



BLACK AND WHITE: THE STORY OF A FAILED FILM PROJECT

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Abstract: In 1931 Mezhrabpomfilm, a Soviet-German film studio financed by Comintern, came up with the idea of producing a propaganda feature film *Black and White* about racism in the United States and invited a group of Afro-Americans to take part in the production. The arrival of the film group that included Langston Hughes and other young intellectuals was widely discussed in the leftist American press and used by the Soviet propaganda apparatus to promote the image of the USSR as the defender of the oppressed minorities. The production was abruptly stopped by order of the Politburo, because the project had been found to be offensive by influential American professionals and businessmen participating in the industrialisation of the USSR and interested in establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Although the Soviet authorities tried to hide the truth about the sudden abandonment of the project, several members of the group did not believe official explanations and were loud in their protests against the cancellation of the film, accusing the party leadership of compromising with American imperialism and betraying a progressive ideology for the sake of pragmatic interests. Nevertheless, the majority of the members of the film group chose not to support the protest and agreed with the official version.

Keywords: *Black and White*, racism, communist propaganda, Mezhrabpomfilm, Soviet-American relations, Langston Hughes, Politburo.

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***Black and White:* The Story of a Failed Film Project**

In 1931 Mezhrabpomfilm, a Soviet-German film studio financed by Comintern, came up with the idea of producing a propaganda feature film *Black and White* about racism in the United States and invited a group of Afro-Americans to take part in the production. The arrival of the film group that included Langston Hughes and other young intellectuals was widely discussed in the leftist American press and used by the Soviet propaganda apparatus to promote the image of the USSR as the defender of the oppressed minorities. The production was abruptly stopped by order of the Politburo, because the project had been found to be offensive by influential American professionals and businessmen participating in the industrialisation of the USSR and interested in establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Although the Soviet authorities tried to hide the truth about the sudden abandonment of the project, several members of the group did not believe official explanations and were loud in their protests against the cancellation of the film, accusing the party leadership of compromising with American imperialism and betraying a progressive ideology for the sake of pragmatic interests. Nevertheless, the majority of the members of the film group chose not to support the protest and agreed with the official version.

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*Beg yo' pardon
Mr. Bragg,
Aint it funny
yo' lily white
sugar
Black mam makes and puts it in the bag¹*

This question, which had been bothering Willie the shoe-shine boy for some time, was addressed by him to a white racist in Mayakovsky's poem 'Black and White' (1925), and all he got for an answer was a punch on the nose. Willie was a simple soul, and

*That such questions
one addresses
To Comintern,
Moscow,
how should Willie
know?*

In 1931–2 the Soviet-German studio Mezhrabpomfilm, which was close to the Comintern, tried to answer Willie's question and to show the world, particularly the countries of Asia and Africa, ““documentary” proof of the manner

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¹ English translation from: *American Quarterly on the Soviet Union*, July 1940, pp. 90–2.

in which capitalist America discriminated against and oppressed its colored citizens' [Smith 1964: 22]. The film about American racism was to be entitled *Black and White*, and to make it more 'documentary' it was decided to involve real black people in the filming, and not white actors in blackface.¹

At the end of 1931 Louise Thompson (later Louise Thompson Patterson), an active participant in the African American cultural movement which has gone down in history as the 'Harlem Renaissance', received a proposal to get together a group of performers to take part in making the film. The proposal, which emanated from Mezhrabpom, was conveyed to her by James W. Ford, a black communist who had worked in Moscow for several years (1928–30), and in particular represented the Communist Party USA at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern [Hauke 1998: 236]. He is believed to have been 'the initial player promoting the idea of the film project' [Crawford, Patterson (eds.) 2017: 48].

To organise the black actors' trip to the Soviet Union a special interracial committee was set up, including the socialist Wilfred A. Domingo, the activist, well-known in Harlem intellectual circles, Bessie Bearden, the famous actress, 'the black first lady of the American theatre' Rose McClendon, the prominent literary critic Malcolm Cowley, who was personally acquainted with Hemingway, Faulkner and other famous contemporaries, the writer and journalist Waldo Frank, and John Henry Hammond, musician, critic, producer and authority on Negro music. The main work was undertaken by Louise Thompson, the informal leader of the group, who set off for Moscow. It was largely thanks to her efforts that the trip was able to take place. Money was needed for the journey to Moscow. It proved impossible to raise it through various charitable organisations, and the committee appealed to well-known black performers and writers for help. This also had no success. Then Thompson proposed that the participants should pay their own travel expenses. Of the twenty-six people she approached, twenty-two agreed, including the well-known poet, writer and fighter for equal rights, the star of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes.

Thompson sent a telegram to Langston in California 'where he was on a lecture tour and invited to come along as a script writer' [Thompson Patterson 1968: 152]. 'HOLD THAT BOAT CAUSE IT'S AN ARK TO ME' Hughes wired back to her [Berry 1983: 152]. He drove his Ford car the whole width of America, from coast to coast, and was one of the last to climb up the gangplank onto the 'ark'. He was inspired by the dream of seeing Soviet Russia, a land free from 'the

¹ For discussions of the project, see also: [Carew 2008: 115–39; Gilmore 2008: 134–48; Roman 2012: 125–53; Lee 2015: 119–48].

brutality and stupidity of capitalism' where he thought there was 'nobody hungry, no racial differences, no color line, nobody poor' [Berry 1983: 161]. Besides, he was attracted by the prospect of trying his hand at the cinema, and he knew that this would only be possible abroad. Anticipating, it must be admitted that the visit was a great success for Hughes: while he was in the USSR, Soviet magazines and newspapers printed scores of his poems denouncing the vices of his homeland, singing the praises of the land of the Soviets and hailing the revolution. A translation of his novel *Laughing to Keep from Crying* was published in the Soviet Union in 1932, and a year later a collection of his poems, *Good Morning, Revolution*. 'As for me, I received for one edition of my poems in translation more money in actual living value than I have yet made from the several editions of my various volumes of poetry in America. For an edition in Uzbek, a minority language <...> I was paid enough to live in grand style for a year or modestly for two years' Hughes wrote with unconcealed pride in his article 'Moscow and Me' [Khyuz 1933: 72].

Another member of the film group, Ted Poston (like his friend Moon) was interested in the offer as a newspaper man: he regarded it as an excellent opportunity to see for himself 'the much publicised Soviet Union and possibly to write stories about it' [Hauke 1998: 235]. Poston's journalist colleagues raised the money (\$110) to finance his journey.

Homer Smith, a postal worker qualified as a journalist, hoped to find work in a country that had overcome racism, and took advantage of the opportunity to leave America. There were also people in the group who had little interest in the Soviet Union. The young writer Dorothy West at first refused to go: 'The last thing I'm interested in is Russia and Communism,' she declared [McDowell 1997: 292]. However, her stories were not getting published, her money was running out, and West decided to join the group, many of whom were personally known to her.

Recalling his comrades in the film group in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes wrote: 'Among these young Negroes were an art student just out of Hampton, a teacher, a girl elocutionist from Seattle, three would-be writers other than myself, a very pretty divorcée who traveled on alimony, a female swimming instructor, and various clerks and stenographers — all distinctly from the white-collar or student classes. Although we had heard that the film was to be about workers, there was not a single worker — in the laboring sense — except perhaps the leader of the group (the one Communist Party member, so far as I knew), and he did not look much like a worker. But, at least, he had not been to college and had no connection with the arts' [Hughes 1956: 70]. Apart from Wayland Rudd, quite an experienced actor, and Sylvia Garner, who had had

a small part in *Scarlet Sister Mary*, a 'Negro drama' in which most of the black parts had been played by white actors, none of the Americans had ever been on the stage or stood in front of a cine camera. In Hughes's words, 'very few professional theater people were willing to pay their own fares to travel all the way to Russia to sign contracts they had never seen. Only a band of eager, adventurous young students, teachers, writers and would-be actors were willing to do that, looking forward to the fun and wonder of a foreign land as much as to film-making. There were a few among them who said they wanted to get away from American race prejudice forever, being filled up with Jim Crow. These hoped to remain abroad. But most of the twenty-two simply thought they had found an exciting way to spend the summer. An exciting summer it turned out to be, too' [Hughes 1956: 70].

Since 'the group was expected to bring back an unprejudiced report on the Soviet Union', the organisers of the trip wanted that as few as possible of them should be members of the Communist Party [Hauke 1998: 235]. Only one of the twenty-two members of the group openly admitted to being a communist. This was Alan McKenzie, 'a somewhat erratic salesman from Long Island who astonished everyone by bringing along a white woman, who was not his wife' [Rampersad 2002: 243]. However, in the words of Ted Poston, the journalist, there were in fact two admitted party members, and, as 'subsequent developments indicated', 'at least three others were then Communists, or became communists during the course of the trip' [Hauke 1998: 235]. Left-wing views were held by Louise Thompson, the lawyer and journalist Loren Miller, the chiropractor, insurance agent and lover of poetry Matt Crawford, and Langston Hughes, who got 'redder and redder' by the day during his stay in the USSR (he even entitled one of his poems 'When a Black Man Turns Red').

