**Video Script**

**Lecture 7 – Contextualizing Oscar Micheaux**

**RTF 308 (Fa20)**

**Introduction**

Today we reach a kind of inflection point in film history,

And that’s the year 1915.

We talked in the last lecture about transitional film,

And we saw how conventions of filmmaking and storytelling that we recognize today

were emerging from the primordial ooze of experimentation.

**Griffith portrait**

1915, however, saw the release of one of the most infamous films of all time,

A 12-reel “Lost Cause” historical fantasy by D.W. Griffith called *The Birth of a Nation*.

(sometimes we leave the “the” off, but it’s the same film either way).

It’s considered a landmark in film history, our first real feature film,

And historians for years minimized its story and impact to focus on its cinematic achievements.

I’ll peel back the curtain for a moment here and say that for people who teach film,

the question of how to talk about this film and whether to show it can be a divisive one.

It’s a moment in history that I’ve tried to approach with great care and consideration.

For starters, I knew I did not want to show this film. It’s widely available if you do want to see it,

But I didn’t want to waste one of my precious few screenings (or even clips) on something so hateful.

But more than that, I spent a lot of time thinking about what the use is of talking

about *Birth of a Nation* at all. Are there any lessons that *Birth of a Nation*,

and the mark it left on US culture and society, can teach us that other films can’t?

**Protest signs**

And after thinking about this for a long time, I realized that we should use *Birth of a Nation* not as the

Paragon of film technique or to talk about Griffith’s genius, but as an archeological tool to unearth

A history of protest, both by audiences—particularly Black audiences—

and by a groundbreaking filmmaker named Oscar Micheaux.

Without understanding what *Birth of a Nation* did, we lose the full context of what Micheaux achieved

In his film *Within Our Gates,* the film you’ll watch for this week.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**Discourse**

To understand the position of *Birth of a Nation* in history, you first need to understand

the concept of discourse.

The very academic definition of discourse is **[ANIMATION]**

*an institutionalized way of speaking or writing about reality that defines what can be intelligibly thought and said about the world and what cannot*

A simpler way of defining discourse might be **[ANIMATION]**

*How we think and communicate about people, things, the social organization of society, and the relationships among and between all three*

But most simply, discourse is the word to describe **[ANIMATION]**

How we talk about things. And how we talk about things to some degree influences how things are.

Think about discourse as a cultural conversation.

Discourse is an important concept for today…

**Discourses**

…because *Birth of a Nation*

belongs to a few different cultural conversations.

**[ANIMATION]** The first we might call the film art discourse,

which focuses on the *technical* aspects of the film.

That goes something like “*Birth of a Nation* was a major milestone in filmmaking” and people

Can debate its merits in terms of structure, lighting, cinematography, editing, and so forth.

**[ANIMATION]** The second we might call the history discourse.

That one goes something like “*Birth of a Nation reflected a moment in U.S. History*

*and changed its course.”*

That conversation includes thinking about the 50th anniversary of the Civil War,

the Lost Cause ideology, the history of the KKK, and so forth.

**[ANIMATION]** Third, there’s what I might call the racism discourse,

Which is the conversation about the *content* of *Birth of a Nation* (its profoundly racist story)

*and* it might also consider how people contested that story it from the moment of its premiere.

**Griffith at Desk**

But before we get into any of these conversations, and before we move on to Oscar Micheaux,

We need to understand a little bit more about D.W. Griffith.

**[ANIMATION]** David Wark Griffith is born in Kentucky in 1875;

His father was in the Confederate army.

He began his career as an actor in touring theater companies and as a playwright.

He tries to sell a play to Edwin S. Porter (director of *The Great Train Robbery* and *Laughing Gas*)

And he’s unsuccessful, but he starts acting in some film for Edison.

**Lonedale**

Meanwhile **[ANIMATION]** William K. Dickson, who you might remember as Edison’s employee,

Has gone off and founded the Biograph Company, which is one of Edison’s main competitors.

**[ANIMATION]** D.W. Griffith moves over to Biograph as an actor in 1908

But quickly becomes a director and his films for Biograph, like *The Lonedale Operator,*

are really well received. He’s popular, and he’s talented.

James Agee, who was a screenwriter, film critic, novelist, and journalist,

who also wrote the nonfiction book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* about the Great Depression,

Said of Griffith **[ANIMATION]**

*“To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of a melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language, the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man.*

**Griffith & U.A.**

Griffith leaves biograph and strikes out on his own in 1913, and it’s in that independent period

When he makes *Birth of a Nation* and its follow up, *Intolerance.*

**[ANIMATION]** In 1919, he goes on to form the United Artists studio

along with some of the biggest stars of the day,

Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks.

