HIP HOP: REMIXING CULTURE THROUGH ARTISTIC DEFIANCE

STYLE WARS
A FILM BY TONY SILVER & HENRY CHALFANT

EDUCATOR GUIDE

AT&T PROUDLY SUPPORTS
TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE FILM

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM WRITER

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

VIDEO MODULES

CLASSROOM GUIDE

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

WORKSHEET LIBRARY

How to Use This Guide

Whether you’re an educator, administrator, parent, student, or just someone who wants to learn more about hip hop, you can use this guide as a way to discuss the themes in the film Style Wars. Discussion questions are in blue, and worksheets—found at the end of the guide—are in green. Lessons are aligned with time-coded video modules, and ‘Resources for Students and Teachers’ offers further reading, further watching, and a list of local and national arts organizations. Above all, we understand that educators are multifaceted artists in their own right, so we encourage you to utilize your own artistic experiences to spark dialogue.

A PDF of this and other creative, incisive Tribeca Film Institute® Educator Guides and companion Student Guides can be found at TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG
ABOUT THE FILM

*Style Wars* is regarded as the indispensable document of New York street culture of the early ’80s; it’s the filmic record of a golden age of youthful creativity that exploded into the world from a city in crisis. The film captured the look and feel of New York’s ramshackle subway system as the graffiti writers’ public playground, battleground and spectacular artistic canvas. Opposing them by every means possible were Mayor Edward Koch, the police, and the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority. Meanwhile MCs, DJs and b-boys rocked the city with new sounds and new moves that redefined street corner breakdance battles as performance art. New York’s legendary kings of graffiti and b-boys own a special place in the hip hop pantheon. *Style Wars* was awarded the Grand Prize for Documentaries at the 1983 Sundance Film Festival.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**TONY SILVER**

Tony Silver (b. 1935–d. 2008) is best known for producing and directing the award-winning documentary *Style Wars*. He also produced and directed *Arisman: Facing the Audience* (2002), about the iconoclastic New York artist Marshall Arisman, and contributed materials to *Bomb It* (2007). He was born in Manhattan, New York, and studied at Columbia University. In addition to his directing work, he was a successful creator of trailers, posters, and advertising material for films, including the trailer for Oliver Stone’s 1983 *Platoon*, which won a Clio award. He died of brain cancer in Los Angeles, California.

**HENRY CHALFANT**


ABOUT THE CURRICULUM WRITER

Vee Bravo is the Education Director at Tribeca Film Institute®. A New York native by way of Chile, Bravo has documented hip hop and youth culture over the past seventeen years. From 2002 to 2010 Bravo spearheaded a hip hop and media literacy initiative at Rikers Island through a partnership with the New York City Department of Corrections, and in 2009 he co-produced his first feature length film, the PBS documentary *Estilo Hip Hop*. Bravo is also one of the co-founders of Stress Magazine, widely recognized as the first lifestyles publication to fuse hip hop and politics during the late ‘90s.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The origins of post-war graffiti have been historically traced to the streets of South Philadelphia during the 1960s. The first tags featured simple signatures applied on walls and mass transit buses. Given Philadelphia’s proximity to New York City, in particular key transportation hubs such as the George Washington Bridge and Bruckner Expressway, it wasn’t long before young people in Washington Heights and the South Bronx began recognizing this creative scribble on interstate trucks. During the early ‘70s teens from such neighborhoods found their way to the yards and layups that stored the MTA’s subways.

Within a short eight to ten years, bubble letters gave way to elaborate lettering styles, design concepts, and messaging. Helped in part by a fiscal crisis that crippled the New York City economy in the late ‘70s and saw the most basic maintenance service severely reduced, thousands of teens took up graffiti as their vocation. By the early ‘80s photography became the preferred documentation tool for writers. Combined with sophisticated meeting spaces such as the Writer’s Bench, the graffiti community grew in social complexity and artistic vigor. Dynamic graffiti crews comprised of racially and economically diverse young people battled stylistically on the subways’ interior and exterior surfaces. This period also marked a pronounced effort by NYC elected officials to contextualize graffiti vandalism through PSA campaigns on the subway and throughout the city.