Sending the film group on its way to Russia, the committee expressed its confidence that 'a pictorial event of great artistic and social significance is heralded by the completion of its plans. The American Negro has never been portrayed on screen or stage in his true character, and this film, *Black and White*, to be produced by the Meschrapom Film Company of Moscow, will be the first departure from the traditional pattern. It will trace the development of the negro people in America, their work, their play, their progress, their difficulties — devoid of sentimentality as well as of buffoonery. Meanwhile Hollywood producers continue to manufacture sentimental and banal pictures and particularly cling to traditional types in portraying the Negro' [Berry 1983: 156]. Although during the first five-year plan, which coincided with the Depression in America, there were a number of American specialists and skilled workers who went to seek a better life in the Soviet Union, the visit of a large group of Negroes was an exceptional event. Naturally it did not pass unnoticed.

On 1 June 1932 the black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* reported in an article headed ‘Stars Now on Way to Russia to Make Film *Black and White*’ that ‘a party of 22 people will embark June 14 on the *Europa* <...>. The group is especially distinguished for its youth and talent. Actually possessing less stage experience than the general run of stage folk, they plan to fit better into the Russian scheme of talking picture production, which stars no one, but casts from life, according to type <...> The making of the project will take four or five months, it is estimated.’ The departure of a group of Americans for Russia ‘to help make a film about Negroes’ was reported in *The New York Times* on 14 June: ‘The Soviet scenario plans to picture realistically the American Negro at work and at play and to trace the story of his development since the middle of the last century.’ The émigré newspaper *Poslednie novosti*, published in Paris, informed its readers on 4 July 1932 that ‘A party of Negroes twenty-two strong has left America. They are all under contract to Moscow to take part in a new film about Negro life which is beginning to be filmed in Moscow. Some scenes of the films will be shot in the cotton-growing regions of Turkestan, since the film will show episodes from Negro life on the American plantations. Of the whole Negro troupe, only one belongs to the Communist Party.’

The Negro groups arrival in the USSR was trumpeted loudest by Leonid Ierikhonov in *Rabochiy i teatr* (but with many false notes and, as it turned out, unhelpfully):

Only a few lines of eight-point type in the foreign news section of the American press.

‘In the USSR the Mezhrabpomfilm Company is making a cine film called Black and White, devoted to the Negro Question.’

And the headlines of the big papers bomb the small-type announcement...

‘Bolshevik propaganda’

‘... The hand of Moscow’

‘... Preparing for a Negro uprising’...

‘... Ban the Communist Party of America’...

‘... Death to the black dogs of Scottsboro’...

And The Daily Worker, the Communist Party newspaper, was flooded with hundreds and thousands of telegrams, written both by black and white...

*...Workers,
farm labourers,
students,
performers,*

musicians,
writers,
scholars...

<...> *And spontaneously, in every state of North and South America cinema committees to assist Mezhrabpomfilm in making Black and White began to be set up <...> The Communist Party of America has taken upon itself the leadership of the incipient cinema committees. Finally a single committee or a single delegation has been chosen to go to the USSR, at the disposal of Mezhrabpomfilm as consultants and actors. The delegation is made up of eleven workers, three performers, five writers and four musicians (there are eight women and fifteen men in the delegation) <...> The twenty-three black delegates are travelling on money raised by black and white people. <...> Leaving for creative work in Moscow at the disposal of Mezhrabpomfilm, they declare that they want to work in a creative field of the building of socialism — the cinema — in a socialist manner, in the same system as every shock-worker in industry. They are thinking of setting up brigades and challenging not only each other to competition, but also other collectives and really, like Bolsheviks, struggling for the quality and deadlines of the film being made. <...> They promise to return home and turn their churches into museums, their palazzos to houses of culture, and their towns and streets to the barricades of the class struggle [Ierikhonov 1932: 13].*

In Leningrad the American delegation was met by a brass band playing *The Internationale*. A banquet at the Oktyabrskaya Hotel was given in honour of the guests, and ran, in Hughes's words, 'all the way from soup on through roast chicken and vegetables right down to ice cream and black coffee' [Hughes 1973: 67]. It is interesting that Dorothy West, Hughes's travelling companion, wrote about the same banquet in a letter to her mother in America on 29 June 1932: 'We were given a fine dinner costing \$7.00 apiece. Soup, chicken and rice, ice cream, and coffee, worth 75 cents in an American restaurant' [West 2005: 187]. As can be seen, Hughes remembered the menu, but did not consider it necessary to mention one detail: the dinner cost each diner seven dollars, and no ordinary Soviet citizen could have afforded it.

An equally splendid reception awaited the Americans on 26 June at the Leningradsky railway station in Moscow. Among the people who met them were the directors of the cinema company, and a few black Americans working in Moscow, including one of the authors of the script, Lovett Fort-Whiteman. The group was accommodated in the Grand Hotel, which 'had enormous rooms with huge pretzarist beds, heavy drapes at the windows and deep rugs on the floors,' Hughes recalled. 'It had a big dark dining room with plenty to eat in the way of ground meats and cabbage, caviar, and sometimes fowl, but not much variety. Most of the guests at the Grand seemed to be

upper-echelon Russians — industrial plant managers and political personages, checking in for a few days then gone — with whom we never became acquainted' [Hughes 1956: 73].

As Homer Smith remembered, 'the morning after their arrival the Negroes were brought together at the Meschrabpom Film Studio to meet the director, Karl Yunghans, and his assistants. There were raised eyebrows and puzzled expressions and whispered asides among the Russians. These were the toiling masses of American Negroes? There before the astonished Russians stood twenty-two men and women ranging in color from dark brown to high yellow. "We needed genuine Negroes and they sent us a bunch of metisi (mixed bloods)," one disturbed Russian remarked in an undertone' [Smith 1964: 25]. J. G. Carew calls the situation 'a case of racism in reverse, the very characteristics used to denigrate blacks in the United States — dark skin color and worker status — were the ones valued for the project' [Carew 2008: 124]. Despite the disappointment of Mezhrabpom, a four-month contract (till 26 October) with the American 'actors' was signed without delay. The contract stipulated that their accommodation and travel expenses should be covered, and that each of them was to receive 400 roubles a month and ration cards.

Hughes's contract was signed after the others, but his work was more generously remunerated.

Mine, a special contract as a writer, was held up a week or so while it was being drawn in detail, when it was finally handed to me in triplicate at the studio, it was entirely in Russian. I said, 'I can't read a word of it, and I won't sign something I can't read.'

The officials of Meschrabpom Films assured me that it was all right: 'Horashaw!'

'That may be,' I said, 'but I will sign only a contract that I can read, in English. I have just come from California where I heard about people signing contracts in Hollywood which they had not read carefully, and—'

'Don't mention Hollywood in the same breath with the film industry of the Workers' Socialist Soviet Republics,' shouted the Meschrabpom executive with whom I was dealing. 'That citadel of capitalism escapism — Hollywood! Bah!'

'Don't yell at me,' I said, 'I'll go right back home to New York and never sign your contract.'

So I went back to the hotel, leaving the documents on his desk. A week later English copies were sent me, and I signed them — at a salary which, in terms of Russian buying power, was about a hundred times a week as much as I had ever made anywhere else. I had paid my own fare to Moscow, as had each of the others in our group. On my way

across the United States, I had left several hundred dollars with my mother in Cleveland to help on her expenses while I was in Europe. Meshrabpom Films refunded all travel expenses to us in dollars once we had gotten to Moscow, and I held onto mine to use on the return trip home [Hughes 1956: 75].

The members of the American cinema group were expecting the shooting of the film to begin in the first days after their arrival in Moscow, immediately after the contracts were signed. 'I think I start work tomorrow,' Dorothy West wrote to her mother on 29 June. 'The director seems sensitive and intelligent' [West 2005: 187]. In another letter at the beginning of July she reported: 'I really have nothing to complain of. I expected very little, and am agreeably surprised with a whole lot. <...> I think we start working on the picture in a few days, and then I shall be extremely busy, no doubt' [Ibid.: 188].

But filming did not begin next day, nor next week, nor next month. It is true that there was nothing to complain about — apart from the lack of work to do. In 1968, in her article 'With Langston Hughes in the USSR', Louise Thompson remembered: 'Although they were not yet at work (except Langston), the film company lived up to its contract of four hundred roubles a month to each person with a hotel room and a book for the foreign office store. Purchases could be made in this store for many foodstuffs and delicacies not available to the Soviet people and not at black market prices. 1932 was not a good year in the USSR. There was famine in various parts of the vast land, and, to make the five-year plan possible, all the Soviet people had but the barest necessities. We were not aware of this for most of us had more money to spend than we had ever had in our young lives. Most of it was spent in having good times — wining, dancing and dining at the Hotel Metropol, parties, and of course there was always the theatre' [Thompson Patterson 1968: 155].

