



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

The Eye Behind the Camera, The Voice Behind the Story

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.03.07
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In this unit, students will explore the relationship between storytelling and film. They will acknowledge the powerful impact that images have on our perception of ourselves and of our world. Unfortunately, in American cinema, many of the images of African Americans have too often been twisted and distorted, mere caricatures of human beings. The ramifications of these negative images continue to be felt. The ultimate goal of this unit is to empower young people, particularly those of color, by arming them with factual information about some of the more intimate details of the Black experience in this country.

To this end, students will take an in-depth look at Hollywood's treatment of the era of slavery. The stereotyped characters, such as the mammy, the Black buck, the grinning pickaninny, and countless others that emerged, were used to dehumanize and marginalize African Americans. By viewing films where such characters appear, students will be more sensitized to the effects of stereotyping.

I have also included films that have a more objective, and sensitive portrayal of Blacks during the slave era in an effort to illustrate the necessity and significance of self definition. Viewing clippings from films by independent Black film makers will further reinforce this as students see that they, too, have the power to reclaim and redefine their stories, images, and cultural legacies. One way that this will be achieved in the unit is through the collecting, sharing, and recording of family histories, stories, and folktales.

(Recommended for U.S. History, Language Arts, and Theater, grades 6-8)

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