In 1990, under the auspices of David Dinkins, the city’s first African-American mayor, new cleaning technology paired with a zero-tolerance maintenance policy successfully eradicated the subway system of graffiti. A few lone holdover crews attempted to keep it alive but to no avail. A new generation of graffiti writers descended on streets, highways and freight trains determined to keep the culture active. By the mid-’90s graffiti video crews and graffiti zines surfaced, providing new platforms and serving new audiences across the globe. By the early 2000s graffiti could be found on fonts, clothing, computer graphics, and video games, ushering in a new era of creative entrepreneurship.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

THE POWER OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Since the inception of graffiti on the streets of Philadelphia in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s mainstream society has extensively framed this art form as a criminal activity, one that threatens the quality of life and brings down the value of private property. This has usually served as the starting point to any discussion on graffiti. In an era of pervasive marketing, how do we relate to graffiti and public art? What’s the difference between a public and a private space? Who determines the use of these spaces? Do you—the student—use public space to express yourself? How? Why?

THE SHARED HISTORY BETWEEN GRAFFITI AND HIP HOP

There’s an endless debate over the varying elements that comprised the early formation of hip hop culture in the early ‘80s. Purists suggest that hip hop’s core foundation rests in the physical inclusion of the MC (performance artist), b-boy/girl (dancer), DJ (music orchestrator), and the graffiti writer (visual artist). In today’s performer-driven music culture, what type of intellectual connections do you—the student—make between art and music? How do your favorite performance artists incorporate visual art into their music? How does visual art influence the way you experience music on TV and the internet? What are the forces that bring visual art and music together?
PRIVATE V. PUBLIC SPACE

Graffiti artists contend that the art form can have the broadest impact when it appears on public surfaces with ample visibility. Proponents of private property suggest that if graffiti artists want to share their work they should place it in a gallery or museum and refrain from using someone else’s property without permission. Are there widely agreed upon definitions as to what public space means, and who owns it? How does art change depending on where it’s seen (on the street vs. in a gallery)? Does the value change? Does the meaning change?

RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Historically, the graffiti community has been racially diverse and inclusive of writers from mixed incomes. Women have struggled to carve out their space throughout the years but are generally accepted on equal footing. From time to time issues pertaining to race and class have proven to be complex, particularly when the criminal justice system renders inconsistent punishment across race and class paradigms. How do race, class, and gender influence your interaction with art creation and consumption? Does race matter when an artist is creating work? Does gender make a difference? Do different genders or races enjoy art differently?

ART AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Since the mid-’90s graffiti inspired art has continuously appeared in mass media advertising campaigns and urban clothing. Many former graffiti writers have continued to carve out their artistic vision for record labels, magazines, books, and films. In the process many have become trailblazing entrepreneurs. Several writers have also gained notoriety in the gallery world and achieved commercial success through museums and guerrilla marketing efforts. What connections are you making between art that exists to inspire within and outside the commercial mainstream? What does the phrase ‘sell out’ mean? How do you differentiate between art that’s sold and art that’s not? Does the quality differ? Does the vision differ?

VIDEO MODULES

1. “Detective Bernie Jacobs and the Writers Bench” (00:02:55–00:04:35)
2. “SKEME and Mother” (00:05:18–00:06:32)
3. “Rock Steady Crew Practicing at the Park” (00:07:19–00:08:40)
4. “KASE 2 and Friends” (00:25:36–00:30:14)
5. “Mayor Ed Koch and MTA Commissioner Richard Ravitch” (00:37:50–00:40:41)
LESSON 1: THE POWER OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Time: 40 minutes
Tools: Graph paper, markers, Style Wars video module one, “Detective Bernie Jacobs and the Writers Bench” (00:02:55–00:04:35), video module two, “SKEME and mother” (00:05:18–00:06:32) and the book Subway Art.

Since the inception of graffiti on the streets of Philadelphia in the late ’60s and early ’70s mainstream society has extensively framed this art form as a criminal activity, one that threatens the quality of life and brings down the value of private property. This lesson explores the motivation for graffiti writers to write their names on subways and delves into the values that drive the populist messages within their art.

PART A: Recognizing art

Using large chart paper, divide the classroom in two sections, labeling each paper with the headings: “Art should inspire people to:” & “Art can best inspire people when it’s located in:” Ask students to write on the paper their responses to each of the headings.

