



Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall. *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games.* Caribbean Studies Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. Illustrations. 348 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4968-3310-5.

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With the publication of this book, Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall has managed to do something extraordinary: she has chronicled the history not of a particular event or a cultural phenomenon but of a glaring *absence*. (And it's not easy to write a book about something that *isn't* there!) Most succinctly put, the heart of the book is a simple question: why aren't there more movies about the Haitian Revolution? Why hasn't Hollywood made an epic blockbuster film about its heroes, like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, or Henry Christophe? The answer, of course, is racism. With an impressive research base and a timeline that covers the entire history of cinema, Sepinwall spends more than three hundred pages unpacking the full unpublished history of every major (and not-so-major, it would seem) cinematic project on the subject, including many that were planned but failed to launch. Her archive on this score is impressive, consisting of the personal correspondence of filmmakers, mothballed screenplays, and her own interviews with directors, actors, and game designers, in addition to published documents like film and game reviews and newspaper articles on budget and production woes.

Sepinwall's theoretical apparatus picks up from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 1995 work, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, regarding the "unthinkability" of the Haitian Revolution, which includes not only the stunned response of the colonists but also the revolution's later treatment by historians, consisting of two prongs: "formulas of erasure" and "formulas of banalization" (quoted in Sepinwall, p. 24). In Sepinwall's book, this framework indeed proves a useful metric for categorizing the film projects, as does Claudy Delné's application of Pierre Nora's notion of "*lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory) in his discussion of outsider texts on the Haitian Revolution in *La Révolution haïtienne dans l'imaginaire occidental: Occulturation, banalisation, trivialisation* (2017) (quoted in Sepinwall, p. 10). In addition to offering cultural analysis of cinematic and video game representations and their reception history, Sepinwall delves here into their production history and (most impressively) the (non)production history of films not yet made.

Sepinwall previously edited the volume *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (2012) and published *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (2005)

as well as numerous articles. Building on her expertise on Haiti and on the French Revolution, Sepinwall critiques the few films, documentaries, shorts, and documentary shorts that have been made, highlighting where their characterizations of events seem to espouse a particular narrative meant to placate white (and especially French) audiences. This is seen especially in the prevalence of characters fitting the profile of the “white savior” or white ally tropes that provide a foothold for white audience members to connect to the story, as if they could not cathect to the central narrative without being given a character who looks like themselves. Most innovatively, the book also addresses video games that reference the Haitian Revolution, or that depict slavery and resistance more generally, emphasizing that such ludic texts, which have often been overlooked by historians, are worthy objects of study. Indeed, whereas this study of the relative absence of heroic, historical on-screen depictions of the Haitian Revolution reveal a discomfort with Black violence or white filmmakers’ desire to control the narrative, violent video games have lately taken up the gauntlet, raising the question of how “we” want to consume depictions of historical slave revolt—and who is that “we”? Sepinwall’s bibliography on the topic is as thorough as her archival work. Her citations of work in this area done by scholars like Kishonna Gray, Emil Hammar, Souvik Mukherjee, and me (as well as game journalists and reviewers) are helpful to those interested in taking video games seriously.

The book is divided into three sections, roughly: on films about the revolution from outside Haiti and from inside Haiti, and on video games depicting the revolution. In the introduction, Sepinwall explains her approach: “In exploring failed attempts to immortalize the Revolution on screen—and highlighting the flaws of existing films and games—I illustrate how unequal divisions of film capital (between whites and Blacks in Hollywood, between filmmakers in formerly colonizing and formerly colonized countries, and

between filmmakers in Haiti and elsewhere) distort cinematic depictions of Haiti” (p. 8). In doing so, films and film projects and video game narratives are evaluated for the ways they may efface or diminish the Haitian Revolution, evidencing Trouillot’s “unthinkability.” Chapter 8, for example, includes a lengthy reading of the eventually abandoned script authored by Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck for the 2012 *Toussaint Louverture* miniseries, which was eventually credited to Philippe Niang. Sepinwall provides many important distinctions between Peck’s draft and the final product, uncovering, in this case, what has been erased. Other areas address productions in which the revolution is trivialized, and, in rare cases, those where films rise to the level of commemorations. Helpfully, the book begins with a capable and handy summary of the revolution in the introduction.

Part 1, consisting of the first six chapters, titled “Foreign Views of the Revolution,” includes the few US films where the Haitian Revolution is depicted off stage, as the backdrop, or in a subplot, for it is never the main event. The first chapter discusses *Emperor Jones* (directed by Dudley Murphy, 1933), a sort of abstracted version of Christophe’s story (based on the Eugene O’Neill play by the same title); Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1969 *Burn!*, set on a fictional Caribbean isle; Charles Najman’s 2002 *Royal Bonbon*; and also Niang’s two-episode miniseries on Toussaint for French television. Here, Sepinwall attends to the films’ diverse shortcomings: whitewashing the ills of slavery, overstating the contribution of white abolitionists, or giving credit to French ideals of liberty for the enslaved’s self-emancipation, what Marlene Daut calls the trope of “Enlightenment literacy” (p. 39).[1] The second chapter addresses four Caribbean made films: *Tula: the Revolt* (directed by Jeroen Leinders, 2013); *Almacita de Desolato* (directed by Felix de Rooy, 1986); the 1993 miniseries *El siglo de las luces*, an adaptation of Alejo Carpentier’s novel, which Sepinwall states “portrays the Haitian Revolution as full of violence, rape,

