Blackbusting Hollywood: Racialized Media Reception, Failure and The Wiz as Black Blockbuster

Abstract:

“Blackbusting Hollywood” draws attention to The Wiz as the first black-cast blockbuster and re-assesses its significance to issues of black media production, reception and distribution. With a focus on press reviews, this essay introduces the concept of racialized media reception in order to understand the ways that The Wiz carried weight beyond its $23 million budget for black and white reviewers and moviegoers. As a black-cast blockbuster, the film’s reception was understood by black reviewers to have enormous consequences for the future of black film in Hollywood while the white/mainstream press could only understand the film as a black version of The Wizard of Oz. The Wiz’s perceived failure, itself a testament to the persuasive power of film reviews to inform public opinion and Hollywood industrial trends, presents an opportunity to reassess the relationship between black-cast films, Hollywood, failure and audiences. Providing an analysis of reviews from both the black and white presses, archival production documents and information about the film’s distribution, this essay argues that with its distribution practices weighted more heavily to exhibition in white suburbs, coupled with white reviewers’ evisceration of the film, film reviews, as a cinematic paratext, helped to structure consumption and shaped the narrative of The Wiz as failure.

As a black kid growing up in Detroit, it never occurred to me that The Wiz (1978, dir. Sidney Lumet) was anything other than a success. The Wiz was as important and special as The Wizard of Oz (1939, dir. Victor Fleming). While The Wizard of Oz annually aired around Easter, The Wiz, because of its opening scene that depicts a family’s Thanksgiving dinner, aired annually around Thanksgiving. In 2013, the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, TX hosted a special screening of The Wiz and as recently as 2018, the Alamo Drafthouse, now a quasi-national chain of movie theatres, hosted screenings of the film across its outposts.¹ For NBC’s third live televised musical, it chose The Wiz. Instead of utilizing imagery from the Broadway musical, on which the 2015 live version would be based, news stories used imagery from the film version. The series finale of Black Dynamite: The Animated Series (Adult Swim, 2011-2015) heavily satirized The Wiz’s soundtrack and plot for its “The Wizard of Watts” episode. Lastly, one of the plotlines for the Orange is the New Black (Netflix, 2013-present) episode “Bunny, Skull, Bunny, Skull” revolves around Taystee’s selection of The Wiz as the prison’s movie night selection. I briefly

mention these cultural moments to suggest that while it remains true that *The Wiz* had a $23 million budget, and earned $13 million in U.S. box office receipts, its cultural import cannot be reduced to its failure to recoup its budget at the U.S. box office.

Moving away from a U.S. box office-centric success model as an indicator of the film’s success, ancillary markets, which have heretofore been unconsidered within narratives about *The Wiz*, are important. While the film was released before home video sales, and broadcast and cable syndication were considered as part a film’s financial success, these ancillary markets help to reposition *The Wiz*’s failure as one rooted *only* in U.S. box office receipts. For example, *Variety* reported that CBS had purchased television syndication rights for *The Wiz* for $5 million while the film was still in production.\(^2\) That, of course, only accounts for the first “multiple airings” on CBS and does not cover any future syndication deals. In addition, the film collected another $6.8 million in international box office in markets including London, France and Japan. In London, on its opening weekend, *The Wiz* earned the equivalent of more than $40,000, a figure that was more than four times higher than the previous year’s high at the single screen on which the film was exhibited in London.\(^3\) These additional figures at least suggest that *The Wiz* broke even with respect to its reported $23 million budget (excluding marketing costs). However, as Monica White Ndounou suggests, “a successful box office may not necessarily equal a successful economic outcome for any project… But the economic failure [of white-cast

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\(^3\) Chris Brown, “‘The Wiz’ is a Winner!,” *Screen International*, April 14, 1979, 2.
films] is never ascribed to the cast’s whiteness.”

However, *The Wiz* was industrially used as a case study for (white) audience’s diminishing appetite for black-cast films. In fact, Donald Bogle argues that black-cast film in the 1970s served as a set of bookends – the decade started “by revealing to the industry that there was a black audience [and] closed with the industry believing that the black film and the black audience were both dead.”

*The Wiz* is a rarity: a black-cast film conceptualized as a blockbuster (and I would submit, the first black-cast blockbuster). Justin Wyatt theorizes that “a blockbuster is separated from the majority of other releases by the size (budget, reputation, bankable source material) and scope of the project… Therefore, a blockbuster could be differentiated through such qualities as *more* stars, *higher* budget, *more* exciting story.” With a $23 million budget, source material adapted from a Tony Award-winning musical, itself adapted from the beloved 1939 screen adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, and a cavalcade of black stars, *The Wiz* was imagined as a blockbuster in its inception as well as within its marketing. In fact, a promotional poster for the film brings its blockbuster aspirations into sharp focus with the tagline: “THE WIZ! THE STARS! THE MUSIC! WOW!”

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Figure 1 Promotional poster for The Wiz exemplifying its reliance on the tenets of the blockbuster

However, *The Wiz* is understood as a *failed* blockbuster as evidenced by the scant attention scholars have bestowed on the film, with Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin writing only that the film “was a box office disappointment” and Christopher Sieving asserting that “The enormous budget… ensured severe losses when *[The Wiz]* opened to smaller audiences.”

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Certainly, focusing on box office-centric metrics might cement its position as a failure, because, as Scott Sandage argues, within a capitalist system, success means profit while failure is equated with financial loss.\(^8\) However, Jack Halberstam argues that failure allows us the opportunity to disrupt and examine “the supposedly clean boundaries between… winners and losers.”\(^9\) While Halberstam is not discussing the politics of film finances, I want to use their engagement with winning and losing to investigate the liminal space within which *The Wiz* operated. Industrially, losing for black films is not an option because black-cast film production is industrially monologic: *any* black-cast film must be a financial success, or it can vanquish the idea of making others like it. In this essay, I want to reconsider the ways *The Wiz* was reviewed in press to point to the ways cinematic blackness functioned to bifurcate audiences, almost ensuring the film’s box office failure. Building upon Jonathan Culler’s theorization that reception studies is “an attempt to understand [a film’s] changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretative assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods,” I investigate the ways film reviewers positioned *The Wiz* upon its initial 1978 cinematic release, rather than a laser focus on U.S. box office receipts as a political economic arbiter of success.\(^10\) Similar to the ways early sound films like *Hallelujah* (1929, dir. King Victor) and *Hearts in Dixie* (1929, dir. Paul Sloane) were reviewed across black and white presses, such an examination of film reviews exposes the ways critical discourse around *The Wiz* coalesced along

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largely racialized lines.\textsuperscript{11} Such an examination of \textit{The Wiz} across racialized discursive systems helps to explore and expose the ways film reviews functioned as a form of production-based encoding that precluded \textit{The Wiz} from achieving its blockbuster box office goals. A focus on \textit{The Wiz}’s film reviews centers the importance of race and Bourdieusian notions of taste cultures. Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, “consumption is […] an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code […] A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence […] into which it is encoded.”\textsuperscript{12} Bourdieu’s import here lies in the ways his theorization of consumption and taste infers racialized modes of media reception.

