Narrative Style in Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates*

*by Dina Ciraulo*

“... I THINK THAT THE PAST IS ALL THAT MAKES THE PRESENT COHERENT AND FURTHER, THAT THE PAST WILL REMAIN HORRIBLE FOR EXACTLY AS LONG AS WE REFUSE TO ASSESS IT HONESTLY.”

*James Baldwin*

*Everybody’s Protest Novel*

Introduction

*Within Our Gates* is the title of Oscar Micheaux’s rediscovered 1919 feature film. Restored in 1993 from a single known surviving print from Spain, the film adds new insight into the workings of Oscar Micheaux, an incredibly prolific African American filmmaker, writer, producer, novelist, and businessman. Since so few of Micheaux’s estimated forty-eight feature films survive, it is difficult to generalize about the entire oeuvre. However, *Within Our Gates* is a stunning film, the first surviving feature by an African American director, and an example of his silent-era work. I wish to concentrate exclusively on *Within Our Gates* not as a fragment from an elusive career, but as a complex, self-sufficient text that stands alone.

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Accounts of Oscar Micheaux’s directorial style invariably address his rough approximation of Hollywood narratives; even the most sympathetic reviews cite the ways in which Micheaux was constrained as a director and therefore unable to construct a slick, seamless product. The obstacles that Micheaux faced were real and numerous, but they do not fully account for the complex structure of *Within Our Gates*. To assert that lack of funds or footage is the reason Micheaux does not adhere to the dominant shooting style of wide-medium-close shot established by D. W. Griffith seems to be missing the point. In *Within Our Gates* there is a finessing of material that is so complex it deserves a closer analysis.

A perfunctory glance at *Within Our Gates* tells the viewer that Oscar Micheaux bends the rules of classical Hollywood form to suit his own needs. He uses some conventional production practices, such as consistent screen direction and having actors enter and exit an empty frame for smoother continuity, yet abandons other standard techniques.

At the level of the narrative, the film does not flow forward in a linear manner. In addition, *Within Our Gates* mixes different genre styles, such as the melodrama, the gangster film, and the Hollywood romance; mainstream films adhere more strictly to genre form. What Micheaux has done in *Within Our Gates* is open up a codified form to create a space for a new kind of narrative, one that relies heavily on the interiority of the main characters.

Oscar Micheaux challenges dominant accounts of history and race relations by using an unusual filmic approach to single shots and to larger narrative construction. Briefly I will outline the salient qualities of the shot, and then proceed to a more extended analysis of narrative form in *Within Our Gates*.

The Tableaux Shot

Shots in *Within Our Gates* are best described as fitting into a tableaux style. Loosely, tableaux shots are filmed with a static camera at a “neutral” distance from the action (no extreme close-ups and few long shots). Usually subjects are centered in the frame and there is a single plane of action, with perhaps a
neutral background. By putting his actors in the center of a static frame, Micheaux asserts the primacy of his characters. From the first shot he shows that African Americans will have full, uncompromised depiction.

Tableaux shots, with their shallow depth-of-field, focus viewer attention exclusively on the actors at center stage. The effect is what Gilles Deleuze calls a “rarefied” frame.

The big screen and depth of field in particular have allowed the multiplication of independent data, to the point where a secondary scene appears in the foreground while the main one happens in the background… or where you can no longer even distinguish between the principal and the secondary.... On the other hand, rarefied images are produced, either when the whole accent is placed on a single object... or when the set is emptied of certain sub-sets...²

With Micheaux, at the level of the shot there is no competing information. This strategy of paring down the image results in a very clear form of address: African Americans are the heart of the story. For if film grammar is constructed through the shot, then Within Our Gates is clear about what, and to whom, it speaks.