and chaos” (p. 45); and *La Ultima Cena (The Last Supper)* (directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1976). Even the best of these “uses the Haitian Revolution instrumentally,” for *The Last Supper* may have been made as a coded effort to “support Castro’s campaigns against the Catholic clergy” (p. 47). None of these, in short, creates a faultless portrait of the Haitian Revolution or historical slave resistance. Whether or not such a portrait is truly possible is something Sepinwall alludes to in passing in her invocation of Elie Wiesel’s discussion of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust. How to commemorate heroes who should not have had to exist in the first place is a larger, complex issue—one I am trying to write a book on myself.[2]

That filmmakers often use the Haitian Revolution as an allegory for other political issues is a point further concretized in Sepinwall’s third chapter, the longest sustained discussion of a single work in the book. Here, Sepinwall performs some of the most impressive archival work: in a single footnote, the author weaves together screenplay drafts from the University of Southern California archives, personal correspondence among the producers on file at the New York Public Library, and the archives of leftist newsletters. *Lydia Bailey* (directed by Jean Negulesco, 1952), an adventure romance set during the Haitian Revolution, exemplifies Hollywood’s failure to make a film about the Haitian Revolution. Among the producer’s personal letters, Sepinwall unearths this gem: “I am not for a split second interested in the ‘cause’ of the political incidents connected with the revolution in Haiti except as we use them as the background of our personal story” (Darryl F. Zanuck, quoted in Sepinwall, p. 71). The history of this particular film is enriched and complicated by the fact that many of the people tasked with writing it would be ensnared in the ever-widening target that the House Un-American Activities Committee was drawing around screenwriters at the time, and successive scriptwriters had their own liberal political agendas as they were writing.

Sepinwall leaves us with the sense that it is very shocking that the film was ever successfully made, yet even so, as one of the few major Hollywood films to depict the revolution explicitly, we feel its shortcomings that much more acutely.

This is nicely balanced with the next chapter, which turns to the comedic uptake of Hollywood’s squeamishness. In chapter 5, Sepinwall discusses a subplot in comedian Chris Rock’s film *Top Five* (2014) in which an artist’s film about the Haitian Revolution is a failure. Her discussion of Rock’s use of humor as a strategy of resistance, “playing on” Hollywood’s fecklessness, is one of the strongest close readings in the book.

However, cinema’s blind spot when it comes to the Haitian Revolution is unique neither to US filmmakers nor to fictional features. The final chapter of part 1 begins with a discussion of key French documentaries, some of them made in the wake of the Taubira law, which in 2001 mandated that schools teach about slavery. In Sepinwall’s analysis, these documentaries still seem to stress white abolitionists and subsume the Haitian Revolution to the French Revolution, giving credit for the slaves’ rebellion to the Enlightenment.

In short, whether we are talking about biopics based on historical personages or rebellions on invented islands that merely seem to be talking in code about Haiti (as in, Sepinwall argues, Pontecorvo’s *Burn!*), “such films have appealed to funders chiefly when they include friendly whites, who make white filmgoers feel as if they too would have fought against racism” (p. 88). Documentaries made outside of Haiti and by non-Haitians seem to stress unduly that there were good white people, too.

In contrast, in the two chapters making up part 2, “Haitian Cinematic Perspectives,” Sepinwall presents the history of Haitian cinema and its difficulties under the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, as well as the representation of the revolution in film and the political uses to which some have put it since, for example, in Arnold Antonin’s 1975

documentary *Ayiti, men chimin libète*, an anti-Duvalier feature made in exile. These chapters introduce the reader to some classics of Haitian cinema, like *Anita, fille d’Haiti* (directed by Rasoul Labuchin, 1982), but also address films that the viewer may likely be unable to locate, such as Kendy Vérilus’s *Toussaint Louverture, par devoir de mémoire* (2003). Also featured in this section are *Liberty in a Soup* (directed by Dudley Alexis, 2015), *Ayiti Toma: In the Land of the Living* (directed by Joseph Hillel, 2013), and a 2016 documentary short called *Haiti—La Route*, which grew out of director Francine Saillant’s ethnographic research and which Sepinwall says has “the best and most detailed interpretation of the Revolution of any film” (p. 159, emphasis added). Sepinwall finds that Haitian-made films, or films made heavily with the collaboration of Haitian artists, like the animated short *Black Dawn* (directed by Robin Lloyd and Doreen Kraft, 1978), are more likely to discuss different kinds of involvement in the revolution, including the contributions of women, rather than just presenting a “great man” vision of the Haitian Revolution; they celebrate rather than denigrate vodou; and they stress the brutality of slavery as the leading cause of the rebellion, not the French’s ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Some filmmakers seem to have a vested interest in downplaying the evils of slavery and the self-emancipation of the enslaved and ascribing the Haitian Revolution, instead, to the Enlightenment. In short some are still seeking to *own* Haiti’s liberation, in a narrative mode, whereas Haitian filmmakers “do not just read about the Revolution in books; they live its legacy each day” and are more likely to celebrate the revolution in a truly varied and complex manner (p. 135).

