

## Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary : Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)

Charles Musser

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# Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary: Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)

Charles Musser

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article porte un regard nouveau sur certains projets documentaires, cinématographiques et photographiques, qui tentaient d'articuler des éventualités utopiques au plus fort de la guerre froide, au moment où des impératifs idéologiques muselaient les artistes, quelles que soient leurs convictions politiques. L'œuvre au centre de cette étude est *Song of the Rivers* (1954) de Joris Ivens, qui est analysée et ensuite mise en parallèle avec l'exposition de photographies d'Edward Steichen, *Family of Man* (1955). Afin de mesurer la complexité textuelle et la dialectique propre au film d'Ivens, cette analyse se penche sur les récits personnels, tissés à même les aspirations épiques du film. Ces récits, concernant Ivens et Paul Robeson, mobilisent la figure du fleuve qui apparaît à la fois dans le cinéma soviétique et les performances de Robeson. Ivens et Robeson ont tous deux repris, et par là-même re-figuré, des éléments de *Song of the Rivers* dans le cadre de deux projets cinématographiques de moins grande envergure et plus intimistes : pour Ivens, *La Seine a rencontré Paris* (1957) et, pour Robeson, *Brücke über den Ozean* (*Bridge Over the Ocean*, 1958), réalisé avec Earl Robinson.

## ABSTRACT

This essay reconsiders several documentary projects in film and photography that sought to articulate utopian

possibilities at the height of the Cold War, when ideological imperatives constrained artists of all political persuasions. The central art work is Joris Ivens' *Song of the Rivers* (1954), which is analysed and then juxtaposed to Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* (1955) photography exhibition. In seeking to reclaim the textual complexity and dialectics of Ivens' work, this analysis looks at the personal narratives that are threaded through the film's epic aspirations. Involving Ivens and Paul Robeson, these narratives mobilize the trope of the river that recurs in both Soviet film and Robeson's performances. Ivens and Robeson both returned to, and so refigured, elements of *Song of the Rivers* in two much smaller and more intimate film projects: Ivens' *La Seine a rencontré Paris* (*The Seine Meets Paris*, 1957) and Robeson's *Brücke über den Ozean* (*Bridge Over the Ocean*, 1958), made with Earl Robinson.

During the last several years I have been involved in two different retrospectives with one overlapping film: Joris Ivens' *Lied der Ströme* (*Song of the Rivers*, 1954). The first was a centennial retrospective of Paul Robeson's film work at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled "Borderlines: Paul Robeson and Film" (18 June-5 July 1999), which I co-curated with Ed Guerrero.<sup>1</sup> The second was "Cinema Without Borders: The Films of Joris Ivens," curated by Wanda Bershen and Richard Peña, which has been touring North America over the course of 2002, having opened at the Walter Reade Theater 20-28 March 2002.<sup>2</sup> The English-language version of Ivens' film, for which Robeson sang the title song, proved highly elusive back in 1998-99. The curators, two independent researchers, and the Museum of Modern Art were unable to locate a surviving copy, despite our considerable efforts. We had to be content with showing a German version, for which Robeson sang a brief prologue "in his own language." (In fact, we were very grateful to the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin for loaning us the print.) Though not advertised as such, our screening may have been the U.S. premiere of Ivens' film, since *Song of the Rivers* had been banned in the United States for many years as Communist propaganda. Our failure to find the English-language version was one of many

indications that much work still needed to be done on Robeson's film career. My continuing quest eventually took me to the European Foundation Joris Ivens in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The foundation not only had paper documentation on the film but a videotape of the long-sought version. In truth, it was taken from a beautiful 35mm print that had resided at the Nederlands Filmmuseum all along—how its presence had escaped queries from the Museum of Modern Art remains a mystery. Obviously I was delighted by this “discovery,” for I had feared it lost. Moreover, it led to my involvement in the Ivens retrospective!

Serious retrospectives are catalysts that can still play an important, complex role in film culture. Beyond their important public dimension, they bring together a group of committed scholars for an exchange of ideas and information. The opportunity to view good quality prints projected on the big screen with an audience and in the context of these exchanges is also invaluable. Those participants fortunate enough to be involved in a retrospective's preparations often learn as much during and after the event as they did before it. In this case, these two retrospectives revealed fortuitous conjunctions. First, they have propelled me to grapple not only with the film but with the related tropes, metaphors and allegories of the river, which these two retrospectives unexpectedly had in common. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have remarked, tropes can be repressive: a defence mechanism against literal meaning. But they also constitute an arena of contestation in which a given trope is open to perpetuation, rejection or subversion.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this complex process of creative invention that I wish to consider, for as this study shows when dealing with a rich conjunction of such uses, any mobilization of a trope can prove a truly multi-faceted intervention. Second, Ivens and Robeson mobilized this trope during the 1950s to evoke the dream of a socialist utopia, which they both shared and which met with intense resistance from anti-Communist democracies in the United States and Europe, which saw them as a threat to their own ideological rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

## Parallel Lives and One Shared Project

As it turns out, Paul Robeson and Joris Ivens led parallel lives. Both were born in 1898, less than six months apart: Robeson, the elder, on 9 April and Ivens on 18 November.<sup>5</sup> Each was involved in the avant-garde art world during the 1920s, working with small communities of artists and intellectuals that propelled them into the arts: excepting the Provincetown Players, Robeson may have remained a lawyer; excepting the Filmliga, Ivens may have continued in his father's business. Both became increasingly politicized and aligned with the Soviet Union during the 1930s, as they embraced the vision of a new socialist utopia in which conflicts of classes, races and nations would be overcome. When did these two artists finally meet? Their biographers have not provided us with that information, so we must speculate. Ivens was in the Soviet Union from April 1934 to January 1936, most of that time in Moscow. Robeson visited Moscow for two weeks in December 1934-January 1935 and met extensively with Sergei Eisenstein but also with Si-lan Chen and her husband Jay Leyda. Leyda, who had a close relationship with Eisenstein, was doing some work for Ivens in this period. Perhaps that was their initial meeting, but who knows. By the time Robeson returned to the Soviet Union in late 1937, Ivens was gone.

The Spanish Civil War proved a defining cause in their artistic and political careers; while in Spain, both spent much of their time with writer Ernest Hemingway. Ivens, however, was in Republican Spain filming *The Spanish Earth* (1937) in the first months of 1937 while Robeson did not go there until January 1938. By then Ivens had left. Robeson did appear in a film about the Spanish Civil War, though his biographer doesn't mention the title. I suspect that this film was Roman Karmen's *Spain* (1939) and am actively researching this loose end.

Ivens and Robeson must have seen each other during World War II (1939-1945), when both lived in the United States and travelled in overlapping circles. After the war they were geographically separated for many years, though they could have met again during Robeson's European travels in 1949. Each was denied a passport by his native country in 1950. Ivens was in Paris when the Dutch invalidated his passport and told the film-

maker to return to the Netherlands. Fearing detainment, the filmmaker chose not to follow those instructions. By October of that year, Ivens regained his passport, though he dared not visit his home country until 1959. Robeson was in the United States when his passport was voided, and he was unable to travel abroad until 1958.<sup>6</sup> In 1963, when Robeson was in ill health and staying at the Buch Clinic in East Berlin, Martin Duberman tells us that the performer was visited by various “old friends,” including Joris Ivens. Two major artists with many shared interests and friends, Robeson and Ivens worked together on only one film project: *Lied der Ströme (Song of the Rivers)*. This collaboration was carried out at a distance, spanning the Atlantic Ocean and breaching the Iron Curtain.

Robeson and Ivens had truly international careers. Ivens not only made films in his native Holland, he worked extensively in Asia (China, Vietnam, Indonesia), North America (Canada and the United States), Latin America (Cuba, Chile), Europe, Africa, the Soviet Union and Australia.<sup>7</sup> Almost all were documentaries of some kind, though he directed fiction in the 1920s and made another such effort in the 1950s. Robeson was a world-renowned performance artist, who was forever crossing national boundaries. He made half his films in England, others in Hollywood, New York, and Switzerland. The actor worked on films about Africa and sought to collaborate with Eisenstein in the Soviet Union. During the Cold War he was the frequent subject of non-fiction films in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Robeson also crisscrossed the colour line that divided the United States into two worlds (black and white) as well as the lines often drawn between high and low culture, art and politics. The performer also moved easily across a wide range of cultural forms: the stage, the concert hall, radio, and the movies.

A major movie star between 1933 (*The Emperor Jones*) and 1942 (*Tales of Manhattan*), Robeson appeared in eleven feature fiction films, almost all of which are now available on video and/or DVD. Robeson also had a significant but still largely unrecognized career in non-fiction cinema. It began with *My Song Goes Forth* (1937), a 50-minute documentary on South Africa, and included *Native Land* (Frontier Films, 1942), for

which he served as narrator, and *The People's Congressman* (1948), a campaign film for U.S. congressman Vito Marcantonio, which he narrated and in which he appeared. This strand of his career neared its conclusion with a documentary portrait of the artist by Roman Karmen, filmed in the Soviet Union in 1958.

The Cold War seriously disrupted both men's artistic, political, and personal lives. In the decade after World War II, Ivens did not necessarily end up working in the Soviet bloc by choice.<sup>8</sup> He was barred entry to the United States and was often viewed as a dangerous figure in Western Europe. Although Ivens was able to move back and forth across the Iron Curtain throughout the 1950s, his filmmaking was limited to Eastern Europe until 1956. It was not until 1957 that he could make a documentary in Western Europe. His first such effort was *La Seine a rencontré Paris* (*The Seine Meets Paris*, 1957). Robeson, confined to the United States, where he was blacklisted, found it virtually impossible even to rent a concert hall in which he could perform. Opportunities in radio, television and film had disappeared. With the FBI watching his every move, jail was a real possibility. Choosing to remain in the United States where he was effectively barred from making a living in any of his several areas of creative achievement, Robeson lived in internal exile. Despite such impediments, the performer still managed to participate in Ivens' Berlin-based documentary *Song of the Rivers* and, near the end of this period, to produce the virtually unknown concert film *Brücke über den Ozean* (*Bridge Over the Ocean*, 1958) with Earl Robinson.

