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**Anthony Ballas**

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## Colonialism, Cinema and Revolution

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ANTHONY BALLAS

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CINEMA IS NOT ALWAYS REVOLUTIONARY, BUT REVOLUTION is always cinematic. Countless episodes from revolutionary history have been captured on celluloid for decades and populated with the familiar cast of star-studded and star-spangled 'great men' elevated in both Hollywood and the Euro-American *mythos*: Jeff Daniels as Washington, Nick Nolte as Jefferson, Paul Giamotti as Adams, and so on. This is a cinema, in other words, brimming with land speculators, slave-owners, their legal counsels, *faux* radicals and rapists.

In all their alabaster glory, such vaunted and apparently regal figureheads have been celebrated if not outright worshipped on the silver screen over cinema's *longue durée*; their powder-wigged visages regularly plastered on promotional posters in multiplexes and monumentalised in digital monochrome on streaming platforms worldwide. In Hollywood in particular, the visual history of the 'Age of Revolutions' unfolds as though it were an unbroken, decades-long tracking shot spanning the history of settler colonialism, Western imperialism and its jingoistic march through twentieth- and twenty-first-century cinema – shot in both HD and out of the barrel of a gun.

Although films based on the so-called Age of Revolutions are anything but scarce in Hollywood and European cinema, it may come as a surprise for many to learn that the Haitian Revolution is conspicuously absent from the big screen historically as today. *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*<sup>1</sup> is Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's meticulous exploration of the visual legacy of the Haitian Revolution in Hollywood and throughout the Western world, offering a corrective to the decades of cinematic and scholarly neglect of the revolution and its historical import.

Sepinwall, a historian of France and Haiti, examines in granular detail the twin legacies of settler colonialism and cinema's dismissal of the world historical events that transpired in Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804, the Western Hemisphere's first slave rebellion to culminate into an independent Black republic. Sepinwall argues that Western cinema has functioned (and continues to function) as a parallel form of domination in lockstep with the West's neocolonial devastation of Haiti. Despite having all of the ingredients for a big-budget epic – complete with the thrills, adventures, intrigues, twists and turns of any Hollywood war film or western – Haiti and its revolution have received short shrift on the silver screen, the predominant cultural and ideological apparatus of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As readers ought already to have anticipated, the reasons for this neglect are multiple, involving a braid of economic, racial and politico-ideological conditions set in motion by the onslaught of settler colonialism, slavery and white supremacy which have shaped the island nation from the 1500s through to our present century. Sepinwall reminds us how, in 2000, then president of France Jacques Chirac claimed without a shred of irony that Haiti had never been a French colony, symptomatically reproducing the broader historical amnesia of Haiti and its revolution in Western thought (116). This amnesia is reminiscent of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot, from whom Sepinwall borrows amply, famously described as the unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Just as the history of settler colonialism and slavery has been repressed in the West, as decades of erasure, disavowal, and omission all attest (not to mention the contemporary attacks on Critical Race Theory and on *The 1619 Project*,<sup>3</sup> and the recently attempted measure to re-label slavery as “involuntary relocation”<sup>4</sup> in Texas textbooks), Hollywood too has forgotten that the ‘Age of Revolutions’ was also the ‘Age of Slavery’, a period marked by the febrile convictions of white supremacy and its counterrevolutionary accomplice: a nascent capitalism hellbent on accumulation through the dispossession of the Indigenous and the unpaid labour of enslaved Africans. And the study of Haiti and its revolution serves as a limit case for all of the above.

It is curious that the Haitian Revolution has made its way into other forms of media more regularly; from Herman Melville to Charles Mingus, through painting, literature, music, in theatre via C.L.R. James and poetry by way of Langston Hughes.<sup>5</sup> Cinema, however, has served as an aesthetics of amnesia, systematically foreclosing the revolution from the popular imagination. In

this way, any ‘cinema of revolution’ that is negligent of Toussaint, Dessalines, Boukman and Fatiman, and that is consciously *sans* the severed limbs and bloodied and fractured skulls of slave masters, is hardly worthy of the name.

