



Emanuel School

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THURSDAY 5<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2023

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION IN FILM

Soren (U6KSG)

Film, as a medium, is wondrously efficient. The messages of a film are usually given over 2 hours with a captive, paying audience of up to 200 people at a time, and they can subtly dissolve their way into the minds of this audience through clever tricks such as representation. To analyse this concept, think back to when you watched a particularly memorable or inspiring film. I'll take, for example, Mamma Mia. Watching Mamma Mia, with its sunny, heavenly carefree representation of the Greek coast – somewhere I have never been and have little knowledge of – makes me want to visit Greece



as it seems like the dream holiday destination. Deriving a clear desire simply through the ways in which a film portrays a place, person, thing, group of people or activity is one of the main reasons for the importance of representation.

Applying this to racial representation, the way that, or extent, to which a film chooses to display people from different groups can have noticeable effects on the way that this group is perceived by the audience of this film outside of the cinema. Also, a common practice of Film Studies is the cross analysis of film representation and society at the time of release, which is proof for the distinct relationship between the two. A simple example is Dumbo, released in 1941 by Disney. At the time, America was yet to see the civil-rights movement, which significantly improved legal racial equality in the country, and this social state is reflected in the animated film. The three crows that Dumbo encounters during the film are led by an unsightly named Jim Crow, and they are displayed as if they have nothing better to be doing than poke fun at Dumbo and his Mouse sidekick. These crows are voiced by a white musician, Cliff Edwards, although he impersonates the African American Vernacular English dialect and therefore the intention for these characters is, assumedly, that they are African American. The non-black children watching the film, who in 1941 could have been yet to meet any African Americans outside of their film-viewing, were likely to assume and act upon these stereotypes of black people, which would feed into the systematic and large-scale mistreatment of black people. This was a common thing to see at the time, and this repetitive negative portrayal enforced assumption bias, where people make an assumption and seek out evidence arguing for this assumption as they

essentially ignore evidence against this assumption. The problem stems from the seed that is planted by representation. Furthermore, throughout the twentieth century, there was a clear lack of black people on screen, an underrepresentation of black talent that, on-screen, reinforced the idea of a world with fewer black people in it than there truly were.

Filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Jordan Peele and Steve McQueen have strived throughout their careers for racial equality in their films, which has been an uphill climb in such a white-dominated industry. The success and recognition of Oscar winning films Moonlight, Green Book and 12 Years a Slave definitely point towards improvement, but white powers in the film industry have at times become complacent and treated representation as an issue that does not require a permanent solution. The work towards equality cannot be pioneered solely by the minorities of Hollywood – real and tangible support is needed from everyone

## JAMES BALDWIN

Jack (U6AEM)

James Baldwin (1924-1987) was an African American writer and civil rights activist. His works centred around the issues of race, sexuality and politics.

Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York. He first became influenced by his French teacher and mentor, Countee Cullen, who achieved prominence and acclaim for her poetry during the Harlem Renaissance (1910s-1930s). Baldwin felt that his creativity was being diminished and reduced by racial discrimination in America. He moved to Paris, the setting for his book 'Giovanni's Room' in 1948. This book depicts a torrid love affair between two men (one of whom is engaged) in the 1950s. Many were upset that a black man was writing about a homosexual relationship between two white men. Baldwin stated that he saw issues of race and homosexuality as not oppositional, but components of a wider issue of equality within America. Baldwin found it beneficial to separate

himself from the segregated society of America and yet still able to make profound cultural observations through his works.

Baldwin was a prominent member of the Civil Rights Movement – leading to his close friendships with Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X and Lorraine Hansberry. His works were influenced not only by his close affiliation with these people, but through his witnessing of their untimely deaths – shaping his writing about race relations.

His other works, 'If Beale Street Could Talk' and 'Go Tell It on The Mountain' also raise awareness of racial and sexual oppression. The semi-autobiographical nature of his books, against a national context, expertly challenge America to uphold its values of freedom and justice for all people, not just a select few. Baldwin also wrote poems and screenplays, including segments of the 'Autobiography of Malcom X', which later inspired Spike Lee's film, 'Malcom X'.



## THE NIGERIAN EXILE BENIN OBA (KING) OVONRAMWEN NOGBAISAI

Mr and Mrs Odigie

The Oba, meaning King of Benin is the traditional ruler and the custodian of the culture of the Edo people and all Edooid people. The then Kingdom of Benin (not to be confused with the modern-day and unrelated Republic of Benin, which was then known as Dahomey) has continued to be mostly populated by the Edo (also known as the Benin ethnic group).



Oba Ovonramwen (above) was born in 1857, he was the son of Oba Adolo. He took the name Ovonramwen Nogbaisi at his enthronement in 1888. Every Oba took a new name at his coronation, Ovonramwen means "The Rising Sun" and Nogbaisi means "which spreads over all." He was the 22nd Imperial Benin Oba who ruled from 1888-1897.