Thompson is disingenuous in saying that she was unaware of the famine. She could have heard about the people who had been reduced to cannibalism by the famine in the Ukraine from her friend the American 'Muscovite', the black American Emma E. Harris, whose hospitality Thompson and her comrades enjoyed. Hughes devoted a whole chapter of his memoirs to the 'very dark, very talkative and very much alive' Emma, a former actress whom a whim of the fates had brought to Russia even before the revolution, the favourite of the American colony, whom 'everybody in Moscow knew.' Although, as Hughes remarked, there was a lack of freedom of speech in Russia, Emma 'said anything she wanted to say.' 'It was Emma who first told us that summer that there was a famine in the Ukraine <...> I never would have known there was hunger a few hundred miles South of Moscow' [Hughes 1956: 83, 85].

The situation in the capital was not so bad, though even here ‘the bare essentials’ were insufficient for everybody, for as Henry Moon remarked, ‘The Communists had not liquidated poverty <...> they had [spread] poverty so that people as a whole were equally deprived’ [Carew 2008: 127]. Thompson could easily have noticed this if she had paid more attention to what was going on around her and taken an interest in the lives of people who did not dine at the Metropole. Even American newspapers were writing that ‘Prices rise, queues wait all night for meat and workers go underfed’ [‘Food Shortage...’ 1932]. But *Pravda* said nothing about all this, nor did the comrades who welcomed the American group, and Thompson, who had become ‘red enough’ during her visit to join the Party as soon as she got back to the USA, preferred ‘not to know’.

Unlike Thompson, Dorothy West, out of whom, as she said, ‘they tried and failed to make a communist’ [McDowell 1997: 291], noticed the hungry and homeless people on the streets of Moscow. She remained in the USSR until 1933 and witnessed the mass deportation of peasants from the capital. In the first number of the journal that she set up when she arrived in the USA, she published an essay under the pseudonym of Mary Christopher, in which she shared her impressions of Moscow with her readers: ‘The room shortage was alarming. Starvation was growing too obvious.’ True, she found — or was given — a simple explanation for this: ‘Until the first of May there were three million souls in Moscow. Moscow can comfortably house half that number. Of this surplus the majority were peasant stragglers to the city. <...> A new passport system was speeded into effect. Everyone had to produce a passport. <...> Thousands of peasants were carted in truckloads to the outskirts of the city. Only the sentimentalist can weep over this. It is better to lie in a soft bed of clover than on a hard park bench. When one realises how many millions of unimportant peasants there are in all Russia, who take no part in her program of progress, one lays no blame on her for lightly dismissing them’ [Christopher 1934: 11]. As can be seen, even some apolitical Westerners had been affected by Soviet propaganda about the ‘programme of progress’ and the irresponsible peasants who were holding it back, propaganda that deprived her of empathy and the capacity to ‘weep over’ other people’s suffering. But fifty years later, when as a quite well-known writer she was asked why most of the heroes of her stories were poor, West replied ‘Maybe my heart goes out to people in difficult situations. <...> I am a defender of the underdog’ [McDowell 1997: 299].

To be fair, it must be said that the situation was not easy for the Americans to understand. None of them spoke Russian, and they were under the continual tutelage of their interpreters. Hughes complained of one of them, ‘We have been here almost two months, and every day she takes us somewhere whether we want to go or not’

[Robinson, Slevin 1988: 321]. During the day they saw the sights of the capital and went swimming in Gorky Park. '[We] were almost nightly guests of one or another of the great theaters, the Moscow Art Theatre, the Vakhtangov, the Meyerhold, the Kamerny, or the Opera, where we saw wonderful performances and met their distinguished actors' [Hughes 1956: 76]. The doors of the best restaurants were open to the 'Negro comrades', and 'The head waiters know us now and greet us with such heartwarming bows' [West 2005: 187]. If they wished they could always go and dance at the Metropol, 'with <...> bar-stool girls about <...> with a jazz band, and pretty women available with whom to dance' [Hughes 1956: 73–4].

The black Americans were bewildered by the heightened interest that Russian women took in them. "All spies," said some of the fellows in our group, who found the Metropol an agreeable but expensive hangout. "Spies who can't be seduced." "Spies or not, they sure look good to me," said others, "And dance!" [Hughes 1956: 73–4]. Hughes could never make up his mind whether the Metropol girls were GPU agents or prostitutes. He thought the latter unlikely, 'since the Russian women, like everybody else, had jobs. Anyhow, the Russians said, prostitution was not "sovietski" — meaning it just wasn't the proper thing to do' [Ibid.: 74]. Another young black man, Ted Poston, many years later recalled with some pleasure the Russian women who 'flung themselves at him and other males in the group' and regarded them as 'enticements provided by the Russians to convert the Americans to Communist dogma' [Hauke 1998: 51].

It was not only the Metropol beauties that were attentive to black Americans. Internationalism and equality regardless of skin colour were principles that were being actively and largely successfully inculcated into Soviet citizens by the propaganda of that time.¹ And the 'Negro-worker-comrades' [Hughes 1956: 76] experienced the results of that propaganda as a sort of symbol of 'colorblind internationalism, one of the cornerstones of new Soviet identity' [Matusevich 2008: 55]. In Thompson's words, 'for all of us who experienced discrimination based on color in our own land, it was strange to find our color a badge of honor, our key to the city' [Thompson Patterson 1968: 156]. Hughes would never forget how

on a crowded bus, nine times out of ten, some Russian would say 'Negro-chanski tovarish — Negro comrade — take my seat!'

On the streets queueing up for newspapers, for cigarettes, or soft drinks, often folks in the line would say, 'Let the Negro comrade go forward.' If you demurred, they would insist, 'Please! Visitor to the front.' Ordinary

¹ For Soviet antiracism and African Americans' contribution to it, see: [Roman 2012: 125].

citizens seemed to feel that they were all official hosts of Moscow [Hughes 1956: 74].

Once at a stationery shop, where Hughes was buying pencils and paper, the assistant, ‘an attractive young woman’, smiled and asked his companion, ‘Tell your friend to come again.’ This made Hughes think. ‘There are some things that US could copy, to its benefit,’ he said after a long silence. ‘The main thing I noticed is a definite lack of hatred against me as a black man. Take the woman in that store. That kind of experience is rare, to be treated with courtesy and friendliness by a white woman. <...> I was thinking about how the two races should be able to live in peace in America. If white, brown, dark and yellow skins can live in peace and without ethnic friction in this country, where there are more than 150 nationalities, could not the same principle be applied in the US, too?’ [Robinson, Slevin 1988: 321]. Fourteen years later, in an article for *The Chicago Defender*, Hughes repeated that America should take a lesson from the Soviet Union, where ‘laws against race prejudice really work’, and Americans need not wait a hundred years to get rid of this evil [Hughes 1946].

Like Hughes, another member of the cineproject, the pro-communist journalist Loren Miller, projected the situation in Soviet Russia, which in his imagination had overcome racism, anti-Semitism and ethnic differences forever, onto the situation in racist America. According to his logic, if the communists had overcome the evil in the USSR, then it was the Communist Party that should do it at home, and so it was necessary to support it. At the end of the summer of 1932 Miller sent an article from Moscow to the American communist paper *The Daily Worker*, in which he compared the situation of the Jews in pre-revolutionary Russia, where they were considered ‘inferior’ to that of the Negroes in contemporary America. It had been possible to overcome the problem of ethnic oppression, Miller continued, thanks to the extension of equal rights to the Jewish population and the right to self-determination. ‘It is more than a coincidence that the Communist Party of the USA has advanced the rights of economic, political and social equality for the Negro and self-determination for the Black Belt in its 1932 platform.’ The article ends with a call for all the Negroes of the USA to vote for James W. Ford, the communist vice-presidential candidate, amongst whose most radical ideas was the right to self-determination for the Negroes of the American South [‘Negro Writer...’ 1932: 3].

The journalist Henry Moon, who had arrived in Moscow together with Hughes and Loren Miller, saw much in the country through different eyes. In his opinion, the struggle against racism in the USSR had been won not so much through the laws as through propaganda that had led Soviet people to see a black skin as first and foremost

a sign of belonging to an oppressed class. That was why forward-thinking Muscovites had been demonstrating proletarian solidarity towards the group of Americans. In his article 'A Negro Looks at Soviet Russia', written in February 1934, Moon, reflecting on his impressions of his trip, wrote that the Soviet communists had 'dramatised the Negro as a symbol of capitalistic oppression.'

His plight in the United States has been extensively pictured throughout the Soviet Union, and his cause has been made dear to the hearts of millions of Soviet citizens who have never seen a Negro. <...> Communist propaganda has thoroughly popularized the cause of the Negro as a fellow-worker caught in the net of American capitalism. The picture of the plight of this race which these teachings have created is often warped and sometimes false. <...> As a result, the average Russian is apt to believe that Negroes are lynched weekly in Times Square and three times a week in Chicago's Loop, that the entire race is politically disenfranchised throughout the country, that no universities in America admit Negroes, and that all social intercourse between the races is strictly forbidden, a taboo which only class-conscious workers dare defy [Moon 1934: 244–5].

While admitting that 'large sections of the Negro working class in America are measurably better off in material things than the bulk of Soviet workers. They are better housed, better clothed, and better fed, and they have more of the materials for comfortable living than the Russian workers,' Moon nevertheless asserted that 'there are things for which one would willingly exchange comparative comfort. Chief among these for the Negro worker is freedom from persecution' [Moon 1934: 244–5].

