

African American Film History

20's, 50's and 70's

Presented by
Nicholas R. Neal

Grapevine Video
presents
Oscar Micheaux's



Within Our Gates



OTTO PREMINGER presents OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN'S
CARMEN JONES

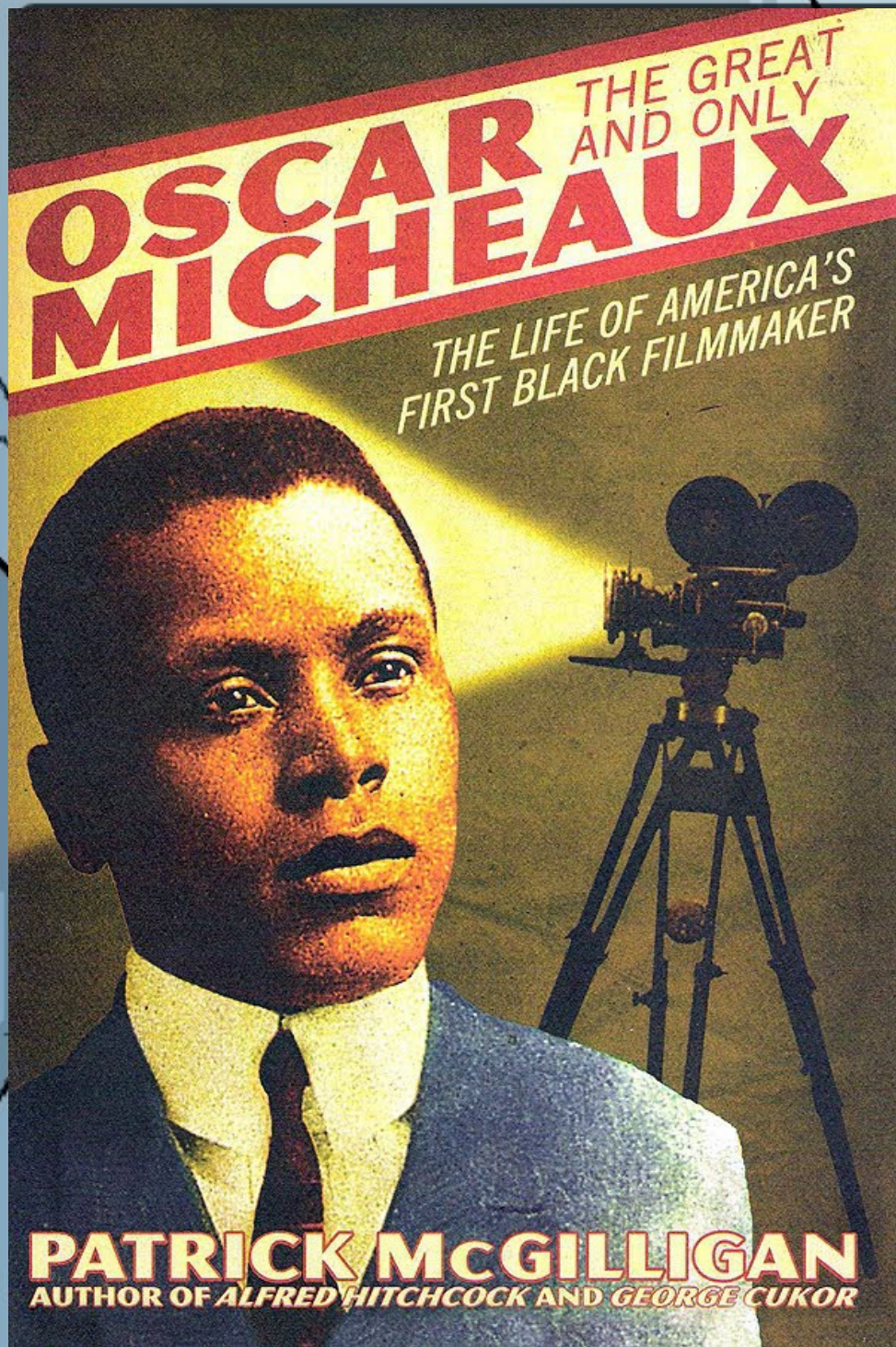
with Boyz's
immortal music



starring
HARRY BELAFONTE
DOROTHY DANDRIDGE
PEARL BAILEY
OLGA JAMES
JOE ADAMS

colour by DE LUXE in **CINEMASCOPE**
Produced and Directed by OTTO PREMINGER Book and Lyrics by OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN 2nd. Screenplay by HARRY KLEINER Released by 20th Century Fox





1920's "Micheaux era"

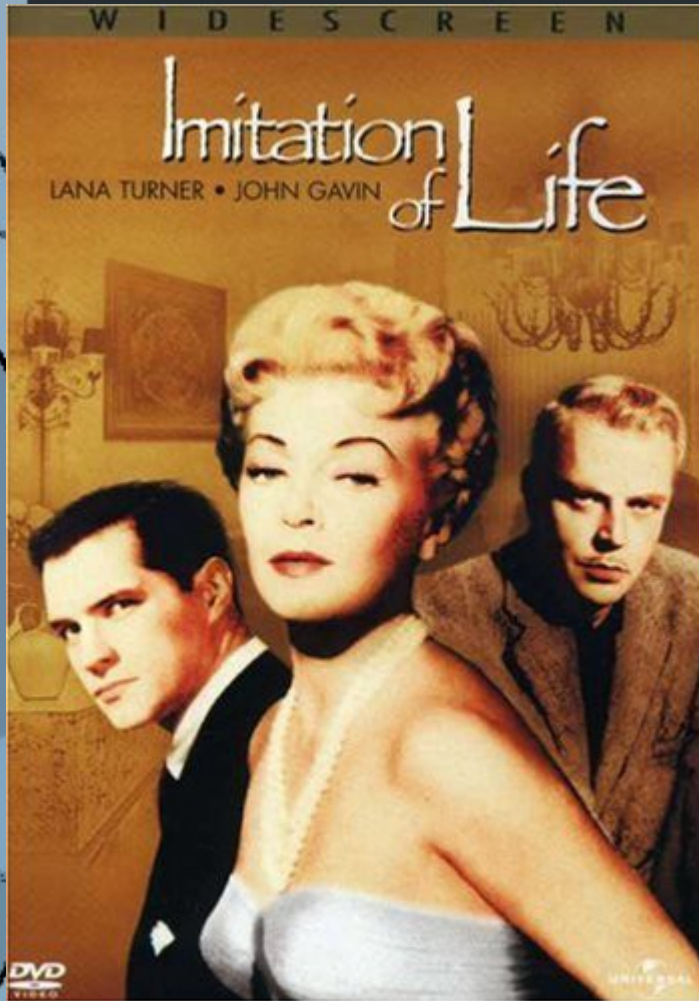
- Oscar Micheaux was one of the most famous African American film makers during the 1920's and 30's
- His Film themes included the economic, social and political struggles of African Americans. Even though his works were more narrative than documentary, they attempted to give a real life account of African American life.
- For Example, *Within Our Gates* (1920) is about a southern black woman who goes up north to find a philanthropist to fund a southern black school[1.]



50's "Escapist Era"

- In the 1950's, African Americans, themselves were being represented more in acting, however depictions of their political struggles were ignored. *Carmen Jones* (1954) [2.] for example, had an all black cast, but their race is never once acknowledged and for a story based on a black military officer during World War II, military segregation is never addressed.
- I call this "escapist" because it tries to avoid the political problems of African Americans.

Imitation of Life



Imitation of Life (1959) shows the limits of political avoidance in this “escapist era.” Sarah-Jones (Susan Kohner), a light skinned black girl struggles with her ethnic identity and constantly tries to pass as being white[3.]