Lastly, part 3, “Video Games on Slavery and the Haitian Revolution,” looks at the topic in ludic narratives, that is, digital video games. Her argument here is that some of the best games “make the Haitian Revolution more thinkable than nearly all non-Haitian films” (p. 181). Sepinwall acknowledges that some people will think that

games can develop empathy and others find the gamification of the subject matter distasteful *tout court*. Much of the chapter also discusses the value of these kinds of texts for the study of history, despite the fact that they almost always feature inaccuracies—of course, so do films. Sepinwall’s reading of various games about slavery and resistance, including the two major *Assassin’s Creed* games that reference prerevolutionary Haiti, makes two major contributions here to the small cache of scholarship on video games about slave revolt. First, Sepinwall includes valuable attention to fan-built content online (the wider field Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux refer to as “Metagaming” in *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* [2017]) in the Animus Database, and AC Initiates, a now defunct community platform that insinuated Toussaint into the narrative. Second, her interviews with Caribbean game designer Muriel Tramis enrich our understanding and appreciation for *Méwilo* (1987) and *Freedom: Rebels in Darkness* (1988), games that characterize the resistance of enslaved persons by “drawing from community memory rather than documents left by colonists” (Tramis, quoted in Sepinwall, p. 212).

The book’s conclusion addresses several recent films, including the controversy surrounding Nate Parker’s 2016 *The Birth of a Nation*, about Nat Turner’s rebellion in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831 and the fantastical blockbuster film *Black Panther* (directed by Ryan Coogler, 2018) as barometers of Hollywood’s comfort with imagery of Black resistance and power.

My criticisms of the book are few. I did have some confusion as to how some of the chapters are structured. For example, Najman is discussed as a non-Haitian filmmaker for his *Royal Bonbon* in chapter 1, and then again in chapter 7 on “Haitian reflections on the revolution’s legacy,” for his 2004 film *Haiti, la fin de chimères*. But that is a slight quibble with form. In terms of content, it

does sometimes seem that in her quest to leave no stone unturned, Sepinwall catalogues some very small potatoes, including educational videos made for internal use, like a six-minute short produced by the Toronto-based Black Lives Matter Freedom school, for the purposes of educating children in its three-week program. At one point I wondered if Sepinwall might address student projects, only to find that, on page 158, she does just that: Sepinwall discusses Sage Love's 2019 *Ayiti: The Awakening*, which, though it has played in some festivals, was indeed made as a student project. Of course, that Sepinwall has been incredibly thorough in her study is hardly a criticism.

This work doubtlessly would have been enriched by more discussion of cinematic devices, especially in one regard: Sepinwall attends specifically to the characterization of vodou ritual and dance in many of these films, arguing that some of the films depict vodou as savage, strange, and sinister while others treat it more respectfully. Without detailed descriptions of these scenes, we are just meant to take her word for it, but discussion of how these varied effects are created might help here. It isn't the subject matter of the vodou ceremony but the treatment of it that affects its depiction. Low angled shots, quick cuts, high-contrast lighting that casts sharp shadows: such devices add up to a depiction of vodou as frenetic chaos. In contrast, other films, like *Black Dawn* (as Sepinwall notes) treat the religion with reverence. And yet, that film does not shy away from illustrating spirit possession and animal sacrifice. To take this further than Sepinwall does, it is the aesthetic choices, such as the steady framing of the subject matter, the combination of colors and animation styles, that effect this. We could even go so far as to say that some elements of the animation are meant to evoke comparison to Christian associations, for better or worse. In the setting of Erzulie's table to resemble the Eucharist, and use of harp music, I would argue, the film emphasizes vodou as one religion among others.

In all, I found Sepinwall's archive staggering and intimidating. I am immensely grateful for this book, and I will lean on it heavily in my own work.

Notes

[1]. Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 50-54. Daut's digital repository of fiction on the Haitian Revolution may also be of interest to the readers of this book. See <https://www.haitianrevolutionaryfictions.com/> as well as, for francophone readers, Delné's book, Claudy Delné, *La Révolution haïtienne dans l'imaginaire occidental: Occulturation, banalisation, trivialisation* (Port-au-Prince: Editions de l'Université d'Etat d'Haïti, 2017)..

[2]. I have a book project in development, tentatively titled "Monumental: Alternative Commemorations of Slave Revolt," that addresses both the absence of monuments to slave rebellion in the United States *and* the uses of absence in diverse depictions of slave resistance. Informed by theorists who highlight opacity and abstraction in their studies (especially Edouard Glissant), I argue that in a range of texts (cinematic, literary, performative, material) absence and abstraction are used intentionally to highlight the difficulties of commemorating this history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-haiti>

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