A typical example of this rarefied tableaux shot comes from the first image in the film. In it we are introduced to the main character, Sylvia Landry, played by Evelyn Preer. An iris opens the scene, and in a medium-wide shot we see Sylvia seated at a table, in the center of the frame. Two interior columns flank the room, with symmetrical chairs placed toward the viewer in front of each column. A simple couch rests against the back wall directly behind Sylvia, keeping our

![Fig. 2. Opening tableau shot from Within our Gates. Video frame largement.](image)
attention at the fore of the frame. Above her head a plain rectangular curtain
hangs over a window, giving weight to the center of the image, and emphasizing,
once again, her central place within the scene. Like earlier films inspired by
theater, this shot uses proscenium framing and action that “plays” to the viewer,
where information is displayed rather than revealed through camera movement.

In the subsequent shot Sylvia is joined by her cousin Alma (Flo Clements), who
sits next to her at the table. Micheaux cuts-in for their conversation, showing
them in a two-shot and then individually in shot/reverse formation. What is
interesting about this series of shots is that in both the two-shots and the indi-
vidual shots, the characters stay in the center of the frame. Generally shot/
reverse requires putting each character at opposite edges of the frame, cutting
between the two so that the viewer associates a particular space (left or right
side of the frame) with a given actor.
Micheaux's insistent centering of his characters gives rise to something unusual. Traditional continuity editing is premised on a mythical spatial relationship between the actors and their environment. That is to say, the “magic” of continuity editing is that people appear to have a relationship to their environment that is in fact not based in reality. Instead of developing spatial relationships, *Within Our Gates* creates a distinct place for characters. Micheaux privileges character over filmic space by continually allowing his actors center stage. Stephen Heath writes of the tableaux shot that one of its distinctive features is “a negation of space for place, the constant realizing of center in function of narrative purpose…”

In the above quote, Heath is referring to the first wave of films ever produced—single shot, short subject films that took much of their form from theater. As a stylistic device the tableaux form has been maligned for being too literal-minded in relation to the image and narrative. Indeed there is often a performative quality to the action, one that strives to make itself clearly explicit. For contemporary viewers this struggle for readability can seem unsophisticated or even comical.

However, the struggle for legibility can be seen in another light. The fact that *Within Our Gates* recalls an earlier moment in film history is crucial. Like many single shot films of the 1890’s, in which a static camera records “reality,” Micheaux’s shots are reminiscent of “actualities” or documentary style recordings of events. Actualities were single shot films of quotidian events: feeding a baby, workers leaving a factory, a man riding a bicycle. The camera is placed at a neutral distance from the subject and the action unfolds without direction.

A need to document reality is at the center of Micheaux’s old-fashioned, tableaux style shot. A fairness of perspective and a sense of objectivity is created by the (medium framed) tableaux shot: it is neither too distanced, nor so close it loses its relationship to its environment. The “reality” Micheaux documents is daily black life and race relations in the United States. The shots testify to a need to create a center space for African Americans in mass culture, and a necessity to hear their stories with some objectivity, so that the “official” historical accounts of black/white relationships can be called into question.
To add to the reality-effect of *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux makes reference to actual places and events that are of particular importance to the African American community. As Toni Cade Bambara notes:

…we will hear about the Piney Woods school… we will see, when the doctor-hero looks at newspapers, actual clippings that were familiar to people of that period as documentative.\(^4\)

In his filmic representations, Micheaux presents what he knows to be true both on a factual basis and on a personal level. At the level of the shot, a certain display of information is given that relates to the factual: neutral distance, centering of subject, clarity of address and clarity of content. It is, however, at the level of narrative construction that we see in what ways Micheaux inserts personal experience as a powerful tool in questioning “the real” and official accounts of history.

At the level of the shot, and on a narrative level, Micheaux constructs alternative representations of people and historical events. This is important to keep in mind given the time that he produced *Within Our Gates*. By the year of the film’s release (1919), classical narrative film structure had been fully developed as a system that relied on contiguous spatial relationships and linear plot development, most notably by D. W. Griffith, director of the klux-klan inspired *Birth of a Nation.\(^5\)* Even while *Within Our Gates* plays with certain Hollywood conventions, Micheaux keeps the narrative outside the rules established, in part, by Griffith.