If the political rigidities of the Cold War more or less trapped Robeson and Ivens, cultural critics and historians in what was then called "the West" (the United States, Western Europe and their political-social sphere) found it convenient to ignore or minimize their artistic work from this period.<sup>9</sup> *Song of the Rivers* was long barred entry to the United States, while it was so heavily censored in Great Britain that its initial release there was halted. It was censored in France as well (Zalzman, 1963, p. 85). As the editors of the French film journal *Positif* (Unsigned, 1955a, p. 76) protested, "Numerous sequences and shots have been cut... while the sound track of the film has been rendered unintelligible."<sup>10</sup> When the film was seen and

discussed, criticism tended to divide along political lines. After seeing *Song of the Rivers* in Vienna, a reviewer for the Dutch Catholic newspaper *De Volkskrant* felt that the film was “for complete morons” and that it marked Ivens’ death as an artist.<sup>11</sup> *Film User* (Unsigned, 1955b, p. 346), a trade journal for the educational and non-theatrical market and perhaps the only British film magazine to comment on the film, remarked:

Cleverly made and wilfully misleading comparison between conditions on either side of the Iron Curtain. Visually it is better than most previous “peace” propaganda; intellectually it is on much the same level, lacking objectivity and relying mainly on an appeal to the emotions of audiences with little knowledge of the facts. As an example of the weapons forged for the cold war, the film is perhaps of some technical interest.

On the other hand, its articulation of a utopian future (tied to present struggles) resulted in Ivens receiving the International Peace Prize in 1955.

*Song of the Rivers* has thus been doubly damned within Dutch-Anglo-American film culture: unseen yet always already relegated to the slagheap of Cold War propaganda. Even Ivens’ most recent biographer, Hans Schoots (2000, p. 244), has characterized it primarily as “a product of centralist thinking, forcing a pluralistic global reality into a simplistic framework that reduced workers to extras in a single global movement.” In France, the film tended to receive more attention and a more generous response. As the editors of *Positif* (Unsigned, 1955a, p. 76) remarked, “Let us recall that Joris Ivens’ work is studied in all histories of the cinema and that at the same time most of his films have been and remain mutilated or forbidden pretty much everywhere in the world.” The film historian Georges Sadoul (quoted in Schoots, 2000, p. 245) felt the picture “approaches ultimate perfection.” H el ene Legotien (1963, p. 167, our translation) of *Esprit* hailed the film for expressing

the true measure of man’s conquest of nature. And it is man in his most universal condition, as a worker, whose activities and struggles each day alter the face of the earth and the destiny of humanity, who inspires the



majestic harmony of this incomparable lyric poem that is *Song of the Rivers*.

Taking her cue from the majestic opening scene, she emphasized aspects of the film other than the central confrontation of exploiters and exploited—aspects that were either muted or rendered confused in the version she was able to see. Nonetheless, exploring the film's form and meaning without focusing exclusively on its political message, Legotien (1963, p. 166) declared that she was moved by the ways in which the film engaged “the traditions of the great works of the past.”<sup>12</sup>

My goal here is to pursue several approaches that can re-contextualize and re-historicize *Song of the Rivers*. As Legotien understood, the film should be considered within the context of film history itself, for rather than a simplistic and didactic expository documentary, the film has significant reflexive elements.<sup>13</sup> It does not, however, question the status or ability of the cinematic image to represent people adequately. Rather it affirms that ability by evoking its own revolutionary and cinematic lineage. The song that Paul Robeson sang for this film requires similar attention. Refusing to interrogate the film (and the song) in isolation, I will juxtapose them to a contemporaneous effort in the United States: Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* photography exhibition. Both film and exhibition articulated overlapping but rival visions of a mass utopia.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the last two sections of this essay further explore the parallels between Ivens and Robeson by considering *The Seine Meets Paris* and *Bridge Over the Ocean*. These small films, while made under commercial and generic constraints, returned to themes of *Song of the Rivers*, not simply to negate its ideological viewpoint, but rather to offer dialectic alternatives that reaffirmed the place of its utopian vision. They helped to create a space for spectatorial freedom while reflecting changing political and cultural opportunities.

### Songs of Rivers

Although produced by the DEFA Studio for Newsreels and Documentary Films in East Germany (DDR), *Lied der Ströme* (*Song of the Rivers*) was funded by the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions. “The third World Trade Union

Congress organized in 1953 by the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) is of course the basis of the film,” remarked WFTU general secretary Louis Saillant.<sup>15</sup> Some of the film was shot at the WFTU conference in Vienna, which opened on 10 October 1953, but the bulk of the material was shot around the globe. A host of international left-leaning stars participated in the film’s production. American performer Robeson and Dutch filmmaker Ivens were joined by German writer Bertolt Brecht, Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich, French writer Vladimir Pozner (an old friend and collaborator of Ivens, Robeson, and Brecht),<sup>16</sup> and Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (with whom Robeson had recently shared the International Peace Prize).<sup>17</sup> This international band worked with an array of mostly anonymous camera operators from all over the world: 32 in all, said to be from 32 different countries. The marquee artists were complemented by a group of political leaders who appeared in the film, many of whom had been jailed or encountered other forms of repression. Its staff of anonymous craftsmen likewise had their counterparts in the rank and file of ordinary working people depicted in the film. Whether stars or foot soldiers, all were united in the struggle to achieve justice and revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Although *Song of the Rivers* had its initial premiere in Berlin at the Babylon Filmtheater on 17 September 1954, Ivens continued to refine the documentary long after that date. Before postproduction was completed, the filmmakers had generated at least 18 versions of the film in many different languages. According to some sources, *Song of the Rivers* was eventually shown to more than 250 million people.<sup>19</sup> Its immediate subject is the struggle of oppressed peoples throughout the world as they organize, attend the third World Congress of Trade Unions, and seek to overthrow Western capitalism in pursuit of a socialist utopia. The film is much more than an oversized news account of its subject. The first lines of narration, recited over scenes of massive construction projects, are: “Aye, but man can yet be the master. By the power of his strong right arm and his intelligence.” The film is fundamentally a celebration of humanity’s ability to transform the natural world. The efforts of

the World Congress of Trade Unions are part of a larger effort to bring this labour and intelligence fully to the fore.

*Song of the Rivers* must also be understood as Joris Ivens' homage to the great revolutionary filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin and his first feature film, *Mat* (*Mother*, 1926). Pudovkin died in 1953, as *Song of the Rivers* was being formulated. The film was Ivens' heart-felt response to this loss. Not only was Pudovkin a beloved friend and colleague, he and his first feature propelled Ivens into filmmaking. As the Dutch filmmaker recalled:

The first Russian film to reach Amsterdam was Pudovkin's *Mother* based on Gorki's novel, but public showings were forbidden by the Dutch censors. This piqued our group of young artists and intellectual Amsterdamers in their two most sensitive spots: the right to freedom of expression and the wish to see experimental films (Ivens, 1969, p. 20).<sup>20</sup>

The ban led this group to form the Filmliga (the Film League) on 11 May 1927. Ivens became a board member, and two days later he provided the projector and served as projectionist for the Filmliga's screening of *Mother*. Almost immediately, Ivens began to make films.<sup>21</sup>

Ivens went on to make a close, frame-by-frame analysis of Pudovkin's film (Ivens, 1927, p. 7). As he later remarked, "the new possibilities for expression shown by Pudovkin's *Mother* enthralled us" (Ivens, 1969, p. 20). Its use of associational montage was to have a profound impact on Ivens' subsequent work. In the case of *Song of the Rivers*, the inspiration was more specific and overt. In *Mother*, as springtime approaches, the streams and rivulets of water gradually meet to form an unstoppable river, just as the small columns of hopeful and courageous working-class people come together to form a powerful revolutionary mass that is marching to demand their rights. This trope continues in Ivens' film as rivers of water and rivers of workers (the masses) are intercut using associational editing. Later, in the film's concluding section, rivers of people (isomorphic with those struggling for freedom on the six rivers of water) come together to form a sea of demonstrators, becoming an unstoppable revolutionary force.

Building on *Mother*, on one hand rivers come together to form the ocean, and on the other radicalized workers come together to form the third World Trade Union Congress (midway through the film) and then the hoped-for worldwide revolution (at the film's end).



Old friends: Joris Ivens and Vsevolod Pudovkin, here with the Russian actor Tcherkov (photographer unknown, 1949)

© European Foundation Joris Ivens / Joris Ivens Archives

Pudovkin did more than serve as a catalyst for Ivens' film career. He praised and supported the Dutchman's early film-making efforts as Ivens shifted from experimental to more socially engaged filmmaking. In 1931 Pudovkin (1931, pp. 162-63; French translation in Zalzman, 1963, our translation into English) wrote:

Ivens chose as his theme the work of man. And work subjected Ivens to its laws. It dictated the film's simple and convincing rhythm, which gave clarity and precision to the editing. It gave birth to what is called "artistic truth," or that organic, inherent logic that creates the unity and convincing force of a work of art and which subjects art to living reality.<sup>22</sup>

It is this precise theme of work to which Ivens returns, right from the film's opening moments. *Song of the Rivers* also recycles significant amounts of footage from Ivens' previous films, including *Philips Radio (Industrial Symphony, 1931)*, *Nieuwe Gronden (New Earth, 1933)*, *Borinage (1934)*, *The 400 Million (1939)*, *Indonesia Calling (1946)* and *Wyciąg Pokoju Warszawa-Berlin-Praga (Peace Tour, 1952)*. This gives the film a layer of meaning that easily escapes the casual viewer. *Song of the Rivers* may appear to exemplify the most impersonal qualities of social realist filmmaking, but it is actually a very personal film, which recapitulates Ivens' own history as a filmmaker—a history that dates from his encounter with Pudovkin's *Mother* and which was shaped by subsequent contact.

