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Sebastian Smoliński
Uniwersytet Warszawski
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6161-6875

Minority Views: *Liberator*, American Cinema, and the 1960s African American Film Criticism

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"Liberator" magazine; African American cinema; civil rights movement; Black Arts movement; black radicalism; black press

Abstract
The article reconstructs the discourse of film criticism in *Liberator* – a radical African American magazine published between 1961 and 1971. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field, the author situates *Liberator* within the context of the 1960s, civil rights movement, and Black Arts movement, and analyses the magazine's role in film culture of the era, as well as the links between the magazine and important black filmmakers and film writers. Four aspects of *Liberator*'s film criticism are explored: cultural memory of past representations, criticism of genre filmmaking, the need for cinematic realism, and the possibility of creating a distinct black cinema. The case study of the critic Clayton Riley's career presents an author who wanted to continue his radical criticism in the mainstream press (*The New York Times*). *Liberator*'s legacy is framed as essential in understanding the tradition of African American film criticism.

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In recent years, American film criticism has received considerable scholarly attention.[1] Journalistic and essayistic writings about movies are seen as forming an important intellectual tradition in the US.[2] Their contemporary analyses enhance the studies of film reception and our understanding of American film history in general. The core of this tradition comprises the writings of white, mostly male critics, such as Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Manny Farber, and Andrew Sarris (with Pauline Kael as an exception). In their works, they tried to define Hollywood as an American institution and develop their own critical projects. Many discussions that characterized academic film studies from the 1970s onwards – including auteur studies, genre criticism, and ideological criticism – were first explored and tested by these authors. They may be called mainstream film critics insofar as they were writing for outlets with significant exposure and circulation, for example, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Village Voice*, all three published in New York City, but reaching a nationwide readership.

It is possible, however, to approach American film criticism from a different angle. Trying to sketch a comprehensive map of this profession, one encounters niches which operated outside of the mainstream US film culture. For most of the 20th century, that was the case of African American film criticism. The task of reconstructing the history of black writers' engagement with Hollywood and independent cinema is only partially completed. The pioneering work of Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949*, provides a unique perspective on this neglected and forgotten chapter of US film history.[3] Combining archival research with an analysis of numerous reviews, published mostly in African American newspapers, Everett persuasively argues the importance of black press as the most influential site of reception and critical evaluation of movies among African American communities. Although she devotes a chapter to *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. David Wark Griffith, 1915) and the ensuing *interventionist criticism* by black authors, Everett makes clear that African American film criticism of that period was much richer and should not be associated only with the heated reaction to Griffith's racist epic. She finishes her narrative at the end of the 1940s, a few years before the emergence of the civil rights movement and cataclysmic shifts in US race relations.

Liberator and black radicalism

As Everett points out, *there exists a sustained discourse on the cinema by African Americans from the turn of the century through the Black Arts movement of the 1960s*.[4] Black film criticism of the 1960s seems as obscure as writings from the previous decades, because it has never been thoroughly examined. Arguably, however, a closer look at critical writings from that period may provide us with a better understanding of the culture of that decade, help us define the attitude towards Hollywood shared by certain black communities, and allow for a reconstruction of views on cinema shared by the groups marginalized and excluded from the mainstream culture. Moreover, it may also shed light on contemporary discussions about film criticism and its ideological stakes.

Liberator, the New York City-based African American monthly journal published from 1961 until early 1971, makes it possible to perform such a dissection of minority views – as opposed to the perspective of the majority shared by the most prominent critics of the 1960s, such as Roger Ebert or Pauline Kael (admittedly, though, as a Jewish woman from the West Coast, she had a different background than male critics from large cities). Employing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the cultural field and position-taking, the article aims to analyse *Liberator*'s film criticism in cultural and political contexts.[5] Investigation of the field of cultural production, according to Bourdieu, entails the work of *constructing the space of positions and the space of the position-takings* [*prises de position*] *in which they are expressed*. This field is relational, with each agent situated in relation to other agents (authors, institutions, social forces) and each position depending *on the other positions constituting the field*.[6] Always intertwined with the questions of success, hierarchies, and social capital, the cultural field is a vast space in constant flux, with each change or intervention influencing the shape of the space and the positions of its agents.

