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Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen: Stalinist Laughter and Anti-Racism in *Tom Soier*

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Mark Twain and his oeuvre were central to the image of the United States elaborated over the course of the 1930s in the Soviet Union, and the film *Tom Soier*¹ is a particularly representative example of how Soviet culture received and appropriated Twain's works. An adaptation of both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Tom Soier* (dir. Lazar Frenkel and Gleb Zatvornitskii) was produced and released in 1936 by the Kyiv branch of Ukrainfilm, the main studio in Soviet Ukraine. Intended primarily for the domestic market and especially for young audiences, *Tom Soier* has been overlooked in the scholarship on Twain and in studies of transnational relations between America and the Soviet Union.² The present essay offers a corrective to this state of affairs, filling a significant lacuna in our understanding of how the United States was depicted in Soviet cinema of the 1930s. In what follows, I argue that, more than simply a Soviet adaptation of an American literary classic, *Tom Soier* should be interpreted as a film that propagates a specific political message about American reality directed at its contemporaneous (primarily Soviet) audience.

This essay illuminates three dimensions of the Soviet discourse on America articulated in *Tom Soier*. First, I show that, as the film structures its plot around the figure of Jim, the fugitive from slavery, it also turns him into an embodiment of the main traits associated with African Americans in the Soviet imagination. In this respect, *Tom Soier* engages with several other discourses on Blacks in America that had become predominant in the Soviet Union of that time;³ however, unlike those discourses, whether in Soviet film or in the Soviet press, *Tom Soier* dresses the question of racism

and inequality in the context of Mark Twain's novels. This is remarkable because, while Twain and his works were immensely popular in the Soviet Union especially as children's novels,⁴ they had not typically been seen as anti-racist manifestos along the lines, for instance, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which enjoyed similar popularity in the country. The film exploits Soviet audiences' familiarity with *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* in order to propagate an anti-racist message that was not readily evident to readers of the source texts and that, in fact, resonates more with contemporary Soviet views of race in America. Yet the film also deviates from the official line by portraying the solution to the fugitive Jim's plight as a complete break from American society rather than as its transformation.

Second, the film's engagement with the question of Blacks in America goes beyond plot elements to encompass, also, its cast: in casting African American actors in the roles of Southern enslaved folk, *Tom Soier* inserts itself into what Steven Lee calls the ethnic avant-garde of the interwar period, whereby leftist political movements and modernist artists worldwide interacted across ethnic and national lines. Importantly, Lee situates this convergence of the artistic avant-garde and anti-imperialist ideology in the Soviet Union, which became both "a site of cultural innovation" and "a beacon of racial, ethnic, and national equality."⁵ While itself not a direct product of this convergence, *Tom Soier* displays the same cosmopolitan spirit that guided Soviet avant-garde enterprises at the time; furthermore, the film employs the cosmopolitan push on the artistic front at the service of the anti-imperialist agenda that guided the ethnic avant-garde.

Finally, its subject matter, foreign setting, and international cast notwithstanding, *Tom Soier* is primarily intended for domestic audiences. As such, the film makes significant alterations to the plot of both source texts in order to make it politically relevant and more easily comprehensible to Soviet viewers, in a process that I denote by the term realist adaptation (by analogy with the Soviet concept of realist translation). These alterations include the creation of characters inspired by Russian or Soviet literary conventions and types, such as Dr. Robinson, the medical doctor who grants Jim's (frustrated) manumission in the film. Yet a more insidious manifestation of realist adaptation in *Tom Soier* consists of its use of laughter and the carnivalesque in ways that evoke contemporaneous Soviet—specifically Stalinist—cultural codes rather than Twain's novels. The use of a so-called Stalinist laughter is particularly noticeable in the film's conclusion, which allegorically performs Black liberation as it depicts Jim sailing the Mississippi River alongside Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, leaving behind his captors, frustrated and symbolically punished. Motivated by intrinsic circumstances of the plot rather than by external factors, this conclusion suggests that Jim's liberation is the result of child play by the adventurous Tom and Huck. Below I show that *Tom Soier*, beyond being a film adaptation of Twain's novels, becomes a screed against American racial inequality and in support of world revolution and national self-determination.

The American “Negro Question” in *Tom Soier*

Tom Soier presents a veritable potpourri of plot elements from Twain’s Mississippi novels, with a generous heaping of Soviet revolutionary spirit to go with it. Echoing key episodes from *Tom Sawyer*, the film depicts Tom as a carefree and playful child who often sneaks out of his room at night in order to play with Huckleberry Finn; one of the main plot lines encompasses their joint escape to Jackson’s Island and the subsequent suspicion among St. Petersburg’s inhabitants that they may be dead. Besides this episode, the film follows primarily the plot surrounding Muff Potter, Injun Joe, and the murder of Dr. Robinson. The film does away with Muff Potter and Injun Joe, though: instead, Dr. Robinson hires Jim and Huck’s Pap to unearth bodies for scientific research. A scientific materialist and positivist fashioned after stereotypical nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries, Dr. Robinson had promised to grant Jim his manumission. In the cemetery, Pap kills Dr. Robinson (an event which, as in Twain’s novel, is witnessed by Tom and Huck) and incriminates Jim. The lawyer who arrives from out of town to defend Jim after the murder is Dr. Robinson’s own brother.⁶ With the help of Tom Sawyer’s testimony, the lawyer manages to incriminate Pap and release his client from prison but, afterward, ignores his late brother’s wishes and prepares to sell Jim to Mr. Thatcher—the judge at Jim’s trial. *Tom Soier* ends with a reiteration of the myth of freedom on the Mississippi as Tom and Huck help Jim escape and sail away on the river.