Part of \textit{The Wiz}’s failure as a blockbuster is rooted in the ways it was decoded by white film reviewers. As such, I build upon Racquel Gates’ theorization that black-cast films often function as two films in one. While Gates suggests that films like \textit{Coming to America} (1988, dir. John Landis) represent one film for black viewers and one for white viewers, I extend her theorization to argue that \textit{The Wiz}’s cinematic duality was comprised of one for black reviewers and another for white reviewers, with the aim of structuring the ways black and white viewers engaged with the film.\textsuperscript{13}

Methodologically, this essay employs contextual reception studies of reviews of \textit{The Wiz}, which Barbara Klinger argues helps to reveal “the intimate impact of discursive and social


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Racquel Gates, \textit{Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 58.}
situations on cinematic meaning.”¹⁴ Importantly, Jonathan Gray situates film reviews as critical paratexts because they “can catch the audience at a decisive pre-decoding moment, just as the text is being born.”¹⁵ Gray’s theorization is fundamental to understanding the ways film reviews can function as knowledge production because of the ways they pre-structure an audience’s engagement with a film. This is particularly salient as the 1960s saw an “increase in esteem for film critics whose opinions were newly recognized as valuable and to whom audiences may have ceded their opinion rights.”¹⁶ In this way, I follow Neil Terry and his co-authors assertion that “good reviews are expected to stir curiosity and identify quality, while poor reviews are expected to limit the interest of the influential early adopters.”¹⁷ Recognizing film reviews and reviewers’ import, I draw on The Wiz’s film reviews within mainstream and black press between 1977 and 1978. My focus on mainstream reviews centers the importance of the ways such reviews sought to engage with potential non-black viewers as they made choices about the films they would see in movie theatres. In this way, as Tamera Shepherd forwards, every publication works as “its own distinct discursive system.”¹⁸ These discursive systems are particularly important for the ways they reify taste cultures and expose the functions of what I am calling racialized media reception.

¹⁶ Baumann, Hollywood Highbrow, 156.
My methodology is also informed by the assertion that the film reviewer, like any active viewer, is a “social subject [who] has a history, lives in a particular social formation (a mix of class, gender, age, region, etc.), and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual.”¹⁹ These axes of identity are part of racialized media reception. In other words, a “good” film that exists outside a reviewer’s notions of taste might be reviewed negatively because it does not appeal to the reviewer’s racial formation. This is most clearly articulated in the disjuncture between the ways white critics have tended to review films produced by Tyler Perry and the box office returns for such films. As I have discussed elsewhere, Perry’s first Lion’s Gate-distributed film Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005) was panned by mainstream reviewers. However, Democrat and Chronicle white reviewer Jack Garner makes his (and by extension, other potential white viewers’) racial formation central by suggesting that white people might not “get” what Tyler Perry was attempting to convey.²⁰ Because cultural referents often vary by race (among other axes of identity), racialized media reception attempts to parse the ways mainstream understandings of black-cast media might fluctuate according to the race of the reviewer – a fluctuation that can be observed within film reviews of The Wiz. I juxtapose mainstream reviews of The Wiz with those that appeared in black press, recognizing that, as Anna Everett argues, black newspapers “became African America’s voice with which to ‘talk back’ to mainstream American society… [and] communication with itself.”²¹

²⁰ Author, “Why All the Hate?”
Building on a reception studies-based methodology, I intersperse archival materials from The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s (The Schomburg) collection on *The Wiz* as well as the Ken Harper Papers held at the New York Public Library’s Billy Rose Theatre Collection to augment the film’s media reception with documentation about *The Wiz*’s planning, and production. Because the film reviews can only tell part of the story of *The Wiz*’s failure, I also draw on data about the film’s distribution in Detroit and Chicago to demonstrate the ways racialized logics were centered within *The Wiz*’s production, distribution and reception.

In sum, I forward that film reviews are a form of audience encoding that, as Stuart Hall reminds, structure the parameters within which a media text can be decoded.\(^2\) While film reviews are most often subsumed into media reception studies and conversations about paratexts, I want to also consider them as a form of media production because they function as a form of knowledge production that can actively encourage (or discourage) viewers from engaging with a particular film. I begin my exploration by examining the industrial context of *The Wiz*, paying particular attention to not only the larger machinations of the film industry in the 1970s, but also the struggles *The Wiz* underwent in order to finally make it to the screen in 1978.

**Reconsidering *The Wiz*: Taking a Black Blockbuster to Market**

*The Wiz* is a film adaptation of the 1975 Tony Award-winning Broadway musical of the same name – both of which are based on L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* and perhaps most famously in the 1939 film adaptation starring Judy Garland. *The Wiz* was produced at an important time in film history. As Hollywood was losing money in the late 1960s with its

attempts to attract older, white audiences with big budget fare like *Doctor Doolittle* and *Hello, Dolly!*, the industry was unsure how it could continue to make money and attract the kinds of audiences it needed to remain financially viable, particularly with the rising import of television as an ancillary market. Additionally, as recounted within the pages of *Time*:

Hollywood finally took note of two basic facts: first, with movie theaters clustering in big cities and whites moving to the suburbs, the black sector of the moviegoing public was growing rapidly… second, the black audience was hungry for films it could identify with, made by blacks, with black heroes, about black life. Now every major studio is making a play for the big black market.

The “surprise” success of *Sweet Sweetback’s Badassass Song* (*Sweetback*) (1971, dir. Melvin van Peeples) made Hollywood stand up and take notice. The film went on to make $15 million at the box office – easily recouping its $500,000 budget. More importantly, gesturing toward *Time*’s assertion that black audience were hungry for black-cast films, the audience for *Sweetback* was estimated to be 95 percent black. After *Sweetback*’s success, Hollywood recognized that it could make relatively inexpensive black-cast films and enjoy big profits.

Novotny Lawrence and Gerald Butters suggest that the set of films known as Blaxploitation films were the “result of favorable conditions [that led] the film industry [to] briefly turn its attention to African American moviegoers, a long-ignored demographic that demonstrated its economic power by frequenting theaters in droves to view proud, assertive black movie

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By the mid 1970s, Hollywood had lost interest in black-cast films as returns began to diminish. At the same time, yet independent of the end of Blaxploitation’s temporary reign, the studios began investing in the blockbuster action film, which could appeal to several demographic groups. Employing this strategy, after abandoning the blockbuster musical films of the 1960s like *West Side Story* (1961, dir. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins), *My Fair Lady* (1964, dir. George Cukor) and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964, dir. Charles Walters), action-adventure blockbusters including *Jaws* (1975, dir. Stephen Spielberg) and *Star Wars* (1977, dir. George Lucas) began to breathe new life into Hollywood’s bottom line. *The Wiz* emerged at this crossroad, seeking to be all three of these things – a black-cast film musical that had aspirations (and the budget) of the kinds of blockbusters Hollywood had become interested in making.