Bourdieu's claims, formulated mainly, but not exclusively, in reference to literature and art, are useful when thinking about the cultural field occupied by *Liberator*. The crucial term "position-takings" presupposes activity and is connected with changes and interventions within the cultural field. The author defines it as *struggles to defend or improve their* [the occupants'] *positions*.[7] Thus, in our case, the journalistic landscape is rendered as a site of conflict, with various authors and magazines occupying different positions within the field, positions which are subject to change but also characterized by an uneven distribution of prestige, capital, and consecration. The staff of *Liberator* appeared in a cultural field marked by racial and economic inequalities and sought to assert their distinct place within that field – a task Bourdieu suggests is a must for all *newcomers*.[8] That may be one of the reasons why the writings published in the magazine were so bold and unconventional. In *Liberator*, the struggle to claim a distinctive place within the cultural field and the struggle for racial progress were parallel activities.

There are three main reasons why *Liberator* is a promising case study of a selected part of the field of film criticism. First, there are important links between the magazine and the broader world of the film industry and film criticism. Second, it provides stimulating examples of politically conscious, ideologically charged film criticism that probably could not have been published in the mainstream press. Third, it covers the transformative period of the 1960s, marked by political upheavals, changes in legislation, battles fought by activists and civil rights movement leaders, the emergence of Black Power, and critical changes in the production and distribution patterns of American movies.

Liberator was a relatively small but influential publishing enterprise of the Liberation Committee for Africa, which in January 1963 transformed into the Afro-American Research Institute.[9] Its circulation grew steadily within the first years since the launch of the publication, reaching 1,500 copies by September 1961.[10] Since 1963, the magazine was distributed nationwide; its circulation was the relatively small 15,000 copies, but *its impact and reputation were far outpacing concerns about circulation*.[11] Christopher M. Tinson, author of *Radical Intellect: Liberator Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s*, should be credited as the scholar who brought

Liberator to the attention of American and foreign readers after almost five decades of oblivion. Tinson's book is a thorough examination of the magazine and its legacy, providing an illuminating overview of political and cultural debates that *Liberator* took part in and helped to shape. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the magazine is its political radicalism. It positioned itself as an uncompromising political voice since the beginning of the 1960s, when US intellectuals discussed the issues of decolonization, independence for African states, nationalism, and what should be the response of African Americans to these events. The shocking and mysterious death of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, was a constant topic of *Liberator*'s articles and editorials in 1961-1962.

The magazine's openly anticolonialist stance was complemented by its equally fierce antiracist, anticapitalist, anti-imperialist politics.[12] As a haven for radical voices, *Liberator* was open to authors eager to discuss black nationalism, anti-government and anti-establishment views, socialism as an answer to capitalist oppression of blacks, questions of activism and the fight against racism, and the condition of black minorities in various parts of the United States. In many respects, *Liberator* was opposed to mainstream white culture and integrationist strategies. It fostered the spirit of black independence, economic justice, and self-reliance and focused on the issues of black emancipation and liberation.[13]

The fact that *Liberator* was primarily a political magazine notwithstanding, it remains an interesting source for scholars of US film history. As part of "the dissident press," it witnessed, responded to, and contributed to changes in the US cultural production.[14] The magazine was engaged in the examination of the flourishing Black Arts movement, which was focused on black identity, the possibility of expressing black experience, and cultural traditions of the descendants of Africans.[15] Among reviews and articles on black artists, musicians and sportsmen, there were several dozens of film reviews published in the *Liberator* throughout the decade. Theatre and the New York stage were of greater interest to the magazine's staff, but short pieces on American and foreign movies present a coherent and altogether fascinating radical discourse on cinema.

Liberator and film culture

The importance of *Liberator* in US film history lies in the contributions of its advisory board members and its authors to the cultural field of the 1960s and subsequent decades. Ossie Davis (1917-2005), James Baldwin (1924-1987), Larry Neal (1937-1981), Clayton Riley (1935-2008), and Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) were, to various degrees, part of the *Liberator*'s intellectual project.

Ossie Davis was listed as a member of *Liberator*'s advisory board in May 1962, in the first issue which published the names of members of that board and of the editorial board. Davis was the husband of Ruby Dee, a famous black actress of the era and the star of *A Raisin in the Sun* (dir. Daniel Petrie, 1961) based on Lorraine Hansberry's play. He was an actor, director, activist, and writer, probably best known as the author of the 1961 Broadway play *Purlie Victorious* (Nicholas Webster directed its film adaptation starring Davis, *Gone Are the Days!*, in 1963). Having a popular black artist as an ally must have impacted *Liberator*'s visibility

and its positioning as an important black publication. Tinson notes that the magazine's staff valued Davis's and Dee's *commitment to justice throughout the early 1960s*.[16] Interestingly, given the radical politics espoused by *Liberator*, film historian Donald Bogle writes about Davis in a different context: *By 1964, Ossie Davis had already acquired a following, that included white liberals and members of the black bourgeoisie. Through sheer push and panache, he had promoted himself into the leading-man category, replacing Poitier on stage in "A Raisin in the Sun" and then winning decent reviews for his work in "Purlie Victorious." In motion pictures, Davis met with moderate success*.[17] Given that *white liberals* and, to a lesser extent, *black bourgeoisie* were two groups that *Liberator* was constantly arguing against, Davis's devotion to *Liberator*'s cause and politics was remarkable.