He was called Idugbowa until he took the title Ovonramwen upon becoming Oba. He succeeded to a kingdom much reduced by growing British commercial and colonial encroachment from its greatest extent (c. 1700). He attempted to seal Benin off from Europeans but by 1892 was forced to sign a protection treaty with the British administration. Disputes over trade along the Benin River (1892–94) led to a campaign against Benin; the murder of the British acting consul general in January 1897 precipitated a full-scale military expedition, which captured Benin City in February 1897.

In 1897, a British military force of approximately 1,200 men under the command of Sir Harry Rawson mounted the Benin punitive Expedition. The force was dispatched in retaliation to the ambush of a British party, at Ugbine village near Gwato on 4 January 1897 by a group of Benin soldiers who were

acting without orders from the Oba; the ambush had led to the deaths of all but two of the British party. The British force captured the capital of the Kingdom of Benin, sacking and burning the city while forcing the Oba of Benin, Ovonramwen, into a six-month exile. The expeditionary force consisted of both indigenous soldiers and British officers based in the colonial era of Nigeria. Numerous artworks (collectively known as the Benin Bronzes) looted from the city palace were sold off to defray the costs of the expedition.

Ovonramwen, also called Overami, surrendered to the British in August and was the last independent Oba of the 500-year-old kingdom of Benin. Ovonramwen tried to maintain his independence in the face of increasing British pressure but was able to delay for only a few years the annexation of his kingdom by the colony of Nigeria.

### The British Conquest of Benin and the Oba's Return

In the 19th century, trade disputes led to strain between Benin and its chief trading partner, Great Britain. This escalated as the European powers moved to divide Africa into colonial territories. The situation culminated in 1897, when a large delegation led by Britain's Acting Consul-General in the region, James Phillips, set off for Benin City despite Oba Ovonramwen's (enthroned c. 1888) requests to postpone their visit.

With these events, the daily routines of the royal court were disrupted and the Edo people were severed from their leaders. Objects within the royal palaces were now the spoils of war, many of which were sold to defray the costs of the invasion. Others were shared among members of the expeditionary force. Others left Benin in the confusion that followed the devastation of the kingdom.

Upon their arrival in London, Benin's royal arts were a topic of conversation and speculation. They sparked immediate interest from museums, particularly in Britain and the German-speaking world, which made efforts to purchase the objects for their collections. Eventually works from Benin could be found in museums across Europe and the United States.

Ovonramwen was exiled to Calabar with two of his

wives, Queen Egbe and Queen Aighobahi. He was received and hosted in Calabar in a small town called "Essien Town" by Etinyin Essien Etim Offiong, the progenitor of Essien Town. He died in Calabar around the turn of the new year in 1914, the same year that his son returned to Benin City. Ovonramwen was eventually buried in the grounds of the royal palace in Benin City. He was succeeded by his first son and legitimate heir, Prince Aguobasimwin, who ruled as Oba Eweka II.

His son, grandson and now his great-grandson, however, have preserved their title and status as traditional rulers in modern-day Nigeria. Benin's monarchy was thus restored, though its power was greatly curtailed. While the Edo people maintained a strong connection to the Oba, the monarchy was reconfigured to be secondary to the colonial system, and later to the Federal Republic of Nigeria.



Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi with his wives, Queen Egbe (left) and Queen Aighobahi (right), c. 1898-1913

Oba Eweka II and Oba Akenzua II (enthroned 1933) used the arts strategically in their efforts to reinvent the kingdom. They commissioned works to replace those taken in 1897 and reinstated some royal rituals while reconsidering their roles in a modern context. Among Eweka II's first acts was the establishment of an altar dedicated to his father, Oba Ovonramwen. He also erected a single collective altar dedicated to all the obas that had reigned before him.

Under the current monarch, Oba Erediauwá, the kingdom has a vital cultural and political life that is steeped in history and tradition. Erediauwá observes important royal practices, including the establishment and upkeep of ancestral altars and the performance of royal rituals. He is also a respected local and

regional leader.

In 1938, in a gesture of great significance to the Edo people, the British returned pieces of Oba Ovonramwen's coral regalia to his grandson Oba Akenzua II thus restoring some of the sacred force of his ancestors. Upon receiving the regalia, Akenzua II is said to have sung out with joy, "The poisonous arrow has killed the elephant," a reference to the long wait that is sometimes necessary before a victory can be attained.

To conclude, at this present moment, some of the Oba's artefacts that were taken by the British are being returned to Benin Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria.

Lastly, the present Oba Ewuare II (born 20 October 1953) was crowned the Oba of Benin on 20 October 2016 (photographed below). He is the 40th Oba, a title created for the Head of State (Emperor) of the Benin Empire sometime between 1180 and 1300. He is dressed in his Royal attire surrounded by his guards and chief men.

The Benin people are known for their red coral beads, which decorate the necks of the royal family and brides during cultural events.

The origin of the coral beads dates back to ancient Benin and holds the uttermost significance to the fashion, lifestyle, culture and tradition of the tribe. These coral beads signify power, dominance and hierarchy.