Upon its Broadway conceptualization, producer Ken Harper envisioned *The Wiz* as not only a Broadway property, but one that could transfer from stage to silver screen. However,

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28 According to notes in the Ken Harper Papers, held at the New York Public Library, Harper initially envisioned *The Wiz* as a television special.
Harper was faced with one big problem: *The Wiz* was not initially a hit on Broadway, and in fact, posted its closing notice on opening night.\(^29\) Through a series of ticket giveaways, black church outreach, and $1.1 million from 20th Century Fox (Fox) to aid in the Broadway musical’s marketing and promotion, *The Wiz* became a Broadway hit. Fox’s backing came with the caveat that the studio would have “first option on film rights, publishing rights and album rights.”\(^30\) Fox hoped that its seven 1975 Tony Awards and its now-healthy Broadway box office would ensure its success as a film property for the studio.\(^31\) Part of my discussion of *The Wiz* in its Broadway iteration is to center that while *The Wiz ultimately* became a Broadway hit, it was not an immediate hit with either critics or audiences, casting doubt on Harper’s assertion that *The Wiz*’s stage-to-screen adaptation made financial sense. In fact, in the *New York Times*’ review of *The Wiz* titled “‘The Wiz’ Misses,” Walter Kerr laments that he wished everyone “connected with ‘The Wiz’ […] had taken equal time to consider what constitutes good theater.”\(^32\) In this way, the Broadway production, like its cinematic iteration was initially caught within a discursive spiral of *racialized media reception* with white critics largely panning the production while the black press embraced and celebrated it.\(^33\)

Although Fox had invested heavily in the Broadway production, the studio let its option on the film expire. But Harper shopped the film around Hollywood and found a cheerleader in Warner Bros.’s then-Vice President of Marketing Warren N. Lieberfarb, the studio that would soon release the black-cast film *Sparkle* (1976, dir. Sam O’Steen), which was made for $1

\(^{29}\) “Selling a Broadway Show or How ‘The Wiz’ was Won,” *Playbill*, 8.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
million and grossed $4 million at the U.S. box office. In an internal memo, Liberfarb writes, “The preferable route [for *The Wiz*...] would be to cast the property with known stars in principal roles and cameos. This would dramatically increase audience want-to-see, lower the possibility that it would be perceived as a Black picture and probably improve negotiable terms with exhibitors.”

Lieberfarb cites the ways *Tommy* (1975, dir. Ken Russell) was cast with cameos by Elton John, Jack Nicholson and Tina Turner as a model for the ways the cinematic version of *The Wiz* should be cast. While Warner Bros. did not choose to produce *The Wiz*, the internal memo is illuminating because it exemplifies the ways the film was never imagined as a “small” film like the Blaxploitation fare from which Hollywood had recently disengaged. Lieberfarb’s memo also centers the imperative that *The Wiz* have crossover appeal. Such crossover potential would also help the studio distribute the film more widely than a black-cast film (musical or otherwise).

Given the imagination of *The Wiz* as a black-cast crossover blockbuster film, Motown seemed an obvious producing partner given its creation of the “Motown Sound” that appealed to white and black listeners alike. In addition, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Berry Gordy, then-president and founder of Motown Records, began to diversify his media interests into film and television production under the moniker Motown Productions. The Diana Ross vehicle, *Lady Sings the Blues* demonstrated Motown Productions’ intent to produce black-cast films that were undergirded by similar philosophies as its recording arm: the production of black content that could appeal to white and black consumers alike. Motown, thus, attempted to deploy its success producing crossover musicians like Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder to also produce crossover cinematic content like *The Wiz*. The notion of crossover stars

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34 Correspondence from Warren N. Lieberfarb to Ted Ashley.
was of paramount importance because as Manathia Diawara rightly argues, “Hollywood’s Blacks exist primarily for White spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek.”35 While *The Wiz* on Broadway could presumably celebrate its unapologetic blackness for a New York “elite” audience, the film had to play (and capture big box office returns) across America including in the “heartland.” In this way, then, the cinematic iteration of *The Wiz* had to adjust its mode of address for a broader audience. Thus, the partnership between Motown Productions and Universal Pictures to make *The Wiz* made business sense.

To appeal to the film’s production imperative that it feature big name black stars, the film casted singer/actress Diana Ross as Dorothy (who had received an Academy Award nomination for her 1972 film debut in *Lady Sings the Blues*, dir. S. Furie), singer/pop music sensation Michael Jackson as The Scarecrow, acclaimed comedian Richard Pryor in the title role, and Lena Horne as Glenda the Good. Sidney Lumet, famed for his directorial work *12 Angry Men* (1957), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) and *The Network* (1976), directed the film with a script by Joel Schumacher. In Schumacher’s adaptation, Dorothy is a 24-year-old elementary school teacher who lives with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry in Harlem. In departing from the 1939 screen and the 1975 stage adaptation, which retains Dorothy’s origin in Kansas, Lumet urbanized the familiar story of Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion by placing the film’s action in New York, a conflation of blackness with urbanity that, as Paula Massood argues, is endemic of black-cast films in the last half of the twentieth century.36 In every version of the script available within the Schomburg’s archive, Dorothy’s origin is located within spaces where

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people of color have historically lived within New York – in the first draft she is from Queens, in the June 1974 second draft Dorothy lives in Brooklyn, before finally landing in Harlem in the final blocking script.\(^{37}\)

Although the film was intended to feel authentically black, with a $23 million budget, it could not afford to be a film for black viewers alone. It needed to appeal equally, if not more so, to white viewers. Desiree Garcia details the ways Motown and Universal attempted to create a film that was both universal and particular. She argues that Lumet attempted to highlight the film’s universal themes in interviews to center its appeal for white viewers while hoping that the blackness of its cast and use of black vernacular would be specific enough for black moviegoers.\(^{38}\) In other words, *The Wiz* had to be both universal and particular, unlike its Broadway iteration which *only* had to play for New Yorkers or those visiting the City. In other words, as Gates suggests about *Coming to America*, the film had to be two films in one – one for black viewers and one for white viewers.\(^{39}\) Gene Siskel articulates the stakes of black film generally and *The Wiz* specifically in 1976 when he wrote that black films needed to cross over and draw not only black viewers, but a large swath of white viewers as well in order to be considered successful.\(^{40}\)

Still Lieberfarb thought *The Wiz*, as a motion picture property, had the potential to achieve success. In fact, the Lieberfarb memo argued that “if any story would appear unlikely material for a Black musical, it is FRANK L. BAUM’s classic THE WONDERFUL WIZARD

\(^{37}\) *The Wiz* Scripts, Sc MC 320, Box 1, folders 1-4, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, *The Wiz* Collection, New York.