**Narrative Structure**

If shots in *Within Our Gates* are pared down for clarity and simplicity, the narrative structure of the film operates in just the opposite manner. *Within Our Gates* is a film that seeks to complexify what appears to be a simple story, so that the viewer emerges with a deeper understanding of the characters’ lives, and struggles against economic injustice and racism.

The plot of *Within Our Gates* can be summed up in a few lines. The official story is about Sylvia Landry (played by Evelyn Preer), and her search for help for
Piney Woods, an institution which schools black children and is on the brink of closure for lack of funds. During the course of the film she encounters many types of suitors (a gangster, a preacher, a doctor), and a romantic relationship develops. Ultimately Sylvia is able to secure the needed finances and unite with the man she loves.

Yet this cursory outline of the story is unsatisfying, not because it omits any of the major plot points, but precisely because plot here is not the point. Plot, as it is traditionally understood in classical narrative, stems from the exterior actions of a character. In *Within Our Gates* Micheaux is less concerned with action than with what is generally defined as subplot, the interior emotive life of a character. Plot functions almost as a narrative justification for the real story, which is given to us in a series of digressions. What I call the real story is the “unofficial” narrative, the divergences from plot in the form of dreams, memories, flashbacks and simultaneous but secondary action.

*Within Our Gates* is structured through a series of narrative digressions. To illustrate the numerous and complex digressions that occur in the film, I will look closely at two sequences that happen mid-way through the film. The first sequence is fairly short, and occurs while Sylvia is in the hospital. The second is much longer, and takes place in the parlour of a white philanthropist, Mrs. Warwick.

The Hospital Sequence

In her search for funding for Piney Woods, Sylvia travels to Chicago, hoping to secure support from wealthy patrons. Dejected in her search, she rests on a park bench. There she witnesses a car speeding toward a small child. She runs into the path of the car, saving the child, but sacrificing herself: she is hit and injured. Coincidentally, the car’s occupant is Mrs. Warwick, a wealthy woman from the city. Sylvia is taken to the hospital, where Mrs. Warwick comes to visit.

The hospital sequence begins with Mrs. Warwick sitting at Sylvia’s bedside. In an intertitle, Mrs. Warwick asks, “…can you tell me what troubles you?” Significantly, Sylvia does not respond. It is as if Micheaux is demonstrating
the incommensurability of their social positions, experience, and the failure of language to adequately address this disparity. Mrs. Warwick grabs Sylvia’s hand, but the young woman turns her head away.

When she turns back to look at Mrs. Warwick, the screen fades to black. A flashback follows. We fade-up on a shot of Sylvia and another teacher from Piney Woods, looking concerned. It is a shot we have not seen before in the film. In an intertitle, the fellow teacher explains that they need five-thousand dollars to keep the school open. A subsequent shot shows the two teachers again, this time with Sylvia shaking her head in dismay. It is significant that this flashback in no way moves the narrative forward; we get no new plot information, for the viewer is already well aware of the need for school funds.

Rather, the flashback fills in Sylvia’s emotional state by showing the viewer what is on her mind, and why she finds the task of communicating with Mrs. Warwick so difficult. It is a return to the past that complexifies the present.

The screen fades back to the hospital scene and the present tense of the story. Mrs. Warwick is still entreat[ing Sylvia to talk, to explain herself, her despondency. Again Sylvia turns away from Mrs. Warwick and the shot fades out. Another flashback ensues. This time we are inside the Piney Woods school. The preacher, who heads the school, is registering school children. This is a shot we have seen before, but it is a shot for which Sylvia was never present. By presenting

Fig. 4. The hospital sequence, from Within our Gates. Video frame largement.
this shot as Sylvia’s flashback, Micheaux links her experience to a more collective struggle within the community. It shows that the past is not just an individual’s set of experiences, nor a singular dominant rendering of events, but a criss-crossing of numerous and diverse conditions over time that affect both the individual and the community.