Discuss:
• How do you recognize when something is art?
• How do you determine what type of art you like?
• How do you recognize when a piece of art is trying to sell you a product?
• How do you recognize when a piece of art is inspiring you to think about something?

PART B: Who are the artists?

Play video modules “Detective Bernie Jacobs and the Writers Bench” and “SKEME and mother”.

Discuss:
• In these clips, who are the members of the graffiti community?
• What do they believe in?
• What are they attempting to accomplish with their art?
• Why have they chosen the subway as a destination?

Read excerpts from Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper’s Subway Art, with particular attention to the whole cars painted by LEE.

PART C: Building impact

Provide each student with markers and black graph paper.

Discuss:
• If you had to come up with an image that inspired people to think critically about something in your community, what would that image be?
• Where would that image be placed in order to have the most impact on people?

Ask students to draw an image or tag within a location i.e. billboard, bus, subway, flag, t-shirt, etc. Have the students tape their drawings on the wall and share.
LESSON 2: THE SHARED HISTORY BETWEEN GRAFFITI AND HIP HOP

Time: 40 minutes

Tools: Copies of Grandmaster Melle Mel's “The Message” lyrics, audio file of “The Message”, Shared History worksheet, Style Wars video modules three “Rock Steady Crew Practicing at the Park” (00:07:19–00:08:40) and four “KASE 2 and Friends” (00:25:36–00:30:14), and Root Causes worksheet.

There's an endless debate over the varying elements that comprised the formation of hip hop culture in the early 80s. Purists suggest that hip hop’s core foundation rests in the physical inclusion of the MC (performance artist), b-boy/girl (dancer), DJ (music orchestrator), and the graffiti writer (visual artist). This lesson is designed to inspire students to think about the cross-pollination of ethnic enclaves, cultures, and communities and their contribution to the creation of hip hop.

PART A: Confluence of elements

Play two video modules: “Rock Steady Crew Practicing at the Park” and “KASE 2 and Friends.”

Discuss using Shared History worksheet:

• What are the elements of hip hop culture?
• How is graffiti related to hip hop culture?
• In what ways are both cultures sharing the same physical space?

Ask students to break out into small groups. Using the film as a reference, ask students to continue to explore the relationship between graffiti and hip hop with a particular focus on aesthetic, location and creator. What other art forms combine visual and verbal art? Where do these art forms take place, or where are they displayed? Small groups present back to larger group. Class instructor jots down responses on board.

Group discussion:

• How does where people live affect the type of art they create?
• How did the different immigrant cultures in a particular community come together to create what we now call hip hop?

PART B: Listening to root causes

Distribute the lyrics to Grandmaster Melle Mel's “The Message.” Have students read lyrics as you play the song for the class.

Discuss using Root Causes worksheet:

• What issues are being highlighted in the graffiti art presented in the film?
• How is the graffiti in your community illustrating issues that are important?
• What issues are being highlighted in the lyrics of this song?
LESSON 3: PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC SPACE

Time: 40 minutes  
Tools: Graph paper, pens, pencils, markers, Ownership worksheet, video module five “Mayor Ed Koch and MTA Commissioner Richard Ravitch” (00:37:50–00:40:41), and New York Times articles linked below.

Graffiti artists contend that the art form can have the broadest impact when it appears on public surfaces with ample visibility. Proponents of private property suggest that if graffiti artists want to share their work they should place it in a gallery or museum and refrain from using someone else’s property without permission. This lesson delves into shifting values that society places on public art and its role in influencing the masses.

PART A: Positioning your artistic message

Play video module “Mayor Ed Koch and MTA Commissioner Richard Ravitch.”

Discuss:
• What are the Mayor and MTA Commissioner’s arguments for stopping graffiti on the subway system?

Following the discussion, provide students with graph paper, pencils, pens and markers. Task them with drawing an image that advocates for a social justice issue of their choice. The students have to place this image in an area visible to as many people as possible. In addition, they are responsible for getting permission from whoever owns the area where they want to place their image, and come up with a convincing argument for the class as to why this would be a worthy cause.