\(^{39}\) Racquel Gates, *Double Negative*, 58.

OF OZ. During the past 12 months the hit Broadway musical THE WIZ has proven the
foregrounding erroneous." He continues by suggesting that in ultimately passing on the project,
20th Century Fox’s:

Mistake lies in perceiving the motion picture as inherently limited to the Black audience. The nature of the material, the composition of the audiences on Broadway… all lead me to the conclusion that THE WIZ could be a mass audience movie. THE WIZ is as black as FIDDLER ON THE ROOF was Jewish! FIDDLER generated $35 million domestic film rental." Lieberfarb’s comparison of The Wiz to Fiddler on the Roof is important because it ignores the differences between race (blackness) and Jewishness (ethnicity and religion). Furthermore, Susan Kray forwards that “the majority of American Jews are perhaps best categorized as ‘almost white.’” At the same time, as Seth Wolitz argues that the film version of Fiddler functions as an “Americanization of Tevye expressed [through] the validation of Jewish-American participation in American life. These two scholarly assertions help to center the ways The Wiz was fundamentally different from Fiddler because while the Motown Sound might have been construed as “almost white,” its artist like Diana Ross and Michael Jackson, while beloved, could not be subsumed into such a categorization. Second, it ignores the differences in temporality from the early 1970s and late 1970s film business. The musical was not a genre of

film to which American filmgoers clamored to see in the 1970s. As Sean Griffin details, the blockbuster musicals that characterized 1960s film culture had fallen out of favor by the 1970s amid diminishing box office returns, socio-cultural upheaval, American economic doldrums and media conglomerations.\textsuperscript{45} Although the genre did not completely disappear, with notable critical and box office musicals film successes like \textit{Cabaret} (1972, dir. Bob Fosse), \textit{Saturday Night Fever} (1977, dir. John Badham) and \textit{Grease} (1978, dir. Randal Kleiser), other 1970s musicals like \textit{1776} (1972, dir. Peter Hunt), \textit{Jesus Christ, Superstar} (1973, dir. Norman Jewison) and \textit{Mame} (1974, dir. Gene Saks) did not fare as well.\textsuperscript{46} Additionally, in discussing \textit{The Wiz} and its box office potential, \textit{Variety}’s Frank Segers notes that while eager audiences lined up for a preview of the film at New York’s Astor Plaza and quickly sold out the theatre, “the audience was, however, predominantly black.”\textsuperscript{47} While he is quick to suggest that black viewers voraciously consuming the film is not problematic on its face, he nonetheless postulates that given the film’s budget, it could not afford to be a niche film for black patronage only.

With such a focus on \textit{The Wiz}’s need to attract white spectators, it is no surprise that its distribution/exhibition strategy primarily focuses on white audiences. In \textit{The Hollywood Reporter}, Charles Ryweck attempts to speak directly to distributors who might be hesitant to book the film because of its blackness. He says, “to put it succinctly, \textit{The Wiz} […] spells money in the bank for exhibitors.”\textsuperscript{48} Additionally, in the Detroit metro area, of the seven theatres in which the film was screened the week of its opening, only one was in the city of Detroit, with a

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\textsuperscript{46} Matthew Kennedy, \textit{Roadshow!: The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 246-247
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second theatre in neighboring Harper Woods, which has historically been home to a large African American population. Importantly, black moviegoers helped *The Wiz* collect $49,593 in its first three days of exhibition at the Americana Theater in Detroit. A similar story can be observed in Chicago, where two of the seven theaters exhibiting *The Wiz* were in predominantly black neighborhoods/exhibition spaces. Gerald Butters details the ways black moviegoers in Chicago began attending Loop area theaters to see movies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the 2,649-seat State-Lake theatre, one of the theatres exhibiting *The Wiz* in 1978. At the State-Lake, *The Wiz* earned $82,688 and another $21,156 at Ford City #1, a movie house on the city’s historically black south side. While it is entirely possible that black moviegoers could have traveled to the suburbs of Detroit or Chicago to see *The Wiz*, such a distribution strategy reveals the power of *racialized media reception*: white moviegoers were seen as the primary target for the film, and as such, mainstream reviews carried significant import while black spectatorship and reviews were understood as sewn up and in some ways, taken for granted.

But, unlike *Coming to America*’s cinematic duality, *The Wiz*’s strategy to reach both black and white viewers was unsuccessful as judged by box office receipts. Garcia suggests that “in the reception for *The Wiz*, the producers hoped, stardom would trump race,” but the reviews for the film reveal a marked racial division in the ways critics reviewed the film, which sought to pre/over-determine the film’s chances of success along racial lines. Dhyon Baumann argues that film reviews, and the quotes that can be pulled from such reviews for marketing purposes,

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49 “The Yellow Brick Road is Paved with Gold!,” *Variety*, November 1, 1978, 8-9.
50 Ibid.
52 “The Yellow Brick Road is Paved with Gold!”
53 Garcia, *The Migration of Musical Film*, 166.
are akin to “recommendations from Consumer Reports - they act as a spending guide.”  

In this way, then, film reviews from The Wiz can provide important context for the ways film reviewers not only understood and reviewed The Wiz, but the ways such reviews may have structured viewer choice.

Scholars have paid scant attention to The Wiz other than its failure. Ed Guerrero argues that after The Wiz, Hollywood cherry-picked and appropriated black culture and music in white-focused movies like The Blues Brothers (1980, dir. John Landis) and The Cotton Club (1984, dir. Francis Ford Coppola). However, The Wiz is a far more important text than a classificatory system in which it is deemed a failure would suggest. Instead, an examination of The Wiz’s reviews exposes the delicate balance the film had to navigate between universality for white (re)viewers and its particularity for black (re)viewers. Both sets of reviewers were working from within racial logics.