Sadly, the final shot of the sequence shows the ways in which language has failed Sylvia Landry, and that her subjectivity is presented as incommunicable to Mrs. Warwick. When we return to the hospital a final time, Sylvia does respond to Mrs. Warwick’s questions, but not with words. Instead she shows her a telegram which outlines the immanent closure of Piney Woods. Again, it is as if spoken language cannot address the disparity of the two women, so Sylvia turns to “facts,” the printed word. The supposed neutrality and authority of printed text stands in distinction to the emotionally fraught Sylvia. The text lends legitimacy to her cause. Her refusal to speak can be seen as the result of the lack of credibility that historically has been placed on black women. Sylvia’s silence is an acknowledgment of the fact that her testimony, along with that of other African Americans, has been neither believed nor understood.

Through the use of flashbacks in this sequence, Micheaux shows how the past is incorporated into the present, and that Sylvia’s self-presentation to Mrs. Warwick is inflected with resonances of the past. This is not a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” portrait where an person’s history is abandoned for a brighter future, as Micheaux is so often accused of portraying, but rather a carrying of the past, and incorporation of the past as part of who we are, where our strength lies. Antonio Gramsci conceptualizes individual identity in just such a fashion.

For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations. He is a précis of all the past.6

(Clearly Gramsci is speaking in Marxist terms. This does not alter my reading of Within Our Gates, for so much of the film illustrates the ways in which racism operates on an economic basis. A larger framework would be required to develop this point, but suffice to say that economics are a recurring theme and Sylvia’s search for funds from wealthy white people is but one example of this).
The Meanwhile

As a structuring device, the flashback breaks-up the linearity of the narrative and creates a story that weaves in and out of different moments in time. In opposition to classical Hollywood narratives, which use flashback for plot development, Micheaux uses these moments as story digressions, taking the viewer away from the “official” action of the film and into a background story.

Drawing on film as an example, Walter Benjamin discusses the usefulness of plot interruption in epic theater, and relates interruption to a form of politicized art practice. I quote Benjamin at length as an introduction to the more experimental uses of digression, or interruption, in *Within Our Gates*.

The interruption of action... constantly counteracts an illusion in the audience. For such illusion is a hindrance to a theater that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements .... [a] situation appears... that, in this or that form, is always ours. It is not brought home to the spectator, but distanced from him. He recognizes it as the real situation, not with satisfaction, as in the theater of naturalism, but with astonishment.... [it] does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences. Only interruption here has not the character of a stimulant but an organizing function.?

Although Micheaux uses flashbacks in unusual ways, the form itself is part of standard film vocabulary. What is more unusual and experimental is his use of story digressions that correspond to a “meanwhile” in the narrative. What I am designating as “meanwhile” are story digressions that go beyond simple cross-cutting or contemporaneous action. These digressions have two distinct forms and temporalities in *Within Our Gates*. I will examine a fairly long sequence to illustrate what constitutes a “meanwhile” and how it functions.

The Parlor Sequence

Shots of Mrs. Warwick’s parlor bookend the action. In the sequence, Mrs. Warwick has decided to ask her friend Geraldine for advice on how best to help Sylvia. It is Mrs. Warwick’s assumption that Geraldine, a southerner, will understand more clearly Sylvia’s plight. In fact, Geraldine serves as the
mouth-piece for what could be termed the official thinking of white southerners during the Reconstruction. She throws off racist opinions with the force of a given, as though what she says is common knowledge. In intertitles, we see her thoughts on African Americans. “...they don’t want an education. Don’t you see that thinking would only give them a headache?” And further on she states:

Their sole ambition is to belong to a dozen lodges and consume religion without restraint, and when they die, go straight to heaven.

As an alternative to giving Sylvia and the Piney Woods school the needed five-thousand dollars, Geraldine suggests giving one hundred dollars to “Old Ned, the best colored preacher in the world.”

