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Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name

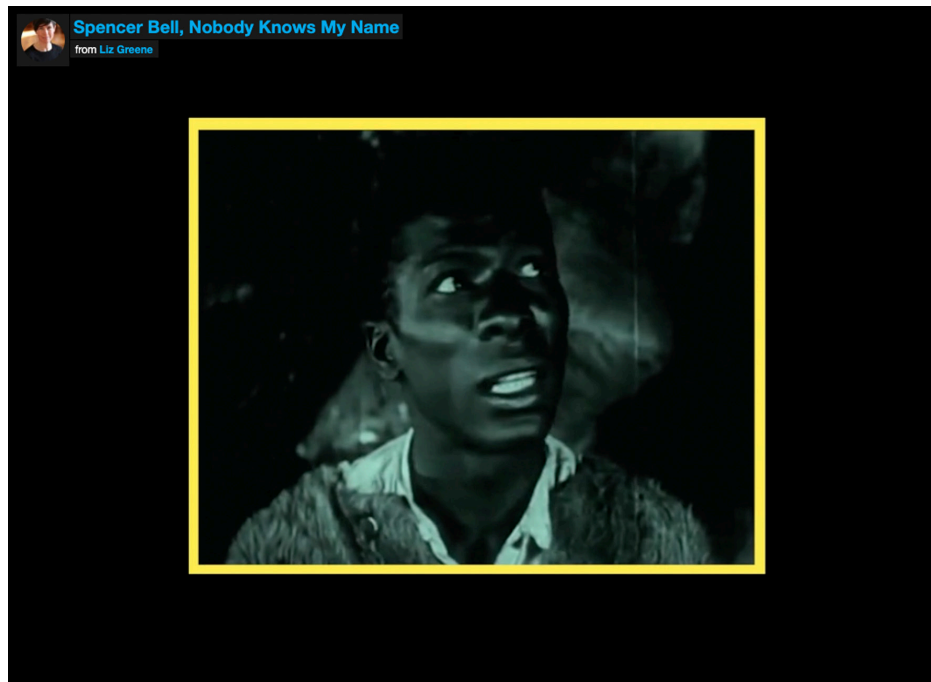
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Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name is an audiovisual essay about the racist depiction of an African American actor, Spencer Bell, in the first feature length film of *The Wizard of Oz* (Larry Semon, 1925). The audiovisual essay showcases Bell's performance, by only selecting and using sequences that he is in. I decided to not only reverse the order of the sequences but also to reverse the footage within the clips themselves. Through reversing the footage from the film, we see Bell's representation unfold, reanimating his performance. By focussing solely on Bell, the audiovisual essay draws attention to him as an actor and celebrates his talent whilst also illustrating the constraints in which he was working. It does so to ask questions about representation in cinema and more critically to unpick the racist imagery evident onscreen. The audiovisual essay argues that it is important to watch such depictions in order to challenge them, and to confront racist imagery. In focussing in on Bell, it is hoped it will prompt audiences to seek out his work and watch his performances in full and, in turn, understand the institutional racism he was working under.

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Research Statement

Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name is an audiovisual essay that makes explicit the racist depiction of an African American actor, Spencer Bell, in the first feature length film of *The Wizard of Oz* (1925). I made this audiovisual essay for several reasons. Firstly, to highlight the strong performance of Spencer Bell in his role as the Cowardly Lion, secondly, to illustrate the racism on display within this film, and finally, to draw attention to how racism in cinema systematically silenced and limited actors' careers and legacies. For this audiovisual essay I drew on the writings of James Baldwin (1998), Daniel Bernardi (2007), Michael Boyce Gillespie (2016), Matthew W. Hughey (2009), Fred Moten (2003), Sianne Ngai (2005), and Richard Dyer (1997) to theoretically unpick what is seen onscreen. This audiovisual essay is the first output from a new research project I have begun on *The Wizard of Oz* universe.