This condensed plot summary points to the most glaring discrepancies between the film and its source texts: namely, the emphasis it places on racial inequality and Jim’s struggle for freedom. Although Jim’s plight constitutes a major element of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Soier* casts it in an entirely different manner: Jim does not initially attempt to escape (one of the triggers of the plot of the novel), but is rather wrongfully accused of murder; unlike in *Huckleberry Finn* (in which only at the end do the reader and Jim find out that he had been a free man throughout the novel), in *Tom Soier* he had been aware of his coming freedom from the very beginning because Dr. Robinson had shown him the letter of manumission. In fact, the film places great emphasis on the letter by having Dr. Robinson’s brother lie about its existence in order to ensure that Jim would remain enslaved. Further emphasizing the evils of slavery, the film opens with a sequence (without a correspondent episode in Twain’s novels) in which a fugitive from slavery is captured in the woods by a bounty hunter, who also happens to be the pastor at the church in St. Petersburg. All characters in this scene will reappear later in the film: the fugitive is forced to help the lawyer Robinson in his pursuit of Jim and the boys at the end; the pastor leads the congregation in a funeral chant as Tom returns from his outing at Jackson’s Island; and Huck’s Pap had also been attempting to capture the fugitive, further demonstrating his evil nature.

In featuring so prominently the question of slavery—and, by extension, of racial inequality in America—*Tom Soier* echoes a pervasive trend in Soviet culture and foreign affairs of the time, which Allison Blakely denotes as the American “Negro

Question”: the persistent allusions to the racial travails and the form that Black liberation would take in the United States.⁷ The Soviet view of contemporary America was that of an industrially advanced but socially dysfunctional country, with the travails affecting its Black population being particularly representative of those social ills. By that view, in the American South, Blacks had been relegated to second-class citizenry through Jim Crow laws and police activity intended to intimidate and terrorize them; in the North, they were understood to constitute an integral part of the oppressed industrial proletariat, toiling under inhumane conditions in factories with no legal protections or possibility of advancement (and likewise subject to abuses from a law enforcement seen to be in cahoots with the industrial bourgeoisie). The Great Depression of the 1930s only exacerbated those conditions of social and racial inequality; this contrasted with the astounding economic growth and breakneck industrialization (primarily in the heavy industry) that took place in the Soviet Union during that decade as a result of Stalin’s decision to assert full state control over the economy in the late 1920s by means of Five-Year Plans for the country.

In the sphere of culture, the twin notions of anti-capitalism and anti-racism were manifested in films, books, and an array of texts that portrayed the Soviet Union as a workers’ utopia where representatives of all races and ethnicities were treated equally;⁸ this was often contrasted with the US as the site of lynching and police brutality. Adding another layer to this view of the United States was the Soviet admiration for its cultural products, from the literature of writers deemed progressive (such as Theodore Dreiser and John Steinbeck in contemporaneous literature, and Mark Twain and Jack London among the classics) to the high technological achievements of Hollywood. The most notable example of the Soviet emulation of American cultural production blended with an anti-American worldview is the musical film *Circus* (*Tsirk*, directed by Grigory Aleksandrov), released on the same year as *Tom Soier*, and based on a script by the Twain admirers Ilya Ilf, Evgeny Petrov, and Valentin Kataev.⁹ *Circus* tells the story of Marion Dixon, a white American woman (played by the Russian star Lyubov Orlova) who escapes the American South after being persecuted for having an affair with a Black man and giving birth to a biracial child. She joins a circus troupe performing in the Soviet Union. At the end of the film, the fellow Soviet (multiethnic) members of Marion’s troupe sing a multilingual lullaby to her child, suggesting that the Soviet Brotherhood of Nations (a recurrent cultural trope) extends to those who come from abroad as well.¹⁰

Evocations of the oppressive atmosphere of the Jim Crow South had also become commonplace during the extensive Soviet press coverage of the Scottsboro trial in Alabama in 1931, in which nine young Black men were falsely charged with raping two white women; eight of them were sentenced to execution, while one underage boy was sentenced to life in prison. The Communist Party of the USA took up the defendants’ case, Soviet political activists led a campaign to draw international attention to the cause, and Soviet mass media followed up with articles, photographs, and illustrations depicting American racism.¹¹ The Soviet activism in turn inspired the

visual iconography behind the animated short *Blek end uait* (dir. Ivan Ivanov-Vano and Leonid Amalrik, 1932), in which the fate of Blacks in America is linked with that of Afro-Cubans who suffer under American imperialism.¹²

In her analysis of *Blek end uait*, Christina Kiaer writes that the depiction of Blacks therein is marked by stereotypes, expressed in visual traits and in the widespread notion in the Comintern and among Russian intellectuals that Blacks were “ever-passive” subjects “awaiting enlightenment” through revolution.¹³ This image of Blacks (especially African Americans) owed much to the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which had been embraced by nineteenth-century Russian readers as an Aesopian attack on the Russian institution of serfdom. As Katerina Clark points out, later readings of the novel, including in the Soviet era, consolidated the association of African Americans with qualities of soulfulness, merriment, and spirituality.¹⁴ *Tom Soier* relies on a similar set of stereotypes. Jim is depicted as a docile subject who breaks into song in order to express both sadness and joy—for instance, when he sings a kind of anthem to Dr. Robinson in gratitude for his manumission. Furthermore, only with Tom and Huck’s help are Jim and the unnamed fugitive capable to stand up to the all-encompassing institution of slavery. While both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Twain’s novels were popular among Soviet children, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* were usually regarded merely as adventure novels rather than antislavery manifestos like Beecher Stowe’s novel. By drawing on themes and Black stereotypes associated in the Soviet imagination with the latter novel, *Tom Soier* resembles an attempt to update Twain’s novels to the prevalent Soviet discourse on racial inequality in America alongside *Blek end uait*, *Circus*, and other works.

Where all three films differ is in how they envision freedom: unlike *Circus* (in which freedom is achieved by leaving the American South and moving to the Soviet Union) or *Blek end uait* (in which freedom appears only at the end of the sketches as a mirage depicting the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square and red flags standing in for world revolution), in *Tom Soier* freedom is manifested in a mix of idyll and utopia, as the two fugitives from slavery escape on the Mississippi accompanied by the two children. While the river resembles a Rousseauian refuge from the evils of capitalist civilization, the steamer that the group commandeers from the lawyer Robinson offers a revolutionary exit from the fugitives’ submissive condition, by embodying the means of production required to liberate themselves from their oppressors. Further modulating this instance of utopia—and setting it apart from, e.g., the triumphant ending of *Circus*, amidst a May Day parade on Moscow’s Red Square, or the promise of revolution in the final stills from *Blek end uait*—is the fact that the narrative of *Tom Soier* is not set in the present, but rather in the antebellum South. The film turns a literary classic into a critique of a form of racial inequality understood to be inherent to American capitalist society.

