

## **Teaching African American Culture Through Cinema**

*Chanelle Harley*

*The U School*

### **Overview**

### **Rationale**

### **Strategies**

### **Objectives**

### **Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans**

### **Resources/ Bibliography**

### **Standards**

#### **Overview**

This unit is aimed to concentrate on African American culture and its diverse multicultural history in order to create a curriculum that provides a different yet complete and refreshing historical view for students in the School District of Philadelphia.

The goal of this unit is to give students a perspective and understanding of how cinema can tell the story of a culture through a movie camera. We will understand the power and effect that cinema has and continues to have in the United States. Special attention will be paid to the role cinema has in bringing attention to current events of the time when a film is produced and well as the telling of historical and culturally relevant events. The relationship between film and the African American community will be discussed as well as critiqued.

Culture and the fundamentals of society have its roots in artistic expression. This is especially true for African American culture. Many traditions and rights of passage have been formed in relation to the arts in one way or another. Film has and is used as a communication device in American society as well. This is especially true when it comes to truly significant historical events. This unit will give students an alternative view on the history of this country and the complex set of issues that a diverse country like ours

deals with. This unit will include the different subgenres within film, the importance of film when recalling historical events and how film has shaped this country.

## Rationale

Film is one of the ways a society can define themselves. In this unit we will take into consideration how the arts, literature and specifically cinema. Literature is the record keeper of our societal practices, film helps solidify this. Using this knowledge, we will assess how cinema is vital to a society and how it is expressed in society. The basis of this unit will encompass some of these social practices. For instance, students will view clips of different film. Many of my students are audio visual learners and this is an effective learning device to help my students become versed in this subject.

The use of exploration and inquiry will grant students awareness as to why film and the arts is important to the identity of this country and more importantly the African American experience. We will analyze different types of films that were popular during different historical periods. This unit will be comprised of lessons that showcase this. This unit will feature different activities for different learning styles within each lesson

This unit will utilize various forms of technology and the internet to give students the tools and resources to be knowledgeable about the culture of poetry so they can be successful in completion of their lessons. These materials will be made accessible to the students during class time.

My school incorporates student-centered station teaching. This is the education strategy in which students are grouped into stations. In these stations students are working on the same Common-Core standards based objectives, but each station is differentiated to those students learning strengths and accommodations. For example, while studying protests over American History; one group will be completing a PowerPoint comparing different concerns of the black community during the Harlem Renaissance while another group is creating a chart detailing modern day concerns in urban areas in places like Philadelphia and New York. This teaching method has not only changed my method of teaching, but it has improved engagement amongst my students. My students are now learning in a style that not only enhances their critical thinking but their knowledge of historical content and their literacy as well as writing skills. Since I have utilized this teaching strategy and relating the material to their environment, my students and I have been on a quest to dig deeper. They want a deeper view of different historical movements that helps them understand and delve into contemporary issues. The study of African-American history and culture through cinema via this curriculum will do just that.

**Commented [MOU1]:** I know at my son's school, they are making the kids all have forward-facing desks in fall. Are there aspects of this that would need adapting during COVID-19 measures? You don't have to add this, but if you want to, I thought I'd flag it.

**Commented [MOU2R1]:**

**Commented [MOU3]:** Great paragraph

## Objectives

This unit is written for the twelfth grade but may be incorporated into the curriculum of all secondary students. The students meet in class every day for at least seventy minutes each class period during the semester. Some lessons require more than one class period to be completed. This unit is meant for social studies classes with an emphasis on using cinema to teach subtopics within the subject.

### Content Objectives

The students will use different forms of multimedia to present the cumulative assignments of this unit.

