

What is black cinema?

Activity 1

How do you define 'black'? Brainstorm the term 'black cinema'. How should it be defined? What are the criteria?

More than one of the criteria below may apply to any individual film. Can you think of any others? Now put them in order of importance.

Order	Criterion
	Film features a black protagonist
	Majority of the cast are black
	Film was written and/or directed by a black person
	Source material was written by a black author
	Film was produced by a black-owned production company
	Film is set in a black-populated country or district
	Film features black themes

Activity 2

In pairs: List as many black film stars and actors as you can think of. Are all of them American? If so, why do you think this is?

Activity 3

Watch extracts from *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, USA, 1987) and *Coming to America* (John Landis, USA, 1998), both of which were released in 1988.

Discuss:

Does the character of Murtaugh (Danny Glover) in *Lethal Weapon* depend on him being black, or could the role equally be played by a white actor?

In *Coming to America*, how is the blackness of the Eddie Murphy character Prince Akeem defined? In what ways are his screen African represented as being different from a black American?

Activity 4

In pairs: Think of four other films featuring black actors – two films in which the ethnicity of the characters seems to be important to the role and two in which it does not. Consider how and why these differences exist.

Ethnicity important	Ethnicity not important

Activity 5

Donald Bogle, in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (2005), put forward the thesis that there were, and had only ever been, five stereotypical roles available to black actors in Hollywood films. These stereotypes, in turn, are derived from the stock characters of 19th-century blackface minstrel shows.

- A 'Tom', according to Bogle, is an Uncle Tom, based on the eponymous 'hero' of Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published in 1852. The Tom is any noble, long-suffering slave-mentality character, who passively allows whites to walk all over him. Sidney Poitier was accused of playing Tom-style characters in films such as *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, USA, 1958) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, USA, 1967).
- The Coon stereotype is a pop-eyed, shuffling, singing, dancing clown, ignorant and fearful, the butt of white people's jokes and, like the Tom, quite harmless. Stepin Fetchit, who played a succession of slow-talking, lazy, bumbling farmhands, stable boys and slaves during the 1930s, is perhaps the archetypal Coon. Spike Lee parodies this type of character in his satire *Bamboozled* (2000, USA).

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- The Mulatto is a mixed-race character to whom the adjective 'tragic' is often attached. The reason for this is that since blackness was regarded as a taint, a single drop of black blood 'condemned' a person to blackness, even if they were 75% white. 'Passing' as white was something a Mulatto in films would try to do, leading invariably to their 'unmasking' and subsequent confrontation with white characters who had thought he or she was 'one of them'. In Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), Jeanne Crain (a white actress) plays a light-skinned trainee nurse who fails to tell her white doctor boyfriend about her black heritage.
- The Mammie was just about the only role available to most black actresses up until the 1940s, and sometimes beyond. The best-known example of this stereotype is Hattie McDaniel's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, USA, 1939), Scarlett O'Hara's overweight, long-suffering, irascible housekeeper. (McDaniel went on to play a very similar character in the early TV series *Beulah* in 1950 shortly before she died.) Another example is the unnamed and unseen (above the waist) black housemaid, who is the scourge of Tom the cat in the MGM animated series *Tom and Jerry*.
- The Buck is the only stereotype who, Bogle claims, poses any threat to whites. He is the physically powerful, sexually potent, rebellious black character who is able and willing to exact revenge on whites. Not only will he confront white men, but ravish white women, who may indeed be attracted to him. The out-of-control heroes of blaxploitation fit this particular cinematic mould, with such characters as Sweetback in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, USA, 1971), John Shaft, and Priest in *Superfly* (Gordon Parks Jr, USA, 1972).

Discuss

The Buck came strongly to the fore in the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, and a version of him may well be evident in any modern action thriller starring Wesley Snipes, although with certain differences. And do you detect any echoes of the Coon in some of Eddie Murphy's less successful roles?

What other examples of these stereotypes, as well as the Tom, Mammy or Mulatto, have you noticed in any recent films?