The Black Press Reviews of a Black Blockbuster for Black Viewers and White Hollywood

Michael Dawson underscores that the black press served an important function within notions of the black public sphere at least since the Civil War by providing information and commentary for and about black American life, politics and culture. As such, turning to reviews from this sector of American media illuminates the investment black reviewers had in black image production, itself a form of racialized media reception. Everett details the central

debates within black press around depictions of cinematic blackness as evidenced in reviews of early sound films like *Hallelujah* and *Hearts of Dixie* with the black press heralded the film for the opportunities it provided black performers while concomitantly expressing concern about the ways such films trafficked in stereotypes of blackness.\(^{57}\) Similar tensions and disquiets emerge around reviews of *The Wiz*. Two broad themes emerge out of reviews of *The Wiz* within black press. First, the black press seized on the notion that *The Wiz* was decidedly not a blaxploitation film, which were often met with derision within the pages of black press for their representational politics. In his review of *A Place Called Today* (1972, dir. Don Schain), writer Len Lear suggests that “the only positive thing about [the film] is that it honestly presents a big-city election as a choice between two evils, but even that is done in such a burlesque, stereotyped manner that it’s difficult to see any relation to reality.”\(^{58}\) Additionally, in September 1972, *Daily Defender* reported that several of Chicago’s black civic organizations were organizing in opposition to *Super Fly* (1972, dir. Gordon Parks, Jr.) and “the recent influx of so-called ‘blaxploitation’ films” which were understood as containing “insidious and leprous dialogue.”\(^{59}\) *The Wiz*’s departure from these tropes partially contributed to the film being heralded as a “must see” for black spectators within black press. Second, and rooted within *The Wiz*’s “must see-ness,” was an acknowledgement of the intertwining politics of the Hollywood industry and black representation. As a black blockbuster, the black press’ reviews often underscored the ways the future of black-cast films in Hollywood hinged on the success of *The Wiz*. I now turn to these

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\(^{58}\) Len Lear, “‘A Place Called Today’ is Pure ‘Blaxploitation,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 1, 1972, 22.

reviews to illuminate the ways they produced *racialized media reception* for their readership.

Among the black press’ reviews, *The Wiz* was positioned within notions of black civic duty that was tethered to a politics of representation as well as an industrial knowledge of *The Wiz*’s importance to the future of blackness in Hollywood. In other words, the burden of representation carries an attendant black spectatorial burden: if there is a “good” black-cast media, then black viewers are expected to see it. Certainly, as the black press was invigorated by a Post-Civil Rights era politic, both the black press and some black moviegoers were searching for black images that were uplifting. As Allyson Field details about early 20th century film:

Uplift films reflected, informed, and participated in the larger movement of African American uplift […] The program of racial uplift emphasized individual initiative, mutual assistance, social respectability, interracial cooperation, and economic independence as components of a general strategy for promoting the advancement of African Americans.60

While *The Wiz* is produced far later than the films Field theorizes as “uplift films,” many of the tenets of those films could be observed in the ways black news outlets reviewed the film. In particular, reviewing *The Wiz for The Pittsburgh Courier*, Bekka Rasul suggests that one of the film’s lessons is “Things that you really want you don’t have to look beyond yourself for them, because they are really inside of yourself… if you ‘believe in yourself!!’”61 In this instance, Rasul relies on notions of bootstrapping to argue that Dorothy’s (and black people’s) problems can be overcome by looking inside oneself and that change occurs by taking individual initiative,

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not by blaming the systemic issues that might otherwise structure black people’s hardships within American culture.

The reviews within black media outlets also gesture toward the ways Hollywood has historically engaged with blackness, and encourages black people to see films, like *The Wiz*, in a bid to demonstrate that black moviegoers will go to the cinema to see “quality” black-cast films. On November 11, 1978, *The Call and Post* reporter Billy Rowe articulates the burden *The Wiz* is forced to industrially carry. He writes:

This is the biggest budgeted film, musical or otherwise, to ever top-cast black superstars and featured performers. Its box office success would change the face of the silver screen. [...]
The subtle battle to hold the line and not shakeup the system, through the failure of so costly a black film, is not beyond the realm of possibility. The ‘they’ who put forth all the above theories, and then some, would do anything to keep that from happening. 62

Two threads are important within Rowe’s assessment. First, he sets the stakes for the success of the film by foregrounding its budget and the historic stakes within Hollywood film production. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Rowe positions the film against white hegemony and the politics of Hollywood film production. He implicitly advances the notion that if black moviegoers help to make the film a box office success, then, despite the industry’s reticence to produce black-cast films, it, as a capitalist-driven industry, will follow the money to more black-cast films with big budgets. Two weeks later, Rowe again used his column to advise black readers: “Don’t let anybody turn you away from this eye and ear adventure, this is the first time in the history of cinema city that so much money, $30- $35 million has been readily spent on an

all-black cast film production.”⁶³ While Rowe’s budget figures are off, he is seemingly responding to the mainstream press’ largely negative assessment of The Wiz in cautioning black moviegoers against listening to those naysayers, gesturing toward the ways a black-cast film’s success can “prove” to Hollywood that black viewers craved particular kinds of imagery divorced from Blaxploitation films. Rowe’s review simultaneously invokes Anna Everett’s theorization that part of the utility of the black press was its position as a black public sphere that allowed newspapers as well as its readers to engage in a call and response to white/mainstream news media.⁶⁴ At the same time, the black press encouraging black moviegoers to see The Wiz seemed to work — in Detroit and Chicago the urban and/or “black” movie houses contributed to 48 percent and 65 percent, respectively, of the film’s box office haul in its first three days of exhibition.⁶⁵

Similar to Rowe’s assessment, Amsterdam News’ Marie Moore situates the importance of The Wiz within the film industry: “Once again, the talents of Black artists served as a regenerative source to put life back into an insipid medium which many New Yorkers watched become stifled or bankrupt due to financial crises […] Just as Black exploitative films in the early ‘70s strengthened a waning film industry, The Wiz hopefully will be the beginning of a new era of lucrative and qualitative Black films.”⁶⁶ These reviews reveal a black investment in seeing black representations that hew more closely to “positive” images in high-budget films.

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⁶³ Billy Rowe, “Black Investors Put Millions in Producing ‘Wiz,’” The Call and Post, November 25, 1978, 6B.
⁶⁵ “The Yellow Brick Road is Paved with Gold!”
Jet magazine praised The Wiz as not only a “different” kind of black film that deviated from Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, but also featured a sense of black escapism, “on the order of Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” While it is true that black-cast films had not typically narratively hewed toward fantasy, the comparison of The Wiz to not only other spectacular films, but mainstream (read: white) blockbusters from the previous year is important. Though the film is celebrated as an unapologetically black one, within black press, the film is compared to big budget white films not necessarily by tethering it to successful Blaxploitation films or even Motown Production’s Lady Sings the Blues, for which Diana Ross received an Oscar nomination. Although many reviews in black press wanted to claim The Wiz as a distinctly black film, the black press concomitantly relied heavily on white taste cultures for legitimation, gesturing toward both the film’s black particularity and its mainstream universality, similar to the ways mainstream press understood The Wiz’s route to box office success. Furthering this connection to mainstream, white culture, Moore centers The Wiz’s debut performance as part of her exclamation that it would be a box office hit. The Wiz “broke the opening day box office record at the Loew’s Astor Place Theatre on Broadway, registering a tremendous $22,009 on the following Wednesday. The previous record holder was Star Wars with $20,322 on Wednesday, May 25, 1977. Despite the many adverse detrimental reviews by critics… the movie appears to be on its way to phenomenal success.” While whiteness for The Wiz became the barometer by which its success was measured in the black press, even as the film stood apart as a black film they embraced for its blackness, it important to remember Variety’s Frank Segers observation that the majority of The Wiz’s audience at the Astor Plaza was black.69

Gesturing toward the ways some reviewers at black newspapers understood the exceptional nature of a black-cast blockbuster in the 1970s, Los Angeles Sentinel’s Gertrude Gipson gushes, “Never have I seen such a colorful production… breathtaking photography, unbelievable make-up, eye popping costumes, fantastic, creative dancers, and the soulful versatile, innovative music of Quincy Jones. The movie is one of the greatest musicals we have seen in many a year.” Importantly, Gipson draws on formalist and aesthetic assessments rather than affective arguments to underscore the ways she positions the film’s claim to excellence and quality. In so doing, although Gipson’s audience is specifically black, she gestures toward the ways that white films are understood as “quality” based on aesthetic valuations.