- Explore and comprehend the extent of the impact of the influence the Harlem Renaissance had on early African American film culture and content
- Compare and contrast pop culture movements with cultural movements as they related to the African-American experience during different time periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries
- Expand and comprehend the impact of film used to tell the story of the African-American oppression in the United States.
- ~~Expand and comprehend the prominent role cinema still plays in offsetting contemptuous race relations in the United States.~~

### Teaching Strategies

The theme of this unit will have the students explore African-American culture and history through film. The objective is to lead students and engage them in understanding the film and cinema itself as not only artistic expression but a valid source for studying historical events. The students will have what is needed to complete each lesson and activity available in the class.

The goals of this unit will be inclusive (but not limited to) of the following:

- The Harlem Renaissance is a considered a premier showcase of black art, culture and society in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Explain its influence on pop culture in the United States to this day and how this pop culture lends itself to film.
- Analyze how the Civil Rights Movement/ Black Power Movement influence and effected cinema from their beginnings until the present. How did/does film not only bring societal issues to the forefront but brings Black culture into mainstream culture as well? How have these issues help shape American cinema?
- Racism and discrimination are once again in the forefront of America's politics and pop culture. Compare and contrast how these issues have been portrayed in American cinema.

**Commented [MOU4]:** Perhaps you could add "and consider how these issues have also shaped American cinema."

## Classroom Activities

### Lesson 1: Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance through film

*Objectives:* The students will be able to identify and analyze the origins and impact of the Harlem Renaissance. The student will be able to explain the significant role film, film makers and playwrights play in bringing this social movement to the forefront and its impact on the African-American community and country

*Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of The African Americans Many Rivers to Cross: Episode four
- Video Worksheet
- Primary source accounts about the time period
- Computer
- Bios of selected film makers
- Clips of Cabin in the Sky (Mininelli 1943) and Stormy Weather (Stone 1943)
- Video Worksheet

**Commented [MOU5]:** For each of the films, can you add in parentheses (director, year of release)?

*Procedures:* The students and the teacher will engage in a discussion to assess their prior knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance and of its impact then and now on modern day film. The students will receive worksheets that correspond with the teacher-selected clips of the above mentioned documentary and movies. The students will review the primary sources via the close reading strategy. The introduction to background knowledge will target specific points and be general in nature due to the amount of information needed and the audience.

*Strategies/Teaching Points:* The students will engage in discussions about the Harlem Renaissance and how the movement was integrated into American pop culture. The students will investigate films inspired by this time and its place in society.

*Closing Activity:* The students will review the information gained from the documentary, close readings, sound clips and class discussions. The students will investigate what it was like to live in Harlem during this time. The students will then create a short script based on those experiences; this lesson should take two to three class periods.

### Lesson 2: Poetry from the Civil Rights' and Black Power Movement

*Objectives:* The students will analyze how the Civil Rights Movement/ Black Power Movement influenced and effected film during and after this time. How did film not only

bring societal issues to the forefront but brought the Civil Rights movement into mainstream culture as well? Why do film makers continually use Civil Rights as a topic of many films?

*Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of various documentaries of your choosing (Eyes on the Prize, I am Not Your Negro are great examples)
- Video worksheets
- Primary source accounts about the time period
- Computer
- Bios of selected film makers

**Commented [MOU7]:** Here it would be good to offer some guidelines (e.g. Eyes on the Prize, I Am Not Your Negro, and many of the archival video resources listed on the Canvas course page).

*Procedures:* The students will research about the Jim Crow era and the movements that resulted from that systemic oppression. The students will take notes on the poetry of that time period and the influence it had on not only African-Americans at this time but its relation to the counterculture undercurrent sweeping America at that time.

*Strategies:* The students will discuss their findings and compare and contrast the poetry showing the African-American experience at the time with poetry explaining the African-American experience today. What are some of these issues people faced and are facing? What has changed? What voice did poetry actually have?

*Closing Activity:* Write a poem as a person who has lived through the Black Power Movement and is now viewing the world today. What is the stark contrast between then and now? Complete a Venn diagram stressing the differences and similarities between movements then and the pavements of today.

