

## Book Review

Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. Pp. vi + 339; illustrations. \$30.00 (paper).

Alyssa Sepinwall's recent monograph *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games* bridges the growing divide between scholarship and popular memory in Haiti and, perhaps more importantly, creates a model of synthesis to reimagine historical film and fiction as crucial elements of public discourse. Sepinwall's text, organized into three parts, examines cinema-driven national reflection, international representations of Haitian history in media, and international reception to these representations, using the Revolution as a central point of analysis. Though Sepinwall includes an analysis of video games in this text, the primary focus of her monograph is film.

Sepinwall quickly establishes that, despite widespread erasure in the international sphere the Haitian Revolution was a critical event in defining the modern world. The Haitian Revolution created a wholly unique precedent for black self-determination that challenged eighteenth century racial ideologies. This erasure translates to the film industry where cinematic interpretations of the Haitian revolution are conspicuously missing despite a tendency by filmmakers to favor narratives of rebellion. By constructing a comprehensive analysis of film and video games, Sepinwall sets out, effectively, to reconcile fact with fiction and create an explanation for why history and memory differ so impressively on what she identifies as the world's first and only successful slave revolt.

Structurally, Sepinwall underpins her film analyses with Robert Rosenstone's 1995 argument, which advocates for the use of fictional narratives to build historical context.<sup>1</sup>

By evaluating multiple examples of cinematized Haiti, Sepinwall provides commentary on an array of narrative structures and fabricated norms that together create an effective historical backdrop rather than an accurate historical story. While the detailed attention paid to costuming and setting creates an effective visual context through which viewers

can interpret the historical period, it does little to unpack the nuance of the revolution itself. By providing these examples, Sepinwall creates a historiography of film, leading her reader through the evolution of Hollywood's Haiti – a strange world that places romance above narrative, emotionality above race, and crucially reflects a sentimentalized ideal of pre- and post-revolution Haiti, a distorted reflection of the real deal.

This combined analysis is Sepinwall's key strength. Sepinwall's work shows, that while both abolitionist rhetoric and revolution are glorified in Hollywood, they are done so only from a white perspective. She underscores this by including a brief examination of underfunded or incomplete projects, emphasizing how, without a sympathetic white character, many epics about the Haitian Revolution simply do not get made. Sepinwall attributes this to funders' discomfort with narratively endorsed violence against "racist white colonists."<sup>2</sup> The disconnect she evidences here creates a conflict on screen, wherein the romanticization of revolutionary narratives works to erase the revolutionary realities of black Haitians in the late eighteenth century.

Her analysis of Philippe Niang's 2012 mini-series, *Toussaint Louverture*, provides a poignant example. Developed over three hours, the series looks at the revolution through a Europeanized lens of heroism, positing Louverture as a flawed protagonist whose own pride ultimately led to his defeat. Though the film does, in a very technical sense, evidence historical literacy about the causes of the Haitian Revolution, the revolutionaries documented have virtually no agency. The few who are granted rationality through narrative are those, like Louverture, who sought to elevate themselves through a European model of social and financial success, defining 'freedom' through a very white and francophone lens. Sepinwall demonstrates that such changes were made retroactively to the script by the production team in an attempt not to alienate white Frenchmen from the metropole, out of fear that the original script cast white slave-owners in a poor light. It is here that Sepinwall is able to beautifully blend film commentary with broader scholarly discourse to evaluate the limitations of cinematic production as a whole.

Despite her many successes, it bears mentioning that Sepinwall's final section on historical video gaming lacked focus. Her analyses of *Freedom: Rebels in the Darkness (1988)* and *Méwilo (1987)* were excellent, and the broader conceptual questions that Sepinwall raises about the process of gamification are important. Sepinwall emphasizes the ways in which the impressive subversion of colonial power in the Haitian Revolution is downplayed, almost universally, to better emphasize player autonomy and make these narratives more marketable to a contemporary consumer. However, some oversights in her coverage of *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry* work to undermine her overall credibility. When taken as a stand-alone game, *Freedom Cry* provides a provocative history of the Haitian Revolution and grants enslaved black communities more agency than is typical in western media. However, when taken in context of the wider *Assassins*

Creed anthology, *Freedom Cry* tends to use black bodies and a narrative of racialized violence to sell an overarching story about a fictionalized European-originating corporation. While Sepinwall recognizes the success of *Freedom Cry* as a stand-alone game, the work could have benefited from explaining the significance of the game's placement within a broader narrative.

Sepinwall's text contributes to a developing precedent for the historical treatment of video games. Thus, it would have been appropriate here to address the unique narrative qualities of an interactive anthology. Interactive anthologies, by inviting users to participate in the narrative, present more opportunities for layered interpretations of story. Because the player has some control over the direction of their experience in the game, more space exists to explore historical plausibility rather than exclusively historical realities. These blurred lines create a nuance to interactive stories that could be further explored. Apart from this section, Sepinwall's book can easily be described as a masterpiece and a critical read for scholars of any field to consider. Within a classroom setting, this book provides an effective means to introduce students to the issue involved in historical filmmaking and invites students to interrogate their own biases regarding the media they consume, and the stories represented therein.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Rosenstone, "The Historical Film as Real History," *The Film-Historia* 5, no. 1 (1995): 5-23.

<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 100.