While two reviewers at black newspapers entered what could be considered negative reviews of the film, they are both carefully measured in their critiques of the film. The Philadelphia Tribune’s Jovida Joylette summarizes the film by writing: “In the final analysis, ‘The Wiz’ is over-promoted, over-done, but yet in its own way is a unique film in a category all its own. It is dazzling and star-studded music filled and colorful and it is a spectacle, however, other than the spectacle, it’s rather short on imagination.” Joylette, in some ways, dislikes The Wiz because of its associated hype, yet she leaves it open that a viewer who might “only” want to see a spectacle would enjoy The Wiz. For her, The Wiz is not necessarily a bad film, nor should black viewers stay away from it. Rather, she seems to position her review as doing her job as Entertainment Writer without necessarily deciding for The Philadelphia Tribune’s readership whether or not they should see the film. It is also important to note that on the page on which

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Gipson, “‘The Wiz’ … a fantastic experience,” Los Angeles Sentinel, November 2, 1978, B-3A – B-4A.

Joylette’s review appears, there is an ad for the film that features its tagline: “The Wiz! The Stars! The Music! Wow!” Such a positioning works to potentially mitigate the “negative” attributes that might attach to the film from its review via its proximity to an ad.

Similarly, Nelson George’s *Amsterdam News* review is positioned as a personal assessment of the film rather than necessarily trying to influence any decision to refrain from seeing the film. His review begins with his assertion that “personally I enjoyed *The Wiz.*” At the same time, George’s review hinges on his rejection of the idea that *The Wiz* can be considered a black film when there was a white director at the helm and the script was written by Joel Schumacher. For George, the film gestures toward the “universal” hamstrings his belief that *The Wiz* is the “authentic” black film that it could be – even as he asserts that he enjoyed the film. It is also significant that George’s tepid *Amsterdam News* review appears in the same issue and section as Marie Moore’s earlier-referenced review, which, unlike George’s review, was the November 4, 1978 cover story, and in which she praises *The Wiz*.

The week following Joylette’s and George’s reviews, *The Wiz*’s producers took out a full-page ad in *Amsterdam News* in which three review excerpts from mainstream press are used to promote the film. Importantly, rather than deploying praise from black newspapers and magazines, like *Ebony* or *Jet*, the film’s producers rely on the praise of mainstream/white media outlets in order to center its paratextual position, thus re-asserting its cinematic duality. Such a move re-asserts the import of the film’s “mainstream” appeal to its overall success.

Ultimately, the black press largely praises *The Wiz* and encourage their readers to see the film, but their assessments are not outside *racialized media reception*. The reviewers are

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operating from within a racial logic that centers the importance of black cinematic content that is high budget and low with respect to stereotypic tropes of blackness. And in such a logical investment, *racialized media reception* reveals that the black press understood two things: first, that the reviews they wrote were important for/to potential black viewers; and second, that their reviews had the power to drive black consumption of *The Wiz*, which could result in Hollywood making more black-cast films with high budget and production values.

*Figure 2 Ad for The Wiz in Amsterdam News using praise from mainstream/white-focused media outlets*
“Nowhere Over the Rainbow”: *The Wiz*, Misplaced Referents and Mainstream Press

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, as a black blockbuster, white moviegoers were important to *The Wiz*’s box office success. However, with few exceptions, the mainstream/white press did not favorably review *The Wiz*. Three broad themes emerge with respect to criticism of the film. First, the white affective connection between the Judy Garland version of Baum’s story seemed all but inescapable for many white reviewers, resulting in a problem of misplaced referents. While it is true that *The Wiz* conjures *The Wizard of Oz* primarily because they are both films, for some white reviewers, such a referent obscures the ability of *The Wiz* to exist as a standalone text that can be judged on its own merits. Many white reviewers questioned whether or not *The Wiz* would be palatable given the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz* remained so indelibly marked on their hearts. To many white reviewers, and perhaps some white spectators, *The Wiz* was considered an urban update to *The Wizard of Oz*, not an adaptation of the Broadway production. As such, *The Wiz* seemed like a colossal departure from a beloved classic. Second, and perhaps most important, although *The Wiz* attempted to make reviewers (and audiences by extension) forget that it was a black blockbuster, its blackness, like “the Judy Garland problem,” was indelibly marked on the film. In this way, white film reviewers working at mainstream newspapers sought to ghettoize *The Wiz*. While *The Wiz* did not resemble the Blaxploitation fare of the early 1970s (particularly given its stars and budget), its blackness provided a lens through which white reviewers could activate a racialized media reception of the film. Third, the reviews in mainstream press tried to grapple with the first two issues but were also concerned with questioning whether or not the film could recoup its budget, a seemingly bizarre question for a film review. I argue that the disjuncture between *The Wiz*’s crossover stars and black-cast blockbuster status collided with the cinematic language white reviewers had become accustomed
to using when reviewing black-cast films, most of which were Blaxploitation films. As such, white film reviewer’s *racialized media reception* provides a window into their “frames of reference” for the film. As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery argue, studying journalistic film criticism “tends to establish the critical vocabulary and frames of reference used not only by reviewers, but by film audiences as well.”73 For Allen and Gomery, these frames of reference are particularly important “when critics are confronted with a film that is ‘different,’ that doesn’t fit neatly into the customary frames of reference of standard critical discourse.”74 *The Wiz* presented white film critics with such a film. As the reviews from mainstream press reveal, reviewers broadly disliked *The Wiz* but tied themselves in knots trying to articulate the reasons for their dislike that could/would not be construed as *racialized media reception*.