Like the other members of the group, Hughes, Moon and Miller were all agreed that the Soviet Union was free of racism and that America ought to follow its example. They had come to Moscow to help their country to this end — that was how they evaluated their own participation in work on an anti-racist film.

When Hughes finally received the script for the projected film, it turned out that no one had bothered to translate it into English. Two or three weeks were lost in translating it, and when Hughes got the translated script and immediately set about reading it, he could not help laughing out loud, 'to the astonishment of my two roommates, lying at that moment half asleep in their beds, dreaming about being movie actors' [Hughes 1956: 76]. The script was 'a pathetic hodge-podge of good intentions and faulty facts' [Ibid.]. Its author, the well-known Soviet scriptwriter G. E. Grebner, a future winner of the Stalin Prize (1947), had a very approximate notion of American life and had composed 'what he thought was a highly dramatic story of labor and race relations in the United States. But the end result was a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness. It was so

interwoven with major and minor impossibilities and improbabilities that it would have seemed like a burlesque on the screen' [Hughes 1956: 76]. Grebner's consultant, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, 'a Negro intellectual and so steeped in party dogma that he had completely lost touch with America' [Smith 1964: 26] had evidently been very little help. The author had fulfilled what had been expected of him politically and ideologically, and it is very probable that if his script had not fallen into the hands of a 'real Negro', and a professional writer at that, nobody would have paid any attention to the absurdities that inevitably arise in such cases.¹ In the morning Hughes took the script to Mezhrabpom and told them that it was hopelessly wrong and beyond all possibility of correction: no believable film could ever be made out of it. Hughes's conversation with the Soviet cinema executives made a strong impression on him, judging by his lively memoirs:

'It is just simply not true to American life', I said.

'But', they countered indignantly, 'it's been approved by the Comintern.'

The Comintern was, I knew, the top committee of the Communist Party concerned with international affairs.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but the Comintern must know very little about the United States.'

'For example?' barked the Meshrabpom officials.

To convince them, I went through the scenario with the studio heads page by page, scene by scene, pointing out the minor nuances that were off tangent here, the major errors of factual possibility there, and in some spots the unintentional distortions which gave the impression of a complete fantasy — the kind of fantasy that any European merely reading cursorily about the race problem in America, but knowing nothing of it at first hand might easily conjure up. I made it clear that one could hardly blame the scenarist who had had, evidently, very meager facts available with which to work.

Having red-pencilled all of the errors, I said, 'Now what is left from which to make a picture?'

The Russians are in general a talkative people, very argumentative and often hard to convince. I had to go over and over it all again, not only with the first officials that day, but several other sets of officials in the studio on subsequent days. They in turn, no doubt, checked with their political higher-ups. These political higher-ups, so I heard, months later, fired about half of the studio executive staff for permitting the mistakes of the scenario to happen in the first place [Hughes 1956: 77].

¹ For a detailed discussion of Grebner's script and its English version, see: [Lee 2015: 122–30].

In the end Hughes convinced the Mezhrabpom executives that the scenario needed to be rewritten, but when he was given the task 'he undertook it with reluctance, and despair that it would ever come out right' [West 1995: 207].

Hughes was not working alone, but in collaboration with the German director and scenarist Karl Junghans, who was to direct *Black and White*. It was not by chance that Junghans had been invited to the Soviet Union. He was a member of the Communist Party of Germany, for whom he made propaganda films, and in 1928 he had directed *Lenin 1905–1928*, about the communist movement in Russia. He had won international fame with *Takový je život* (1929), a film about the unhappy fate of a laundress in Prague which combined a poetic naturalism with Eisenstein's techniques of montage. The main role had been played by Vera Baranovskaya, who had also appeared in two films by Pudovkin at the end of the 1920s.¹

The decision to invite Junghans to film *Black and White* was influenced not only by the fact that by the beginning of the 1930s he had won the reputation of 'a popular film director' with 'tireless energy' [B. B. 1930]. The organisers of the Moscow film project must have supposed that Junghans was well acquainted with the problems of black people, since he had spent several months in 1930 in Africa, working on the documentary *Fremde Vögel über Afrika*. Junghans, admittedly, was not credited as writer and director, as 'in the process of editing, Junghans got into an argument with the producers and left when they asked for additional footage to be shot in the studio' [Berman 2004: 111].

Be that as it may, the German director's African experience could hardly have any relevance to a film about the problems of black people in America, for, as Hughes remarked, Junghans 'knew nothing at all about race relations in Alabama, or labor unions, North, South or European' [Hughes 1956: 80]. Hughes's collaboration with Junghans was complicated by the fact that the latter knew neither Russian nor English and they had to communicate through an interpreter. Remembering his co-author, Hughes writes that Junghans was 'an artist', though not an entirely disinterested one. 'An enormous budget, millions of rubles, had been allotted to its [the film's] making. Money was no problem. Junghans had been in Russia several months now, waiting to begin' [Ibid.]. A year earlier Junghans had left Sonia Slonim (Vladimir Nabokov's sister-in-law) with whom he had had an affair that had been known to the whole Russian community in Berlin [Pitzer 2013: 104]. Then, in Hughes's

¹ Despite an 'artistic success and excellent press', *Takový je život* made a loss, and Baranovskaya had to go to court to try to get her fee from Junghans, who had declared himself bankrupt. See: [B. B. 1930].

words, he ‘had married one of the prettiest women in Moscow, a simple girl with the blondest of blonde hair and the bluest of blue eyes. She was a little doll of an actress, quite unspoiled, whom he hoped to take back to Germany with him and develop into a star’ [Hughes 1956: 80]. The energetic and ambitious Junghans was ‘very worried about the current delays in his picture, and most anxious to begin to create in cinema what Meschrabpom intended to be the first great Negro-white film ever made in the world’ [Ibid.]. The project was the more important to him as it promised the chance to make his mark again as an outstanding director.

What, then, was the result of the joint efforts of the German director and scriptwriter and the American writer and poet?

In his article, and in his later memoirs, Hughes, so critical of Grebner’s scenario, says nothing about his own work, but it was written about by Dorothy West and Thompson, who were in close contact with him, and also by another member of the American cine group, Loren Miller. In Miller’s words, the division of labour was organised as follows: ‘The director, Junghans, was given the task of making these changes. Langston Hughes, famous poet, was contracted to aid in the dialogue’ [Miller 1932]. By the end of July the ‘young, active and ruddy’ Junghans was enthusiastically describing the plot of his coming film to the English writer Charles Ashley over a cup of morning tea in Moscow [‘Black and White...’ 1932].

Thompson’s archive contains a variant of the scenario typed in English (it is known that Hughes had brought a typewriter with him) which Hughes says nothing about in his memoirs. It may nevertheless be confidently asserted that this was the result of his collaboration with Junghans, finished by the end of July. The Hughes-Junghans authorship is indicated by the accurate use of American realities and vocabulary, the insertion of rhyming slogans into the text, and the absence of any traces of translation. According to Glenda E. Gilmore, the final version of the script ‘is written in clean American English with occasional instances of dialect’ [Gilmore 2008: 140–1].

Since Hughes thought the ‘general outline’ of Grebner’s scenario ‘plausible enough’, it remained unchanged. Those details which he regarded as ‘wrong’ were corrected [Hughes 1956: 78]. Like Grebner’s original version, Hughes and Junghans’s cinema epic began with a prologue: Africa, Negroes in chains, a missionary distributing Bibles, a slave ship, and a map of the continent with the text: ‘From 1680 to 1850 there were exported from Africa to America 4,500,000 Negro slaves’, a slave auction, ‘an iron cage in which a captured Negro is bleeding’, a white officer from the North calling upon the Negroes to join in the fight against ‘the godless Southern planters’, and finally a quotation from Marx on the historical significance of the American Civil War. Then the action moves to the present:

a factory, where the Negroes are doing the hardest and most dangerous work, and conflicts between coloured Americans on one side and Italians and Irish on the other. ‘Why can’t we join their Unions, then?’ one of the characters asks. ‘Because the union leaders, and the bosses together, keep us separated — black from white’, he is told [Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Emory University. Box No. 2:4. Item 1: 74, 75]. It is curious that in the original variant of the scenario the labour organiser was a positive hero ‘who endangered his life by attempting to organise Negroes and whites together in the South’. This part in the film was given to a white American, the professional dancer John Bovington. A Harvard graduate and economist who had spent several years teaching economics in Kyoto, Bovington had come to the Soviet Union in the hope of finding artistic freedom. He brought to Moscow a dance number in the spirit of Isadora Duncan. He used the language of dance to depict a primordial creature that emerged from the prehistoric swamps and gradually turned into a Human Being. Ideally Bovington dreamt of dancing naked, and had once even done this in his own country (without winning the sympathies of the audience), but he was not allowed to repeat this in Moscow. Hughes saw Bovington on the stage and concluded that he was utterly unsuited to the role of a worker. ‘American labor organizers, in the public mind, at least, were rough-and-tumble guys, not esthetic looking. Yunghans argued that he had been politically informed by Meschrabpom that progressive American organizers were very intelligent.’ While agreeing that labour leaders might well be intelligent, Hughes continued to insist that their hero, who worked in a foundry where there was no place for weaklings, should not look and move like a dancer [Hughes 1956: 89–90]. The authors’ quarrel had an unexpected ending. The union leader was transformed from a fighter for unity between blacks and whites, as in the original scenario referred to in Hughes’s memoirs, to a racist obstructing the unification of the proletariat in the scenario in Thompson’s archive. A traitor to the interests of the workers, the union boss (who was probably to have been played by Bovington after all) tears a notice saying ‘BLACK AND WHITE SOLIDARITY WILL STOP THE ROTTENESS IN THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT’ off the lavatory wall [Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Emory University. Box No. 2:4. Item 1: 244].