The earliest iteration of Haiti in cinema arrived via what Roger Luckhurst has called the “gothic palette”<sup>6</sup> of horror films like *White Zombie* (1931), an aesthetic inherited in large part from literary figures like Lafcadio Hearn, who imagined Haiti as an exotic, dark and dangerous den of thieves, saturated by mysticism and voodoo – an imagination as ideologically problematic as it was aesthetically stunted. Zombie cinema, in other words, reduced Haiti down to a mere style or motif, sanitising the horrors of slavery behind an eldritch veneer.

Turning away from these and other tired tropes, Sepinwall instead examines a host of mostly unknown or underappreciated screen media from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through the close analysis of films both made and unmade, films and scripts which were censored for their apparent communist sympathies and for their lack of empathetic white heroes, films made in the United States, France, Haiti and the Caribbean more broadly, and through a host of different genres, including documentary, drama, romance, short film, animation, and television, Sepinwall not only broadens but also deepens our understanding of the cinematic historiography of the Pearl of the Antilles. Perhaps most surprisingly, Sepinwall comments at length on video game depictions of Haiti and the Revolution produced by Haitian and non-Haitian game designers, dedicating the book’s final chapters thereto (we will return to video games below).

*Slave Revolt on Screen* opens with a bit of bathos. The introduction begins with an explication of Chris Rock’s *Top Five*, his 2014 film in which the comedian plays André Allen, an actor and director who makes a film about the Haitian Revolution, only to be met with hostility toward the way it “chronicles Black violence against whites”. As Sepinwall writes, “*Top Five* subtly pointed to Hollywood’s avoidance of subjects like the Haitian Revolution and its near-total disinterest in portraying Black revolutionaries sympathetically” (3), a subtext in the film to which critics and scholars have yet to pay much attention. For Sepinwall, *Top Five* marks an unexpected foray into the West’s historical amnesia of Haiti and its revolution. Sepinwall will go on to dedicate Chapter 5 to *Top Five*, commenting on Rock as a trickster figure, employing the African American “tradition of doubled or double-voiced humor”, or “signifyin(g)” (105), the subject of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s classic 1988 book *The Signifying Monkey*.

In Chapter 1, Sepinwall appraises how well films represent the Haitian Revolution, particularly how films out of the United States like *Burn!* (1969) with Marlon Brando and *Emperor Jones* (1933) starring Paul Robeson, as well as the French miniseries *Toussaint Louverture* (2012), distort the history of the revolution. In Chapter 2, Sepinwall turns to Caribbean features like *Tula: The Revolt* (2013) and *El siglo de las luces* (1992), claiming that although they represent the Haitian Revolution more sympathetically and with better accuracy than the films in Chapter 1, “the Revolution remains subplot or metaphor in these films, rather than their center” (54).

Chapter 3, alliteratively titled “Handling Haiti in HUAC-era Hollywood”, is a high point of Part I. In this chapter, Sepinwall explicates the production history of 20th Century Fox’s 1952 film, *Lydia Bailey*, which, despite featuring certain familiar sexist and racist tropes (including blackface), is “startlingly antiracist and ahead of its time” according to Sepinwall (56). In this chapter, Sepinwall disentangles the complicated production history of the film, including funding difficulties, its ever-changing personnel and its often seismically shifting script logistics, seamlessly transitioning between close reading, visual analysis, biography and historiography. Along the way, Sepinwall provides a robust commentary on the post-war context of Hollywood during the HUAC years out of which *Lydia Bailey* was produced, examining how the political atmosphere of the 1940s and 50s contributed to the stylistic, dialogic and other production details of the film; with anti-racist and anticolonialist movements of the 40s and 50s, and class and ‘red scare’ politics together giving shape to the final product, a depiction that treats “the Haitian Revolution as analogous to other Atlantic Revolutions” (78).