A short piece in *New York* magazine clearly articulated the stakes for the cinematic version of *The Wiz*. “All it has to do is the following: (1) surpass the [L. Frank Baum] book; (2) surpass the musical; and (3) surpass Judy Garland’s *The Wizard of Oz*.”75 On one hand, the ways the unnamed writer sets up the seemingly insurmountable achievement the film has to conquer in order to be deemed successful are true. Simultaneously, the articulated metrics for *The Wiz*’s success are illuminating because they highlight the ways black-cast films are expected to financially over-perform because of an industrial forgetting that black-cast films can do well at the box office – after all, the box office success of films like *Sweetback* and *Shaft* occurred less than a decade prior to *The Wiz*. On the other hand, the review concomitantly illuminates the workings of *racialized media reception* by demonstrating the ways the mainstream press could

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74 Ibid., 90.
not separate *The Wiz* from *The Wizard of Oz*. In this way, then, their frames of white reference structured the ways white reviewers could even conceive (re)viewing the film. Sensing this semiotic disconnection white reviewers were making in discussing *The Wiz*, Lumet, in a *Soho Weekly* interview, rhetorically asks “Did you ever read the reviews of the original picture? It got the shit kicked out of it. Judy got the worst reviews of her life.” Loretta Lumet’s defensive stance is well-placed given that most mainstream media outlets eviscerated *The Wiz* for failing to replicate the 1939 version of the story.

In his *Time* magazine review of *The Wiz*, titled “Nowhere Over the Rainbow,” John Skow admonishes the film for failing to be as fantastical as it should have been. Straining to ensure that his negative review is not misunderstood as one that longs for Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, he situates his dislike of *The Wiz* in a rebuke of the “bankable star” turn in Hollywood. Essentially, Skow hates *The Wiz* because he reads the casting of Diana Ross as endemic of the ways Hollywood has begun to rely on bankable stars as budgets got larger in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He argues:

Thus, when you want to cast a black version of *The Wizard of Oz*, you do not hold an audition for beautiful teen-age black girls who can sing like crazy, though the possibilities of such an audition stagger the imagination. You sign up Diana Ross, who is beautiful and sings like crazy, and is known to bankers from a career dating back to the early ‘60s… Ross is 34, so the script calls for a Dorothy who is 24 and a shy schoolteacher. This is awkward, because if the fantasy is to succeed, Dorothy must be childlike.

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However, in trying to ensure that he is not understood as disliking the film because it is not *The Wizard of Oz*, Skow inadvertently exposes that his review is, in fact, tethered to a racialized media reception. In his three-column review of the film, he does not actually begin a review of the film until the third column. In the first two columns, he mentions *The Wizard of Oz* twice. With so much of the space devoted to trying to disavow any connections to *The Wizard of Oz* and that *The Wiz* exists as a film in its own right, Skow can only muster that “A huge budget corrupts hugely. By this time the viewer has realized that he can’t win, he can’t break even, and he must get out of the theater.” However, he never quite tells his viewers why *The Wiz* is as bad as he believes, only that it is not *The Wizard of Oz*.

In this way, Skow’s review (and white reviewers’ reviews writ large) often suffer from a sense of misplaced referents. Zeroing in on what Skow implies, the *New York Post*’s Archer Winsten suggests that *The Wiz* would not ultimately prove successful, “except with specially interested audiences.” Here, “specially interested audiences” is code for black viewers. While he praises the set design (done by white set designer Tony Walton) and the yellow brick road (provided by a firm named Congoleum), he covertly suggests that the film is not one that appeals to him, and by extension, will not appeal to other white viewers, signaling that *The Wiz* exists outside white cinematic taste cultures. Additionally, *New York*’s David Denby spends the first paragraph of his review discussing *The Wizard of Oz* and its cultural status as a classic film and suggests that “those of us trying to play fair with *The Wiz* will have to hold our sentiment in check” but nevertheless concedes that the film “is taking a hell of a risk in going up against one of the best-loved films ever made.”

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78 Skow, “Nowhere Over the Rainbow,” 118.
despite its budget, “*The Wiz* couldn’t buy the ageless pop tunes, soul, wit or magic of the 1939 Judy Garland film classic.”\(^8\) It seems that, like the Scarecrow’s song within the film, that *The Wiz* “Can’t Win” when it comes to mainstream press who, try as they might, cannot shake the phantom of *The Wizard of Oz* as the referent by which to judge the merits (or shortcomings) of *The Wiz*.

Gary Arnold’s *Washington Post* review of *The Wiz* crystallizes the reasons that the film would likely be positioned as a black film with little commercial appeal. He asserts that the film’s commercial appeal is minimized because of prejudices that include reluctance by white moviegoers “to attend a movie with an all-black cast, even one including [Diana] Ross, [Lena] Horne, Richard Pryor, Michael Jackson and Nipsey Russell… [and] prejudice against reinterpreting the classic *The Wizard of Oz*.”\(^2\) Arnold illuminates the tension between the notion that *The Wiz* somehow blackens the historical legacy of a beloved white classic and that white viewers tend to be less likely to see movies with a majority of black bodies on the screen, while asserting that the film is quite good and should be seen – a theorization that holds true when looking at the first three days of *The Wiz*’s box office haul in Detroit and Chicago, as I demonstrated earlier in this essay. This ghettoization of *The Wiz* continues in Charles Champlin’s *Los Angeles Times* review of the film. After initially mentioning the budget for the film and naming its director Sidney Lumet, Champlin moves on to set up the dichotomy between the mainstream appeal of “the whitest of fantasies, *The Wizard of Oz*” and the “contemporary urban black experience” depicted in *The Wiz*.\(^3\) This instance of racialized media reception positions

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\(^2\) Gary Arnold, “The Wiz; A Musical Powerhouse that Sets the Spirit Soaring

*The Wiz* as a kind of black people’s version of the more culturally acceptable *The Wizard of Oz.* If there is any doubt about the ways Champlin, and by extension the *Los Angeles Times,* expected the movie to be received by the commercial marketplace, he explicitly states that the producers of the film have to “hope for a crossover audience” in order for its production costs to be recouped.84

It is *The New Yorker* that engages in a deeper discussion of what they explicitly describe as “the most expensive film ever made with a black cast and [...] the most expensive movie musical ever made.”85 In her five-page review of the film, Pauline Kael seems unsure how to understand *The Wiz.* At once, she admonishes the film for not being black enough, judged here by the failure of the writers to have “zingers from black thinkers or jazz musicians” inscribed on the bits of paper Michael Jackson’s Scarecrow pulls out of his stuffing and reads which come from white thinkers and artists including Shakespeare and Bacon. At the same time, she admits that she enjoyed the essentialized notion of cinematic blackness she finds in Michael Jackson’s Scarecrow, Nipsey Russell’s Tinman (who she asserts has built a career as an “inoffensive black entertainer [who performed] in front of white audiences”) and Ted Ross’ Lion because they “give their roles black show-biz equivalents of the musical-comedy and burlesque styles” and represent a kind of blackness that “white viewers can easily accept.”86 Nevertheless, Kael, like many of the other reviews by white reviewers in mainstream publications, doubts the commercial viability of *The Wiz.* Aside from her countless reminders that the film is peopled with black bodies and is decidedly not the Garland version of *The Wizard of Oz,* she points to a historical

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86 Ibid., 141 -142.
failure of genre films when she asserts that “only a half dozen or so musicals… have ever brought in as much money as The Wiz cost.”