Hughes was particularly irritated by what he considered one of the central scenes in Grebner’s scenario:

An important scene intending to show how a poor but beautiful colored girl might be seduced by a wealthy young man in Alabama. The girl was pictured serving a party in the home of the director of the steel mill whose son became entranced by their lovely dark-skinned servant. This hot-blooded white aristocrat, when the music started, simply came up to the

beautiful Southern colored girl passing drinks and said gently 'Honey, put down your tray; come, let's dance.'

In Russia, old Russia of the Tzars or Soviet Russia, in a gay mood, master and maid quite naturally might dance together in public without much being made of it. But never in Birmingham, if the master is white and the maid colored — not even now in this democratic era or integration [Hughes 1956: 78].

In the scenario from Thompson's archive this scene that had irritated Hughes took the following form: 'The Negro girl, Babe, serves drinks to a group of men in library. They joke with her and ask her to dance for them. One dials the radio until he finds some hot music. Babe dances in a circle of white men' [Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Emory University. Box No. 2:4. Item 1: 340]. In this variant of the scenario the situation in which the unfortunate Babe finds herself is, to the author's mind, more realistic, but no less humiliating.

It may be that the episode in which a black girl is made to dance by a white man was written after Hughes and the other Americans had witnessed the humiliation of a real black girl, Dorothy West, at a party at the home of the Soviet 'aristocrat' Sergei Eisenstein. Many years later, this is how West remembered it:

Though the other Americans with whom I had come to Russia were present, by some mysterious process I had been selected to be the center of attention.

It was very flattering and I was in a state of euphoria until the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, the host of this gathering, who, in this period of the 1930s, was acknowledged the filmmaker without equal across the world, said to me in the kindest, coaxing voice, 'Will you dance for me?'

A little amused by the question, I said politely and pleasantly, 'I don't dance.'

Still quietly, still gently, he asked me again to dance. Again I murmured a refusal. The exchange went on for fifteen minutes or more, though it seemed like a day and a night to me, and perhaps to him.

Finally, his face and voice full of wrath, his patience completely exhausted, he rose to his feet and bellowed at me in a voice like God's, 'I am the great Sergei Eisenstein, and you will dance for me.'

It was then that I burst into tears and fled from the room [West 1995: 205–6].

This episode had a happy sequel for Dorothy: a fortnight later she again met Eisenstein, who apologised for a joke that had gone badly wrong.

To make it more dramatic, Babe's dance is intercut in the scenario with the scene of a lynching: 'Shine, tied to a tree in the forest, moans, twists, and turns, in a circle of white men' [Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Emory University. Box No. 2:4. Item 1: 342]. The scriptwriters had not spared the dark tones of their palette in depicting the Klansman engineer who organises the lynching, or the clergyman who pockets the money that had been collected for the black worker's funeral. The film was supposed to end with a crowd scene: the factory workers, black and white, Irish and Italian, were to join in a single surge: 'the firm and decisive Emma' carries a banner saying 'Avenge Shine!',¹ a young pioneer holds a placard: 'FOLLOW THE RUSSIAN WORKERS', 'A policeman from a motorcycle throws tear gas bombs into the crowd' and 'the demonstrators disappear in the smoke' [Ibid.: 419, 449, 458]. The propagandist emotion and ideological setting were seemingly quite in tune with the mood of the period, the most obvious absurdities of Grebner's scenario had been removed, and filming could begin immediately. Eventually the Americans were told that filming would begin on 16 August, and on 3 August twenty of them took the train for Odessa. They were given rooms in an excellent seaside hotel. There was a fountain illuminated with different colours by the open-air patio where they dined. 'I had never stayed in such hotels in my own country since, as a rule, Negroes were not then permitted to do so,' Hughes recalled. They enjoyed themselves, swam, sunbathed, and took a Black Sea cruise as guests of the Theatrical Trade Unions, calling at Yalta, Sochi, Gagry and Sukhumi [Hughes 1956: 93–4]. Two of their comrades, Leonard Hill and Henry Moon, stayed behind in Moscow. Junghans, the director, and the Mezhrabpom executives did not go to Odessa either. According to Moon, four days after the group had left (that is, on 7 August), he began to hear rumours that the filming was being cancelled, and this was confirmed on 8 August by the manager of Mezhrabpom, Otto Katz, citing 'technical difficulties' [Moon, Poston 1932]. A few days later Moon read in the *New York Herald Tribune* about 'the sudden collapse of the "Mezhrabpom" project to produce a motion picture depicting "the exploitation of the Negro in America from the days of slavery to the present"'. The Soviet authorities, said the article, suppressed the film for fear that the release of the film would 'prejudice American opinion against the Soviet Union', and the 'postponement' of the project meant its 'slow death' ['Negroes Adrift...' 1932]. It is most probable that the author of the article was Eugene Lyons, the United Press correspondent in Moscow, who had been paying close attention to the events surrounding the 'politico-artistic project' and was acquainted with its participants [Lyons 1938: 508–9].

¹ The man murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

Moon telegraphed the *New York Amsterdam News*, and in this, his first dispatch from Moscow, he already expressed doubt that the filming had been cancelled for technical reasons. ‘The real cause is withheld. <...> Drastic action is likely’ [‘Soviet Abandons...’ 1932]. Then he swiftly travelled to Odessa, whither his comrades had returned after their pleasant Black Sea cruise. Moon’s news that work on the film had been halted was met with a real storm of indignation. The director of Mezhrabpom, Boris Babitsky, tried in vain to calm it when he came to Odessa on 16 August. He invited the Americans to tour the Soviet Union, assured them that the studio would fulfil the conditions of the contract (in particular, would pay for their return journey), and suggested that those who wanted to stay in the USSR could do so.

Babitsky gave four reasons for ‘postponing’ the filming: ‘One, the scenario was unsatisfactory; two, some members of the cast were unsuitable; three, a Negroid-looking national group in Soviet Turkestan that was to be used in mass scenes had yet to be trained; and four, Mezhrabpom lacked the technical facilities for the project’ [Berry 1983: 164].

He did not, however, state the fifth, most important reason — the political reason. Work on the film had been prevented by a man who had little to do with the cinema, Colonel Cooper, an American consultant engineer who had been invited to the USSR to build the hydro-electrical station on the Dnieper. At the end of July he had come to Moscow and tried to use all his influence on the Soviet leadership to prevent the creation of an anti-racist, and therefore anti-American film. Diplomatic relations had not yet been established between the USA and the USSR, although both sides were aware of their necessity. In America, ‘Among those who favored recognition were leaders of a liberal stripe, notably Franklin D. Roosevelt and Alfred E. Smith (who did not see eye to eye with his fellow Catholics). They were joined by liberal journals like *New York The Nation* and *The New Republic*, which had been pro-Russian since 1917. Also active were various intellectuals, shading into “parlor pinks”, who were impressed with Soviet social objectives,’ and also ‘industrialists and exporters, especially those like the southern cotton growers who were cursed with a surplus’ [Bailey 1950: 271]. Naturally Cooper himself was interested in stable relations between the two countries. He hoped that the biggest order of his career would be followed by others, and the news of an anti-American film that might delay, if not halt the process of bringing the two countries together was very upsetting to him. As the engineer in charge of constructing the Dneprostroy Dam, on whose work the completion of a gigantic element of the first five-year plan depended, and as the chairman of the Russian American Chamber of Commerce in New York, he had access to the corridors of power in the Kremlin. At the end of July

Cooper had tried to see Stalin. Stalin was in Sochi at the time, and the American engineer had been received by Kuybyshev. Kaganovich, Kuybyshev and Molotov informed the Leader of the results of the meeting in a secret coded report on 29 July 1932: 'Cooper came and informed Kuybyshev that he was empowered by the deciding business circles of America to negotiate on the mutual relations of the USSR and the USA. He asked Kuybyshev whether he might meet the whole Politburo, given the exceptional importance of the questions which he had come to raise. Kuybyshev naturally declined to answer in such terms, and said that he would report to the government and let him know whether it was willing to negotiate and to whom it would entrust the negotiations. Cooper expressed the wish to be informed regarding agreement to negotiations and who would conduct them on the 31st, when he has been promised a meeting with Molotov. On 31 [July] Cooper would give greater detail of the tasks entrusted to him by business circles. He asked for a meeting with you. Kuybyshev promised to give a reply on the 31st. Please let us know your opinion' [*Stalin i Kaganovich...* 2001: 251].