In adapting a literary classic to the screen and conveying it in a traditional narrative style, the filmmakers created in *Tom Soier* a work that stands apart from the avant-garde (whether ethnic or not), including Soviet Montage cinema and other

modernist experiments. Yet *Tom Soier* represents a late reverberation of the ethnic avant-garde, insofar as it turns this same literary classic into a politically meaningful tale of anti-racism and cosmopolitanism. Central to this interpretation is the actor who plays the role of Jim in the film: the American Wayland Rudd. In the next section, I will explain the significance of the casting of an African American actor in a Soviet cinematic portrayal of antebellum America.

Wayland Rudd and the Ethnic Avant-Garde

The never completed *Blek end uait*, based on a homonymous poem by the famous Russian Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, is linked in turn with yet another abortive project from 1932 about the African American condition, a live-action film entitled *Black and White* (*Chernyie i belye*). Although *Black and White* never went beyond the script (unlike *Blek end uait*, some segments of which were in fact made), it stands as one of the most representative examples in the history of the interwar ethnic avant-garde: the film brought together a large contingent of Black artists including, most notably, the Harlem Renaissance icon Langston Hughes. Hughes had serious misgivings about the stereotypical depiction of Blacks in the script (written by a Soviet screenwriter), a criticism which Lee has shown to have been at least in part unwarranted.¹⁵ Be that as it may, the film was never made, and, besides the script, all that was left of the project was the visit to the Soviet Union of twenty-two African American artists, many of whom traveled around the country after the project was canceled and wrote memoirs of their stay in the USSR. Although they all departed the country within months of the cancellation of the project, one of them eventually returned in 1934 after a brief sojourn in the US, namely Rudd, an actor and aspiring playwright.¹⁶ Four years after *Black and White*, he went on to play the role of Jim in *Tom Soier*.

The casting of Rudd as Jim represents a neglected link between the revolutionary spirit of the ethnic avant-garde and the conventional filmic style and more conservative Soviet political agenda of the second half of the 1930s. A promising actor before leaving the US, Rudd was one of only two members of the *Black and White* crew who settled permanently in the Soviet Union; his decision to remain seems to have been motivated, at least initially, by his identification with the egalitarian atmosphere of the USSR, although anecdotal evidence indicates that he grew disillusioned with the country later in life.¹⁷ As one of only a handful of Black actors in the USSR, Rudd came to be typecast in films and plays as a representative of the oppressed working class and a victim of racism; his efforts at playwrighting were seemingly unsuccessful, possibly because they relied on similar stereotypes.¹⁸ Since *Tom Soier* is as much an exposé of American racism as it is an adaptation of an immensely popular set of works by an American author, the casting of Rudd serves at once to lend legitimacy to Soviet condemnations of American society and as an implicit endorsement by an American actor of the Soviet approach to a classic of American literature. In fact, in an article for the Harlem newspaper *The New York Amsterdam*

News from 1937 reporting on Rudd's Soviet career and on *Tom Soier*, the USSR-based correspondent Chatwood Hall¹⁹ writes that "The stories on which the picture is based are too well known to American readers to be rehearsed here," indicating not only the status of Twain's novels among the African American community (the primary readership of the publication), but also the confluence of Soviet filmmaking and American literature carried out to a great extent through the figure of Rudd.²⁰ In other words, Rudd appears in the film not only (racially) as a Black actor, but also (politically, or nationally) as an American actor, lending legitimacy to the production on two distinct fronts. We should not take Rudd's Americanness for granted: for comparison, the 1931 film *Black Skin (Chernaia kozha, dir. Pavel Kolomoitsev)*, produced by Ukrainfilm after a script that draws extensively from the scenario for *Black and White*, featured an African actor in the role of Tom, an African American autoworker who goes to work in a Soviet factory after losing his job in America due to the Great Depression.²¹ Later Soviet adaptations of Twain's novels also featured African actors (professional or amateur) in the role of Jim, an indication of both the scarcity of professional Black (specifically American) actors in the Soviet Union, and of the decolonizing focus of Soviet anti-racist campaigns in the postwar period.²² Conversely, while Rudd played African American characters in other Soviet films, he never again interpreted a character from an American classic novel such as Jim.

What does it mean to have an American play Jim alongside Soviet actors? *Tom Soier* is a concrete example of the cosmopolitan, revolutionary cooperation envisioned by cultural agents such as the Comintern on the one hand, and by representatives of the ethnic avant-garde on the other. Katerina Clark associates the years 1935–36 (coinciding with the production and release of *Tom Soier*) with the height of the Soviet-led antifascist campaign in Europe and beyond, a campaign that relied, to a great extent, on an ecumenical conception of world culture and specifically world literature.²³ Beginning with the foundation of the short-lived World Literature Publishing House in Petrograd in 1918, world literature had come to be understood in the Soviet Union not just as an encyclopedic assortment of representative exemplars of literature from around the world, but also as a political project dedicated to promoting universal literacy and establishing a progressive canon of socially minded literary works. The latter were, in turn, viewed as spiritual predecessors to the Soviet project (in literature as well as in real life).²⁴ Twain was included in the Soviet world literature canon, and two articles published in the Soviet world literature journal *Internatsional'naia literatura* in the mid-1930s (one by Theodore Dreiser, the next a chapter from Van Wyck Brooks's *The Tragedy of Mark Twain*) helped to consolidate the standard Soviet narrative of Twain as a tragic figure torn between the social pressure to produce humor and the innate wish to reflect on the evils of humankind and of American (capitalist) civilization.²⁵ Adding to this reading of Twain's life, his novels also came to play a similar role as that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Soviet imaginary, namely to serve as exposés of American slavery and racial inequality, although this reading became more prevalent only in the postwar period.²⁶ In a memoir of her childhood in

Leningrad after World War II, for instance, the US-based poet-artist Marina Temkina writes that her “awareness of American slavery came with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I was probably nine then, and I wonder if I could get much from the book’s introduction, which explained that Tom Sawyer symbolized the relationships between white and Black people in the American South?”²⁷ While *Tom Soier* avoids the more extreme ideological interpretations at play in Soviet introductions and commentaries to Twain’s works, it updates the plot of the novels to focus on the Soviet favorite theme of anti-racism.²⁸