At the same time, Kael wants the film to be “blacker,” suggesting that the “lion certainly could have used an Afro,” that Lena Horne’s Glenda should have been made “a sexy Good Witch” and asking for “cheerful numbers and a good spirit” from the film. What becomes problematic in her assessment of The Wiz is a reliance on the stereotypes of black people that circulated (and in many ways continue to circulate) within the white cinematic imagination. For Kael, if a black performer’s hair in the 1970s is not styled in an Afro, it is not black. Nor can a black woman as beautiful (and light-skinned) as Lena Horne fail to trade on her beauty in the way that a “good” Jezebel is supposed to do, revealing her racialized media reception. Kael cannot comprehend that a black woman can believably “be a kindergarten teacher in Harlem [who] is implacably virtuous… too shy to go out with men… [and who] wears a demure high-necked pale-lavender blouse.” She seems to demand that black people in film conform to her narrow vision of authentic blackness. At turns, The Wiz is simultaneously positioned in mainstream press as “too black” for white audiences and not “black enough” for black viewers.

Certainly not all of the mainstream reviews for The Wiz panned the film. While the New York Post’s Archer Winsten derided the film, the production took out a full-page ad in the paper to try to mitigate the impact of such negative reviews, which ran the day after Winsten’s review. Rex Reed’s positive New York Daily News review was re-printed and used as an advertisement that ran in newspapers across the country. In the review, Reed praised The Wiz

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87 Ibid., 138.
88 Ibid., 142 - 143.
89 Ibid., 138.
saying, “Visually, The Wiz outdoes everything I’ve seen on the screen in decades.” Gesturing toward the efficacy of positive film reviews on viewer reception practices, the film’s publicity department used Reed’s exclamation that “Fabulous is the word for ‘The Wiz’… a colossal entertainment. Everyone is just plain perfect” in newspapers – both black-focused and mainstream papers – across the country to bolster the film’s chances of achieving box office success. However, try as they might, most mainstream newspaper reviewers could not review the film without tethering it to the 1939 cinematic adaptation of The Wizard of Oz – a largely white way of seeing a black-cast film in the late 1970s. It is The Wiz’s status as a black-cast blockbuster that engenders such frames of whiteness to structure the industrial and critical responses to the film.

Figure 3 Rex Reed’s positive review of The Wiz was reprinted as an ad in both mainstream and black-focused newspapers across the country.

91 Ibid., 1.
The Art of Black Failure: *The Wiz* as Post-Civil Rights Black Blockbuster

Released in the wake of the Black Civil Right movement, *The Wiz* exists in the shadow of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assertion that people be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. However, *The Wiz* was ultimately judged (and accepted or dismissed) based not necessarily on its content, but largely on its blackness. Mainstream and black publications could not get past the film’s blackness, a blackness that was often placed within a monolithic and stereotypical framework that either resulted in the film’s commercial failure or contributed to an impulse to see black bodies in a well-financed studio film. Film reviews of *The Wiz* in black press and mainstream press reveal the post-Civil Rights schism in American culture. Many black people longed for so-called positive representations that eschewed the scripts of blackness being circulated within Blaxploitation films. In that vein, *The Wiz* engendered a *racialized media reception* that was tethered to a sense of civic pride for many black reviewers’ assessing *The Wiz*, and the film represented the first time Hollywood seemed to truly be investing in big budget black-cast films. After all, *The Wiz*’s $23 million budget far outstripped *Shaft*’s (1971) $500,000 budget as well as *Sparkle*’s (1976) $1 million budget.93 On the other hand, white reviewers exposed their *racialized media reception* via a general disinterest in *The Wiz* because it failed to replicate their expectations, as set by the Judy Garland version of *The Wizard of Oz*. While one could argue that mainstream film reviewers were reacting to the film’s aesthetics in analyses of *The Wiz*’s shortcomings, the amount of time many of them spend discussing *The Wizard of Oz* is telling in its *racialized media reception* of *The Wiz* and white reviewers’ frames of reference.

Ultimately, *The Wiz*’s failure to recoup its production budget in its initial theatrical run was not necessarily because it was a bad film (many “bad” films realize profits at the box office), but because of the film’s distribution model coupled with its attendant white racialized media reception. The reviews of *The Wiz* illuminate the ways the critical discourse around the film shaped the barriers and barometers of success for the film even before it was viewed by audiences. With its distribution practices weighted more heavily to exhibition in white suburbs, coupled with white reviewers’ evisceration of the film, film reviews, as a cinematic paratext, helped to structure consumption.

Simultaneously, *The Wiz* was considered not just a failure, but a black failure. The burden of representation was too great for *The Wiz* as an expensively produced black-cast blockbuster. The reviews in the black press revealed an understanding of the industrial importance of *The Wiz* and encouraged black people to see the film as an act of showing Hollywood the power of the black dollar. And as I demonstrated, black viewers showed up in great numbers to consume *The Wiz*. The film was bound within a demonstration of black civic pride for film content that did not traffic in “negative” images of blackness, often associated with Blaxploitation films. These discursive residues haunt black-cast film contemporarily. As I have argued elsewhere, many black people feel an obligation to see black-cast films in order to demonstrate the hunger for seeing black bodies on the silver screen – even when they might hate a film or producer, like the film oeuvre of Tyler Perry.\(^{94}\) Black critics were keenly aware of the precariousness of black media output within Hollywood. Despite the existence of what Timothy Havens calls “industry lore” – a set of beliefs about the ways black media texts should/will perform in the marketplace – black critics remained aware of the ways blackness functioned as

\(^{94}\) Author, “Why All the Hate?”
useable and expungable within Hollywood, and as such, activated *The Wiz* as a harbinger of black possibility within the pages of their respective publications. The fact is, by the end of the 1970s, Hollywood was simply done with black-cast films. Despite black press reviewers’ exclamations about the film and aided by mainstream newspaper reviewers’ general evisceration of it, *The Wiz* provided a convenient case study on which Hollywood could hang its decision to move away from black-cast film production. *The Wiz* was not simply a box office failure; it was a black failure that could be mapped onto all black-cast films. I am not suggesting that Hollywood needed a reason to disengage from black-cast films, rather, *The Wiz* provided an industrial shield that could serve as a ready-made case study to deflect charges of racist practices within the industry. In fact, it would take Hollywood 10 years to greenlight another all-black cast film: *School Daze* (dir. Spike Lee, 1988). But in singularly focusing on *The Wiz*’s U.S. box office figures, rather than including its international haul or ancillary markets including syndication deals and soundtrack sales, *The Wiz* could be painted as a failure that no longer made sense for an industry that had tired of black-cast films as well as musicals. In the final analysis, like the Scarecrow’s song from the film, *The Wiz* couldn’t win. It couldn’t break even, and it couldn’t get out of the Hollywood game.

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