Stalin let them know his opinion the very next day: '30 July 1932. Cooper is very insolent and has been spoilt by being allowed to see Soviet leaders so easily. I am almost sure that he has not been entrusted with anything concrete, either political or commercial. Most likely he wants to get involved with the building of our new hydro-electric stations on the Volga. He shouldn't be indulged. Nevertheless he should be received politely, listened to attentively, and his every word written down and reported to the Central Committee. I don't want to see him, since there is no need for it. Stalin' [*Stalin i Kaganovich...* 2001: 252].

Molotov and Kuybyshev immediately replied to the Leader, 'You are absolutely right that Cooper has no serious proposals, either political or commercial. There is nothing more than the question of a visit by ten big bankers and industrialists, Republicans and Democrats, and that in a very vague form, both as regards the timing and the make-up of the delegation.' Further, 'at the centre of the conversation was the question of the thirty Negroes who have come to the USSR to make a cine film. Cooper found out about this on the ship on his way to the USSR. Cooper argued persistently for an hour that the Negroes' visit to the USSR, and even more the making of a film as an example of anti-American propaganda, would be an insurmountable obstacle to recognition. Cooper himself does not find it possible for him to continue working in the USSR, or to take part in the campaign for recognition, if this film is made. Evidently Cooper was expecting offers of more work. He continued to insist on a meeting with you. In answer to the request concerning the Negroes we confined ourselves to remarking that it was not the film that was significant and that it was not facts like that that were obstacles to recognition.

We simply listened to him on the delegation from business circles, and he himself did not insist on a concrete answer. Cooper goes to the Dnieper project tomorrow, and he has asked for the answer concerning the Negroes and the meeting with you to be sent to him there. We suggest not giving him any answer about the Negroes, and politely refusing a meeting with you' [*Stalin i Kaganovich...* 2001: 252].

As may be seen, Cooper had directly connected the plans to make an anti-racist film with the prospects for establishing diplomatic relations between the USSR and the USA in his conversations with the Soviet leaders, and made it quite clear that future contacts between the two countries, and his own participation in Soviet technical projects, could be jeopardised.

Stalin approved the suggestion of 'not giving him any answer about the Negroes.' On 1 August the question of 'The Negroes' was discussed at a session of the Politburo, which entrusted Postyshev and Piatnitsky with taking the necessary measures on the basis of the exchange of opinions that had taken place, and on 2 August the Politburo passed the following resolution: 'a. Not to make known any complete refusal to release the picture *Black and White*; b. To entrust to Comrades Postyshev and Piatnitsky a review of the scenario of the picture with a view to making serious changes in accordance with the exchange of opinions that has taken place' [*Stalin i Kaganovich...* 2001: 252]. On 3 August, Kaganovich sent Stalin a record of his conversation with Cooper, adding his own opinion: 'He behaved insolently, evidently, and in my view our people responded weakly. As for the facts of the Negro question, we have entrusted Postyshev with finding them out, and think that we could do without this film. They (Mezhrabpom) did it without any permission from the Central Committee' [*Ibid.*: 259].

In this way, on 3 August (the very day the 'cine group' set off for Odessa) the decision to 'do without the film' had already been taken. Cooper had won his point: the film about Negroes had been shut down and the Colonel could be proud of his victory. As Eugene Lyons was later to write in his book, 'The Kremlin saw the point instantly. The whole undertaking was canceled. The public — and the disgruntled Negroes — were fed lying statements which first pretended that it was merely a postponement of the project, then blamed the abandonment upon defects in the scenario. It was perfectly clear, however, that the retreat was diplomatic. The interests of the U.S.S.R. as a functioning state had collided with the interests of the U.S.S.R. as the vanguard of world revolution. The real needs of a real state received preference over the hoped-for revolution' [Lyons 1938: 508–9].

After leaving Soviet Russia, Cooper told the American consul in Berlin about his success, and he found it necessary to send a report to the Secretary of State himself.

American Consulate General

Berlin, Germany, August 30, 1932.

SUBJECT: report of conversations with Colonel Hugh L. Cooper, concerning his visit to Russia

Sir,

I have the honor to report that Col. Hugh L. Cooper of New York, returned from Russia several days ago and gave the Consulate General certain information with reference to conditions in Russia. Col. Cooper has been particularly agitated over the reception and kindly treatment which American negroes have had in Russia. It appears that recently a German film producer went to Central Africa where the suggestion occurred to him that a film could be produced exhibiting the negro as an object of barter and trade and subject to social humiliations which the white race were supposed to have heaped upon him. It appears that the production of the film did not interest German producers and that the promoter eventually found his way to Russia where the matter was favourably considered and, according to Col. Cooper, where plans were eventually started for the production of the film in Russia. The American negroes there resident were to take part in the film; but it was found that American negroes did not suit the parts which it was intended to portray and that certain difficulties arose with regard to the production. These facts came to the attention of Col. Cooper, according to his report, and he had an interview with Molotov regarding the whole subject of American negroes in Russia. The Russian Government, it appears, was disposed to listen to the objections made by Col. Cooper and called a meeting of certain responsible officials to consider the whole question. The project of producing the film came also before responsible members of the Government and an investigation took place which resulted in the scheme being entirely forbidden. Col. Cooper reports in fact that Russian officials had no sympathy whatever with the idea and drastically disapproved it. This gave an opportunity to make certain representations to the Russian authorities regarding the schooling of American negroes in Soviet Russia, in communist doctrine, etc., and it appears that in view of the strong stand in the matter taken by Col. Cooper, this procedure has now been entirely abandoned. Col. Cooper reports that about twenty-five negroes of American nationality are resident in Moscow and that they have received favourable treatment heretofore but that now their position has been entirely reversed. The result of the action of the Soviet Government was to throw these negroes into an embarrassing position and they appealed to the Third International to foster their interests and ambitions. In this connection Col. Cooper stated that the Third International appears to be at a very low ebb and that the Russian Government is giving it very little countenance and support. With regard to the negroes, Col. Cooper says he has the assurance of responsible Russian officials that negroes will not be allowed in the future to enter

Russia. <...> Col. Cooper believes that the negro venture in Russia is totally at an end <...>

Col. Cooper informed that he was returning to Russia next month to attend the opening of the great dam which his firm has just finished on the Dnieper river. He also informed that the Russians are considering another engineering project of importance concerning which his advice is being sought [Berry 1983: 168–9].

The American ‘actors’ who found themselves at the epicentre of these events could not, of course, have known the details of Cooper’s negotiations with the Soviet leadership, but the colonel had made no secret of his desire to prevent *Black and White* from being made, and had openly criticised the project while he was in Moscow. As Dorothy West said, ‘Henry [Moon] and another man were in a bar one night when they overheard Hugh Cooper, the American who was building that incredible Dneprostroi dam, say that if the Russians went ahead and made the movie denigrating the way Americans treated blacks, he would never finish the Dam’ [Hauke 1998: 217]. Not only that, Cooper contacted Alan McKenzie, the only communist in the American group, directly and advised him not to take part in the film. McKenzie reported the conversation to the Comintern, where he was given to understand that Cooper’s protest would not be received sympathetically in Party circles [Moon, Poston 1932]. This had evidently satisfied the American members of the cine group, since the news that the film was to be shut down, reported by Moon and confirmed by Babitsky, took them by surprise. They received it very emotionally. ‘Hell broke loose. Hysterics took place. Some of the girls really wanted desperately to be movie actresses. Others in the group claimed the whole Negro race had been betrayed by Stalin. Some said the insidious hand of American race prejudice had a part in it all — that Jim Crow’s dark shadow had fallen on Moscow, and that Wall Street and the Kremlin now conspired together never to let the world see in films what it was like to be a Negro in America’ [Hughes 1956: 95].

On 20 August the woebegone group of actors returned to Moscow, and two days later had a meeting with the leaders of Mezhrabpom. Passions were running high. The first to speak was Loren Miller. In his opinion, shared by Hughes and Thompson, the postponement of the film due to Mezhrabpom’s inefficiency threatened to undermine ‘the electoral chances of James W. Ford, the black vice-presidential candidate and the main U.S. communist behind the film.’ Then Ted Poston spoke. He read a statement that he had written together with Lewis, Moon and Alberga, accusing Mezhrabpom of ‘right opportunism’, of ‘base betrayal of the Negro workers of America and the International proletariat’ and of ‘sabotage against the Revolution’ [Rampersad 2002: 250].

Formally Mezhrabpom was a cinema company independent of the state, so that the studio leaders could not admit to carrying out an order 'not to make known any complete refusal to release the picture'. The company took all the blame upon itself and found itself in a very difficult position. The Americans were not satisfied with the results of the meeting, and at their requests representatives of the groups were received at the Comintern, where they reiterated their claims. Hughes and Miller again voiced their apprehensions that refusing to make the film would seriously damage the prestige of communism in the United States and other countries. They were at a loss to understand why, now that a new scenario was ready, shooting should not begin. Poston and Moon were much more outspoken in their contributions, saying that the reason for the failure of the project should be sought in the Kremlin. O. A. Piatnitsky, at that time head of international relations at the Comintern, remarked to Moon, 'That's a very courageous speech, Mr. Moon, but I wonder if you would be so courageous in Atlanta, Ga.' 'Oh, does it take courage to speak the truth in the Soviet Union?' Moon riposted [Poston 2000: 52]. In their search for the truth Moon and Poston tried to have a meeting with Stalin and even wrote him a letter signed by six of the Americans, to which, of course, they received no reply.