PART B: Owning your artistic message

In 2008 Shephard Fairey (of OBEY fame) used an image owned by the Associated Press to create his now-iconic, multi-colored image of Barack Obama. In 2012 he was put on probation and fined $25,000 for tampering with evidence. Fairey said, “My wrong-headed actions... have helped to obscure what I was fighting for in the first place—the ability of artists everywhere to be inspired and freely create art without reprisal.” Though not a question of physical space, the ideas surrounding who owns an image and where it can be used are closely knit with graffiti. This activity explores those questions. Provide students with background on the case between Associated Press and Shephard Fairey, including pertinent information on AP and biographical information about Fairey. Then ask students to read the New York Times article on the court battle.

Articles:
New York Times: Arts Beat—Shepard Fairey Is Fined and Sentenced to Probation in ‘Hope’ Poster Case

Using the Ownership worksheet, ask students to outline the arguments for both parties as explained by the New York Times.

Discuss:
• Who owns art?
• Does the location of a work of art change who owns it?
• How do you think a graffiti writer would respond to someone copying his/her tag? What if they changed it slightly?
• How do you interpret this quotation: “My wrong-headed actions... have helped to obscure what I was fighting for in the first place—the ability of artists everywhere to be inspired and freely create art without reprisal.”
LESSON 4: GRAFFITI ARTIFACTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Time: 80 minutes
Tools: Graph paper and Archiving worksheet.

Historically, graffiti culture in New York City has been passed from one generation to the next. Over time this rite of passage has included drawing books often referred to as “black books,” sketches, homemade markers and ink, spray paint cans and nozzles, photographs, magazines, books, videos, and hordes of transit paraphernalia. Other aspects of hip hop culture include obsessive record collecting, shoe collecting, and wearing brand name jackets, jeans, and hats. This lesson provides students with basic ethnographic techniques by which to archive graffiti-specific artifacts at home or in their communities.

PART A: Mapping your neighborhood’s graffiti

Provide students with graph paper and ask them to draw areas in their neighborhood where they see graffiti. Ask them to add the number of areas where they see elements of graffiti.

Discuss:
• Why would we want to keep track of graffiti? Of graffiti artifacts?
• Are the artifacts valuable? Why?
• How can you archive something as transient as graffiti?

PART B: Archiving graffiti in your community

Explain to students that over the course of two days they will be responsible for identifying a graffiti artifact. This can include an assortment of art pieces, products, tools, documentation and paraphernalia. Examples can be old spray paint cans, nozzles, pictures, markers, black books, stickers, magazines, clothing, caps and hats, sneakers, etc.

As an example, the educator should use one of the aforementioned items and conduct an archiving exercise in class. Students should then be given the Archiving worksheet and tasked with collecting ethnographic information from a graffiti artifact in their neighborhoods.

Discuss:
• What did you notice about locations where you found graffiti? Are they always the same spots? Do different crews/people use different locations?
• Are paint can designs different than they are now? Are nozzles different? Why?
• If you found a magazine, who’s in it? What advertisements are in it?
• If it’s a black book, who’s in it? Are any of those people still on the wall in your neighborhood?
• Do you recognize any stickers in the black book from around your neighborhood?
RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

FURTHER READING  IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED IN THE FILM, CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS.

Spraycan Art
By Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff
Published in 1987 by photographers Henry Chalfant (author, Subway Art) and James Prigoff, this book explores the worldwide spread of graffiti with intimate images of artists paired with thought-provoking quotes. This book framed, along with Style Wars and Subway Art, the earliest conversations about graffiti as an art form.

Street World: Urban Art and Culture from Five Continents
By Roger Gastman, Caleb Neelon, and Anthony Smyrski
From New York to South Africa to Mumbai, authors Roger Gastman, Caleb Neelon, and Anthony Smyrski present a modern, world-wide view on graffiti. Divided into more than 50 topics and illustrated with more than 500 photographs, this book celebrates the street as a stage for the visual creativity of a generation.

Taking the Train:
How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City
By Joe Austin
How did kids in New York so thoroughly rile up the city’s bureaucracy in the ‘70s and ‘80s by simply “writing”? Why did a bankrupt city decide to spend their money on preventing these artists? This 2001 history of graffiti—with a distinctly academic lean—explains how.

Can’t Stop Won’t Stop
By Jeff Chang
Nearly forty years after the first inkling of hip hop, this extensive look at the nature, origins, and meaning of the hip hop movement won an American Book Award in 2005. Author Jeff Chang is a culture and music critic, and this book is fueled by his serious interest and honest research.