Writing in 1953, while in preparation for *Song of the Rivers*, Ivens revealed his concern about the relationship of the personal story to a documentary's real theme (the struggles of the people). He remarked that

There are documentary films in which the personal actions form a continuous line, where one or more persons are being seen throughout the entire film... The personal story should also not exceed the framework of the thematic material—nor should the spectator's interest be forcefully pushed in a direction of personal action because then the real theme and general notions are pushed too far into the background (Ivens, in Bakker, 1999, p. 269).

In discussing personal stories, Ivens was referring to film subjects such as Nanook and his family in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North (1922)*. In *Song of the Rivers*, however, it is Ivens' personal story that is imbedded in the film. This story is not articulated by placing the filmmaker in front of the camera: the filmmaker never appears and goes unmentioned except for the head credits; nonetheless, his personal story is represented by and through his films. Because this reflexive rumination on film and personal history appears invisible to the uninitiated, the film's principle theme remains comfortably in the foreground.

Although Robeson does not appear on screen, like Ivens he is one of the film's personal subjects. Let me explain. *Song of the*

*Rivers* is in a long tradition of documentaries that are structured along musical lines. City symphony films such as *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walther Ruttmann, 1927) and *Entuziazm* (*Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas*, Dziga Vertov, 1931) are obvious examples. About Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1935), Marie Seton remarked, "The structure of the film is musical" (in Jacobs, 1979, p. 102). Many of Ivens' earlier films work within this paradigm: *Regan* (*Rain*, 1929), *Industrial Symphony*, and *Pesn o Gerojach* (*Song of Heroes*, 1933). With a simple narrative line—the opening of a bridge, the building of a huge manufacturing complex—the Dutchman, like other documentary filmmakers, needed to find other principles of organization, and musical forms provided favoured models. Poetry provided a closely related model, and the sound track (or in silent films, the intertitles) was poetic in structure. The song conveniently brought these two impulses together. Ivens' *Song of the Rivers*, in fact, wove a song throughout its ninety or more minutes. This song, with music by Shostakovich and words by Brecht, was also called "Song of the Rivers," though its German title ("Lied von den Flüssen") differed somewhat from that of the film (*Lied der Ströme*). In fact, the film has a strong and quite rigorous structure that becomes easily discernable after repeated viewings.

When describing his involvement in *Song of the Rivers*, Robeson remarked that the lyrics and music were sent to him at his brother Ben Robeson's parsonage in Harlem (the Mother A.M.E. Zion Church at 155 West 136 St.), where he was then living. They were accompanied by a request that he sing them for Ivens' film. The lyrics were in German, while the names of the lyricist and composer went unmentioned. Had Ivens and Pozner expected Robeson to sing in German? Such an assumption seems reasonable, for he sometimes sang in that language. If so, they were to be frustrated, because he translated the lyrics into English with the help of his collaborator Lloyd L. Brown (Brown receives screen credit for the translation).<sup>23</sup> The recordings were then made in the make-shift studio at his brother's parsonage with the help of his son (Pauli or Paul Robeson, Jr.)—with similar arrangements to those he used when making

records. According to Paul Robeson, Jr.,<sup>24</sup> he carted a heavy “portable tape recorder” over to the parsonage and recorded his father. As Paul Sr. remembered, “The various verses and choruses were to be sung in the precise number of seconds specified for each; and I was to sing unaccompanied” (Robeson in Ivens and Pozner, 1957, p. 19). Once completed, the recordings were sent off to Ivens in East Berlin. Later, after reading of the film’s success in the newspapers and learning the names of the song’s composer and lyricist, he declared, “what a wonderful film making company I had become associated with! And there was a warm glow of appreciation for the invitation they had sent me, making it possible, despite all barriers, for a Negro American to join with Hollander and Russian and German and Frenchman and all the others in creative work for peace and liberation” (Robeson in Ivens and Pozner, 1957, p. 21).

Robeson’s participation on *Song of the Rivers* was certainly a coup for the filmmakers, lending their film prestige and filling out its international character. Yet despite the prominence his association gave to this project, Robeson’s vocal presence posed certain problems and varied among the many versions of the documentary. At this point, I have viewed four different prints of the film. Robeson sings “Song of the Rivers” in the English language version. Here the song has seven verses and these are spread throughout the film, providing one of its key structuring elements. The verses are each devoted to a river (the Mississippi, the Ganges, the Nile, the Yangtze, the Volga and the Amazon) and tied to images depicting struggles in that section of the globe. These Robeson sings solo. Significantly, the first verse focuses on the Mississippi (i.e. the United States) and goes:

Old Man Mississippi rages  
Robs us of our cattle, plunders field ashore.  
Levy walls forgotten by the rulers  
Spending billions for atomic war.

But we who suffered devastation  
Who drowned in the rivers of blood,  
Cry peace for our land and all others,  
Unite 'gainst the flood.

The filmmakers added musical accompaniment during the post-production process. For the final, seventh section, which concludes the film, Robeson's singing is joined by that of a chorus making his voice just one of many. Accompanied by visuals of mass demonstrations often led by trade union leaders, this binds the star singer, the political leaders and working people into a single struggle.

Robeson's rendition of "Song of the Rivers" does not appear in either of the two German versions of the film that I have seen. The reason for this is perhaps obvious. The song has a message to communicate, and this message was more important than the person who sang it. Robeson's somewhat later concert film for the East Germans, *Bridge Over the Ocean*, could be (and was) subtitled, but this was not considered a viable option for Ivens' epic. If the filmmakers had hoped/expected that Robeson would sing Brecht's lyrics in German, they subsequently had to find other solutions. In both German versions, "Lied von den Flüssen" was sung by the Radio Choir of Leipzig. In the somewhat longer version that the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv (Berlin) lent to the Museum of Modern Art for its "Borderlines: Paul Robeson and Film" retrospective, Robeson sings "Hymn of the Workers" "in his own language" before the film proper actually begins. Accommodations were thus made so that Robeson's affiliation with the project could be retained in the film itself. However, in the somewhat shorter German version available at the Joris Ivens Foundation, Robeson's voice has been completely removed. In the French version at the Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC, Bois d'Arcy), Robeson's English-language rendition is retained, with a translation ("adaptation française") from Brecht's original lyrics by Léon Moussinac and Fernand Lamy appearing as subtitles during Robeson's singing.<sup>25</sup>

Having Robeson sing "Song of the Rivers" was not a chance idea—a choice simply based on his renowned voice, his progressive politics and the wish for geographic and racial diversity. His persona was integral to the film's meaning and aesthetic, for the film engaged his artistic history in ways that echo its engagement of Ivens' history as a filmmaker. Encountering the song's opening verse, one cannot avoid thinking that Brecht's Old



Man Mississippi river is a conscious evocation of and response to Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics for "Ol' Man River," which was in many respects Robeson's signature song. Note, too, that when Robeson sings this verse, there is a shot of a sign reading "Show Boat" to help reinforce this connection. Using Robeson's voice established an explicit relationship between Hammerstein and Jerome Kern's song of one river and Brecht's song of six. The song is then able to serve as an engagement and a critique: Brecht's Mississippi rages while Hammerstein's is lazy and indifferent. Brecht's Mississippi can be mastered "by the prowess of man's strong right arm and his intelligence," while Hammerstein's is a timeless, unalterable force. There is pain and struggle on Hammerstein's Mississippi, but no sense that it can be changed.



Still from *Song of the Rivers* (Ivens, 1954),  
a flood of the Mississippi river  
© European Foundation Joris Ivens / Joris Ivens Archives

The river as a subject and symbol has had a rich history in the United States as well as in Russia and the Soviet Union. Certainly the figure of the river engaged Robeson as much as Pudovkin and Ivens. Robeson was unquestionably familiar with

Langston Hughes' (1958, p. 88) poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers":

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I build my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down  
to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn  
all golden in the sunset.  
I've known rivers:  
Ancient dusky rivers.

Robeson had already spoken of rivers, having rewritten many of Hammerstein's lyrics for "Ol' Man River" while singing the song at concerts during the Spanish Civil War—making the song his own (see Duberman, 1988, p. 214). Although Hughes' poem may not be a direct source for *Song of the Rivers*, it seems valid enough as an intertext. Ivens and Brecht had both crossed paths with Hughes at different points. Hughes had strong ties to the Soviet Union during the 1930s and his visit to Moscow in June 1932 (during which he worked on an unrealized film project) coincided with a period when Ivens was based there. Hughes had also met Brecht in Paris during the Spanish Civil War (see Rampersad, 1986, p. 344). Might they have been familiar with one of Hughes' most memorable poems?

Certainly Robeson had continued to speak of rivers, even after rewriting Hammerstein's lyrics. In the 1940s he added a song to his repertoire that evoked the Mississippi but for different ends—to "symbolize the oneness of humanity." "Four Rivers" was written in 1944 for the Broadway revue *Meet the People of 1944*. The words were by Edward Eliscu, who contributed to such Hollywood films as *Flying Down to Rio* (RKO, 1933) and *The Gay Divorcé* (RKO, 1934), and by Henry Myers; the musical score was by Jay Gorney, whose song credits include "Brother Can You Spare a Dime." All three worked on Broadway and in Hollywood. The song was a perfect wartime expression of Popular Front sentiment, of the temporary co-

joining and awkward if real reconciliation of these two utopian visions. It became a staple of Robeson's repertoire, for he sang it at the 1952 Peace Arch concert along the U.S.-Canadian border near Vancouver:

'Tis the story of the four rivers  
that the eyes of the world are on  
They're called the Thames, the Mississippi,  
And the Yangtze and the Don.  
The four rivers of waters they could be  
But they discovered how to get together  
where the rivers roll to the sea.  
River rolling down to the open sea.