At this point the screen fades down on the parlor and an intertitle appears: “Old Ned, as he is...” Here the narrative diverges from the main storyline to present a character that will never reappear in the course of the film. At the narrative level, Ned is an aside, and in no way moves the film forward; yet quite a long stretch of screen time is devoted to his character and to his relationship to white people. The digression serves as a layering onto the main story, where we see how whites perceive Ned, his relationship to white men and his relationship to his congregation. Finally, we witness Ned’s self-revelation, which serves as a counterpoint to Geraldine’s official discourse. An iris opens the scene with Ned preaching at the pulpit. He is gesticulating and offering a hell-fire sermon. The congregation alternately cries, sleeps, shouts, and yawns.

At the end of the sermon, an intertitle introduces yet another digression, showing Ned in an unrelated setting with new characters. We are told that on Monday, “Ned pays a visit to his white friends.” If the first digression could be justified by showing Ned at his work, this second digression exists purely to fill-in the complicated economic and social conditions in Ned’s life,

Fig. 5. The opening shot of the parlor sequence, from Within our Gates. Video frame largement.
Fig. 6. On the left, “Old Ned, the best colored preacher in the world.” On right, “Old Ned, as he is...” Video frame enlargements.

and to illustrate the rampant, viscous racism suffered by African Americans. (There are echoes of Ned in the character of Effram, who is introduced later in the film. He too buddies up to a band of white southerners, but to his own demise. Each character shows that selling out fellow blacks to whites is ultimately self-destructive. Here again the intimate connection between the individual and the community is made clear.)
Here we have a digression within a digression. The shot opens with two white men smoking and reading the paper. We have never seen either man before and we will not see them again in the story. The men sit opposite each other, on the edges of the frame. Ned enters the shot through a centered door, and stands between the two men for the entire length of the shot. The men ask Ned his opinion on “coloreds’” right to vote. On cue, Ned performs his spiel, saying that politics, wealth and power are for white men, that blacks have Jesus and are going to heaven. The men clap their hands in approval. As Ned continues, however, saying that whites will go to hell for their sins, one of the men stands up and kicks him in the behind. This man’s laughter and delight are the clearest thing we see, for he moves up close in the frame and then recedes. Ned exits the room, and is immediately remorseful for having sold-out his race for “a mess o pottage.”

The move from parlor conversation to Ned’s story represents an interruption in the narrative flow that can be described as “meanwhile” although events are not necessarily occurring simultaneously. In fact, the sermon and the visit to the white men could not both be happening within the framework of the parlor conversation. This meanwhile is more metaphorical, opening up a space within the flow of the narrative to examine more closely the unofficial text, showing events not in a cause-effect relationship, nor as simultaneous yet distinct, but rather as part and parcel of each other.

Homi Bhabha writes of the space of the “meanwhile” in the essay “Dessimination.” In it he defines what he terms minority discourse, and the place of a “meanwhile” in that discourse.

From that place of the ‘meanwhile,’ where cultural homogeneity and democratic anonymity make their claim on the national community, there emerges a more instantaneous and subaltern voice of the people, a minority discourse that speaks betwixt and between times and places. It is what I have been calling the unofficial narrative that “speaks betwixt and between times and places” and takes the form of interruptions and digressions that is the heart of Within Our Gates. The real story is told in these moments of interruption, moments that “color” the official reading of the story.
When Ned’s story ends, Micheaux cuts back to Geraldine and Mrs. Warwick in the parlour. Geraldine leaves, and several shots later Sylvia decides to visit Mrs. Warwick again. As Sylvia leaves her house, we get a quick shot of the preacher pacing at the Piney Woods school and then a shot of Mrs. Warwick pacing. This is a more conventional use of cross-cutting that conveys the idea of simultaneity and “meanwhile.” Micheaux moves outside of this in the next scenes.

The next several shots show Sylvia and Mrs. Warwick in conversation. By Sylvia’s reactions, we see that Mrs. Warwick is expressing some doubt about giving Sylvia funding. As they continue, an intertitle states, “Meanwhile, Dr. Vivian continues his study.” The next shot shows Dr. Vivian, who is romantically involved with Sylvia, sitting at his desk. Quickly we move back to Sylvia rising out of her chair and shaking hands with Mrs. Warwick. The next shot is a piece of text, presumably showing what Dr. Vivian has been reading.