Nowhere is this revolutionary reading of Twain’s novels more visible than in the film’s conclusion: while the diegesis depicts two white American children saving the lives of two Black men who are enslaved, Rudd’s and Patterson’s roles also ensure that the scene embodies the Soviet ideal of a world revolution led by the vanguard of the proletariat, namely the Soviet Union itself. In other words, spectators witness two simultaneous acts of anti-racism in this scene: Tom and Huck help to rescue Jim and the unnamed fugitive from slavery; Soviet children (the actors Konstantin Kulchitsky and Nikolai Katsovich) join forces with Black men—the African American actors Wayland Rudd and Lloyd Patterson. Sure enough, as an allegory of Black liberation under the aegis of the USSR, this scene strays far from the spirit and the letter of Twain’s novels, which is not to say that it is unfaithful to Twain from the perspective of Soviet interpretive practices. Instead, as I will argue in the next section, this scene is part of a complex of adaptation strategies intended to enhance the significance of Twain’s novels to contemporary Soviet audiences and to convey the purported true meaning of those texts. I call these strategies “realist adaptation.”

Tom Soier as a Realist Adaptation

Watching *Tom Soier* for the first time, a viewer familiar with Twain’s novels is struck by the ways in which some characters resemble stereotypical characters drawn from both contemporary (socialist realist) and classical Russian literature; conversely, the character of Jim, who spends much of his time on screen singing and humming while doing menial work, resonates with then-current depictions of Blacks in the Soviet press and cinema (both musicality and physical strength being traits associated with Blacks). Such alterations or deviations from Twain’s works are deliberate artistic decisions by the filmmakers, intent on catering to Soviet audience’s expectations and preconceptions. I call this process realist adaptation, by analogy with the then-incipient practice of realist translation. The concept of realist translation was coined by Ivan Kashkin, one of the dominant Soviet translation theorists. Kashkin and his pupils tended to focus primarily on accurately conveying the extra-literary meaning of the source text in the target language, whereby the style of the source-language work would be subject to a contextual interpretation by the translator. The task of the translator in this scheme is to interpret, from an ideologically correct standpoint, the reality that is being expressed in the narrative. To Kashkin, the first stage in the process

of translation consists in the translator's acquaintance with the general "design" (or "intention," Russian *zamysel*) of the literary text, understood, among others, as the "place, role, and value of the original," that is as the historical circumstances of the work.²⁹ This step is important insofar as it enables the translator to proceed to an ideologically correct interpretation of the text: "Realist translation, as a weapon of cognition of reality, is our reading of the original through the 'new, fresh eyes' of a person of our time, a man of letters who uses the method of our literature [i.e. of socialist realism] in his work."³⁰ As with (realist) translation, so with what I call realist adaptation in this essay: in adapting Twain's works to the Soviet screen, the filmmakers recast his novels through the perspective "of a person of our time." Several strategies are thus at play in realist adaptation, including the reduction of a character to a stereotypical representative of their class or race (e.g. in the figure of Jim); the appeal to native literary types as a template for interpreting characters in the source work (Dr. Robinson); and allusions to contemporary themes and modes of social conduct in the development of the plot and character relations in the adaptation, most noticeable in the way *Tom Soier* deals with Huckleberry Finn's fraught relationship with his father and how the boys' punishment of the lawyer Robinson is depicted at the end of the film. Having discussed in the previous section the figure of Jim and Soviet stereotypes when portraying Blacks, below I will explain the significance of the character of Dr. Robinson; following that, I will analyze the networks of relationships between, on the one hand, Huck and his Pap, and, on the other, the boys and the lawyer Robinson.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Dr. Robinson is a secondary character whose death sets in motion the plot around Injun Joe and Muff Potter. In *Tom Soier*, in contrast, Dr. Robinson is linked with the remaining characters in a number of ways: he is murdered by Huck's Pap, who incriminates Jim, to whom Dr. Robinson had been planning to grant freedom. He is also a staunch believer in equality, someone who enjoys the friendship of the race-blind (or even anti-racist) Tom and Huck more than of the adults in St. Petersburg. Finally, his plan to unearth bodies from the cemetery is guided by a belief in scientific progress, which is contrasted with Jim's superstitious fear of ghosts and the dead. Dr. Robinson resembles the scientifically minded revolutionaries of nineteenth century Russian novels, most notably Bazarov, the dashing medical student in Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* (also called *Fathers and Sons*; *Ottsy i deti*, 1862), who enjoys dissecting frogs and who uses Western medical practices when treating the serfs on his parents' estate. The film's Dr. Robinson contrasts starkly with his brother (played by the same actor), the lawyer who successfully defends Jim in his murder trial. In a way, the lawyer Robinson's role is to double down on the film's exposition of slavery, since he rejects his brother's decision to release Jim and instead intends to sell him to the judge after the trial. Beyond suggesting the evil of slavery, the film in fact alludes to a common trope in Soviet depictions of America, namely how American institutions—including the Judiciary—help to strengthen slavery's grip on society.³¹

A more insidious sign of a realist adaptation at play in *Tom Soier* is the film's deployment of the themes of laughter and the carnivalesque, which are aligned with cultural codes prevalent in the Soviet Union at the time, most notably during the show trials and public denunciations of purported enemies of the people that dominated the public discourse during the second half of the 1930s. Consequently, as a modality of adaptation, *Tom Soier* produces a potentially sinister interpretation of both novels, turning the children, not only into agents of justice (as they prove to be in the novel *Tom Sawyer* and as Huck Finn becomes, in a moral sense, in *Huckleberry Finn*), but also into agents of a specifically Soviet form of denunciation and punishment. In other words, Tom and Huck, in the film, are not only stand-ins for the Soviet ideal of racial equality; through their sense of righteousness and their denunciations and actions to save Jim, they also end up embodying codes of conduct more often associated with leaders and martyrs of the communist movement in their struggles against reactionary enemies.