**[ANIMATION]** But most importantly, after *Birth of a Nation* his mythology

as Film’s Founding Father grows, and he’s popularly credited with inventing

the closeup, the scenic long shot, cross-cutting, fading out/in, masks and vignettes, finding talent,

elevating cinema to an art, the first feature-length film, and the first film shown at the White House.

I put an asterisk here because, knowing what we know about the history of early and transitional cinema,

when so many people were experimenting with the form and its technology,

we also know that it’s hard to really attribute some of these developments to one person.

**Wrench**

For example, let’s take the closeup.

So here, you see the infamous close-up of the wrench in *The Lonedale Operator*.

**Great Train & Madame’s Cravings**

**[ANIMATION]** But we also know that eight years before Griffith’s wrench shot,

We saw this shot at the end of *The Great Train Robbery*. And sure, maybe you can argue

That this wasn’t integral to the telling of that story.

**[ANIMATION]** But in 1906, five years before *Lonedale,* we had Alice Guy-Blache

Cutting to closer shots of Madame and her cravings in that short film about pregnancy.

So, there were people experimenting with different shot types and distances

before *The Lonedale Operator.*

**Advertising**

One reason people might regard his contributions so singularly is that his career took on

A new significance after *Birth of a Nation*, which was in many ways unlike films that had come before.

But another reason might be how his films were advertised at the time!

Here, you see two ads for *Lonedale* from 1911, both of which a) totally spoil the film

But also b) call out monkey wrench as something to watch for—priming audiences to receive the reveal.

**Birth of a Nation**

So all of this brings us to 1915,

when Griffith releases *Birth of a Nation* under its original title, *The Clansman.*

It’s important to note that 1915 is fifty years after the Civil War ended,

And that this moment is important in the historiography of the Civil War.

There’s a lot of nostalgia, revisionism, and reconsidering of the war years as people look back.

*Birth of a Nation* does represent a step forward in filmmaking.

It’s three-hour epic—much longer than other films had been to that point—

that depicts historical events like the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and Civil War battles.

To the 1915 viewer, it feels realistic *and* historic at the same time.

It’s a potent combination.

However, what the film does is actually fuse Griffith’s compelling cinematic techniques

With a racist fantasy.

The film’s depiction of the Reconstruction era in particular

depicts emancipated Black people as monsters

and the KKK as swashbuckling heroes, riding in to save the day.

Now, just like Griffith didn’t invent filmmaking,

He also didn’t invent racism or the KKK or romantic ideas about white supremacy.

However, what he did do was marry them together into a blockbuster.

He made this racism spectacular, and he made the KKK appealing for a new mass audience.

It was so appealing and so effective, in fact, the KKK used this film as a recruiting tool.

I’ve included on this slide a little excerpt from film critic Roger Ebert’s essay on the film,

Which I’ll include as an optional link if you want to read about the plot in more detail.

***Birth of a Nation* advertisement**

So, Birth of a Nation goes on to be incredibly profitable and popular.

It was the first film shown at the White House, screened for President Woodrow Wilson,

Who reportedly said “It is like writing history with lightning.

My only regret is that it is all too terribly true.”

Though this quote is a little bit apocryphal,

The idea is that Wilson seems to buy what Griffith is selling, hook, line and sinker.

Much more recently, *New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody had this to say about this film:

*“The worst thing about Birth of a Nation is how good it is. The merits of its grand and enduring aesthetic make it impossible to ignore and, despite its disgusting content, also make it hard not to love. And it’s that very conflict that renders the film all the more despicable, the experience of the film more of a torment—together with the acknowledgement that Griffith, whose short films for Biograph were already among the treasures of world cinema, yoked his mighty talent to the cause of hatred (which, still worse, he sincerely depicted as virtuous.”*

I would argue with Richard Brody about finding it hard not to love the film –

I find it very easy not to love it.

But what I think his quote underlines is the film’s *effectiveness.*

We can’t understand its impact without understanding how its hateful message

was spread by its total watchability for 1915 audience.

**Pause**

Now. Let’s pause the lecture for a moment.

**Independent lens.**

Please use the link below and watch the *Independent Lens* video from the beginning to about 5:05.

You can watch the whole thing if you like, but I really just want to concentrate

On how Black audiences organized against this film in 1915.

**2-3 minutes**

Then, pause for 2-3 minutes after you watch.

Free write, or chat with someone (I know I have some roommates who are both in the class!)

about these three questions:

Can audiences effectively protest media?

What tactics did Boston protestors use in 1915?

Do we need different tactics for 2020?

Come on back after you’ve watched and reflected.

**“Boston Race Leaders”**

So, as you saw, leaders like William Monroe Trotter led intense protests against *Birth of a Nation*.