#### Final Lesson: Film Script

*Objectives:* Film Script. Students will imagine they are different essential film makers during certain movements and moments in African-American history. These roles will be randomly selected and differ from class to class. They will then collaborate with members in their groups.

*Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of various documentaries of your choosing
- Video worksheets
- Script samples
- Computer

*Procedures:* The students will research filmmakers and the script writing process. They will use the internet to do this research. Why is this film and filmmaker? Why are these societal issues focused on in this particular movie? The students will document the process and explain the different societal issues, the purpose of the creating a script and film idea and why these issues are important to understand the African-American experience in this country.

*Closing Activity:* What types of genres of film usually showcase the African American Experience? Who usually writes scripts and how do they become films? The students will document the answers to these questions and explain why this form of artistic expression was essential in getting out some of the messages of respective movements in African-American History. The students will write a five-paragraph essay on their findings not inclusive of any films they viewed in the course of this unit.

*Adaptations to the Final Project:*

- PowerPoint Presentation
- Journal Entry
- Rubric for Journal Entries (Sample)

**Commented [MOU8]:** This is a great idea. People often assume that documentaries are not scripted, but this is an exercise that makes students realize that the narratives of history have to be created by someone, and gets them to think about whose point of view "history" reflects.

**Commented [MOU9]:** A film like Watermelon Woman also raises questions about how there might be different experiences within the more singular idea of "the African American Experience." Might this be something that you want to introduce explicitly in your guidelines (totally up to you!)?

## Resources

### Rubric for Historical Fiction (letters, journals, poems and newspaper articles)

Criteria	Excellent 5	Good 4	Close 3	Needs Improvement 2	Poor Effort 1	NA 0
Ideas and Content	My paper brings the time & place my character lived alive; vividly describes her/his experiences and values; refers to relevant, historically accurate details.	My paper reveals the time and place my character lived; describes a day in her/his life; most or all details are historically accurate.	The time & place my character lived is clear, but his/her experiences are more like a list than a letter or diary entry; some details may be historically inaccurate.	I tell the reader when and where my story is set but make no attempt to include historically accurate facts or details.	The setting of my story is murky, and the characters' experiences and/or values are often historically inaccurate.	I didn't write enough to judge my own ideas and content.
Organization	My writing has a beginning, middle, and end that are easy to identify and follows the designated format.	I have either a strong lead, developed middle or satisfying ending but not all three. And I followed the designated format.	I have either a strong lead, developed middle or satisfying ending but not all three. But I made some mistakes with the format.	My paper failed to contain two of the following: a strong lead, developed middle, satisfying ending, or formatting was missing.	My paper failed to contain three of the following: a strong lead, developed middle, satisfying ending, or the formatting was missing.	I didn't write enough to judge.
Paragraphs	I indent the beginnings of all paragraphs & have one topic per paragraph. I wrote at least 5 paragraphs.	I indent the beginnings of all paragraphs, have one topic/paragraph, and I wrote 5 paragraphs.	Some of my paragraphs are too long, too short, or not indented. I wrote at least 5 paragraphs.	I have several problems with paragraphs and/or I wrote less than 5 paragraphs.	I use incorrect paragraph format and/or I wrote less than 5 paragraphs.	I didn't write enough to judge.
Voice and Tone	I use 1st person. My voice sounds like a real person. My paper has personality & shows how my character thinks and feels.	I sound like I care about the topic. My writing voice is engaging but may fade in and out.	My tone is OK but my paper could have been written by anyone. I need to reveal more about how I think and feel about the topic.	My writing is bland, mechanical or pretentious. It sounds like I have not found my own way to say things. I used 2nd or 3rd person.	My writing is too formal or inappropriately informal. There may be no hints of a real person in it. It may sound like I don't like the topic.	I didn't write enough to judge.
Word choice	The words I use are striking but natural, e.g., "wondered" instead of "thought." I use powerful verbs & historically accurate words, phrases and slang from the period.	My paper has some fine word choices and generally good language. Some parts may be routine.	The words I use are acceptable but ordinary. I should try to use more expressive words.	My word choice is uninspired, colorless and dull, or sounds like I am trying too hard to impress. Some words may be used incorrectly.	The same words are repeated over and over and over and over. Some words may be confusing to a reader.	I had better get busy....
Conventions	I use the correct grammar, capitals, spelling, and punctuation.	I made some errors, perhaps by taking risks and using interesting words or sentences.	My spelling is correct on common words. Some errors in grammar and punctuation. I	Frequent errors are distracting but do not interfere with the meaning of my paper.	Many errors in grammar, capitalization, spelling & punctuation make my paper hard to read.	I didn't write enough to judge.