Robeson could use "Four Rivers" to refigure and enrich the trope of the Mississippi river, using it to express a Popular Front ideology.

Ivens' film and Brecht's lyrics embraced crucial qualities of the Eliscu/Myers/Gorney/Robeson song, which was sometimes known by an alternate title: "Song of the Four Rivers." While it is always tempting to see such conjunctions as mere coincidence, Ivens and Brecht were both in the United States when the song first came out. They also must have heard it when listening to recordings of Robeson's performances. Each section of Ivens' film modifies Pudovkin's trope by ending with shots of the open sea. Brecht's lyrics in some sense update the trope, replacing a Popular Front motif with a Cold War one. Brecht depicts the different rivers in terms that were oppositional and confrontational, rather than brotherly—though the hope of ultimate unity and peace is still present. Brecht's lyrics and Ivens' film obviously expand the number of rivers from four to six—adding the Nile, the Amazon as well as the Ganges, while substituting the Volga for the Don and dropping the Thames. The result is much greater emphasis on peoples around the globe and in the developing world. All this helps to explain the pleasure Robeson found in singing Brecht's lyrics. He must have seen it as part of a long and increasingly layered rumination on the river as a lyrical trope. The film was not designed to efface these earlier efforts, for the filmmakers took great care to evoke them.

If Ivens appropriated one set of cinematic and revolutionary tropes involving the river (particularly the Volga) in order to structure and organize his film, Brecht's song engaged another set of literary and poetic metaphors (involving the Mississippi) that were more problematic. These come together in a powerful synthesis the way the rivers converge in the sea. Critics have generally lost sight of this textual complexity, or we might say that this complexity was overpowered by the film's sledgehammer depiction of a demonic United States and an idealized Soviet Union. To be sure, peoples along the Ganges, the Nile, and the Amazon are contending with the adverse impact of capitalism; but it is Brecht's verse on the Volga that stands in strongest contrast with those he wrote about the Mississippi:

Mother Volga, our beloved,  
First among your children Lenin showed the way.  
And the boatmen sorrow song was ended,  
Turbine songs of power cheer each day.  
Here stands our Stalingrad immortal  
Her message to all of mankind:  
Wherever the Fascist seeks dominion,  
His doom let him find.

In contrast to the state of affairs along the Mississippi, revolutionary socialism has tamed the Volga, improving life along it. In fact, this section opens with the ice of the Volga breaking up and flowing downstream (a direct evocation of Pudovkin's *Mother*). The scene quickly changes to summer (the present, after a revolutionary spring). Here the Soviet Union is the vanguard state and Stalingrad, named after the Soviet leader, has approached if not achieved utopia.

In the sections devoted to the Volga and the Mississippi, images reinforce these verses in a literal manner. Accompanying the stanza on the Volga are images of bountiful nature, a boat ride on the tranquil Volga, and hydro-electric power stations. The bombed out buildings of Stalingrad are shown in the distance, monuments to a heroic past that is a distant memory—not a war that was less than a decade old.<sup>26</sup> The Soviet Union is a place of abundance and happy workers. As with the lyrics, these images contrast to those of the United States, particularly

along the Mississippi. Ivens shows shots of flooding and dislocation that were taken in the 1930s and are now associated with Depression America. He also includes a brutal still image of two lynched black men: the image is all the more disturbing because in a film where bounty is associated with sensual movement, this static shot is of a photograph.<sup>27</sup> Once again image and song reinforce each other.

### Families of Man

When the spectator's attention is limited to the film's explicit or "general" theme, *Song of the Rivers* would seem to embrace some of the most reductive qualities of propaganda. Certainly the documentary's utopian aspirations co-exist uneasily with reductive political rhetoric. Beyond exploring the half-hidden intertextual framework—the personal narratives—outlined in the previous section, how might we further redeem this film? One way is to examine more closely the ideological exigencies of the Cold War, for it is these pressures that straight-jacketed Ivens and other artists. As already suggested, *The Family of Man* photography exhibition, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) on 26 January 1955, provides a useful foil. Here are two projects that combine epic ambitions with utopian longings. Or, to appropriate Susan Buck-Morss' eloquent characterization (2002, p. ix), both undertakings shared a "collective dream [that] dared to imagine a social world in alliance with personal happiness, and promised to adults that its realization would be in harmony with the overcoming of scarcity for all." In many respects the rivalry between these two competing visions confronted the spiritual core at stake in the Cold War. By the very act of expressing these aspirations, they were inevitably fighting Cold War battles on the culture front, in an effort to win over people's hearts and minds (see Sandeen, 1995, pp. 95-155).

The epic scope of *Song of the Rivers* and *Family of Man* as to subject matter was matched by efforts at distribution. The individuals and groups that were behind *The Family of Man*—notably Edward Steichen, the Museum of Modern Art, the Rockefellers, and the United States Information Agency

(USIA)—sought broad, world-wide distribution. Although scheduled to open simultaneously in New York, Europe, Asia and Latin America,<sup>28</sup> the overseas touring packages became available only somewhat after its Museum of Modern Art debut. In the end the show traveled to 38 countries between 1955 and 1962 with over 9 million visitors (see Sandeen, 1995, p. 95). *The Family of Man* was hampered in its ability to reach audiences on the scale of *Song of the Rivers* due to the small number of touring packages. It was far more expensive to make and to install such packages than to print and project a copy of a *Song of the Rivers*. Not surprisingly then, the USIA had made a 26-minute sound film of the Steichen exhibition by 1957. More than 300 prints were struck in both 35mm and 16mm, with sound tracks in 22 different languages. These were actively screened in over 70 countries outside the United States.<sup>29</sup> The USIA documentary may have lacked the epic qualities of *Song of the Rivers*, but it helped to right the balance somewhat in terms of viewing numbers. Both *Family of Man* and *Song of the Rivers* were also turned into photographic books, though here the Steichen catalogue (or, as I would suggest we call it, a “family album”) was produced for a mass readership, while the *Song of the Rivers* book was a high quality, large-format hardback for a more limited audience.

The many parallels between *The Family of Man* and *Song of the Rivers* are remarkable. The project directors latched onto similar themes and chose to execute them on a similar scale. For curator and “creator” Edward Steichen (1986, p. 3), *The Family of Man* was “the most ambitious and challenging project photography has ever attempted.”<sup>30</sup> Both Steichen and Ivens took materials shot by individual photographers/cinematographers from around the world and structured them into their own unified visions. Steichen received “over 2 million photographs from every corner of the earth” and finally selected 503 images. “The photographers who took them—273 men and women—are amateurs and professionals, famed and unknown” (Steichen, 1986, p. 3). Nonetheless Steichen, through selection and organization (the key tools of the documentary filmmaker) forges these individual images into a presentation of which he is clearly

the author. Steichen and Ivens thus play very similar roles in both these epic undertakings. Like Ivens, Steichen incorporates images from his own work into the overall achievement. The most significant of his three photographs may be the one showing his two daughters, Mary and Kate Steichen. All are in the recognized style of the family snapshot. They include a still of a boy jumping into a lake, taken from behind so his identity is obscured, and a more formally composed portrait of a grandmother-like figure standing outside a farmhouse with a freshly baked pie (see Steichen, 1986, p. 190).<sup>31</sup> These images affirm that his family is part of the family of man and align him with the favoured mode of capturing family life—the snapshot. *The Family of Man* catalogue is structured and laid out like a family album.

From Edward Steichen's first announcement regarding *The Family of Man* exhibition, it was evident that he sought images that were different (or could be used differently) from those being gathered by Ivens:

We are not concerned with photographs that border on propaganda for or against any political ideologies.

We are concerned with following the individual and the family unit from its reactions to the beginning of life and continuing through death and burial (Steichen, 1954, p. 31).

Steichen (1954, p. 31) was looking for “the universal elements and aspects of human relations and the experiences common to all mankind rather than situations that represent conditions exclusively related or peculiar to a race, an event, a time or a place.”

To his credit Steichen sought to include significant counterpoints that acknowledged man's inhumanity to man: potential threats to the notion of a shared humanity and ultimately even to humanity's existence. Perhaps the most powerful such image to remain in the book from the exhibition shows Jews being led at gunpoint by German SS through the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. Certainly the album contains no images of the KKK or lynched black men. Steichen had included an image of

two lynched black men when the exhibition first opened, but it proved too powerful and threatened to undermine his avowed goal of articulating a shared universalism (see Sandeen, 1995, pp. 49-50). Crucially, it showed a side of the United States that threatened to politicize the show there. Moreover, inclusion of this photograph in an exhibition designed for worldwide consumption could be seen as anti-American in the midst of a Cold War confrontation.<sup>32</sup> The image of the lynched black men would have foregrounded a Civil Rights theme to a U.S. audience and underscored aspects of daily life and politics in the United States that had attracted Robeson and many others to a rival political and economic system. Perhaps it was impossible to express forcefully a radical vision of domestic racial equality and a “ban the bomb” argument at the same time. Political and ideological constraints had an impact on Steichen’s vision of a new world. Nonetheless, Steichen conceived man’s inhumanity to man within a religious and racial framework, not an economic one (with nation acting as another active category in this regard).