Here, you see coverage from *The Chicago Defender* on that protest, meaning that

Stories about audience resistance spread nationwide.

I’ll include a link for you to read this whole article below if you’re interested.

So if what we’ve been talking about here is media *and* protest…

**Micheaux**

…Oscar Micheaux and the film *Within Our Gates* is a story of media *as* protest.

Micheaux was born in 1884.

**[ANIMATION]** He was one of 13 children of a formerly enslaved father.

Micheaux struck out on his own in his teens, and he moves to Chicago at 17

Where he holds many jobs, including as a Pullman Porter (or an attendant on a train).

**Pullman Porter**

Without digressing too much, it’s worth mentioning that being a porter was seen as one of the better jobs

Available to Black men at the time. It provided a middle-class income

And you got to see the country, which was kind of a perk.

**Brotherhood Convention**

But what’s more interesting is that the Pullman Porters organized into the first Black labor union,

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,

Here pictured at their convention in 1938.

They organized in 1925 under the rallying cry of “Fight or Be Slaves.”

They have a fascinating history, and I’ll link you to the Pullman Porter museum

in the optional content below if you want to learn more

**Micheaux**

So, Micheaux is working in this unique profession,

But he eventually decides **[ANIMATION]** to become a homesteader in South Dakota.

**[ANIMATION]** and he starts writing novels,

including one based on his experiences called *The Homesteader.*

**[ANIMATION]** A very early Black studio called the Lincoln Motion Picture Co.

Wanted to adapt *The Homesteader* into a film,

**[ANIMATION]** But instead of just granting the rights, Micheaux forms the Micheaux Film & Book Co.

Of Sioux City and starts making his own films, including *The Homesteader* in 1919

*Within our Gates* in 1920

And 42 more throughout his career.

Your reading today is a short interview with a man who was an actor in one of Micheaux’s films,

So you can get a feel for what it was like to be on set with him.

I also wanted to include it to recognize the importance of oral history and memory to film historians!

**Advertisements**

So, Oscar Micheaux is an independent filmmaker.

Like Griffith, his work can be controversial.

Like Griffith, his work is *political*.

But unlike Griffith, Micheaux works from a place of decreased power,

Socially, economically, and industrially.

And yet, he still manages to make *Within Our Gates* in 1920, this powerful, radical, beautiful film

That speaks back to *Birth of a Nation*.

And while Griffith’s film is exhibited nationwide for months,

*Within Our Gates* is frequently banned from being shown at all.

**Sylvia**

As I mentioned in our announcement, and as you’ll see in the film

*Within Our Gates* is the story of Sylvia, a young Southern Black woman.

Her relationship is ruined by a jealous cousin in cahoots with a ne’er-do-well named Larry;

Larry continues to torment her by trying to sabotage her work to raise money

for a Black school as well as a burgeoning new love affair

by threatening to reveal something from her past.

The last half or so of the movie is a flashback to what exactly happened to Sylvia and her family,

And that story is the *inverse* of *Birth of a Nation*.

It depicts what it was like to be a Black family in the South

Living with omnipresent threat of physical, emotional, and even financial harm.

**[ANIMATION]** A schoolteacher named William Huggins saw the film in 1920 and described it this way:

*“The Birth of a nation was written by oppressors to show that the oppressed were a burden and a drawback to the nation, that they had no real grievance, but on the other hand they were as roving lions seeking whom they might devour. Within Our Gates is written by the oppressed and shows in a mild way the degree and kind of his oppression. That he is an asset to the nation in all phases of national life, aspiration, and development.”*

So even back in 1920, viewers saw these two films in conversation with each other—

As part of the same discourse.

**Stereotypes**

One thing you’ll notice about *Within Our Gates* is that there are two kinds of acting in this film.

There’s characters like Sylvia, who are quite naturalistic—

Each time I watch Evelyn Preer’s performance, I grow to love it more.

But there are other characters who seem to be much more cartoonish.

To understand why Micheaux made this choice, we have to think about stereotypes.

**[ANIMATION]** Ellen Seiter defines stereotypes as

*“systematic representations repeated in a variety of forms from jokes and cartoons to news broadcasts, feature films, and television series*

**[ANIMATION]** and most importantly, *“what is usually false about a stereotype is the suggestion that all people of a group are this way, and this way by nature, and that we should feel superior to them, whether we despise, fear, or laugh at the stereotype”*

So, a stereotype is an image combined with a judgement,

applied indiscriminately to a group of people.

**Controlling images**

When Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins talks about stereotypes about Black women,

She uses the term controlling image,

A term I love because it describes effect of a stereotype.