Mezhrabpom did not break the conditions of the contract: all the members of the group continued to receive their money and ration cards. True, the Mininskaya Hotel, where they had been accommodated after their return from Odessa, fell far short of the Grand; foreign guests did not usually stay there, so that they could not be seen by their white compatriots. There was no one left to complain to, but the four most politically committed Americans could not accept that the film had been banned. The group had long since split into two factions of different sizes. As Lyons, the journalist, wrote, 'The disciplined communists among them meekly took orders, signed the statements drafted for them, and scouted around for jobs. But a minority made no secret of its sorrow. Four of them sat in my office, sizzling with indignation, feeling themselves insulted and betrayed' [Lyons 1938: 509].

The four angry men mentioned by Lyons were the journalists Henry Moon and Theodore Poston, the ex-communist McNary Lewis and the Jamaican farm worker Laurence Alberga. They were disgusted at the 'red treachery' of the Soviet authorities, who had followed the lead of a white American and betrayed the interests of oppressed Negroes. They were opposed by Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson, Loren Miller, Matt Crawford, Alan McKenzie and Dorothy West, who accepted the official version of a pause in work on the film and had brought over the majority of their comrades to their side. Though they too realised the role played by Cooper in the fate of the film, they preferred to accept the explanation offered by Mezhrabpom

and the Comintern, and were rewarded with their tour of the country, with being published (like Hughes), with work (several of them remained in the USSR for various lengths of time), or with money (Dorothy West received a ‘gift’ of \$300, a very substantial sum in those days). They called those who disagreed with the official explanation ‘the black White Guard’. In the heat of the argument the ‘black White Guard’ called Hughes ‘a communist Uncle Tom’, Thompson ‘Madame Moscow’ and ‘Glupie’, and all their opponents ‘communist puppets’ and ‘traitors’.

The ‘hostilities’ between the ‘Black White Guard’ and the ‘communist puppets’ escaped from their hotel rooms onto the pages of American newspapers. The polemic surrounding ‘the most important of the arts’ was overtly political in nature. At the beginning of the 1930s the communists in America were trying to win the votes of black voters, and, in general, to propagate the communist idea among the Negro population, and relied in their struggle on Soviet Russia, the best friend of the oppressed. To admit that there were diplomatic considerations behind the shutting down of the film meant to agree with Moon and Poston, who accused the USSR of betraying Negro interests. Hence the insistence with which pro-communist newspapers repeated the version that filming had been deferred purely for technical reasons or on account of the scenario, and rejected any accusations directed at the Soviet leadership for closing down the picture. Thus as early as 17 August, only a few days after the breaking of the news that the project had been halted, the editor of communist *The Daily Worker* told a reporter from the *Amsterdam News*: ‘I believe you will find that the picture will be made after a few minor details have been taken care of. Although we have no direct word from Moscow yet, we are sure that the rumor that the Soviet Union is catering to race prejudice in America by holding up this picture will prove to be unfounded. It is doubtful, however, that the picture would ever be shown in the United States, even if it is completed’ [‘Soviet Abandons...’ 1932]. James W. Ford maintained that ‘there could be no political obstacle which could induce the Soviet Union to abandon the project of making a film of Negro life’ [‘Reds State...’ 1932]. For pro-Soviet American communists it was particularly important to support the actual members of the group: interviews with them or their writings in the press were supposed to strengthen American Negroes’ belief that, in Miller’s words, ‘The Soviet Union is the Negroes’ best friend.’ In this situation the statements of the ‘black White Guard’ — the four dissident truth-seekers — were extremely inopportune. At the beginning of September they published a declaration in which they repeated that the halting of the work on the film *Black and White* which the Moscow company Mezhrabpom was to have produced in order to ‘show the differences in race attitudes in Russia and in America’ was nothing other than ‘a base

compromise', 'an ignoble concession to race prejudice' which 'compromises 12,000,000 Negroes of the United States and all the darker colonial peoples, while sacrificing furtherance of the Communist world revolution to the advantages to be gained from American recognition of the Soviet Union' ['Four Actors...' 1932]. The official representatives of Mezhrabpom attempted to calm the American friends of the USSR with deliberately untrue assurances that 'work on the film will begin definitely next Spring' ['Scoffed at Rumor...' 1932]. Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson and Miller played their parts as experts and defenders of the Moscow version with all possible conviction. They gave interviews, 'expressed indignation at the utterly unfounded allegations carried by the foreign press that the film has been postponed because of political considerations', and lauded the Soviet Union, where they had been given 'every accommodation and the finest treatment' and 'cordially welcomed', and where they had been 'afforded opportunities that as Negroes and working people would never have been opened to them in any other country'. Finally they published their own 'statement of the fifteen' to counter the 'statement of the four', saying that 'because of scenario and technical difficulties, the Meschrabpom film finds it necessary to postpone work on the film for one year' ['Negro Film Group...' 1932]. Hughes, who enjoyed the reputation of 'a leading Negro poet and writer' both at home and in the USSR, unfailingly insisted on this explanation of the delay to the film ['Scoffed at Rumor...' 1932]. Never a word did he say about his collaboration with Junghans on the new, revised scenario — not in his Moscow interviews, not in his articles, nor in his subsequent memoirs. Eagerly submitting to party discipline, he trimmed his words to the aims of communist propaganda. Although Hughes was never a member of the party, he was disposed in favour of communism at that time, and never denied this, even during McCarthyism. Thus in a prose poem written in the summer of 1932 he called on people to vote for the communists Foster and Ford and sang the praises of the land of the Soviets: 'Arise, ye prisoners of starvation, you workers in the cotton fields of the south, and vote (but can you vote in a democracy?) for Foster and Ford. Arise, ye wretched of the earth, you black ones everywhere — hungry, underpaid, ragged in Cleveland, Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles — denied the rights of man — give your vote to Foster and Ford. <...> A better world's in birth! Look at Russia — nobody hungry, no racial differences, no color line, nobody poor. Listen to Foster and Ford' [*African American* 1932].

'His presence in the Soviet Union,' Hughes's biographer F. Berry remarks, 'was simply further evidence of his steady move toward the left. He had been moving in that direction for several years, and in 1932 he wanted the world to know it' [Berry 1983: 161].

The dissidents in the American group would not be cowed. They left the Soviet Union before their contracts had expired. On their way to the USA Moon and Poston sent a long article to the *New York Amsterdam News* from Germany, saying, in particular, ‘Once again the forces of American race prejudice have triumphed, and this time in a land where it would be least expected — the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. <...> Extending its long and powerful arm into the heart of the Worker’s Republic, American capitalism has turned thumbs down on a Soviet project designed to aid in the liberation of the Negro masses in the United States, and the Soviet Union, under the leadership of the Communist party, has accepted its dictates. <...> The Soviet Union, faced with grave internal problems and threatened on its eastern front by Japanese aggression in Manchuria, has chosen to court American favor rather than to follow the program of the Comintern (Communist International) in promoting the Revolutionary cause among Negroes of the United States and the colonial peoples of the world. And the Comintern has accepted this compromise.’ They correctly named Cooper as the chief enemy of the project and suggested that in his efforts to prevent the production of the film the engineer had been supported by financial and industrial corporations [Moon, Poston 1932].¹

On their return home Henry Lee Moon and T. R. Poston continued to criticise the USSR and Stalin, who, in their words, ‘had subordinated revolutionary activities to court favor with the capitalist countries,’ and promised that production of the film would be undertaken in the United States: they had apparently come to an agreement with a German film director (whom they did not name) and were hoping to raise the money necessary to make the picture in America. As we know, their hopes were not fulfilled [‘Make New Plans...’ 1932]. When the third dissident, the ex-communist Lewis, came back to America, he admitted that he was disillusioned with the ‘Worker’s Republic’. Contrary to his expectations, he had found that ‘Russia cares nothing for the interests of the Negroes beyond the point where they can serve her purposes.’ ‘The Soviet is making rapid advancement, he said, but declared that the trend is toward nationalism’ [‘McNary...’ 1932].

In Moscow, black African and African American students of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) expressed their disappointment in the Land of the Soviets. On 19 January 1933 they had a meeting with D. Z. Manuilsky, Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, to discuss their problems. Unlike the members of the cine group — African Americans who had been received as honoured guests — the black students knew life in Soviet

¹ See also: [‘Say Race Bias...’ 1932].

Russia from the inside, and had seen and experienced manifestations of racism. They were unhappy with how black people had been portrayed in the shows *The Negro Child and the Ape* at the Children's Theatre, *The Negro* at the Kamerniy Theatre, and *The Geisha* at the Operetta Theatre. They were offended by the attitude of Muscovites to them: passers-by called them 'apes' and spat at the sight of them. 'The dirtiest Russian in the street, and the most educated, can laugh at me, a Negro'; 'I've come up against greater chauvinism [racism] here than in capitalist countries. <...> No one spat at me there in the way they <...> [do] here in Moscow,' they protested.¹ The students did not conceal their indignation at the cancellation of *Black and White*. In reply Manuilsky decided to reveal to them the truth about the role of white American engineers working on the five-year plan, and tried to convince the students of the untimely nature of the film by telling them about the threat of war, the interests of the world proletariat, and the need to preserve good relations with America, not forgetting to mention Comrade Stalin's speech on 'The Results of the First Five-Year Plan' delivered on 7 January 1933 [McClellan 1993: 383–5].