---

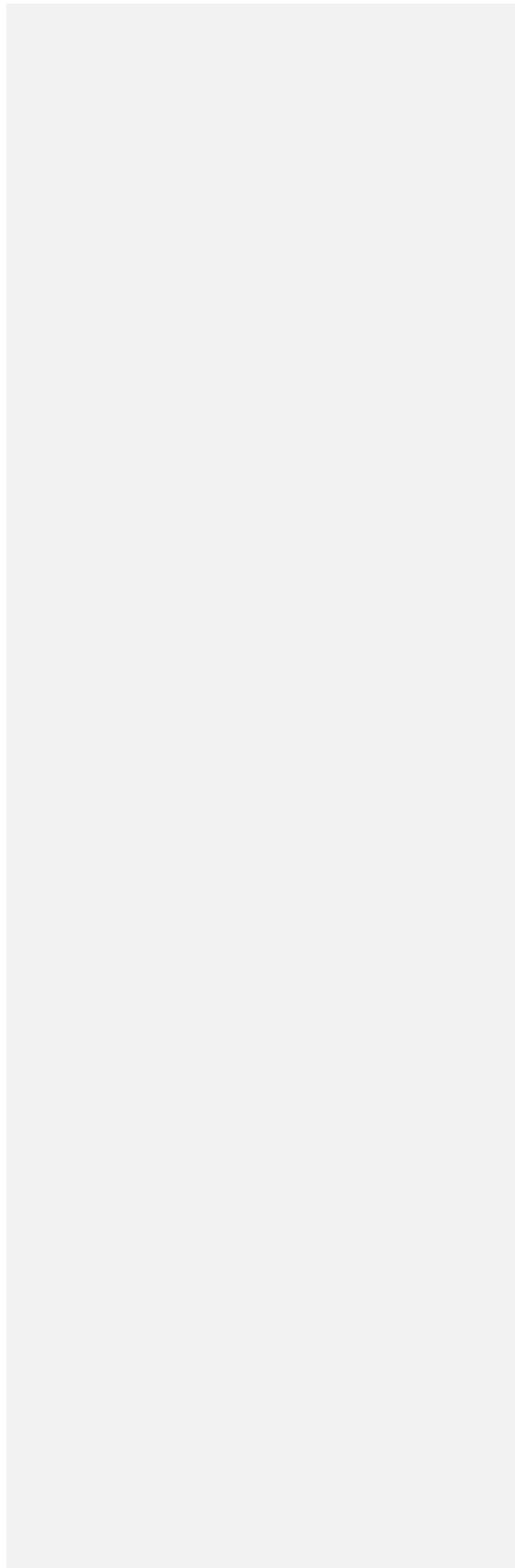
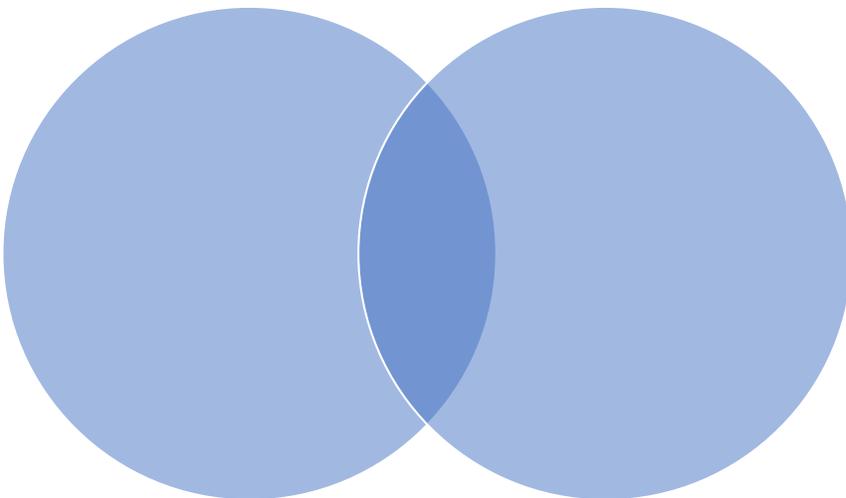
---