*The Family of Man* includes a group of photographs that acknowledge the desperation which comes with hunger, but which is, as Steichen wished, universalized and tied to disasters and other misfortunes—juxtaposed with a quotation from Virgil: “What region of the earth is not full of our calamities” (Steichen, 1986, p. 150). In *Song of the Rivers*, capitalism was inevitably responsible for poverty: “You need thousands of poor men... to make a rich man.”<sup>33</sup> The film understands the world as a global economy. Labourers from around the world have much in common: their exploitation. This is so pervasive and, as the film contends, consistent across regions, that such exploitation becomes its own universal truth.<sup>34</sup> That is, economic relations are the primary structuring principle of people’s lives and, in crucial respects, of the film. In contrast, economic relations are completely absent from *The Family of Man*. They are disregarded because they are not considered universal or perhaps not about love, while the family is. Although the two projects share the dream of a world free of hunger, in this respect as in so many others they speak at and past each other.



The parallels between *Family of Man* and *Song of the Rivers* are multifaceted. The atomic bomb is an apocalyptic image for both projects. For Steichen, it is the overwhelming fact that requires us to recognize our common humanity—that we are one big family. This image, the only one in the exhibition in colour, was kept out of the book—becoming, in effect, a structuring absence. The text that accompanied this image was nonetheless given a separate, full page in the album. This was a statement by Bertrand Russell:

The best authorities are unanimous in saying that a war with hydrogen bombs is quite likely to put an end to the human race... there will be universal death—sudden only for a fortunately minority, but for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration (in Steichen, 1986, p. 179).

The atomic bomb threatens not simply to destroy families, but all families. It represents the concrete nightmare of destruction against which the utopian notion of humanity as a single family is the necessary answer. In *Song of the Rivers*, the bomb is the ultimate weapon of rapacious capitalism, a symbol of its willingness to go to any length in order to enforce its will. These different outlooks are reflected in the key institutions that each work puts forward. If the World Federation of Trade Unions is the decisive vehicle for a just world in *Song of the Rivers*, the United Nations plays a similar role in *The Family of Man*. One is designed to support the working classes in their often violent struggle against colonialism, imperialism and capitalist greed which in themselves transcend national borders; the other to resolve conflicts between nations regardless of political ideology.

The labour of ordinary people is treated respectfully and even rendered heroically in *The Family of Man*. In this it overlaps with *Song of the Rivers*. Yet in Steichen's vision, work is only one modest aspect of human life, while it is the fundamental starting point in Ivens' documentary. Where does Steichen depict economic exploitation? He doesn't, because it is overcome in his utopian vision; this is left to Ivens. Ivens images two Americas—an impoverished one and one that is ruthlessly rich

and indifferent. Freedom from scarcity for the vast majority of peoples can only be imagined in a world with a different social organization and political configuration. Correspondingly, where are the middle classes in *Song of the Rivers*? Perhaps the proper answer is that they are to be found in *The Family of Man*. Steichen's show is filled with images of the good life. It is not the good life of the rich but of ordinary Americans—whether depicted in a family portrait for *Life* magazine or a shot of a father and son relaxing on the couch by Diane and Allan Arbus (see Steichen, 1986, pp. 59 and 53). They present the kinds of everyday pleasures that Ivens had once depicted in his documentary portrait of an American family, *Power and the Land* (1940). Steichen in no way restricted these pleasures to the United States. They appear to a lesser extent in Canada, Western Europe and even the U.S.S.R. (the peasant family sitting at a table with Orthodox icons in the background) (see Steichen, 1986, pp. 92-93). In fact, the anthropological images of Africans untouched by Western influences seem to embrace middle class lifestyles on their own terms. For Steichen, the peoples of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Amazon seem beyond the reach of the Western economic system (though not its technologies of vision). Again, the opposite is asserted in *Song of the Rivers* even when peoples remain in a primitive state, their condition is just another cruel and calculating strategy of capitalist indifference and exploitation. Obviously such arguments had been rehearsed many times on both sides before either of these projects was undertaken. Nonetheless, the shared concerns of Cold War enemies as well as their symmetrically oppositional understandings are striking.

If *Song of the Rivers* structures the United States and the Soviet Union as blatant opposites, *The Family of Man* exhibition pursues a more oblique course. The U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe appear infrequently in Steichen's show, but when they do, the images are not oppositional and confrontational. The photographer turned curator seemingly avoids the ideological by forsaking the obvious rhetoric of a bountiful America and a trampled Russia. For example, he includes a Robert Capa photograph, which shows a Soviet woman gathering grain by hand.

There is ample harvest here, but the image also suggests hard work and the scarcity of mechanical assistance. This is underscored when it is immediately juxtaposed to an aerial view of eleven or twelve combines harvesting immense fields of grain on the Great Plains of the United States (see Steichen, 1986, p. 66). Nature is bountiful everywhere but it is reaped differently on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. Steichen brings up the issue of technology in *The Family of Man*: harvesters, Einstein, and high technology are all notably American. Technology will create a world free of scarcity—a world that can already be evoked and imaged by the middle class. Steichen puts aside the economic and political system that divides East and West, creating a text that appears to downplay or avoid ideological differences while actually just displacing them.<sup>35</sup>

*The Family of Man* exhibition asserts its positions more subtly than *Song of the Rivers* (at least to our eyes), but each documentary achievement seems to call for a rebuttal from its equally ideological counterpart as visionary utopias are reduced to political rhetoric. They are engaged in a seesaw battle that seems static, ritualistic and finally unproductive. Steichen and his photographer allies could not escape the polarization and propagandistic vortex, so why should we expect it of Ivens and his collaborators? Today we can see the ways that these two projects were of a piece, shackled in some way by their epic aspirations. *Song of the Rivers* was strenuously censored in the West, mocking U.S. claims to freedom of expression and the exchange of ideas. On both sides these cultural achievements were easily mapped onto the Cold War confrontation.

### **Smaller Projects and a Smaller River**

It was with smaller and more personal projects that Anglo-American filmmakers, photographers, and artists could partially escape—and so engage through indirection—the toxic, monolithic confrontation of ideologies. Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1956) offered quite different depictions of the United States. Roy DeCarava's and Langston Hughes' *Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), Lionel Rogosin's documentary film *On the Bowery* (1956), and Lindsay Anderson's *Every Day Except Christmas*

(1957) focused on discrete geographic spaces and subcultures. These latter are among the better-known examples of the “Free Cinema” movement. Free Cinema involved a looser, more off-the-cuff production style. Above all else, however, it meant documentaries that were free from the heavy-handed proselytizing that had made cinema first and foremost an extension of previously defined, rigidly-held political positions. Cinema could explore and describe the world without turning it into illustrations of a pre-established ideology.

We tend to think of the Free Cinema as a phenomenon largely confined to the West and to filmmakers with a more liberal or bohemian sensibility. Yet Ivens’ thirty-two minute documentary *The Seine Meets Paris* fits comfortably into this movement. Personal and global circumstances were conducive for this turn of events. Although Ivens continued to have strong ties to the German Democratic Republic and East Berlin, he had based himself in Paris. The film was made through a production company, Garance Films, founded by three friends from leftist (French Communist Party) film and theatre circles. One of these founders, and the film’s producer, was the actor and director Roger Pigaut, who had narrated three of Ivens’ films (see Schoots, 2000, pp. 252-253). The idea for the film originated from Georges Sadoul, who acknowledged that the idea came from *Song of the Rivers* and his own love of the Seine (see Schoots, 2000). Unable to get his idea produced, he turned it back over to Ivens. *The Seine Meets Paris* is likewise a love poem to Ivens’ new home: affectionate and playfully undogmatic without betraying his underlying Marxist sensibility. The Seine is what unites tramps, lovers, children and day labourers. As filmed from a river barge and along the banks of the Seine, the camera treats all its subjects with a radical equality that reaffirms the utopian. Remarkably, then, Ivens returned to the river as the central trope for his film in order to explore, extend, and above all refigure it. His idea was not to correct but to complement and perhaps alter the context for understanding that prior work. In doing so he begins with a clear evocation of *Song of the Rivers*.



Fig. 3 — Joris Ivens. Still from *La Seine a rencontré Paris*, people sunbathing on the banks of the Seine in Paris, 1957  
© European Foundation Joris Ivens / Joris Ivens Archives

The first four shots of *Song of the Rivers* are 1) a long pan of distant mountains, 2) a bird (perhaps a hawk) in flight, and 3 & 4) mammoth waterfalls, perhaps the Victoria Falls in Africa. Accompanying these shots is Dimitri Shostakovich's majestic music. *The Seine Meets Paris* begins with two shots of a waterfall. These are shot close up: the first using a lengthy, elegant pan and the next an audacious tracking shot perpendicular to the fall, very much in the spirit of the opening scenes in *Song of the Rivers*. Nonetheless, it soon becomes evident that the waterfall is a quite modest one. The sound track is ambient sound, and instead of the image of a bird as in *Song of the Rivers*, we hear one sing. Ivens makes clear that we can and perhaps should read this film in relationship to his earlier epic but necessarily in a different mode, a different spirit. Everything is smaller, more intimate, and insistently non-didactic. Instead of six rivers there is only one—a seventh river going through the city in which Ivens and his collaborators live. Instead of Shostakovich's symphonic score there is familiar "French" music composed by Philippe Gérard, played on a small variety of instruments—an accordion, a piccolo, harmonica, guitar, harpsichord, flute and

piano. Instead of Bertolt Brecht's militant, dissonant song we have Jacques Prévert's much gentler poem. The playful spirit is evident in the opening stanza, which takes the form of a riddle:

Who is it  
Who is always in the city  
And yet who is always arriving  
And yet who is always departing

A CHILD:  
It's a river  
Responds a child  
A solver of riddles  
And then with a gleam in his eye he adds  
And the river is called the Seine.<sup>36</sup>

For the child "the Seine is like a person" with different moods: "It cries if you cry and will smile if you need consoling." The world of work and class does not disappear, however. The child's viewpoint is followed by that of a day labourer who works on the docks. For him,

The Seine is a factory  
The Seine is hard work  
Upstream and downstream always the same turn  
Of fortunes for wine, for coal and for wheat  
Which go up and down the river following the course  
of the stock market.