The Soviet undertones of denunciation pervade Tom and Huck's (especially the latter's) accusations against Huck's Pap, who had murdered Dr. Robinson and then incriminated Jim. The accusation takes place in the courtroom scene at Jim's trial. The lawyer Robinson calls Tom Sawyer to the stand. Tom exculpates Jim and incriminates Pap, but the judge argues that his testimony, coming from a child, would need to be corroborated by another witness. In a plot element borrowed from *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck had been tied up and thrown in a cell by his father, who had also been guarding Jim while the latter was imprisoned. During the trial, Huck manages to extricate himself and escape from the cell, and, at the last moment, bursts into the courtroom in order to corroborate Tom's testimony and absolve Jim in the process. Huck here comes to resemble the idealized figure of Pavlik Morozov, a young boy who was brutally murdered in the woods outside his rural village in the Urals–Siberian borders in 1932. While this much is a fact, everything that followed over the course of the Soviet press coverage of the show trial acquired the dimensions of myth: Pavlik was supposedly a member of the Soviet Young Pioneers (akin to a communist version of the Boy Scouts) and became a martyr of the movement as a result; members of his father's family were convicted of having murdered Pavlik in revenge for allegedly denouncing his father's (alleged) grain-hoarding activity to higher authorities. As Catriona Kelly has demonstrated in her extensively researched account of the case, Pavlik's denunciation of his own father was eventually downplayed in the quasi-fictional biographies that were written about him, partly as a result of the Soviet revalorization of the nuclear family in the late 1930s.³² Yet in *Tom Soier*, a film set outside the Soviet Union and in a different timeframe, Huck's denunciation of his father, as well as Tom's testimony, serve to highlight their preternatural revolutionary consciousness and vigilantism that echo the foundation myth surrounding Pavlik.

As it turns out, Tom and Huck's denunciation does not suffice to liberate Jim; the boys also need to punish the perpetrators of injustice. In depicting this punishment, *Tom Soier* draws on a specifically Stalinist brand of laughter and carnival.

After Jim proves his innocence and is released from prison, the lawyer Robinson betrays him and prepares to sell him to Judge Thatcher, but the two boys intercede and help Jim escape. Jim, Tom, and Huck float away on the Mississippi on a raft not unlike that from *Huckleberry Finn*, but Robinson, with the unnamed fugitive in tow, pursues them on a steamship. As Robinson catches up to the raft and prepares to take Jim back, the unnamed man who is fleeing slavery intercedes; with his help, the kids overpower the lawyer and commandeer his steamship. Notably, Tom and Huck turn their punishment of Robinson into a form of play: they cover him in tar, creating an uncomfortable resemblance to blackface, and abandon him in the raft, where they hang a sign that says that he has smallpox, in a theme borrowed directly from *Huckleberry Finn* when Huck wants to ensure that Jim will remain undisturbed inside the raft's tent. The fugitive hunters are also shown to be on their way from town to the shore. Here the kids' ruse achieves an effect similar to the episode from the book: when the fugitive hunters (led by the pastor) arrive to capture Jim, they run away at the sight of a Black man seemingly infected with smallpox. Jim and his friends travel aboard the steamer with no clear destination, and Jim, now freed, sings of his newfound—if belated—freedom. The ending aligns with the depictions, prevalent elsewhere in the film, of Huck and Tom as fun-loving boys and of Jim as a naïve man of nature. Black liberation is portrayed as the alliance between newly conscious Blacks (Jim and the unnamed fugitive) and progressively minded whites (the boys) in the fight against racial inequality. The film suggests that the boys' appeal to authority figures (in the courtroom scene) would not have sufficed to save Jim, given that the (American) system of law itself is portrayed as corrupt and haphazard; nor would Dr. Robinson's well-intentioned act of manumission achieve its intended result. In fact, Dr. Robinson's ineffectual actions resemble the stance of the aforementioned nihilist Bazarov from Turgenev's novel, whom Russian radical critics of the XIX century admired and whom the Soviets likewise appreciated, but who had been clearly superseded in the latter group's pantheon by characters who better expressed the principles of scientific (i.e. Marxist) socialism. Instead of Dr. Robinson's bureaucratic paperwork and the boys' legal testimony in the courtroom, the only way to grant the freed man the freedom to which he is legitimately entitled is through Tom and Huck's direct action, beyond the boundaries of the law, to help him escape and to subdue the lawyer Robinson.

The more puzzling aspect of the ending is precisely what comes once Robinson has been subdued, namely the use of blackface as his punishment. Tom and Huck are clearly more effective at liberating Jim than his former owner Dr. Robinson, a fact that, from a Soviet perspective, speaks of their anti-racist bona fides and the superiority of their actions over Dr. Robinson's approach. But the boys' subsequent decision to smear tar on the lawyer Robinson's face seems to contradict their apparently progressive credentials. What are we to make of the uneasy resemblance of Robinson's tarring to a form of blackface itself?

Before tackling this question, I would like to review some cultural dimensions of the use of blackface. In her recent study of blackface, Ayanna Thompson writes that,

in Shakespeare's time (when some of the earliest blackface theatrical performances have been recorded), "the performance of blackness occurred both through the exhibition of black and brown bodies ... and the imitation of blackness on theatrical stages."³³ The exhibitionist aspect is expressed, for instance, in the fact that Blacks were often used as exotic-looking servants in royal courts across Europe (including the Romanov court in Russia³⁴), a process whereby, as Thompson argues, power is transferred from the Black object of observation to the (white) gazing subject. This exotic aspect is present *in potentia* in the reports of the preconceptions regarding the African American members of the *Black and White* crew (writers, actors, artisans, etc.), who noted that Soviet officials and film producers were at times appalled by the fact that they were light-skinned, could not sing, or did not have the hardened skin or callous hands indicative of a lifetime of hard labor, betraying an expectation that all Blacks would have a similar set of cultural and physical traits.³⁵ Years after that project's debacle, those expectations still seemed to prevail in *Tom Soier*, as Jim is consistently depicted singing and performing manual labor throughout the film. Besides playing the role of Jim, the actor Rudd is thus performing a modality of blackness that Soviet audiences would be more likely to recognize.