---

---

---

**Write a journal as a person who has lived through the Black Power Movement and is now viewing the world today. What is the stark contrast between then and now? Complete a Venn diagram stressing the differences and similarities between movements then and the pavements of today. How would two films about these eras be similar and different?**



## Bibliography

Minnelli, V. (Director), & Schrank, J. (Writer). (1943). *Cabin in the sky* [Motion picture on DVD]. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

*Pinky* [Motion picture on DVD]. (1949). Chicago: Films Incorporated.

Sirk, D. (Director). (1959). *Imitation of life* [Motion picture on DVD]. United States: Universal Pictures Co.

*Stormy weather* [Motion picture on DVD]. (1942).

[Bernstein Matthew H., and Dana F. White. "Imitation of Life in a segregated Atlanta: its promotion, distribution and reception." \*Film History\*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2007, p. 152+. \*Gale General OneFile\*, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A166945659/ITOF?u=upenn\\_main&sid=ITOF&xid=4a50885b. Accessed 20 July 2020.](https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A166945659/ITOF?u=upenn_main&sid=ITOF&xid=4a50885b)

[Bowdre, Karen M. "Passing Films and the Illusion of Racial Equality." \*Black Camera\*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21–43. \*JSTOR\*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.5.2.21. Accessed 20 July 2020.](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.5.2.21)

[Lew, Kirsten M. "From Social Problem to Maternal Melodrama: The Lost Lynching Scene in John M. Stahl's \*Imitation of Life\*." \*Film History\*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2018, p. 107+. \*Gale General OneFile\*, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A619742327/ITOF?u=upenn\\_main&sid=ITOF&xid=17190d35. Accessed 20 July 2020.](https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A619742327/ITOF?u=upenn_main&sid=ITOF&xid=17190d35)

Lucy Fischer, *Imitation of Life. Douglas Sirk: Director* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991)

***Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era***  
by Scott, Ellen C 2015

***Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood***  
by Petty, Miriam J

2016

Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford University Press, 1977)

Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Temple University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2003)

Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001)

***Bright boulevards, bold dreams: the story of Black Hollywood***  
by Bogle, Donald 2005

***Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters***  
by Bogle, Donald 2011

***Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies and bucks: an interpretive history of Blacks in American...***  
by Bogle, Donald 1994

Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002)

Ryan Jay Friedman, *Hollywood's African American Films: The Transition to Sound* (Rutgers University Press, 2011)

**Commented [MOU10]:** Ellen C. Scott has lots of other articles—you can search for them in Penn's franklin catalogue—that might be of interest, but she writes about Pinky in this book.

## Appendix

### *Standards*

This curriculum unit aligns with the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading and Writing in History and Social Studies.

- *Reading in History and Social Studies Standards*
  - CC.8.5.11-12.C. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.F. Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.F. Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.J. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently
  - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
  - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies. Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

- *Writing in History and Social Studies Standards*

- CC.8.6.11-12.I. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- CC.8.6.11-12.G. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation
- CC.8.6.11-12.F. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- CC.8.6.11-12.E. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
- CC.8.6.11-12.B.\* Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/