs given to Yon Barna.

32 Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*, p. 346.

- 33 Quoted in Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein*, p. 65.
- 34 Barna, *Eisenstein*, p. 268.
- 35 Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, p. 273.
- 36 *Eisenstein 2: a Premature Celebration of Eisenstein's Centenary*, ed. Jay Leyda, London, 1988, p. 50.
- 37 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.
- 38 Barna, *Eisenstein*, p. 189.
- 39 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.
- 40 *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 1: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. Richard Taylor and transl. Richard Powell, London, 1988, p. 221.
- 41 See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), London, 2001, p. 336. Anatoly Kornelievich Vinogradov's novel, *The Black Consul*, translated by Emile Burns, was published by Gollancz in London in 1935.
- 42 See Sergei M. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, London, 1968, p. 176, and Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 316.
- 43 Percy Waxman, *The Black Napoleon: the Story of Toussaint Louverture*, New York, 1931, p. 293. On Waxman's work, see David Scott, *Scripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Durham NC, 2004, pp. 81, 243.
- 44 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 316.
- 45 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74. Intriguingly, Eisenstein had read Michelet's *L'Oiseau* (1857), which has a brief passage on Toussaint Louverture. See *The Eisenstein Collection*, ed. Richard Taylor, Oxford, 2006, p. 154.
- 46 *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 4*, ed. Taylor, p. 334.
- 47 Sergei Eisenstein, 'Cinematography with Tears! The Way of Learning', *Close Up* 10: 1, March 1933, pp. 5–7. See also Sergei Eisenstein, 'A Course in Treatment', in Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. Jay Leyda, London, 1977, pp. 87–90.
- 48 'Russian to film life of L'Ouverture', *Negro Worker*, April–May 1933.
- 49 On this project, see Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, pp. 115–39, and Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: an Autobiographical Journey*, New York, 2000, pp. 69–99.
- 50 Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, pp. 125, 127, and C. L. R. James, 'On *Gone with the Wind* [1940], in *C. L. R. James on the "Negro Question"*, ed. Scott McLemee, Jackson MI, 1996, p. 54.
- 51 Barna, *Eisenstein*, p. 189.
- 52 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 27.
- 53 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.
- 54 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 20–2.
- 55 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 22–3.
- 56 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 23.
- 57 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 25–6.
- 58 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 130.
- 59 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 58.
- 60 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 78.
- 61 *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 3: Writings, 1934–47*, ed. Richard Taylor and transl. Richard Powell, London, 1996, p. 23.
- 62 S. M. Eisenstein, 'Unity', in *The Battleship Potemkin: the Greatest Film Ever Made*, ed. Herbert Marshall, New York, 1978, p. 32.
- 63 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, p. 26.
- 64 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 83–4.
- 65 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 91–2.
- 66 See *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 3*, ed. Taylor, p. 360, n. 27. See also Jay Leyda, *Kino: a History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, London, 1983, p. 299.
- 67 Carew records a chance encounter in Harlem, but there is no further evidence of this. See *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, p. 143.
- 68 Paul Robeson Jr, *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, New York, 2001, p. 213.
- 69 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 251.
- 70 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 43, and Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 114.
- 71 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 55, and Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 134.
- 72 Seton, *Eisenstein*, pp. 316–7.
- 73 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 321. Eisenstein's course was first published in *Life and Letters Today* (London), June–July, 1936.