Sepinwall also provides a curious detail in this chapter, recounting her own difficulties with accessing the film; despite its big budget (~\$1.775 million at the time of production), *Lydia Bailey* “was never issued on home-viewing format in the US, and it has not been shown on television for decades; until recently, *only one US library owned a copy*” (56, my emphasis). This insightful kernel punctuates the themes of disavowal and amnesia explored throughout the book, a pithy reminder of the political and economic barriers erected by Hollywood which continue to bar the Haitian Revolution from reaching mass audiences.

In Chapter 4, Sepinwall discusses unmade films about the Haitian Revolution, focusing on how projects were often unfunded or underfunded given their lack of benevolent white sympathisers, co-conspirators and heroes. The list of names

associated with unmade films throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first is so striking that it is worth reproducing in full: Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn, John Huston, Herb Jeffries, Ellen Holly, Sergei Einstein in collaboration with Paul Robeson, C.L.R. James, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, William Marshall in collaboration with Ousmane Sembène, Robert Altman, Louis Malle, Danny Glover, Angela Bassett, Don Cheadle, Wesley Snipes, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Mos Def and even Hugo Chavez. In Part 1, Sepinwall brilliantly explicates the ways in which different national cinemas and productions big and small disproportionately represent the revolution on screen.

In Part 2, Sepinwall further delineates the uneven cinematic representation of the revolution, turning to Haitian productions themselves which were inspired by the revolution. In Chapter 7, Sepinwall offers an account of the horrors of the Duvalier years leading up to the 2004 bicentennial of the revolution, discussing the violent persecution of artisans under both Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier, and the Tontons Macoutes (Papa Doc's death squads), including the on-air assassination of Jean Dominique in 2000, providing these and other details typically unknown to Western audiences and Euroamerican film scholars alike.

Sepinwall discusses films by Raoul Peck and Arnold Antonin, who were both critical of Aristide, as well as films from the wider Haitian diaspora, from Montreal to New York. Films like *Ayiti Toma: In the Land of the Living* (2013), Peck's *Moloch Tropical* (2009), and the "Haitian-born, Brooklyn-raised artist" Sage Love's *Ayiti: The Awakening* (2019) are discussed in this chapter among many others. According to Sepinwall, these films offer more thorough and thoughtful interpretations of the Haitian Revolution, featuring details often completely absent from their French and American counterparts, such as the sympathetic portrayal of revolutionary leaders like Dessalines, Toussaint and Christophe, as well as Boukman and Pétion (158). Haitian reflections on the legacy of the revolution also include depictions of revolutionary women such as Cécile Fatiman and Catherine Flon – the figures who receive the most neglect in representations and scholarship on the revolution. The films in this chapter also offer reverential depictions of the Bois Caïman ceremony, Haitian Vodou and the "role of *lwa* in the revolution's success" (159), challenging the patina of exoticism often found in American portrayals of Haiti in particular.

In Part 3, Sepinwall departs from the analysis of traditional screen media, concluding the volume with the Haitian Revolution in video games. Sepinwall examines games produced in North America, Europe and the French Caribbean,

covering well-known, big-budget franchises like *Assassin's Creed* (2007–present), as well as small-budget, lesser-known titles from previous decades such as *Ménilo* (1987) and *Freedom: Rebels of Darkness* (1988). The book's final chapters on video games are striking for many reasons, not least because of Sepinwall's elucidating analysis on both 3D and 2D gameplay, close readings of the dialogue sequences, cinematic cut-scenes and even the internet fan cultures belonging to these games. Sepinwall emphasises the fact that the millions of users who play games, like the widely popular *Assassin's Creed* franchise, vastly outstrip the number of viewers to ever have been exposed to the handful of instances Hollywood and other national cinemas have screened the Haitian Revolution in any capacity. For Sepinwall, this is a promising feature of video game culture: that the revolution has found a more stable foothold through video games demonstrates a future potential to utilise this often neglected medium to educate young gamers on the unthinkable revolution at a global scale. As Sepinwall puts it in Chapter 9, "younger generations increasingly learn history through bestselling games such as *Sid Meier's Civilization* and the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, just as older generations acquired their knowledge of history through films and even Disneyland" (183).