This poem has not always been appreciated. Michèle Lagny (1999, p. 116) finds it the "the weakest part of the film," claiming that "the text heavily stressed the commonplace relations between love and death, life and a flowing river, and the anthropomorphic character of the Seine in the film, which weakens Ivens' purpose." Perhaps she is right, but I still find it an effective artistic choice when seen as part of the genealogy described here—admittedly a very different context than Lagny brings to bear on the film.

That Prévert's poem works against (or at least in tension with) Ivens' purpose may be the point here—the artistic choice. In contrast to *Song of the Rivers*, image and words do not repeat or illustrate each other. Prévert tells us that for these day labourers,

the Seine is just another factory, and Ivens' camera shows us that these men work hard. But the camera attends to the way the worker empties the boat of grain, not to his exploitation. The man works, but it is not backbreaking labour (nor is he made heroic). Only later in this section of the film, when there is no poetic commentary, do we see day labourers unload a barge of heavy stone. We may recall Prévert's earlier line, but we must make this connection and the image is no longer there simply to augment it. Even here, however, the camera does not dwell. It watches, notes these men's activities and moves on. We can tell these labourers do not have an easy life, but we are not told how we should make political sense of this.

Beyond the poem, there is no narration. This is obviously an important departure from *Song of the Rivers*, for which Ivens and Pozner provided extensive, ideological commentary. For most of the film there is only ambient sound or Gérard's musical accompaniment. Ivens shows life along the Seine but we are not told exactly what we are seeing or why we are seeing it. At one point a musician—quite possibly Gérard himself—is playing a guitar on the banks of the Seine, surrounded by an informal, appreciative audience. But it might be just a musician encountered on the filmmakers' cinematographic expedition. Other artists—painters, photographers, sketch artists—are also shown documenting daily life in the city. Ivens is again one of many—one of many denizens of the city, one of many people trying to capture its visual enchantment.

*The Seine Meets Paris* is a return to the art of visual observation that Ivens had practised in the late 1920s (see Gunning, 2002, p. 19). Ivens employs a variety of filming methods but one of the most persistent and effective is the hidden camera, which Vertov often advocated in his manifestos. The camera is concealed both on board the boats travelling down stream and on shore. Here and elsewhere Vertov (rather than Pudovkin) is evoked, urged on perhaps by Georges Sadoul, who would later write a book on the great Soviet documentary filmmaker. Not unlike *Chelovek s kinoapparotom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929), *The Seine Meets Paris* begins with the statement: "There are no actors in this film, simply men, women and children

who love the Seine.” Many of the shots are remarkably candid views of people fishing, talking, eating, sleeping, and playing. We are fascinated by how they move and hold themselves, how they interact. The film is an affirmation of daily life, of being alive. In some respects it looks towards the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), who would focus on daily life as a reservoir of existence, a refuge that had so far escaped theorization and analysis.

As Ivens himself remarked, *The Seine Meets Paris* is at the other extreme of his documentary work in *Song of the Rivers*. If he saw this as a necessary dialectical relationship, people in Berlin found this creative tension more difficult to recognize or accept. They tended to see the film as “apolitical”—a characterization that Ivens biographer Hans Schoots has voiced as well. Ivens (quoted in Böker, 1981, p. 48) replied to this “accusation”:

Gentlemen, I was accused yesterday of having been too much of a poet, and that for example my film *La Seine* is not militant enough of a documentary. I was not accused of being a poet, but of being too much of a poet, because the film *La Seine*, which you may have seen, is a very lyrical film. For some, mainly for younger colleagues, it is not a fighting film; the director is more of a poet than of a documentarist. I believe such a thought is completely wrong. It is the same artist who made *The Song of the Rivers*. It is the same man, the same ideology...

I showed *The Seine Meets Paris* in Cuba, where people are in a direct struggle, and people like the film because it says “Yes” to life. They like the film the same way they love *The Song of the Rivers*.

In fact, *The Seine Meets Paris*, which received the Palme d’or at the Cannes Film Festival and other recognition, imbedded *Song of the Rivers* even more firmly in the intertextual history of filmmaking. It refigures and revitalizes the trope, which seemed to reach a certain dead end or apotheosis with *Song of the Rivers*, by taking it in a different direction. Those who had declared Ivens’ death as an artist were proven wrong. *The Seine Meets Paris* favoured the everyday rather than the ideological and the



looser, more associational interplay of word and image rather than the redundancy of image and narration.

### **Film as a Bridge Over the Ocean**

Like Ivens, Paul Robeson returned to the river as a motif in the years immediately after *Song of the Rivers*. Robeson's situation in 1957-1958 was more difficult than Ivens', for he still lived under numerous constraints and even danger in the United States. Nonetheless, he also found a somewhat more relaxed environment with renewed opportunities. In the summer of 1957 he was able to give a series of public concerts in California (see Duberman, 1988, p. 454). Early in 1958 Vanguard Records provided him with a commercial recording contract, enabling him to return to the studio. He also received attractive offers to perform in Europe. While Robeson was still barred from travelling abroad to fulfill these engagements, groups overseas pressed the U.S. government to return his freedom to travel. Although it granted Robeson the ability to visit U.S. territories (Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and so forth) in August 1957, the State Department refused to return his passport. Various groups around the world were preparing to celebrate his 60th birthday on 9 April 1958. When it became evident that he could not attend any of these festivities, the German Democratic Republic arranged for him to make a concert film that could be shown in his absence.

*Bridge Over the Ocean* is a TV-style concert film in which Robeson and his colleague Earl Robinson combine song with extemporaneous remarks. At one point, because there are no head or tail credits, this film survived in an unidentified state: the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin, Germany, listed the picture as *Paul Robeson und Earl Robinson Singen für die DDR (Paul Robeson and Earl Robinson Sing for the German Democratic Republic)* with an uncertain date, but tentatively placed at 1954. Earl Robinson, however, seems to refer to this film in his autobiography as *Brücke über den Ozean (Bridge Over the Ocean)* and claims that it "premiered at a 60th birthday festival for Robeson in East Berlin in 1958" (Robinson and Gordon, 1998, p. 223).<sup>37</sup> Robeson biographer Martin Duberman (1988, p. 461) also refers

to a 60th birthday film shown in East Berlin, without providing a title or other specifics. Recently published article, Günter Jordan reports that the film was commissioned by Deutsche Fernsehfunk Berlin (East German Television-Berlin) and shot in early 1958. The film was both screened in the Berlin Friedrich-Palast and given a simultaneous television broadcast on his birthday, 9 April.<sup>38</sup> *Bridge Over the Ocean* and *Song of the Rivers*, which did not go into general release until after 1955 (and we should remember that 1957 is the date appearing on book-related materials), were circulating in East Germany at roughly the same time. In fact, they are works that reverberate with each other. How self-consciously they did so, on Robeson's part, may be impossible to determine precisely, but the title of his concert film would certainly seem to acknowledge the former on more than one level. If we recall that Ivens concluded each section of *Song of the Rivers* with images of the ocean, it is this body of water that Robeson's film now seeks to bridge. Moreover, in selecting his program of songs for this film, Robeson chose to return to the river as a recurrent motif. Obviously, this is only one strand of a concert film that addresses both his present circumstances and past history as a performer. As a creation for his 60th birthday, *Bridge Over the Ocean* is a rich summation of his work as a concert artist even as it insistently affirms his optimism regarding the future.

*Bridge Over the Ocean* begins with Robeson talking into the camera and so to his audience: "We deeply regret our inability to be with you in person but hope that the film will offer some measure of our feeling." Still denied a passport, Robeson used film as a means to travel in time and space (to bridge oceans): to connect with people on the other side of the Iron Curtain and to outwit those who barred him from leaving the U.S. This makes *Bridge Over the Ocean* a reflexive film that comments on its own making and demonstrates a political use of "the absence of presence," which has been discussed by film theorists such as Christian Metz. Film becomes a utopian medium in its ability to transcend space and time—to outwit state oppression. Robeson next introduces the composer Earl Robinson at the piano, who wrote the first song that Robeson is about to sing:

“The House I Live In.” Robeson points out that Robinson had recently been in East Germany, bringing quiet attention to his own lack of freedom.

*Bridge Over the Ocean* was shot on a single, small set, with Robeson and Robinson performing against a plain stage curtain. This lack of a locatable space underscores their semi-outlaw status and Robeson’s own predicament as an enemy of the state. Indeed, the film lacks any head or tail credits, reflecting his artistic and social isolation in the United States. (Robeson actually discouraged people from seeing him or embracing him on the street: they might easily become tainted by associating with a “known communist” or “fellow traveller” such as himself.) Nonetheless, these constricted conditions of production, the narrowness and simplicity of the space, yield a forceful intimacy. As Robeson sings “The House I Live in,” these circumstances produce an even more intense poignancy:

What is America to me?  
A name, a map, the flag I see  
A certain word—democracy  
What is America to me?  
The house I live in,  
A plot of earth, a street,  
The grocer and the butcher,  
and the people that I meet,  
The children in the playground,  
The faces that I see,  
All races all religions,  
That’s America to me.

The place I work in  
The workers at my side  
The little town or city  
where my people lived and died  
The howdy and the handshake  
The air of feeling free  
The right to speak my mind out  
That’s America to me.