Besides exhibitionism, blackness was also performed through mimesis, more notably through blackface, whereby white performers exert power over the Black subject by acquiring their physical traits. Blackface on stage, in Thompson's interpretation, is a form of virtuoso performance by the white actor *and* is a means of securing white supremacy by ensuring that the performance of Black characters will remain the sole purview of white actors.³⁶ This form of blackface was on its way out in the Soviet Union; in fact, Kiaer, in her discussion of the representation of African Americans in Soviet media, notes that as early as in 1930 "the common technique of using blackface on white actors" as a casting decision "was falling out of favour, as its associations with American racism began to be understood."³⁷ Six years later, *Tom Soier* stands as an example of this move away from blackface, as the producers were able to cast in the roles of enslaved men, not one, but two Black actors—and, specifically, African American actors. Yet blackface is nevertheless present in the film; insofar as the lawyer Robinson literally displaces Jim as the fugitive on the raft, his blackface fulfills a similar mimetic function as that described by Thompson. There is one important caveat, however. The performative dimension is here replaced by a concrete act of punishment: in a reversal of fortunes, Robinson is made to resemble someone who is enslaved (precisely the condition to which he wanted to resubject Jim); that is, he is made to look Black.

Blackface, that instrument of the ruling class, is here deployed against a representative of white supremacy itself, which is to say that it becomes a modality of carnivalesque punishment. As articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin,³⁸ the carnivalesque is characterized by an emphasis on bodily functions, reversal of moral values, elimination of social hierarchies, and subversive laughter: the protagonist of the Bakhtinian carnival, often the king or another authority figure, "is the representative of a world

which is aging, yet pregnant and generating. He is beaten and mocked, but the blows are gay, melodious, and festive. ... The protagonist is adorned as a comic victim with bright ribbons. The images of the bodies rent apart are also important.”³⁹ In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, this modality of laughter was appropriated by the ruling class in order metaphorically to portray the atrocities carried out by the Stalinist regime as the manifestation of the will of the masses.⁴⁰ In Evgeny Dobrenko’s apt formulation, Stalinist laughter “*was a channel and a legitimizing mechanism of violence, prohibitions, and limitations. It was a tool of intimidation*”⁴¹ deployed by an official culture in order to legitimize itself. Examples of the regime’s self-legitimization through popular culture include films emulating Hollywood-style musical comedies (e.g. the aforementioned *Circus*), the formation of Soviet jazz bands and a sort of middlebrow musical culture,⁴² as well as the creation of novels and films that display the people overcoming enemies, often followed by carnivalesque celebrations (not unlike in *Tom Soier* itself). Furthermore, the mid- to late-1930s witnessed a proliferation of state-sponsored carnivals and other popular festivals in Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union: these carnivals were either standalone events in which participants “cavorted until dawn in masks and costumes,” or became the crowning events of public celebrations and holidays.⁴³ The emphasis on populist laughter coincided with the height of the Stalinist Terror, the perpetrators of which often claimed to be obeying the will of the masses. Stalinist laughter (a degraded form of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, if you will) and terror alike attack “the image of power as it was yesterday. ... An image or figure that is supposed to be replaced is satirized and thus in a certain way annihilated, eradicated simply by virtue of being placed in the past.”⁴⁴

In the scene of Robinson’s punishment, *Tom Soier* displays a similar type of Stalinist laughter, at once progressive (intended to mock a representative of the slaveholding elite) and oppressive (based on violence and cultural stereotypes). On the surface, the scene displays a form of Bakhtinian bottom-up laughter: children joyfully punish adults for their wrongs (and not the other way around), the rich and powerful white man is made to resemble someone who is enslaved (with the promise of corporal punishment—“bodies rent apart”—that it entails), while the fugitive from slavery, now freed, sails the Mississippi. The episode does not just allegorize Black liberation as it had been envisioned by the Party; further fulfilling a political dictum, it also portrays the departure of the old guard by means of the defeat of the representative of white supremacy and American liberal democracy that the Soviets consistently derided (significantly, Robinson is a lawyer).

White supremacy’s defeat is symbolized by the tar on Robinson’s face, here depicted as the result of innocent child play. Yet this is not just an example of the ostensibly joyous, life-affirming carnivalesque laughter envisioned by Bakhtin: by causing the lawyer to resemble a Black man who is enslaved, blackface makes him powerless. It also makes him liable to a different form of corporal punishment, not anymore as play, but rather imposed upon an enslaved Black person by the old ruling class. In other words, the film implicitly pits America’s purportedly false democracy

(embodied in the lawyer Robinson) against its own ruling class (the upstanding citizens of St. Petersburg); in doing so, however, it deploys a racist stereotype by depicting the former as a Black enslaved man, debased and powerless. *Tom Soier* never quite resolves the glaring contradiction between its anti-racist message and the racist connotations of blackface as punishment. Instead, the film leaves this contradiction behind as it ends with the assertion that the boys and fugitives from slavery can only achieve true freedom on the river, beyond the boundaries of American society.

Conclusion

Tom Soier stands as a document of a peculiar historical moment in the Soviet relations with the United States and its disenfranchised Black population: the film's casting of Wayland Rudd alludes indirectly to the failed *Black and White* film project and its utopian promises of interracial, international, left-wing cooperation; at the same time, in adapting an American classic to the screen, the filmmakers also appealed to the Soviet world literature canon that would encompass works from ages past as well as from the new communist era—all at the service of the mission of class struggle. Finally, while reverberating with the Soviet Union's primordial internationalist mission, *Tom Soier* is also, to a significant extent, a reflection of the domestic cultural and political practices of Stalinism, including its modalities of laughter and punishment. While the film's deviations from, and combinations of, plot elements from Twain's novels make it a curious type of adaptation, what stands out the most is how *Tom Soier* enlists Twain for two very contemporaneous causes then being fought: those of communism and racial equality. Rather than disproving the Soviet message of racial equality, the depiction of blackface as a form of child play and punishment in the film's conclusion speaks of the inherent paradoxes of Stalinist ideology—cosmopolitan and progressive, but also imbued with a sinister and violent strain.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout this essay I refer to the film by its transliterated Russian title in order to distinguish it from the title of Twain's novel and its eponymous protagonist. Except for words and names with established spellings in English (e.g., Dostoevsky), I transliterate Russian terms using the simplified Library of Congress transliteration system; for simplicity's sake, I omit the apostrophe used to mark the soft sign from words occurring in the body of the text (e.g. Lazar Frenkel rather than Lazar' Frenkel').
- ² The film appears to have gone unnoticed in the Soviet press at the time; besides film listings in newspapers, the only references that I have been able to find are three mentions in passing in *Iskusstvo kino*, the main film industry journal in the USSR. In one article, *Tom Soier* gets average marks for its set design and technical features: S. Bronshtein, "Tekhnicheskoe kachestvo nashikh fil'mov 1936 g.," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5