In Chapter 9, Sepinwall covers the revolution in several *Assassin's Creed* games, including *Liberation* (2012) which is set in French Louisiana in the late eighteenth century, and *Black Flag* (2013) and *Freedom Cry* (2013) which are set in the West Indies and Saint-Domingue before the revolution. For instance, Sepinwall argues that games like *Freedom Cry* offer "a better representation of Haitian slave resistance than most other depictions by foreigners", commenting that *Freedom Cry* doesn't "sanitiz[e] slavery or creat[e] white heroes" but rather "plunges players into plantation society and tasks them with helping enslaved people escape their oppressors" (193).

In Chapter 10, Sepinwall turns to French Caribbean games, focusing largely on the work of the Prix-Goncourt-winning novelist Patrick Chamoiseau who collaborated on two games with one of the first successful Black women in the video game industry, Muriel Tramis. Together, Tramis and Chamoiseau made *Ménilo* (1987) and *Freedom* (1992), while Chamoiseau went on alone to create *Lost in Time*, another game which recounts slavery in the Caribbean. Sepinwall praises these games as "pathbreaking" and "trailblazing", analysing how they "highlight enduring counter-images of Haiti among the Antillean people" against the hegemonic image of Haiti as "a bogeyman, a place where dangerous

Blacks had murdered whites and suffered the consequences of poverty” (210). For Sepinwall, French Caribbean video games are clearly a high point of visual historiography of the Haitian Revolution.

For students of history, undergraduate and graduate alike, as well as research professionals seeking to open up unexplored or underappreciated intersections between history and culture, aesthetics and politics, Sepinwall’s book is invaluable. It serves as a model text for navigating the often vertiginous experience of interdisciplinary research, while zeroing in on the stakes of cultural production in tandem with the long history of the political and economic consequences of settler colonialism, slavery, and their continuing legacies in our present century.

But most of all, this title comes recommended to students and scholars of cinema. It is shameful how neglected Haiti has been in film studies, theory and criticism, and we cannot simply attribute this monumental failure to the lack of films coming out of the island nation over the last century. As Sepinwall puts it in Chapter 8, “the lack of a Haitian epic on the Revolution is not because Haitians have not tried to make one, nor because they lack cinematic talent”, insisting that “[Raoul] Peck’s and [Jean-René] Lemoine’s unfilmed script could have been the best Haitian Revolution film yet made” (177). Film scholars must heed the call of *Slave Revolt on Screen*, and seek to remedy the embarrassing (perhaps unforgivable) lack of scholarship produced on Haitian cinema and its revolution. Furthermore, we cannot unmoor this neglect, this historical amnesia, from film studies’ own racist, colonial roots. In other words, the disavowal of Haiti in film studies is not epiphenomenal; by partaking in the erasure of this major piece of revolutionary world history, film studies reproduces the logic of settler colonialism – Haiti and its revolution are bones in the throat of film studies and Western consciousness alike.


It becomes ever more ironic to an almost sublime degree when calls to decolonise film studies are contemporaneous with the repeated failure to focalise Haiti and often even acknowledge settler colonialism – the original sin, or, to put it in terms familiar to fans of contemporary Hollywood, the ‘origin story’ of the Western Hemisphere. As Aimé Césaire once stated, “to study Saint-Domingue is to study one of the origins, the sources of Western civilization”.<sup>7</sup> The opposite must also be true: to forget the Haitian Revolution is to overlook the origins of Western civilisation, which includes the origins of modern cinema itself. This failure cannot persist unremedied if film studies is



to maintain even the semblance of relevance today – and the same is probably true of media studies, literary studies, if not academia as a whole.

