

FILM SERIES

Wednesday, 6 September 2023, 19:30 pm

SCALA Programm kino, Apothekenstraße 17, Lüneburg

Oscar Micheaux: „Within Our Gates“ - United States 1920 - Original with English Intertitles

Introduction: Dr. Verena Adamik, LIAS Fellow

Content Warning: Some scenes contain racist and sexual violence.

Dear Lüneburgians, fellow cinephiles and esteemed colleagues,
Welcome to this screening of Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, starring, amongst others, Evelyn Preer (as Sylvia), who would grace many of Micheaux's movies as one of the first Black screen stars ever, and Floy Clements (as Alma), who'd later in life get into politics and become the first African American woman in the Illinois House of Representatives. As you can already tell, historic significance abounds.

I would like to thank the teams at LIAS and at Scala Programm kino for going through the trouble of obtaining it, fitting it, and go looking for a soundtrack - thank you to all that made this screening possible.

Within Our Gates is commonly considered the oldest still-existing feature length movie by an African American producer. Its writer, director, producer, (and one of the supporting actors), Oscar Micheaux (1884 - 1951), was a prolific filmmaker and author: he published seven novels and produced at least forty-four movies. Considering that he grew up in a poor, rural Black household, and that his father had formerly been living enslaved, Micheaux's ascent to the screen is even more impressive. As a young man, Micheaux bounced from job to job, to soon find that he was striving for something else than the meagre and bad employment opportunities available to Black folk at the time, which were always underpaid, unprotected and underrepresented. He tried his hand at waiting tables, in the meatpacking district, in the steel mills, as his own boss as a shoeshiner, one of the famous Pullman Porters (butlers in luxury train cars), and as a homesteader (a pioneer farmer, leasing land from the state) in South Dakota; before he published his first book at the age of 28, and returned to the Chicago scene (a hub of movie and culture production at the time - Hollywood was not yet the place to be). When negotiations about a movie adaption of one of his novels failed, he decided to found his own production company, drawing on contacts with rich people he made as a Pullman Porter. In a sense, he was the first indie producer of US cinema: Budgets were always slim, so that scenes often had to be shot in one take, wardrobes and equipment were borrowed, and scenery was improvised. That meant even more skill was required of those involved making these movies.

All his productions are *race movies* - that is the contemporary name for movies that include romance plots, melodramatic occurrences and excessively emotive acting as well as fast action to comment on race and racism in the USA. This genre, as well as novels written after



the same formula, were incredibly popular and influential in the USA - *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852) comes to mind. This popularity of course corresponds to historical reality. At the time, the USA is a nation legally segregated: the so-called Jim Crow laws assign everyone deemed 'colored' inferior places and institutions everywhere in public, made sure that public education for Black children was subpar, and that White power kept Black people in a state of second-class citizenship. These laws also ensured that, especially in the Southern states, White people could keep Black people from voting and from taking public office - means by which the African American community could have changed the political landscape.

The most famous race movie is *Birth of a Nation*, the collaborative work of a White supremacist writer and a White supremacist producer: It promoted Antiracism had glorified the Ku Klux Klan to the point of reviving it. With a comparatively large budget, *Birth of a Nation* was able to incorporate a range of new techniques of film making - wide-angle mass scenes, dramatic close-ups, tracking shots, and other expressive camera movements; parallel action sequences, fast crosscutting, and fading. Despite protests by many African Americans and their allies, the movie was shown across the USA and a box office success, as White audiences flocked to it. Statements and personal notes we have from White viewers, including the then president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, illustrate the pleasure they felt as this piece of racist propaganda confirmed their prejudices, fears, and glorification of Whiteness.

Birth of a Nation, just as *Within Our Gates*, features a rape, and a lynching - murder by a mob, executed as an extralegal means of punishment. Lynching, just as race riots, were a quotidian reality of the USA. The numbers speak for themselves: e.g., someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929 - weekly terror continued over decades. Three quarters of the victims were Black. Contrary to what *Birth of A Nation* and much racist propaganda would allege, the victims were not exclusively adult males accused of rape, but people could be tortured and burned alive for such minor offenses as shop-lifting or insolence - and even those allegations were often only a pretense to vent White hate. I do not want to go into the graphic details of some of the atrocities, so I will leave it at stating that they illustrate how racist depravity knows no bounds. This is also illustrated by the fact that often lynching was a community event, including candy vendors, postcards and souvenirs - these souvenirs being torture instruments, or the physical remains of the lynched. When the Black activist Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) wrote an essay decrying the practice and the rape-myth, she herself had to flee her home, evading a mob that threatened her life. This emphasizes that the scenes of violence in the movie are not hyperbole, even if the filmic style to viewers today may suggest so. Making a movie like this was a brave act in itself, challenging the prevalent myths that justified Antiracism violence. What the movie tries to do, as race movies tend to, is to appeal to the emotions of the audience, to rattle them so that then political arguments fall on fertile or on barren grounds.

A note on the music: the original score, that is, the music that would have accompanied the movie in theaters when it was released in 1920, was unfortunately not available to us, and, as



far as I can tell, is actually lost. So Scala, and we at LIAS decided to adapt music from a YouTube upload of the film so you do not have to sit in complete silence. Had we money, time, and space, we would have hired a blues or jazz ensemble, which likely played along the movie in most Black theaters - in Chicago, for example, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Ma Rainey, or Ethel Waters gave concerts during screenings, stealing the show from the movie at times.

My research centers on how Black artists work to expose the strategies of racism, for example by refashioning generic conventions of White racist productions, complicating them and working them to their own case; this movie fits into the larger topic of Black strategies to contribute to a public of which they are ontologically excluded. Micheaux's movies were initially indie successes, especially with audiences of color - however, they were also controversial, and attentive viewers will certainly be able to spot some of the reasons why. As, over the course of the next decades, African American communities began to question Eurocentric aesthetics, middle-class values and the American Dream that they were so clearly to be excluded from, Micheaux lost importance. Only in the 1980s, interest in him returned, and his greatest hit, *Within Our Gate*, long lost, was finally restored from a Spanish copy in 1993 by the Library of Congress.

Dr. Verena Adamik