- 74 Leyda, *Kino*, p. 303.
- 75 Barna, *Eisenstein*, p. 190.
- 76 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.
- 77 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 326.
- 78 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 79, and Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 317. For the text of the letter, see Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, pp. 213–14.
- 79 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, pp. 79–80.
- 80 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 17.
- 81 Quoted in Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, p. 18.
- 82 Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, London, 1989, p. 167.
- 83 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 86. See also Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, p. 213.
- 84 Barna, *Eisenstein*, pp. 189–90. See also Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, p. 213.
- 85 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 86.
- 86 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 327.
- 87 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 328. Eisenstein had Jewish ancestry on his father's side, and so in this sense like Robeson was also of an oppressed race.
- 88 See *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974*, ed. Philip S. Foner, New York, 1978, ed. Foner, p. 102.
- 89 Moussinac, *Eisenstein*, pp. 60–1.
- 90 Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, pp. 170–1.
- 91 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, pp. 74, 77, 83. Mikhoels was murdered by the Soviet secret police in an 'anti-Zionist' Stalinist purge in 1948, which claimed the life of (among others) another good friend of Robeson, the Jewish writer Itzik Feffer. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, pp. 352–3. According to Herbert Marshall, a former student of Eisenstein who had directed Robeson in the 1938 Unity Theatre London play, *Plant in the Sun*, and who wrote the screenplay for the 1940 film *The Proud Valley*, 'Mikhoels was a dear friend of Paul Robeson, and when Paul sang *The Kaddish of Rabbin Ben Sarah* – he had in mind Mikhoels'. See Herbert Marshall, 'Paul Robeson – Aftermath IV', *Bulletin of the Center for Soviet and East European Studies* 23, winter/spring 1979. On Mikhoels, see also Herbert Marshall, 'Eisenstein and Others', *The Listener*, 5 April 1973.
- 92 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 630.
- 93 Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 96, and Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 329.
- 94 Barna, *Eisenstein*, p. 189.
- 95 Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: the Years of Promise and Achievement*, Amherst, 2001, pp. 316, 339.
- 96 Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*, London, 2001, pp. 100, 143.
- 97 Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, p. 145.
- 98 S. M. Eisenstein: *Selected Works*, vol. 3, ed. Taylor, p. 23. See also Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 334.
- 99 For Robeson's public reaction to the Kirov assassination, see *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Foner, pp. 95, 109.
- 100 *Eisenstein: Selected Works*, vol. 3, ed. Taylor, pp. 360 n.27, 362 n. 67. See also Richard Taylor, 'Ideology as Mass Entertainment: Boris Shumyatsky and Soviet Cinema in the 1930s', in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, London, 1991.
- 101 Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 352.
- 102 *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Foner, p. 105.
- 103 Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, p. 236.
- 104 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 196.
- 105 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, pp. 178–80, 627.
- 106 Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, p. 231. In May 1936, Robeson told Ben Davis of the *Sunday Worker* that since *Sanders of the River* 'I have refused to play in three films offered me by that same producer'. See *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Foner, p. 107.
- 107 Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963*, Durham NC, 2002, p. 238.
- 108 Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, p. 236.
- 109 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 630.
- 110 Marie Seton Collection, British Film Institute, London.

- 111 Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, pp. 279–80. See also *Film Essays with a lecture by Sergei Eisenstein*, ed. Jay Leyda, London, 1968, p. 200.
- 112 For more discussion of the experience of black Americans in the Soviet Union in this period, see Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, and Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African-Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937*, Lincoln NE, 2012.
- 113 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, pp. 154–5.
- 114 Quoted in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, pp. 203–4.
- 115 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 94. See also Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 366.
- 116 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 95.
- 117 Robeson Jr, *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, p. 288. See p. 291 for an account of the visit.
- 118 Sergei Eisenstein ‘Laocoön’ [c.1937], in *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 2: Towards a Theory of Montage*, ed. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor and transl. Michael Glenny, pp. 177–8. See also p. 245, Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Rhythm’ [c.1937].
- 119 Sergei Eisenstein, ‘On Colour’ [c.1937], in *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 2*, ed. Glenny and Taylor, p. 267.
- 120 *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 3*, ed. Taylor, p. 362.
- 121 Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 97.
- 122 Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p. 222.
- 123 See Seton, *Eisenstein*, pp. 352–3, 366; Seton, *Paul Robeson*, p. 103, *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 3*, ed. Taylor, pp. 360–2; *Eisenstein: Selected Works, vol. 4*, ed. Taylor, p. 847; Leyda and Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work*, p. 74.
- 124 Hannah Durkin, ‘Remembering Slavery on Screen: Paul Robeson in *The Song of Freedom* (1936)’, *Slavery and Abolition* 34: 2, spring 2013, p. 253.
- 125 Cited in Durkin, ‘Remembering Slavery’, p. 258.
- 126 Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Chicago, 1993, pp. 352–3. On James and Nemours, see James, *Black Jacobins*, p. xvi, and Charles Forsdick, ‘The Black Jacobin in Paris’, *Journal of Romance Studies* 5: 3, 2005.
- 127 Stuart Jeffries, ‘Danny Glover: the Good Cop’, *Guardian*, 18 May 2012.
- 128 Dan Glaister, ‘Big battle over little general: rival films portray life of Napoleon’, *Guardian*, 1 April 2004, p. 13.
- 129 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 130.
- 130 That James’s play *Toussaint Louverture* made it to the stage owes something to the intervention of two friends of Eisenstein, Marie Seton and Jacob (‘Jack’) Isaacs, (1896–1973). See C. L. R. James, *Toussaint Louverture: the Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History: a Play in Three Acts*, Durham NC, 2013.
- 131 Jan Carew, ‘Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois in London’, *Race and Class* 46: 2, 2004, p. 43.
- 132 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 130.
- 133 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1998, pp. 394–7. For more on Langston Hughes and Haiti, see Philip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*, Charlottesville, 2014, pp. 37–55.
- 134 Charles Forsdick, ‘“Burst of Thunder, Stage Pitch Black”: the place of Haiti in US inter-war Cultural Production’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 14: 5, 2011, pp. 7–18.
- 135 Sergei Eisenstein, *Non-Indifferent Nature*, transl. Herbert Marshall, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 58–9. For Dorian Rottenberg’s translation of the complete text of ‘Black and White’, see Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Works in Three Volumes, vol. 1, Selected Verse*, Raduga Publishers, [Moscow], 1985, pp. 138–40.