(May 1937): 58–64. A second article simply lists the film among those recently produced by its studio: S. Orelovich, “Kievskaiia studiia Ukrainfil’ m k XX godovshchine Oktiabria,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11 (November 1936): 41–44. The third dismissively describes *Tom Soier* and other films as “merely screen adaptations” of literary works (D. Nikol’skii, “Siuzhety 1936 goda,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5 (May 1936): 21–28, here 22, my translation). Lazar Frenkel, the co-director of *Tom Soier*, is mentioned in volume 2 of a four-volume history of the Soviet cinema published in the 1970s; he directed several children’s films in Soviet Ukraine during the 1930s, but his films are said to display clichés characteristic of Soviet children’s cinema of the time in general. See Kh. Abul-Kasymova et al., eds., *Istoriia sovetskogo kino, 1917–1967*, vol. 2, 1931–1941 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973), 300 and 364.

- ³ On these discourses, see especially Katerina Clark, “The Representation of the African American as Colonial Oppressed in Texts of the Soviet Interwar Years,” *The Russian Review* 75, no. 3 (July 2016): 368–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12081>, and Christina Kiaer, “A Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism in the Animated Short Film *Blek end uait*,” in *Comintern Aesthetics*, ed. Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 352–88.
- ⁴ On the Soviet reception of Twain, see, most recently, Margarita Marinova, “Huck Finn’s Adventures in the Land of the Soviet People,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): 119–47, <https://doi.org/10.5070/T812255980>
- ⁵ Steven S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1.
- ⁶ This instance of doubling is oddly reminiscent of the trope in classical Russian literature and in Twain’s own poetics. See, for instance, the Italian twin brothers (meant to have been Siamese twins in an early draft of the novel) who visit Dawson’s Landing in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1893–94), or the prince and Tom Canty in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), who resemble one another physically, were born on the same day, and decide to swap places. Huck Finn’s (accidental) impersonation of Tom Sawyer in the Evasion episode of *Huckleberry Finn*, which leads to there being two Tom Sawyers when the “real” Tom arrives (and pretends to be Sid), is also a type of doubling. The figure of the double or doppelgänger is frequent in Russian literature of the nineteenth century, especially in the works of Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In Gogol’s *The Overcoat* (*Shinel’*, 1842), the protagonist Akaky Akakievich orders a new overcoat that in a way embodies a better version of himself; in his “The Nose” (“Nos,” 1836), the bureaucrat Kovalev “loses” his nose, which then acquires a life of its own and roams the streets of St. Petersburg wearing a government uniform much like Kovalev’s (they also run into each other in church). In Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (*Dvoinik*, 1846, rev. ed. 1866), the low-level bureaucrat Golyadkin runs into a man he believes to be his double during a snowstorm, and this double (a better version of himself) then proceeds to take over Golyadkin’s social and professional life;

in a secondary plot line of *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), a peasant named Mikolka confesses spontaneously to the murders that Raskolnikov had committed, while the evil Svidrigailov seems to be supernaturally aware of Raskolnikov's actions and the thoughts inside his mind (an array of other major characters in the novel also “mirror” different aspects of Raskolnikov's psyche).

On the importance of the double to Dostoevsky's oeuvre, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), especially 215–24. Twain's predilection for the trope of characters trading places was noted by Soviet scholars, although admittedly this was much later in the Soviet era: see P. V. Balditsyn, “Novellistika Marka Tvena,” in *Mark Tven i ego rol' v razvitii amerikanskoi realisticheskoi literatury*, ed. Ia. N. Zasurskii (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 11–35.

- ⁷ See Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1986), Ch. 8, 105–22.
- ⁸ Notably, Stalin's first executive role in the Soviet Union (or, more precisely, the Russian Soviet Republic), from 1917 to 1923, was as its Commissar for Nationalities, a term meant to denote the country's constituent ethnic groups (including ethnic minorities).
- ⁹ Only the latter was eventually credited after Ilf and Petrov, who were frequent collaborators and who would travel together to the United States in the following year, disavowed the script after unauthorized changes to it. Note also that Petrov was Kataev's younger brother.
- ¹⁰ On *Circus*, see especially Rimgaila Salys, *The Musical Comedy Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov: Laughing Matters* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009), Ch. 2, 121–200.
- ¹¹ For a detailed account of Soviet involvement in the Scottsboro campaign, see Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), Ch. 3, 91–124. For a discussion of a poster on the subject by the well-known Soviet graphic artist Dmitrii Moor, see Christina Kiaer, “Inventing an Aesthetics of Anti-Racism: African Americans in Early Soviet Visual Culture,” in *The Wayland Rudd Collection: Exploring Racial Imaginaries in Soviet Visual Culture*, ed. Yevgeniy Fiks (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021), 94–112, here 102–105. See also Meredith Roman, “Anti-Racist Aspirations and Artifacts,” in the same volume, 153–58.
- ¹² The title of the film is drawn from a poem by the Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky and is the Cyrillic transliteration of the English phrase “Black and White.” On the connections between the animation and popular culture tropes, see Kiaer, “Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism,” 356–9.