> The Negro is a human being. His nature is not different from other human nature. Thus, we must recognize his rights as a human being. Such is the teaching of Christianity.

The digression from the parlor conversation to Dr. Vivian serves several functions. Dr. Vivian can be seen as the positive example of education, and the text shows the justice of Sylvia’s cause. Yet the exact moment in time when this episode exists is vague, for there is no cause-effect relationship between the two events. In Within Our Gates these two scenes have relational meaning, where characters are not isolated, but exist in relationship to others and to larger cultural issues. Thus, the parlor sequence comes to a conclusion with reference to no fewer than four different locations. The cross-cutting that follows develops a relationship between elements that is not necessarily time-based.

Memory

Over and over again in Within Our Gates we see that memory bursts into the present tense of the narrative with material force. That is to say, images that represent memories are not ephemeral or fantastical. Rather memory has a function in the narrative that, while being autonomous, gives resonance and
depth to the story. The presence of memories have real, affective power on characters. During the hospital sequence, Sylvia’s inability to communicate with Mrs. Warwick was the result of the heaviness of her memories, and their effect in the present.

Memories and digressions to the past form an interesting story structure in Within Our Gates. Micheaux shows that historical events are not contained to a dead past, but continue to live in the thoughts, dreams and memories of a people. In one notable sequence at the end of the film, Sylvia’s friend Alma tells Dr. Vivian the story of Sylvia’s past. It is a long flashback in which Sylvia’s family is lynched and she is the victim of an attempted rape. The screen time devoted to this tale show that the past is very much alive at a narrative level, and that knowledge of the past is crucial for an understanding of individual character.

This conceptualization of history and of story is in distinction to dominant constructions. Both forms rely on a linear telling of events, where cause-effect relationships continually move forward. All accounts lead into the future, and the past, though formative, is dead. One has only to think of Micheaux’s contemporary Henry Ford to see how radically different Within Our Gates works. Ford’s famous line on history illustrates both corporate necessity and cultural privilege.

History is more or less the bunk. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we make today.

In Race Matters, Cornel West quotes Richard Wright on the relationship between history and our present lives.

We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is... If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the living past living in the present, for our memories go back...

This quote is particularly apt when looking at the narrative structure of Within Our Gates. The parlour sequence culminates in Mrs. Warwick’s pledge to Piney Woods school not of five but fifty thousand dollars. This closure of events could have been an apt finish to the film, for Sylvia accomplishes her
goal and becomes romantically involved with Dr. Vivian. It seems all the loose ends are tied. Yet Micheaux constructs several turns of events that lead to the above mentioned flashback, which is entitled “Sylvia’s Story.” The flashback, which reconstructs the brutal climate of the south, is framed as an explanation of Sylvia’s character to Dr. Vivian. In the flashback, we learn of the lynching of her family and her rape by a white man. “Sylvia’s Story” is outside the official storyline, and does nothing to further the meeting of the two lovers. Yet its presence in the film, particularly at the end, gives pause to the entire struggle that has been depicted thus far. Sylvia’s story counters official historical accounts and representations, which have so often portrayed blacks as violent, black men as rapists, and the Reconstruction as a smooth, bloodless transition.

If linear narrative can be said to resemble linear accounts of history, where events constantly move forward into the future, then Micheaux constructs a story that keeps the narrative and historical flow in check. Within Our Gates returns to the past and depicts the unofficial text, through memories, dreams and digressions. It is a task that puts in question both dominant accounts of history and classical modes of narrative filmmaking.

Notes

I would like to thank Scott Simmon for reading a draft of this essay. His work on the restoration of Within Our Gates, as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of film history, was invaluable.

2. Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), 12.
5. There is a convincing body of criticism that positions Within Our Gates as a direct response to Griffith’s Birth of a Nation. See Jane Gaines “Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama and Oscar Micheaux” in Black American Cinema, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Toni Cade Bambara interview in Black Film Review 7, no. 4.

9. This sequence is discussed at length by Jane Gaines in “Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux,” *Black American Cinema*, 52-60.
