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Silent Film Exhibition and Performative Historiography: The
Within Our Gates Project

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Lewis to Will Hayes, dated November 15, 1925, about von Stroheim's "orgies, with certain players"; a letter from Irving Thalberg, firing "Mr. von Stroheim"; a story synopsis for *Queen Kelly* (1928); von Stroheim's contract for *The Honeymoon*, *The Wedding March*, Pt. II; *The Wedding March* script (1928); correspondence pertaining to *The Wedding March*; Erich von Stroheim's personal horoscope (1928); a press book for *The Great Gabbo* (1929); a signed agreement for an unrealized remake of *Blind Husbands* (1931); an employment agreement for *The Lost Squadron* (1932); a breakdown of Erich's involvement in *Hello, Sister*, *Walking Down Broadway* (1933); an original screenplay for *Between Two Women* (1937); von Stroheim's *Arsenic and Old Lace* script (1941);⁷ telegrams from Lillian Gish and Boris Karloff regarding *Arsenic*; "The Hun Rides Again," a story Erich wrote in 1941 for *The New York Times*; an invitation to the preview of *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943); Erich's casting suggestions for a story on the Greek gods (1944); correspondence between Peter Noble and Erich von Stroheim (1947 through 1953.); a 1954 letter from Richard Griffith at the Museum of Modern Art, stating the museum had acquired *The Devil's Passkey*; and a letter from Gloria Swanson stating she wanted to make *Sunset Blvd.* as a musical and asking whether von Stroheim would appear in it (March 14, 1955).

The importance for film history of the Erich von Stroheim estate collection cannot be overestimated. Yet, this collection may have ended up in the trash had it not been for some fortuitous encounters and good luck. For forty years after his death, various members of von Stroheim's family kept their materials a secret. One can only speculate, for example, why Jacqueline Keener did not give Thomas Quinn Curtiss access to the material when he wrote his book in the late 1960s, especially since he was apparently a friend. The fact is that survivors of important film industry people seldom consider the materials in their possession of great value, and many collections do end up in garbage bins. Even if they do value the work of their parents, grandparents, uncles, or aunts, survivors are often elderly themselves and are at a loss as how or to whom the boxes of stuff may be transferred. At other times, unscrupulous collectors have taken such materials and

attempted to sell them, a practice becoming more frequent with eBay and other Internet sites auctioning film memorabilia. There can be no doubt, however, that such estate collections are best given to public institutions, whether archives such as the Academy's or university special collections. Only then can it be guaranteed that these materials will not only be preserved for posterity but also made accessible to any and all scholars, regardless of the thrust of their research.

My own hope is that now that the Erich von Stroheim estate is accessible in a public institution, it will lead to new research into the career and life of one of this country's greatest filmmakers.

NOTES

1. Peter Noble, *Hollywood Scapegoat: The Biography of Erich von Stroheim* (London: Fortune Press, 1950), 4.
2. Thomas Quinn Curtiss, *Von Stroheim* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 4.
3. As late as 1994, the catalog for the Berlin Film Festival Retrospective to Erich von Stroheim could not with certainty name a date for his emigration, although they did note that Erich had officially resigned from the Viennese Jewish Community on November 17, 1908, most probably just before leaving Vienna for the United States. See Wolfgang Jacobsen, Helga Belach, Norbert Grob, eds., *Erich von Stroheim* (Berlin: Argon Verlag GmbH, 1994), 275.
4. The Pabst was a drinking establishment, probably serving Pabst Beer, in New York.
5. Richard Koszarski, *The Man You Love to Hate: Erich von Stroheim and Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); revised as *Von: The Life and Films of Erich von Stroheim* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2001).
6. The Bonn exhibition ran under the same title as the Academy exhibit. It was on view from November 20, 2005, to February 12, 2006.
7. The film was eventually made in 1944 by Frank Capra from a script by Julius and Philip Epstein, without von Stroheim receiving any credit.

Silent Film Exhibition and Performative Historiography

The Within Our Gates Project

ANNA SIOMOPOULOS AND
PATRICIA ZIMMERMANN

Within Our Gates: Revisited and Remixed launched Black History Month in 2004 at Ithaca College in New York, with a newly commissioned score by jazz pianist Fe Nunn for Oscar

Micheaux's landmark silent film *Within Our Gates*. The performance featured live music from a jazz quartet, Baroque clarinet solo, African dancing, and djembe drumming. It also featured digital live mixes and spoken word performances by the Body and Soul Ensemble and the Ida B. Wells Spoken Word Ensemble. On a conceptual level, the project and the performance engaged four central ideas: critical historiography, the new film history, digital culture theory, and collaborative ethnography. The goal of this project was to rethink the exhibition of politically significant silent films and to encourage a contemporary audience to engage critically with one particularly important film, *Within Our Gates* (1920). In order to create a new reception context for a groundbreaking silent film, we used live music, digital technology, and spoken word performance; we hoped that this new presentation of the film would provoke audiences to see the cultural continuities and discontinuities between different technologies, and the political implications that these technologies have at different moments in social history.

Within Our Gates: Revisited and Remixed worked to establish a collaboration between the academic community and local musicians in Ithaca, a town recognized as a vibrant center for a wide range of music. The team comprised an interdisciplinary group of artists and scholars who brought different intellectual and aesthetic skills to the project. Patricia Zimmermann, a film, video, and new-media historian and theorist, conceived of the idea of rescoring a silent film for Black History Month at Ithaca College. One member of the collective, Anna Siomopoulos, had just completed a dissertation on Hollywood cinema and the politics of the 1930s for which she had done extensive research on Micheaux. Drawing on her research, she suggested *Within Our Gates* as a possible project because of its history of censorship, its importance in American film history, and its uncompromising view of black life in the 1920s. To rescore the film, Zimmermann commissioned the musical talents of Fe Nunn, a composer and songwriter who lives in Ithaca.