The story of *Black and White*, widely discussed in America and a matter of concern to the students of the KUTV, was passed over in silence in Russia. It was not proper for the citizens of a country so proud of its emancipation from racial and ethnic division to know that an anti-racist film had been banned. Besides, the first five-year plan was nearing completion, and whole pages of newspapers were devoted to the glorification of the achievements of the Land of the Soviets and its wise leaders. Nor were the foreign specialists, without whom these achievements would have been impossible, forgotten. And Col. Cooper was practically the most important of them. The question of how his work should be recognised had been discussed as early as 1932. In his report on his conversations with Cooper about *Black and White*, Kaganovich had written to Stalin on 19 August 1932: 'Incidentally, Cooper is still trying to get a meeting with you and today he raised with Kuybyshev the question of his firm's work with us, and also of how his contribution to the building of Dneprostroy should be marked. I think we could give him a certificate of honour marking the contribution of his consultancy. He says that wherever he has built anything they have marked his contribution with a special ceremony. I would like to have your written opinion' [*Stalin i Kaganovich...* 2001: 289]. The answer was brief: 'Stalin to Kaganovich, 21 August 1932. Cooper must without fail be buttered up, included in the "roll of honour" (without fail!) and given a special certificate, which is to be published' [Ibid.: 294]. There was evidently a complete understanding for the time between Cooper and the

¹ Cited from [McClellan 1993: 384–5].

Soviet leadership, and both sides fulfilled the conditions of their tacit agreement. Cooper spoke at the opening ceremony of the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station after Kalinin, Ordzhonikidze and Chubar, and completely in the spirit of the age: he mentioned Lenin's far-sightedness, and the 'wisdom' of the current leadership. 'Dneprostroy today can look the whole world boldly in the eye,' he declared, 'and tell it that it is ready to play its part in the further industrialisation of the country. And Dneprostroy challenges anyone who used to doubt the wisdom of your government's decision to begin such a gigantic task as the building of the greatest hydroelectric power station in the world in conditions of technical difficulties on a scale never before encountered.' Cooper was 'battered up' as per Stalin's orders: he received the Order of the Red Banner of Labour and a certificate of honour from the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. His name was included on the board of honour of the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station ['Dneproges imeni Lenina...' 1932].¹

While the Soviet authorities marked Cooper's achievements and banned the film about racism in the USA at his request, they did not heed his advice to stop 'educating American negroes in the spirit of communist doctrine.' Those members of the cine group who had decided to remain for the time being in the USSR were invited by the theatrical section of the trades unions to take a trip around any part of the country they should choose. Hughes and ten of his comrades wanted to see the life of the people of Central Asia with their own eyes. An interesting programme was prepared for them: visits to a tractor factory, a silk mill (where a concert of Uzbek, Tajik and Jewish music was given in their honour), the Uzbek Opera Theatre, a teacher training college, a women's club, the Trade Union House, the Museum of the Revolution, state and collective farms, and meetings with the local communists, including the Secretary of the Central Committee of Uzbekistan. 'One more speech triple translated and one more statistic on anything will kill me,' one of the girls complained [Hughes 1956: 106]. Exhausted by far too warm a welcome, everyone but Hughes decided to return to Moscow. (The decision was taken by vote: ten votes out of eleven in favour of leaving.) Hughes spent several months more in Central Asia, and the result of his trip was an enthusiastic article in *Izvestia*. What he had seen in Soviet Russia — and he had seen not only the Metropol and Moscow theatrical performances, not only the Soviet farms and factories, but hunger, dirt and destitution too — had not changed his opinion of Soviet Russia, because, as he remarked himself, 'It all depends on whose eyes look at it.' Hughes, who had arrived from America, where racism was not yet a thing of the past, looked on Russia as a country which had overcome racism, and for that he was

¹ See also: ['Celebrate Start...' 1932].

willing to close his eyes to a lot of things there. In 1946 he attempted to justify his enthusiasm: 'I have written mostly about the things I liked about the Soviets, because they far overbalance the things I don't like <...> I would also like to see our country and their country be friends, not enemies' [Hughes 1973: 92].

P.S. What happened to the main members of the group

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) continued to work tirelessly: his verse won him the reputation of being the best African American poet; his plays were performed all over America, including on Broadway; he organised Negro theatre troupes; he co-wrote the screenplay for *Way Down South*; in his weekly column in the black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* he criticised the social defects of the USA and struggled against racism and McCarthyism; in 1934–46 he wrote several apologetic articles on the USSR; he taught at the universities of Chicago and Atlanta. His collected works were published in eighteen volumes in 2001–2.

Louise Thompson (1901–1999) declared in an interview after her return to America that 'Russia today is the only country in the world that's really fit to live in' [*New York Amsterdam News* 1932]. Under the impression of her trip she joined the Communist Party of the USA and became a leading civil rights activist. In 1940 she married William L. Patterson, a leading African-American communist and civil liberties activist.

Loren Miller (1903–1967) did much as a lawyer for the complete integration of black people into American society. From 1964 to 1967 he was a member of the Supreme Court of the State of California. A few years after returning from the USSR he admitted that 'he had made an error in taking too strong a position on the side of the Communists' [Hauke 1998: 218].

Dorothy West (1907–1998) remembered the year spent in Russia as 'the most carefree' of her life. She used the money she had got in the USSR to found the journal *Challenge* for African American readers. She was the author of stories, three novels, and several essays on life in the USSR.

Henry Lee Moon (1901–1985) continued to work as a journalist. He edited the African American journal *The Crisis*. He was known and respected as a civil rights activist.

Theodore (Ted) Poston (1906–1974) became the first black reporter on the staff of a 'white' newspaper (*New York Post*), where he worked successfully for thirty-five years.

Homer Smith (1908–1972) settled in Moscow, where he was offered the job of reorganising the postal service. He worked in newspapers

for black readers and as a war correspondent. He married a Russian and lived fifteen years in the Soviet Union.

As well as Smith, Lloyd Patterson (1911–1942) also stayed in Russia. He married the designer Vera Aralova, and worked as a newsreader on the radio, broadcasting in English. Evacuated during the war, he died of typhus.

Karl Junghans (1897–1984), despairing of ever making the ‘colossal, first ever’ anti-racist film, left the Soviet Union and set off to find fame in Nazi Germany. His documentary *Jugend der Welt* (1936) about the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen was the first in a series of commissions from the Nazi Party and Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda [Aitken 2013: 471]. For a time he was considered one of the foremost cinema directors of Nazi Germany (something he was careful to conceal afterwards). He was entrusted with documentaries like *Die Große Zeit* (1938) and *Jahre der Entscheidung* (1939), which praised the Nazi Party and its leader. In 1936 Junghans made his first talking picture *Durch die Wüste*, based on the novel by Karl May, Hitler’s favourite writer. However, his comedy *Altes Herz geht auf die Reise*, based on the novel by Hans Fallada, displeased the Führer and showings of it were stopped. Having lost Goebbels’s favour and fearing for his life, he fled to Switzerland using false papers, and thence to France. Shortly before the Germans arrived in Paris Junghans emigrated to America, where he was immediately arrested as a suspected Nazi sympathiser. After a few months, though, he managed to regain his freedom, and set off for California in the hope of a career in Hollywood. After Pearl Harbor he was again arrested on suspicion of being a German spy. The FBI archives contain records of Junghans’s interrogation and his evidence about ‘half real and half invented’ events and expeditions. He expressed his willingness to co-operate with the authorities and was released conditionally, forbidden to leave Los Angeles. Instead of a career directing in Hollywood he worked as a gardener for Berthold Brecht and other German refugees from Nazi Germany. In 1947 Junghans succeeded in making the documentaries *Sand Paintings* and *Monuments of the Past*, about the life of the Navajo and Hopi.¹ Afterwards he returned to Germany and in 1975 he was given a lifetime achievement award by the German Film Academy.

Boris Yakovlevich Babitsky (1901–1938) remained director of Mezhrabpom until 1934. After that he became director of Mosfilm, and in June 1937 deputy director of the Zoo Centre attached to the circus management of the All-Union Committee of the Arts. On 22 December 1937 he was arrested on a charge of participating in a counter-revolutionary terrorist organisation. He was shot on 10 March 1938.

¹ For further details on Junghans’s life in the USA, see: [Pitzer 2013: 171–3, 184–5, 350].

* * *

In 1932 Mezhrabpom did after all start making *Black and White* — but in the form of a three-minute cartoon on motifs from Mayakovsky's poem, directed by Ivan Ivanov-Vano and Leonid Amalrik, and released in 1933. In the film, Willie the shoe-shine boy tries to get an answer to the question that is worrying him from a white racist with a whip in his hand and a fat cigar between his teeth, instead of addressing his question 'to the Comintern, in Moscow'.

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