This is interesting psychologically but it doesn't touch too heavily on segregation and how that might cause someone to want to pass for being white. In other words it focuses on the personal rather than the political.

**WHEN THESE BROTHERS STICK
IT TO YOU... IT'S FATAL!**



**ROY
JEFFERSON**

**MIKE
THOMAS**

STARRING IN

**SEE THEM
REVENGE
A SISTER'S
RAPE!**

**SEE THEM
REVENGE
A BROTHER'S
MURDER!**

BROTHERHOOD OF DEATH

with LETARI • HASKELL V. ANDERSON III • MIKE BASS • Executive Producer RONALD K. GOLDMAN
Produced by RICHARD BARKER and BILL BERRY • Directed by BILL BERRY • Screenplay by BILL BERRY,
from an original story by RONALD K. GOLDMAN • Music Produced by JOHN LEWIS

R RESTRICTED
Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

Theme song "HIGH HORSE" written by SUSAN MINSKY & MARK SCHIMMEL
Recorded by REVELATION on RSO Records and QUIET STORM on VIRTUE Records

Released by
DOWNTOWN DISTRIBUTION CO., INC.

70's "Blaxploitation Era"

Blaxploitation acknowledged the political struggle of African Americans yet portrayed the resolutions of those struggles to be a romantic form of vigilantism.

Example: *Brotherhood of Death* (1976) [4.] which is a film about three black vietnam vets' fight against the Ku Klux Klan's corruption of local police, at first through the ballot, then through bullets. This brings up legitimate issues of police corruption and voter suppression yet this very real world scenario is solved through romantic vigilantism.

The Black Klansman



The Black Klansman (1966) has a very similar story to *Brotherhood of Death*. Jerry Ellsworth (Richard Gilden) takes the law into his own hands and fights against the Ku Klux Klan after they kill his daughter[5.]

The twist is that he does so by “passing for white” and infiltrating the Klan. Thus not only exacting physical revenge but ideological revenge as well. His passing in a sense, integrates the Ku Klux Klan.

This type of irony is very very prevalent in Blaxploitation.

Common Themes



“Passing”



The concept of biracial people trying to “pass” for being white was prevalent in all of the eras I studied. We've all ready discussed the “passing” in *Imitation of Life* and *The Black Klansman*, but there was also passing in one of Oscar Micheaux's piece

The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920). There's a scene where a biracial man is trying to court a white woman, and pretending himself to be white. His plan his foiled however by the appearance of his black mother[6.]

Religion

Religion takes on different roles in each of these eras. In *Within Our Gates*, religion is actually portrayed as a way for whites to subordinate blacks.

In *Imitation of Life*, Annie's (Juanita Moore) religious nature is portrayed as part of her motherly charm and makes Sarah-Jones' abandonment of her ethnic identity somewhat parallel to the prodigal son parable.

In both *The Black Klansman* and *Brotherhood of Death*, religion is portrayed as an organization for black political change and thus targets of the Ku Klux Klan.

Filmography

Within Our Gates (1920)

The Symbol of an Unconquered Race (1920)

The Exile (1931)

The Girl from Chicago (1932)

No Way Out (1950)

Carmen Jones (1954)

Imitation of Life (1959)

The Black Klansman (1966)

Foxy Brown (1974)

From Harlem to Hong Kong (1974)

Brotherhood of Death (1976)

Timeline

Note: I could not find the specific dates for *The Black Klansman* and *Brotherhood of Death*. So in order to have them on the time line, I just put down that they came out on the first of the month they were released.

Citations

[1.] *Within Our Gates*. Dir Oscar Micheaux. 1920. Online

[2.] *Carmen Jones*. Dir Otto Preminger. 1954. Online

[3.] *Imitation of Life*. Dir. Douglas Sirk. 1959. Online

[4.] *Brotherhood of Death*. Dir. Bill Berry. 1976. Online

[5.] *The Black Klansman*. Dir. Ted. V. Mikel. 1966. Online

[6.] *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. Dir. Oscar Micheaux. 1920.

Online