Other members of the collaborative included Grace An, who had just completed a dissertation using postcolonial theories of cross-cultural visual representation; John Hochheimer,

a scholar of journalism and radio at Ithaca College who possessed a vast knowledge of the history of African American musical forms; and Zachary Williams, a new faculty member in African American studies, a spoken word artist, and a preacher. Finally, four academically trained artists joined our project: Baruch Whitehead, from the School of Music, not only played classical oboe but also had experience in leading black choirs; filmmaking professors Chang Chun and Meg Jamieson helped create the staging and lighting effects for the performance; while Simon Tarr, a filmmaker and digital artist, volunteered to be the project video jockey.

Siomopoulos prepared for the entire team a packet of film history readings from recently published books and journal articles on Micheaux and the history of black film exhibition. During rehearsals, Nunn suggested that everyone involved in the project make his or her own particular contribution to the conception of the event and the final performance. Consequently, the spoken word segments of the production evolved from the collaboration between jazz musicians and academics: the musicians composed musical interpretations of the film, while the academics wrote a spoken word script with the idea of providing historical and theoretical analysis of Micheaux's film, African American cultural history, and the role of technology in the changing contexts of mass media reception. In this way, the music and words had a dialectical relationship to each other; the music released the images from silence and the past, while the spoken word operated as a distancing device to pull the spectator out of the film and into larger historical, theoretical, and critical debates.

Through a collaborative process that was not without conflict, argument, and debate, we attempted to rethink the way that music accompanies silent film screenings. Our performance evoked the improvisational, immersive experience of black theaters on the south side of Chicago in the 1920s. In these venues, live performance of jazz and blues drove the film and inspired audience participation, thus inverting the Hollywood film convention in which music predominantly supports the film narrative and promotes spectator identification. Based on our research into black exhibition practices during the silent period, we decided that the music

for our performance would not function subserviently to the filmic text or narrative but as an equal. In other words, we sought to destabilize the film text, reanimate film reception, and complicate film spectatorship through music, spoken word, and multiple voices.

The team formed two ensembles to put into practice our reconceptualization of silent film exhibition. Named for the 1925 Micheaux film starring singer and social activist Paul Robeson, the Body and Soul Ensemble was composed of Ithaca College faculty from the departments of journalism, television/radio, cinema, music, and the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. Together we worked to create a performance before the screening that would help the audience understand the complex relationship between Micheaux's film and contemporary cultural politics of race. Following a digital mix of images from the civil rights movement and African American film, an African dancer performed a dance while accompanied by a djembe drummer. Next came a short, spoken word segment in which different speakers read quotes from African American cultural history, rap, poetry, and critical theory. The Ida B. Wells Spoken Word Ensemble was a second research and performance group composed of Ithaca College faculty. Named for the black feminist journalist who exposed the horrors of lynching, the group collaborated on a script that resembled the spoken word performance of the Body and Soul Ensemble prelude, in that it similarly combined historical and theoretical source material. The difference was that the Ida B. Wells script would be read while the film was screened behind the performers; through this juxtaposition of flat-screen and live performance, we hoped to construct a lively dialogue between the technologies and racial politics of past and present.

In the essays that follow, the evolution of the different components of the project is documented. Patricia Zimmermann, the executive producer and guiding spirit of the project as a whole, articulates the performance's theoretical underpinnings, its attempt to rethink silent film exhibition in a digital age. John Hochheimer explains the project's historical relationship to the multiform radio programs of the 1950s and 1960s. Grace An describes the process that shaped the construction and performance of

the spoken word script recited before and during the screening of Micheaux's film. Anna Siomopoulos includes a version of her public lecture on *Within Our Gates*, *The Birth of a Nation*, and silent film exhibition in black theaters of the 1920s, a lecture that preceded the performances of both ensembles. And Grace An and Anna Siomopoulos interview Fe Nunn on the musical collaboration that helped generate the film's new score. Also accompanying the dossier are some of Simon Tarr's digital images from the performance of the Body and Soul Ensemble that immediately preceded the silent film screening.

The Birth of a Black Cinema

Race, Reception, and Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates

ANNA SIOMOPOULOS

In the last decade, film scholars have focused an increasing amount of critical attention on Oscar Micheaux's 1920 silent film *Within Our Gates* as an important African American response to D. W. Griffith's notoriously racist film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Oscar Micheaux's landmark film provided a rebuttal to Griffith's depiction of black violence and corruption with a story of the injustices faced by African Americans in a racist society. While Griffith's film represents black male assaults on white female purity, Micheaux's film sets the historical record straight with its depiction of the attempted rape of a black woman by a white man. But the racial reversals in the plot of the film are not the only challenges that *Within Our Gates* poses to Griffith's film. *Within Our Gates* also counters *The Birth of a Nation* in the politics of its aesthetics, specifically in its very different use of parallel editing. Griffith's film uses cross-cutting to present a very simple opposition between white virtue and black villainy; in contrast, Micheaux's film uses a complex editing pattern to present a larger social vision of many different, competing political positions within both white and African American society. The complicated style of Micheaux's editing works to constitute a spectator who is more politically critical than the spectator constructed by