The everyday, expansive world of America that the song describes is now reduced to this claustrophobic studio space. The numerous “people that I meet” contrast with the obvious isola-

tion of the set (no supporting cast, no host, not even a studio audience) and the fact that meeting Robeson was a dangerous undertaking. “The howdy and the handshake,” “the air of feeling free,” and “the right to speak my mind out” are the very things that he has been denied. The song articulates a utopian and optimistic view of the United States—one only recently articulated in *The Family of Man* exhibition—that is contradicted by the conditions under which Robeson lived and worked. (Charles Burnett used this song in *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and its juxtaposition with images there has a strikingly similar meaning and emotional effect.) At the same time the song expresses a faith in what the United States could be, should be, and even was at its best moments. This sense of hope and possibility is powerfully expressed through Robeson’s voice and his rendering of the song.

After Robeson’s moving rendition of “The House I Live In,” Robinson takes over and sings a few more of his own compositions. When Robeson returns to the stage, he sings “Four Rivers,” discussed earlier in this article. In *Bridge Over the Ocean*, the effectiveness of Robeson’s rendition of “The House I Live In” is partially achieved through the tension between song and image—the gap between what the United States is capable of being (the song) and what it is (the conditions under which he was filmed due to his political and everyday circumstances). Likewise, the “Four Rivers” is, on one level at least, an allegorical call for human unity, peace, and cooperation. The rivers—those in the West (the Thames and the Mississippi) and those in the East (the Don and the Yangtze) come together. The song situates its narrator (its singer) outside the conflict, though the space again reminds us that he is, in fact, trapped and all but crushed by it. Yet Robeson’s powerful voice and his charismatic, warm strength make it impossible for us to think of him as its victim. Political positions are transcended and brotherhood is achieved. But on another level there is irony, for the rivers (and the sailors on those rivers evoked in the second stanza, which is not reproduced in this essay) come together quite easily, while the nations through which those rivers run cannot. These are the complexities—the dialectics—that drive Robeson’s art, even at its most political.

Ivens' *Song of the Rivers* rarely provides a tension between word and image. As previously discussed, the lyrics and the images regularly reinforce each other in ways that are redundant and ultimately impoverish the film. *Bridge Over the Ocean* moves in the same direction as *The Seine Meets Paris*, by restoring that tension and complexity. It does not, however, merely reassert this internal complexity within the concert film. Robeson reactivates the lyrics of these other river songs, so that the viewer can have more ready access to their overall tropological complexity even when listening to Brecht's lyrics for "Song of the Rivers." At the same time Robeson was perhaps indirectly questioning the value of Brecht's lyrics, which demonized one side (or the people of any one river) of a confrontation. Retaining a song from the Popular Front evoked earlier aspirations and alliances that still had their utopian power (see Kelley, 2002, pp. 52-58).

Robeson not only sang "Four Rivers" for *Bridge Over the Ocean*, he performed "Ol' Man River" as well. Certainly Robeson had had increasing problems with the Hammerstein/Kern song with its racial stereotypes and suggestion of a timeless world. But Hammerstein's lyrics have substantive, positive elements as well in that they explicitly address the ways that Southern blacks are exploited and live a life of poverty ("You and me, we sweat and strain, body all achin' and racked with pain. Tote that barge, lift that bale"). Robeson's original rendition of "Ol' Man River" in the musical *Show Boat* was so compelling that it in some sense transcended or exceeded the song's own limitations. Robeson never completely rejected the song: he reworked it. That is, he embraced it and in doing so he made it his own. This embrace moved from what Houston Baker (1987, pp. 51-52) has characterized as a "mastery of forms" to a "deformation of mastery," in which the artist "must transform an obscene situation... into a signal of self/cultural expression." Robeson continued to use the power of that conjunction, but now gave it a twist:

There's an Old Man called the Mississippi  
That's the man I don't like to be  
What does he care if the world's got trouble  
What does he care if the land ain't free

That old man river, that old man river  
He must know somepin' but don't say nothin'  
He just keeps rollin', he keeps on rollin' along  
He don't plant taters  
He don't plant cotton  
Them that plants 'em is soon forgotten  
But old man river, he just keeps rolling along.

You and me we sweat and strain  
Body all aching and racked with pain  
Tote that barge, and lift that bale  
You show a little grit and you lands in jail.  
But I keeps laughin' instead of cryin'  
I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'  
But old man river, he just keeps rollin' along.

Certainly, as the opening lines make clear, he rejected the tendency to identify himself with the river of the song. So when Robeson sang these revised lyrics for *Bridge Over the Ocean*, it was something more than a simple rendition of his signature song. His reiteration of this song could also be seen as both an activation of and a response to Brecht's lyrics for "Song of the River." Where Brecht engages the Hammerstein/Kern song in order to reject and upend it, Robeson deforms it in order to make it his own. The revised song thus provided Robeson's own distinctive voice in this chorus of legendary socialist artists.

Although *Bridge Over the Ocean* may, at first glance, seem little more than a minor footnote in Robeson's film career (and that of U.S. and East German motion picture production), it does much with very little. It assumes a form and structure that conveys much more than the individual songs convey by themselves. This is done through the various on-camera permutations of the Robeson-Robinson collaboration, the arrangements of songs and the performers' apparently extemporaneous comments during the concert, as well as the self-conscious uses of the medium itself. The film, for example, demonstrates an easy, affectionate and profound collaboration across the colour line. On the other hand, Robeson clearly affirms his identity as an African American and embraces the historical roots of that identity by singing two slave songs. He uses "Ol' Man River" literally to rewrite the image of black Americans perpetuated

even by well-intentioned white artists. Furthermore, several of Robeson's songs are European. He sings two songs first in English and then in German ("Baby Sleeping" and "All Men Are Brothers") and finally concludes with a song that evokes the Spanish Civil War and affirms the importance of international struggle: "Freedom." The selection recapitulates his history as a concert artist in a way not dissimilar to the way *Song of the Rivers* recapitulated Ivens' filmmaking career.

Robeson repeatedly expresses his optimism for the future in *Bridge Over the Ocean*. Between songs he uses some extemporaneous remarks to insist that there will be better days ahead in the United States and the world. This was due, in part, to the continuing impact of the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 17 May 1954, to end segregation in the schools, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. (This landmark decision occurred about the same time that Robeson was working on Ivens' project.) Gains in integration, the waning of McCarthyism, and the demise of Stalinism were evident by 1957-58 and encouraged his sense of optimism.

Ivens' *The Seine Meets Paris* and Robeson's *Bridge Over the Ocean* were responses to a project for which both had deep affection. As I have tried to show, Ivens' earlier film was more complex and sophisticated than critics have cared to acknowledge. Nonetheless, its redundancy of narration and image, and its binary oppositions of communism and capitalism as well as the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics reflected ways it often conformed to the paradigms of Cold War propaganda. This does not mean that *Song of the Rivers* was dishonest or insincere. If we put aside political conviction and simply focus on these artists' personal experiences, Brecht's analogy of the raging Mississippi to the U.S. state was a powerful metaphor for the ways in which anti-communism and the United States government had devastated their lives and those of their friends. Filmmaking is the art of the possible. Their affection for such a project did not preclude an awareness of and even frustration with political realities and rigidities on all sides. For men accustomed to crossing borders, the early to mid-1950s must have been extremely difficult times.

Nonetheless, when this confrontation between the two nuclear powers entered a new, less dogmatic phase, Ivens and Robeson returned to the river as a trope in order to insist on its complexity and richness. In making *The Seine Meets Paris* and *Bridge Over the Ocean*, these socialist artists were not negating or distancing themselves from the earlier film. Rather they were creating juxtapositions with *Song of the Rivers* that could create or re-emphasize a space for critical reflection and intellectual freedom.

All three films sought to assert utopian possibilities at the height of the Cold War, when ideological imperatives constrained artists of all political persuasions. As critical readers, we can reclaim and resurrect these possibilities by pursuing the films' intertextual gestures rather than insisting on reductive readings that understand these films as simple substantiations of official political positions. *Song of the Rivers* may offer up a utopian morality, show individuals as part of a unified mass (the working classes of the world in their struggles against capitalism), and so function to immortalize the doctrines of the World Federation of Trade Unions (Sontag, 1975, p 40). (According to General Secretary Saillant, the Federation's basic principle was "united action everywhere, in everything.") But if it immortalizes Soviet leaders—a feature of official totalitarian art noted by Sontag—this is done only in an oblique manner. On one hand there is Vsevolod Pudovkin, hardly the kind of leader Sontag had in mind. On the other, there is Stalin, who also died in 1953—three months before Pudovkin. In fact, Stalin is never actually named (at least in the English language version); rather, Brecht's lyrics evoke the city of Stalingrad. Stalin may have died, but the city that bears his name and embodies the force of his will prospers. Here too is another recently fallen leader that Ivens' film mourns; his loss, like that of Pudovkin, remains too painful to confront overtly. Although Stalin's apparent absence from the film can also be seen as a circumvention (indeed, it is Lenin and not Stalin whose name is formally evoked in the song), the pairing of Pudovkin/image/Ivens and Stalin/song/Robeson (or Lenin/song/Robeson) has a certain formal logic. For Ivens, Pudovkin's death represents a personal loss even as Stalin's death



(and/or Lenin's) is a loss for the masses. The film then functions as an elegy as much as a forward-looking affirmation of revolutionary struggle. All this underscores the film's complexity, even as it hints at a necessary level of ambiguity. It shows the Communist-led movement at a crossroads.

In different ways, *The Seine Meets Paris* and *Bridge Over the Ocean* move away from the organizing principles of *Song of the Rivers*, of totalitarian art. Ivens and Robeson counter this spectacular epic with personal vision on one hand and personal musical history on the other. The people who live, work and play along the Seine never constitute a mass. They have the river, not political struggle in common. They are individuals experiencing the everyday, mundane realities and pleasures of Parisian life. Likewise, there are no masses in the Robeson-Robinson concert film. The ordinary American about whom Robeson sings (and Robinson writes) in "The House I Live In" are like the ordinary Parisians of Ivens' film. If Robeson and Robinson are courageous leaders in the struggle for social justice, their self-presentation is anything but heroic. Their songs evoke African American resistance to slavery, the Spanish Civil War, the Popular Front of World War II, and the ongoing Cold War. They map out a history of struggle by bringing together different musical traditions. Again these two films evoke *Song of the Rivers*, not to reject the earlier film or distance the artists from it. They free themselves from its propagandistic purposes even as they refigure and engage them.