FURTHER WATCHING  IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.

Planet B-boy
Planet B-Boy is a 2007 documentary film that focuses on the Battle of the Year—an annual b-boying competition. The film features incredible footage and interviews, including one with Ken Swift of the Rock Steady Crew. Directed by Canadian-American Korean filmmaker Benson Lee, and shot by Portuguese-American filmmaker Vasco Nunes.

Flashdance
Flashdance is a 1983 romantic drama produced by Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, starring Jennifer Beal as a young Pittsburg welder who wants more. The film tells the story of her love-affair with dance and her eventual success—entry into the Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance and Repertory.

Exit Through the Giftshop
Exit Through the Gift Shop: A Banksy Film tells the story of Thierry Guetta, a French immigrant in Los Angeles, and his obsession with street art. The film charts Guetta’s constant documenting of his every waking moment on film, including encounters with Invader, Shepard Fairey, and Banksy. Premiered at Sundance in 2011.

Love Letters—Short Graffiti Videos
Steven Powers is a sign painter and artist who produced a series of short videos documenting hip hop culture: watch The Roots freestyle. Since, Powers has embarked on the Love Letters project in Brooklyn, NY (by Dave Chino) and in Syracuse, NY (by Faythe Levine and Samuel Macon).

GET INVOLVED  CRAVING MORE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE? CHECK OUT THESE ORGANIZATIONS.

Akila Worksong
akilaworksongs.com
Akila Worksong is “The Essential Communications Agency for the Development of ExtraOrdinary Visions.” They serve as representative, spokesperson, and organizer for people, corporations, and non-profits. Contact them to bring a speaker to your school or organize an event.

Black Girls Rock! Inc.
blackgirlsrockinc.com
Black Girls Rock! Inc. is a non-profit youth empowerment and mentoring organization established to promote the arts for young women of color, as well as to encourage dialogue and analysis of the ways women of color are portrayed in the media. Sign up for their New York Saturday program or apply to summer camp.

Brooklyn Hip-Hop Festival
bkhiphopfestival.com
Brooklyn Hip-Hop Festival was established in 2005 and is now New York City’s largest hip hop cultural event. The festival showcases positive aspects of hip hop culture by highlighting artistic progression, community building, and social change. Visit the website to attend the festival or volunteer.

Corridor Gallery
corridorgallerybrooklyn.org
Corridor Gallery serves the local Brooklyn community by initiating a dialogue of contemporary art. The gallery is also home to Rush Education Programs, which exposes and immerses disadvantaged urban youth in the study and practice of contemporary art. You can submit your artwork or apply to be a curator.
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<th>CAN BE FOUND IN:</th>
<th>CREATED BY:</th>
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<tr>
<td>GRAFFITI</td>
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<td>HIP HOP</td>
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## Root Causes Worksheet

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## Ownership Worksheet

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<th>What Service Do They Provide?</th>
<th>Who Do They Serve?</th>
<th>How Do They Reach Us?</th>
<th>Why Do They Feel Infringed Upon?</th>
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<td>The Associated Press</td>
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<td>Shephard Fairey</td>
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### ARCHIVING WORKSHEET

**WHAT KIND OF GRAFFITI ARE YOU ARCHIVING?**

CHECK ONE:  
- [ ] TAGS  
- [ ] BUBBLE LETTERS  
- [ ] PIECE  
- [ ] OTHER

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<th>SURFACE</th>
<th>HOW IS IT APPLIED?</th>
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**CHECK ONE:**
- [ ] TAGS  
- [ ] BUBBLE LETTERS  
- [ ] PIECE  
- [ ] OTHER
TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES® STAFF

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ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®
This program provides NYC public school students and teachers with access to free, educationally-relevant and challenging films. Each screening is followed by a Q&A, study guides and supplemental educator materials are provided, and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize films as part of their curriculum. This monthly-series strives to expose New York City students to independent films and help educators and students incorporate film-viewing into their classroom work. For more information about TFI’s education programs, please visit TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG/YOUTH or email education@tribecafilminstitute.org

This program is supported, in part, with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and the New York State Council on the Arts with support from Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

Cover photo by Henry Chalfant
MARE139 (Associate Producer, Style Wars) at New Lots yard, Brooklyn, NY