- ¹³ Kiaer, “Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism,” 378. Kiaer demonstrates that *Blek end uait* performs aesthetically a modality of Black liberation that grants more agency to Blacks than one might expect.
- ¹⁴ See Clark, “Representation of the African American,” 373, 376ff. For a comprehensive account of the reception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Russia and the Soviet Union, see John MacKay, *True Songs of Freedom: Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Russian Culture and Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).
- ¹⁵ See Lee, *Ethnic Avant-Garde*, Ch. 3, especially 122–30.
- ¹⁶ The literature on Rudd is fairly extensive, although it tends to neglect his participation in *Tom Soier*, which is often noted in passing alongside Rudd’s other main film roles in the 1930s. See especially S. Ani Mukherji, “‘Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans’: Black Cultural Work in 1930s Moscow,” in *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Eve Rosenhaft and Robbie Aitken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 120–41, especially 135–139; and Yevgeniy Fiks, ed., *The Wayland Rudd Collection: Exploring Racial Imaginaries in Soviet Visual Culture* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021).
- ¹⁷ The second alumnus of the *Black and White* project who settled in the USSR was Lloyd Patterson, a set designer and father of James Patterson, the mixed-race child who is serenaded at the end of *Circus* and who later became a Russian-language poet. Lloyd, in turn, was cast in the minor, silent role of the second fugitive from slavery in *Tom Soier*. See Rimgaila Salys, “The Pattersons: Expatriate and Native Son,” *The Russian Review* 75, no. 3 (July 2016): 434–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12084>.
- ¹⁸ See the testimony by the theater critic and historian Inna Solovyeva reproduced in Vladimir Paperny, “To USSR and Back,” in Fiks, ed., *The Wayland Rudd Collection*, 54–59, here 58–59.
- ¹⁹ Pen name of Homer Smith, a Black writer and another member of the *Black and White* project. On Homer Smith, see Mukherji, “‘Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans,’” 124–129.
- ²⁰ Chatwood Hall, “Complete Soviet Film of ‘Huckleberry Finn,’” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 17, 1937, 16.
- ²¹ Kiaer, “Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism,” 359–60. Kiaer points out that “Jim” is a stereotypical name given to African American characters in Soviet narratives and reports of the time, and it is likely that “Tom” is one such name too.
- ²² See Roman, “Anti-Racist Aspirations and Artifacts,” 156.
- ²³ See Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), Ch. 5, 169–209; see also Katerina Clark, *Eurasia without Borders: The Dream of a Leftist*

Literary Commons, 1919–1943 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021).

- ²⁴ The literature on Soviet world literature is extensive. Particularly useful sources are Maria Khotimsky, “World Literature, Soviet Style: A Forgotten Episode in the History of the Idea,” *Ab Imperio* 2013, no. 3 (2013): 119–54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2013.0075>; and Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 175–85.
- ²⁵ Teodor Draizer, “Dva Marka Tvena,” *Internatsional’naia literatura*, no. 11 (1935): 3–10; Van Uik Bruks, “Iumor Marka Tvena,” *Internatsional’naia literatura*, no. 6 (1936): 143–52. Brooks’s article follows the publication of excerpts from Twain’s autobiography in issues 1–5 of the journal in 1936.
- ²⁶ This is so despite the fact that a 1926 edition of *Huckleberry Finn* in the Soviet Union was retitled as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and the Runaway Negro Jim*. See Marinaova, “Huck Finn’s Adventures in the Land of the Soviet People,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12, no. 2 (December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5070/T812255980>. That edition, as it turns out, is heavily abridged, and ends up placing more emphasis on plot elements of adventure than on Jim’s plight per se. It is also worth noting that, in the early Soviet era (much as in the US in the twentieth century), the artistic qualities of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were downplayed, with the book regarded as sentimentalist and excessively religious. See MacKay, *True Songs of Freedom*, 62–74. In contrast, Soviet critics repeatedly pointed to Twain’s purported atheism as a positive trait.
- ²⁷ Marina Temkina, “My Black Moments,” in Fiks, ed., *The Wayland Rudd Collection*, 132–39, here 134.
- ²⁸ By eliminating any trace of the King and the Duke from the plot, *Tom Soier* forestalls a more thorough critique of capitalism as a whole. Those characters tend to be regarded in Soviet literary scholarship as the byproduct of unfettered capitalism, which generates class inequalities and a criminal underworld of small-time crooks. The film prefers instead to focus on the local issue of race relations, more or less devoid of questions of class.
- ²⁹ Ivan Kashkin, “O realizme v sovetskom khudozhestvennom perevode,” *Druzhba narodov*, no. 4 (1954): 188–99, here 192. My translation.
- ³⁰ Ivan Kashkin, “[Perevod i realizm],” in *Masterstvo perevoda – 1963* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1964), 451–65, here 461. My translation.
- ³¹ The film’s exploitation of the theme of a corrupt Judiciary likely alludes to the Scottsboro trial, which riveted audiences and readers as it was being covered in the Soviet media. See Kiaer, “Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism,” 376.

- ³² Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta, 2005), 165. My discussion of the myth (and facts) surrounding Morozov is based on Kelly's exemplary study.
- ³³ Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 36.
- ³⁴ See Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, Ch. 2, 13–25. Some of these servants went on to lead successful lives in Russia: the foremost example is Abram Gannibal (c. 1696–1781), an African man (born in either present-day Ethiopia or Cameroon) who was enslaved in the Ottoman Empire and gifted to Peter the Great of Russia. Gannibal was raised in the imperial household as a free man, and had a long career in the military. His great-grandson was Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Russia's national poet, who wrote an unfinished novel about his ancestor. Pushkin himself was consecrated in Soviet culture in 1937, on the centennial of his death, one year after the release of *Tom Soier*. On the Pushkin Jubilee celebrations, see Jonathan Brooks Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin! Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).
- ³⁵ Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 144; Clark, "Representation of the African American," 378–79; Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 125–26.
- ³⁶ Thompson, *Blackface*, 40.
- ³⁷ Kiaer, "Comintern Aesthetics of Anti-Racism," 356.
- ³⁸ The carnivalesque pervades Mikhail Bakhtin's thought and works, but the most thorough exploration of the topic is contained in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
- ³⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 207.
- ⁴⁰ It is worth noting that Bakhtin's own *Rabelais and His World* is based on a doctoral dissertation he concluded in 1940, meaning that much of it would have been written during the second half of the 1930s.
- ⁴¹ Evgeny Dobrenko, "Laughing Stalinism: The Fate of the Comic in a Tragic Age," *Slavic and East European Journal* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 1–20, here 3, emphasis original.
- ⁴² Dobrenko, "Laughing Stalinism," 5.
- ⁴³ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 182
- ⁴⁴ Dobrenko, "Laughing Stalinism," 12, emphasis original.

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