

Oscar micheaux



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In auteur theory, a term originated by film critic Andrew Sarris in his essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory" 16, there is a desire to outline the personal vision of the director. This is said to be the key instrument to understanding filmmaking. In addition, he writes the question is how does a director express personal vision? The concern is how this theory is used to examine the initial "obsessions" and "thematic preoccupations" of the director versus the original creator or author. This essentially becomes a study or attempt to outline the director's desire and/or personal statement.

The purpose of the auteur theory is then to analyze films if not to understand the characteristics that identify the director as auteur. In the study of film criticism, during the 1950s, the basis behind "auteur theory" studies how a director's film reflects the director's personal and creative vision, as if the director was the original creator or author. Francois Truffaut, the famous French film director and critic, maintains that a good director (including the bad ones), exhibits such a distinctive style if not promotes a consistent theme that his or her influence is unmistakable in the body of his or her work.

Like Truffaut, Andrew Sarris believed through analyzing film, an 'auteurist' becomes appreciative of directors whose works detail a marked visual style as well as those whose visual style was less noticeable but whose movies reflected a consistent theme. As a result of this influence by critics like Truffaut, the auteur theory and "auteurism" have become a very crucial and influential aspect of film criticism since 1954. African American Film Producer-Director Oscar Micheaux is an often overlooked auteur in contemporary film criticism.

He created films depicting black life from 1908 to 1950, on what he felt were realistic terms, while also providing entertainment for the black movie going audience during that time. His films, unlike previous depictions, contained a range of types and attempted to show that blacks were often just as rich, educated, sophisticated and cultured as whites. <sup>1</sup> His films embodied who he was as a black man during hostile racial prejudice in America. Because of this particular style and the meaning behind his films, Micheaux has been criticized primarily for presenting a class system based on color in his movies. A possible sacrifice he was forced to make after his films depended on white financing after the Great Depression. <sup>3</sup> As Sarris noted, the classification of an "auteur", is that a director must accomplish technical competence in their technique, personal style in terms of how the movie looks and "feels", and interior meaning. In order to classify Oscar Micheaux as an auteur, these three premises as Sarris defines them, will evidence Micheaux's work as an auteur based upon the process he utilized to create these films, their negative and positive reception by audiences and critics.

In addition, the further study of how African American Cinema has been received and contributed to understanding black cultural traditions will evidence the basis and criteria behind his work. Micheaux's films, were unmistakable allegories of his own life, just as movies by Charlie Chaplin, D. W. Griffith, Orson Welles and other notable directors at that time, depicted their vision of America. <sup>15</sup> In order to understand and better examine the works of Micheaux, it is important compare the reception of two of his best received films.

Based upon a story he had written, the film "Homesteader" was chronicled by the Chicago Defender to define the "new negro" whereas the critiques by both white and black audiences differed about his film "Within Our Gates", which was his response to D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation". Oscar Micheaux's body of work along with other films of the "race movie" film genre, often called race films, existed in the United States approximately from 1915 to 1950. These films primarily consisted of movies produced for an all black audience, featuring black casts.

These films were often low-budget and technically inadequate, due to very little or no backing from any of the major Hollywood Studios. Like other independent black filmmakers of the time, his work and films were considered "rough". Financial limitations, typically impacted his style and work. Micheaux wanted his brand of films to contrast and differ from earlier depictions of blacks as portrayed in minstrel shows, subservient, "happy-go-lucky" or as savages.

By utilizing what author Gladstone Yearwood defined as an "afrocentric" model, understanding the body of work created by Oscar Micheaux, will evidence his pioneering endeavours to create and develop the aesthetic of African American thought that reflected cultural priorities that delineated from the dominant society. Additional references from articles, journals and critiques of his work will be used to examine the strategies and techniques he invented and adapted to use motion pictures as a means to create his films.

For his black audiences, Micheaux believed in emphasizing black themes. The themes he often focused on included blacks passing for white, intermarriage, injustice of the courts against blacks, and even the sensitive subjects of lynching and the Ku Klux Klan. <sup>3</sup> Micheaux used his movies to deliver a message. Because of this, Micheaux's films were often controversial and censored. While they were shown nationally, his movies were either screened at special matinee's or midnight viewings, when and where blacks could attend. The third and "ultimate" premise of the auteur theory by Sarris pertained to and concerns with the interior meaning. Sarris defined interior meaning as an extrapolation from the tension between a director's personality and his material. <sup>6</sup> Ossie Davis, an African American film actor, stated, " There were black people behind the scenes, telling our black story to us as we sat in black theaters. We listened blackly, and a beautiful thing happened to us as we saw ourselves on the screen.

We knew that sometimes it was awkward, that sometimes the films behaved differently than the ones we saw in the white theater. It didn't matter. It was ours, and even the mistakes were ours, the fools were ours, the villains were ours, the people who won were ours, and the losers were ours. We were comforted by that knowledge as we sat, knowing that there was something about us up there on that screen, controlled by us, created by us - our own image, as we saw ourselves..." <sup>6</sup> Micheaux produced seven novels and approximately forty films, all for black audiences from 1913 to 1948.

The influence of Oscar Micheaux's earlier film career is evidenced by his intent to present positive images of African American life that no other filmmaker was showing at that time. Often considered technologically

inferior, Micheaux's use of editing and film techniques helped him to depict and present some of the most controversial issues of that era. Micheaux had to overcome his own objections, and then proceeded to use film as a means to communicate his ideas, and to do what had not been done before him. That was to portray blacks with dignity and respect.