She says **[ANIMATION]** *Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression.”*

And **[ANIMATION]** *“These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.”*

**Minstrelsy**

The stereotypes that you see in both *Birth of a Nation* and *Within our Gates* are both drawn

From blackface minstrelsy – though they are used to utterly different ends.

But to explain **[ANIMATION]** blackface minstrelsy was a theatrical practice that originated in the north,

In which—as scholar Eric Lott puts it—“white men caricatured Blacks for sport and profit.”

**[ANIMATION]** A minstrel show would usually contain a group of performers in blackface makeup

And exaggerated, oversized costumes, and a show contained three parts:

Songs, novelty performances like comedy sketches or speeches, and a longer narrative skit.

Minstrel performances were often really physical,

and featured a lot of cartoonish violence against black bodies—kicking, punching, falling, throwing etc.

**Mickey**

Minstrel images were so widely integrated into 19th and 20th century popular culture

They have engrained themselves everywhere—

Including, as you can see, in some of our most beloved cultural icons.

**Birth of a Nation**

*Birth of a Nation* mobilized blackface toward explicitly oppressive ends.

**Thomas Rice**

But Black artists from Micheaux to much more modern creators

Have also drawn on these stereotypes in *tactical ways* in order to comment on them.

**[ANIMATION]** Here’s a drawing of White performer Thomas Rice

In blackface as his character “Jim Crow,” circa approximately the 1830s.

Rice used Jim Crow to depict Black people as lazy, untrustworthy tricksters…

…and this is we get derive the term “Jim Crow” era or “Jim Crow” policy.

**[ANIMATION]** And here’s a still from Childish Gambino’s *This is America* video,

which seems to intentionally reference this controlling image.

**Efram and Old Ned**

In *Within Our Gates,* Micheaux also places stereotypical, minstrel-inspired characters

Alongside more naturalistic ones like Sylvia or Dr. Vivian.

Why? Like Childish Gambino, to comment on them.

What I think is fascinating—and part of Micheaux’s genius—is that each stereotyped character

Has a moment when he drops his act.

For Efram, it’s when he realizes selling out Sylvia’s family will not save him.

For Old Ned, it’s after he lets a room full of white men degrade him.

Through these brief but heartbreaking moments when a caricature evolves into a real human,

With real human reactions,

Micheaux is showing us how limiting the caricatures are in the first place.

**Canon**

I want to end the lecture by thinking a little bit about canon..

**[ANIMATION]** a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works,

and a criterion or standard of judgement.

We often use the phrase “the film canon” to refer to some list of must-see films…

You know, “the best” of film art, the most “influential” films.

Many people who come to this class already have some idea of what film history is, and that history

Usually reflects the so-called American film canon – *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca,* etc.

**Canon 2**

Director Paul Schrader wrote about the film canon in an article for *Film Comment* in 2006,

And argues that even when we say we reject the idea of a film canon,

there’s just so much film out there we construct new canons by accident all the time anyway.

He says:

*“de facto film canons exist—in abundance. They exist in college curriculums, they exist in yearly 10-best lists, they exist in best-of-all-time lists of every sort.”*

D.W. Griffith and Oscar Micheaux’s place in the film canon is something to think about.

**Spike Lee**

Spike Lee has given a lot of interviews about *Birth of a Nation*,

Because his experience of being asked to view the film uncritically in film school

As part of the canon of great American film is something that has stuck with him.

In fact, he made his student film about a Black director who is hired to remake *Birth of a Nation*.

Though I’d like to think we are more critical now about *Birth of a Nation* now than in Lee’s day,

I wanted to consult one of the most canonical canons of them all: the AFI top 100.

**AFI list**

The AFI is the American Film Institute, and they produce and maintain the

AFI 100 years 100 Movies list—supposedly the 100 most important films in American history.

This is an influential list. If we have a film canon, this is it.

*Birth of a Nation* did appear on the original 1998 list at number 44.

Interestingly, and perhaps in response to critiques like Spike Lee’s,

The AFI removed it from their list altogether in 2008.

**[ANIMATION]**….But, they stuck Griffith’s follow-up film, *Intolerance*, at 49 instead.

So, to me – and this is just me opining –

the AFI seems like it’s bending over backwards to keep Griffith on this list.

(And, for what it’s worth, it’s not like *Intolerance* is some parable of racial harmony…

Griffith actually made it in response to people who had been intolerant of *him*

following the release of *Birth of a Nation*.)

And while the AFI hold a spot for Griffith

perhaps swapping in yet another of his films in the next revision,

It’s important (and perhaps frustrating) to know

that Oscar Micheaux’s *Within our Gates*,

nor any of his other films, has ever been on the list…

…a signal, perhaps, that we haven’t come nearly as far as we like to think.