An academy which so persistently fails to reckon with the history of slavery and settler colonialism should be ruthlessly and unremittingly scrutinised. Without a critical account of what Gerald Horne has recently dubbed “left wing white nationalism”,<sup>8</sup> the academy and other institutional bodies seem doomed to repeat these and other failures moving forward. Students, scholars, activists and researchers must take steps to avert such a future; as global capitalism, the wages of Western imperialism, and, of course, the twin threats of climate catastrophe and ecological fascism loom Janus-like over the horizon, the political and ideological stakes have arguably never been greater. And with the Global South disproportionately affected by all of the above and more, it is high time we burn this neglect and other dangerous malignancies out of our political and scholarly practices. We must do more than merely recognise topics like Haiti and the Haitian Revolution and numerous others which have been criminally under-studied in the West. Rather, we must centralise them and their importance in world history. Sepinwall’s work is not merely a step in this direction, but a great leap forward.

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Haiti was the colonial world’s biggest producer of coffee and sugar, planted and harvested by enslaved Africans under the crack of a whip, on soil that was violently seized from the Taíno people, who were liquidated from the Caribbean by European settlers. Today, the United States is the world’s largest consumer of these commodities, as well as the world capital of cultural production. Historical amnesia is thus built into the fabric of global capital’s trade networks and the entertainment industry itself; the former snakes around the globe, strangling our fragile ecology, while the latter severely constricts our already myopic vision of history. What is needed today is a Proustian recollection (*anamnesis*) to supersede the feedback loop of these amnesiac apparatuses. Perhaps sugar, coffee and cinema ought to be our collective madeleine. 

## NOTES

1. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021). All subsequent page references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.
2. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
3. *The 1619 Project*, spearheaded by the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, began as a piece of long-form journalism published in the *New York Times* in 2019, and was later released as an expanded edition in book form in 2021. *The 1619 Project* “aims to reframe [US] history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” – see Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project”, *New York Times Magazine*, 14 August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>. The project has recently been attacked by various figures in US politics and academia. In 2021, Ron DeSantis banned the teaching of Critical Race Theory and *The 1619 Project* in Florida public schools. In August 2022, James Sweet, the president of the American Historical Association (AHA) published an essay in the AHA’s newsmagazine *Perspectives on History* – see James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present”, *Perspectives on History*, 17 August 2022, [www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present](http://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present), in which he accuses the project of “presentism”, and laments how the study of history has been contaminated by contemporary political issues, such as race. (Sweet issued an apology two days after the publication of “Is History History?”.) In her latest book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2021), Catherine Liu, a film studies professor at University of California Irvine, dedicates the first chapter to outrageously and spuriously comparing *The 1619 Project* to the so-called “Sokal affair” from the early 1990s, in which Allen Sokal infamously published a hoax essay in the journal *Social Text*, accusing *The 1619 Project* of perpetrating a conspiracy about the history of the United States that treats slavery and settler colonialism as unique forms of oppression.
4. In the summer of 2022, a group of curriculum developers working for the Texas State Board of Education proposed replacing the word “slavery” with “involuntary relocation” in second-grade classrooms – a grotesque euphemism to say the least. Although it was not passed in the school board, the proposal came on the heels of Senate Bill 3, which did pass in the Republican-dominated Texas Senate by a vote of 18–4 the year prior. SB3 aims to prevent the teaching of Critical Race Theory in the classroom, and even mentions the latter by name.

5. See, for example, the recently published volume, *Haitian Revolutionary Fictions*, ed. and trans. Marlene L. Daut, Grégory Pierrot, and Marion C. Rohrleitner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022).
6. Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 52.
7. Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 100.
8. Gerald Horne, “‘The White Republic’: Response by Gerald Horne”, *Convergence Magazine*, 17 May 2021, <https://convergencemag.com/articles/the-white-republic-response-by-gerald-horne/>; reprinted in *Monthly Review* under the title, “Against Left-Wing White Nationalism (Organizing Upgrade)”, <https://monthlyreview.org/press/gerald-horne-against-left-wing-white-nationalism-organizing-upgrade/>.