I came across Larry Semon's 1925 version of the film whilst conducting research on Victor Fleming's more famous 1939 adaptation for a class I was teaching on the Audiovisual Essay at Liverpool John Moores University in February 2021. Using the Middlebury method,¹ I worked alongside my students to learn more about the Fleming

¹ "The Middlebury method" refers to the Scholarship in Sound and Image: Workshop on Videographic Criticism, held at Middlebury College, Vermont, USA since 2015. The first three iterations of the workshop were funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Resources from these workshops can be found at Keathley, Mittell, and Grant (2019).

film.² When I was undertaking the Middlebury multiscreen exercise, I sought out all the audiovisual versions of *The Wizard of Oz* that I could find, focussing on the character of the Cowardly Lion. That choice proved fruitful, as previously, I had not known about Semon's 1925 feature film or the portrayal of the Cowardly Lion. Spencer Bell played the Cowardly Lion, but his character was also listed as Rastus, and Snowball, both racially demeaning names for this character. Most significantly, Bell himself was miscredited in the film with the racially motivated name, G. Howe Black. After carrying out research I discovered the actor's real name. I completed the multiscreen exercise, but immediately knew I wanted to come back to Bell and this 1925 film to find out more about him.

In creating this work, I selected all the sequences of Bell in the film and put them into my Adobe Premiere Pro timeline. Assembling the footage was challenging because sometimes I struggled to see Bell onscreen, the lighting and blocking of scenes meant that at certain moments he was barely visible. I drew together 54 sequences with Bell in them and I was struck by his impressive physical performance. When the camera is on Bell, he is compelling to watch, his physicality complements those movements of Semon and other actors onscreen. I decided, after I watched the 54 sequences together, that I would reverse the order of the sequences, as it allowed me to tell the story of the film differently, to disrupt the narrative, to offer instead a radical oppositional text. Rather than ending my audiovisual essay on a positive, heroic moment, this methodological approach allowed me to slowly disclose the levels of racism displayed within the film. By reversing the film, I was able to discuss many elements that are problematic, allowing an audience the necessary time with Bell before his character is so explicitly racially stereotyped.

The audiovisual essay showcases Bell's performance, by only selecting and using sequences that he is in. I decided to not only reverse the order of the sequences but also to reverse the footage within the clips themselves. Through reversing the footage from the film, we see Bell's representation unfold, reanimating his performance (Ngai 2005: 124). The other benefit of reversing the film order and the footage within each clip was that it allowed for a further critical distance from the original material. The musical soundtrack is also reversed for each clip, allowing for moments of disjuncture, the audience is not given an opportunity to be seduced by the soundtrack within this audiovisual essay. By focussing solely on Bell, the audiovisual essay draws attention to him as an actor and celebrates his talent whilst also illustrating the constraints in which he was working. It does so to ask questions about representation in cinema and

² I have written about my approach to teaching the audiovisual essay in, Liz Greene, "Teaching the student, not the subject: Videographic Scholarship", *The Cine-Files*, Issue 15, Fall 2020, <http://www.thecine-files.com/teaching-the-student-not-the-subject>.

more critically to resist the racist imagery evident onscreen. The audiovisual essay argues that it is important to watch such depictions in order to challenge them – to directly confront and disrupt racist imagery. In focussing in on Bell, I hope it will prompt audiences to seek out his work and watch his performances in full and, in turn, understand the institutional racism he was working under. Donald Bogle (2003: xxi) argues against the idea, that, “There was no [black film] history”. Adding Spencer Bell’s name to those of other actors highlighted in Bogle’s book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* is an important first step in writing his name back into American film history.

Uncovering this film for the first time whilst teaching and sharing my work with students was an interesting pedagogical encounter. We were scheduled to watch together the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Video Essay playlist³ in class and it was timely to discuss this film in relation to the video essays in the playlist. The discussion for this BLM session was the most animated of all our classes. The students discussed *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) as a utopian/feminist/queer film and were upset to see this earlier (1925) film iteration. However, it allowed us to discuss how we deal with the legacy of racism, and this was particularly pertinent as we were all based in Liverpool, England, a city that made its fortune from the slave trade. Watching the playlist with students, whilst also working on this film allowed for a robust discussion on how we address the past and make work in the present. Issues of digital black face also came up within the class and the layers of material we looked at created a dynamic space to explore these issues. *Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name* was completed (in draft form) whilst teaching this class and proved to be an important pedagogical exercise in responding to and resisting racist depictions onscreen. Subsequently, I put a yellow frame around the film in this audiovisual essay for two purposes. Firstly, to enable the image to be more visible to the audience, and secondly, to align the audiovisual essay with the political aspirations of the BLM movement.

³ The Black Lives Matter playlist was compiled by Will DiGravio, Kevin B. Lee and Cydnii Wilde Harris. It was initially screened at festivals and is available to access here, <https://thevideoessay.com/blacklivesmatter>.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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