Yale University

#### NOTES

1. I am particularly grateful to the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Rutgers University and its former director, Rae Alexander Minter, who invited me to become a part of the Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen project and enabled me to pursue the study of Robeson's career in film. The Museum of Modern Art (New York) sponsored the film exhibition "Borderlines: Paul Robeson and Film" (June 18-July 5, 1999), which I co-curated with Ed Guerrero: many thanks to Larry Kardish, Mary Lea Bandy, Ytte Jensen, and Josh Siegel. Their support enabled me to see the Robeson films discussed in this essay. Gratitude also to Mark Reid who was part of the curatorial team for an earlier event at the UCLA Film and Television Archives, entitled "Paul Robeson: Star of Stage and Screen." *Song of the Rivers* was only shown

at the MoMA event. In fact, my involvement with the Robeson programs was due to another retrospective, "Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era," which I co-curated with Pearl Bowser and Jane Gaines. Gratitude also to Andy Horn, who brought Robeson's *Bridge Over the Ocean* to my attention, as well as Michael Kerbel, Tom Gunning, John MacKay and Cheryl Finley.

2. Many thanks to André Stufkens and Kees Bakker of the European Foundation Joris Ivens, who involved me with the "Cinema without Borders: The Films of Joris Ivens" retrospective. This current article reworks and expands on a catalogue essay that came out of that event: "Despite All Barriers: Paul Robeson & *Song of the Rivers*" (Musser in Stufkens (ed.), 2002a, pp. 62-71).

3. See Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 137).

4. André Stufkens has discussed the importance of utopian longings in Ivens' documentaries. See Stufkens, 2002b, pp. 7 and 13.

5. Two other artists who figure prominently in this essay were also born in 1898: Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein. Picasso was born in 1881, but the rest were younger: Pozner (1905), Shostakovich (1906) and Robinson (1910).

6. See Schoots (2000, pp. 228-30 and 258) and Duberman (1988, pp. 388 and 463-65).

7. The international nature of Ivens' career is foregrounded in Stufkens (2002a).

8. Marceline Loridan-Ivens to Charles Musser, 20 March 2002.

9. *Song of the Rivers* goes unmentioned in Barnouw (1974). It is mentioned once, as part of an extensive list, in Jacobs (1979, p. 282) and referenced as a "great but little-seen" documentary in Véronneau (1984, p. 417). It remains unacknowledged in Meran (1973), Ellis (1989), Nichols (1981; 1991) and Winston (1995), among others. The status of *Song of the Rivers* should be clear if we recognize that Nichols dedicated *Representing Reality* to the memory of Joris Ivens (as well as Emile de Antonio).

10. This article is unsigned but the title page indicates that this issue involved the equal collaboration and production of R. Borde, E. Chaumeton, J. Demeure, A. Kyrou and R. Tailleux.

11. *De Volkskrant*, 16 October 1954, quoted in Schoots (2000, p. 245).

12. Legotien's sensitivity to the way *Song of the Rivers* recapitulated Ivens' earlier work was no doubt assisted by two post-war retrospectives of Ivens' films, which provided her with a rich framework for appreciation and interpretation.

13. See Nichols (1991, pp. 56-57).

14. See Buck-Morss (2002, p. ix).

15. In Ivens and Pozner (1957, p. 3). There are different publications with the same title, publisher and date. This version at the Museum of Modern Art Library is in English and may have been designed as an insert for the photo book of the same name. Other versions of this book are available in German (at the European Foundation Joris Ivens) as well as Russian and French.

16. See Ewen (1967, pp. 382, 443, 445) and Hayman (1983, pp. 384, 386).

17. See Duberman (1988, p. 391).

18. This assertion that the filmmaker is a worker like many others is articulated in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

19. See Devarieux (1979, pp. 107-08) and Zalzman (1963, p. 182).

20. According to Hans Schoots (2000, p. 35), Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*The Battleship Potemkin*, 1925) had played in Amsterdam in 1926, before Pudovkin's *Mother*. In contrast to *Mother*, the authorities had permitted it a commercial venue.

Ivens' misremembrance only further underscores Pudovkin's place in the Dutch filmmaker's memory.

21. See Schoots (2000, pp. 35-37) and Stufkens (2002a, pp. 57-58).

22. See also Carlos Böker (1981, p. 43).

23. Lloyd L. Brown was a left-wing black writer who helped Robeson set up the Othello Recording Company in the early 1950s. He also collaborated with Robeson on his autobiography *Here I Stand* (1958).

24. Paul Robeson, Jr. to Charles Musser, 5 November 2002. See also Robeson, Jr. (2001).

25. According to credit sheets at the Joris Ivens archive, "4. 'Le chant des Fleuves'/Paroles de Bertolt Brecht/Adaptation française de Léon Moussinac et Fernand Lamy. 5. Interprété par Paul Robeson." The song, however, is titled "Les Fleuves" on the French copy. The words and meaning are quite different from the English language version:

Old Man Mississippi rage  
Il emporte terres, fermes et bétail  
Mais déjà grandit la résistance  
Contre ceux qui l'ont lancé sur nous  
Nous qui n'avons plus de terres  
Ne pardonnerons pas  
Quand sera détruit le gang  
de tes maîtres Mississippi  
Par nous tu seras dompté Le temps  
Travaille pour nous

A translation into English might be:

Old Man Mississippi rages  
He sweeps away soil, farms and cattle  
But already resistance grows  
To those who have cast that upon us.  
We who have no more land  
We will never forgive  
When will the gang of your masters  
Be destroyed, Mississippi?  
We will tame you  
Time works for us.

26. Susan Buck-Morss has analyzed Stalin's sense of time in ways that illuminate the depiction of devastation of the battle of Stalingrad as a faint memory. Stalin sought to accelerate historical time. In 1931 he announced: "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance within ten years. Either we do so, or we will be crushed" (Joseph Stalin in Buck-Morss, 2002, p. 38). As depicted in *Song of the Rivers*, ten years of reconstruction would seem to have achieved such a temporal leap.

27. Each verse culminates a sequence that has substantial earlier narration. The U.S. section includes this commentary: "On the banks of the Mississippi the poor work for the rich. And when they are black, they're twice as poor and work twice as hard. And to keep the Negroes in their place... the Ku Klux Klan." After a sequence of shots showing the Klan (many of which are taken from *Native Land*), there is the still of two lynched black men with the commentary "The American way of death." Shots of the raging Mississippi in flood follow, with the narration "To master the Mississippi for good would take less money than the United States spends each year to prepare for war."

28. See Steichen (1954).
29. Internal memo to Edward Steichen et al., 14 May 1957, Photo Archives, Museum of Modern Art, quoted in Sandeen (1995, p. 97).
30. Already in his first press release, Steichen declared that *The Family of Man* was “probably the most ambitious and challenging project photography has ever faced” (Museum of Modern Art, “Museum of Modern Art Plans International Photography Exhibition,” 31 January 1954, Department of Photography Archives).
31. Other images appear on pages 39 and 88.
32. In removing the photograph of a lynched black man, Steichen further reduced his depictions of African Americans (and Africans), once again sacrificing the black body to larger national goals. *The Family of Man* contained numerous pictures of African American life and this inclusion can be seen as a manifestation of desegregation and the early civil rights movement. However, the integration of black subjects only occurs within the overall exhibition. Inter-racial interaction does not occur within the individual images, except for two scenes involving children and a scene of the UN General Assembly (Steichen, 1986, pp. 136, 189 and 184-185). Many of these images of African Americans show them radiating sorrow and “soulfulness.” With the powerful presence of the lynching photograph, there would have been some justification or logic to such choices. At the same time, it would be easy to point out that Steichen had no images of the Soviet Union’s gulags. These issues underscore the ways in which every act of selection and juxtaposition ultimately became an ideological act framed by the Cold War.
33. *Song of the Rivers*, English language script, Joris Ivens Archive.
34. Of course, class exploitation and confrontation is a fundamental tenet and truth of Marxism. In this sense, Ivens was presenting what Vertov also sought: a communist decoding of the world (see Joris Ivens, “Repeated and Organized Scenes in Documentary Films,” in Bakker, 1999, p. 268).
35. Both Ivens and Steichen depict bountiful technology as a positive asset strongly associated with his own side in the Cold War, even as they deny its presence on the other side of the Iron Curtain.
36. Jacques Prévert, “La Seine a rencontré Paris,” in Zalzman (1963, p. 147, my translation):

Qui est là  
 toujours là dans la ville  
 et qui pourtant sans cesse arrive  
 et qui pourtant sans cesse s’en va  
 UN ENFANT  
 C’est un fleuve  
 Répond un enfant  
 Un devineur de devinettes  
 Et puis l’œil brillant il ajoute  
 Et le fleuve s’appelle la Seine

37. Robinson indicates that *Brücke über den Ozean* “played for a number of years in the GDR and around socialist Europe.”
38. See “Brücke über den Ozean,” *Neues Deutschland*, 9 April 1958, S4, cited in Günter Jordan (2002). Jordan’s article was written in response to my article “Despite All Barriers: Paul Robeson & *Song of the Rivers*” and provides valuable information as to its distribution and exhibition in Berlin and East Germany. Jordan, director of the German Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, and I were pursuing our inquiries simultaneously. Many thanks to Jordan for his research and the Filmarchiv for its cooperation in making materials available for the Robeson retrospective in the United States.

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