James Baldwin was first listed in *Liberator* as a member of its advisory board in the November-December 1962 issue. The January 1963 issue had his picture on the cover and included the only article he has ever written for *Liberator*: "Not 100 Years of Freedom." As Tinson points out, the actual scope of his contribution to the magazine is unclear.[18] In the early 1960s, Baldwin was already one of the most important black intellectuals in America, the author of such novels as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and the collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). After he and Ossie Davis parted ways with *Liberator* in the mid-1960s over a controversy surrounding the magazine's series of allegedly antisemitic articles, Baldwin would continue his high-profile career and write the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), among others. In the field of US film culture, Baldwin's most important contribution remains his seminal book-length essay *The Devil Finds Work* (1976): a sophisticated, multi-layered examination of the racist strategies of representation and the simultaneous appeal of Hollywood cinema. It is in the light of that essay that one is tempted to look at film criticism in *Liberator*. Even though it is difficult to establish the extent of Baldwin's involvement in the project, he was undoubtedly familiar with the radical rhetoric of the magazine and its cultural criticism. Film reviews published in *Liberator* provide a vital link between the African American film criticism of the pre-civil rights era and *The Devil Finds Work*, the single most important text by a black author exploring the entanglements of race, Hollywood, desire, and the allure of mainstream cinema.

Larry Neal, signed under his articles in *Liberator* as L. P. Neal (he will be mentioned under this name later on in the article), was one of the key theoreticians, activists, and artists in the Black Arts movement. He was also a poet, playwright, essayist, and co-editor (with Amiri Baraka) of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* in 1968. Recently, Neal's contributions to the emergence of the black film aesthetic are finally being examined by scholars who previously did not investigate the intersections of black film culture and Black Arts.[19] Neal was also an author and editor of *Liberator*, and he contributed a single – but important – film review to the magazine (of *Goldfinger*, dir. Guy Hamilton, 1964). Neal's manifesto from 1968, "Film and the Black Cultural Revolution," although published in a different journal, remains a product of the same radical part of the cultural field that fostered the writings of *Liberator*'s staff.[20]

The last two individuals worth mentioning in this context are critics Clayton Riley and Toni Cade Bambara. Riley was one of the chief editors of *Liberator*

and its most important film and theatre critic, who, after the magazine's demise, contributed as a critic to *The New York Times*, among other outlets. His work will be explored in the latter part of the article. Bambara is an influential figure in US film and film studies. Novelist, educator, screenwriter, feminist, activist, and scholar, she was the author of *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992), a study of the first film directed by an African American woman, Julie Dash, that received a theatrical release. Bambara penned the last film review published in *Liberator*, devoted to *Burn!* (*¡Queimada!*, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969).

These five activists and writers were significant actors in the cultural field occupied by *Liberator*. Although the magazine situated itself in opposition to the mainstream and as a radical voice of the black minority, some allegiances could go beyond these assumptions and facilitate building a more visible community, confirming the permeability of boundaries within an ever-shifting cultural field. A contributor to the history of black-themed US cinema (Ossie Davis), a distinguished, famous writer (James Baldwin), a key figure in the Black Arts movement (L. P. Neal), a black male film and theatre critic (Clayton Riley), and a feminist intellectual and artist (Toni Cade Bambara) all at one point or another were part of *Liberator*'s network. Thanks to that, the magazine's place in US film culture of the 1960s seems not to be modest but rather important, considering the political and social dilemmas of the era.

What kind of film criticism appeared in *Liberator*? Was it concerned mostly with political issues? How did it fit in with the radical profile of the publication? The next part of the present essay seeks to explore these questions, highlighting four themes permeating the film writings appearing in the journal: cultural memory of past representations, criticism of genre filmmaking, the need for cinematic realism, and the possibility of creating a distinct black cinema.

Cultural memory and film criticism

The first piece of film criticism appeared in *Liberator* in August 1964. The last, Bambara's review of *Burn!*, in December 1970. Within the span of a few years, the authors covered an intriguing array of productions, from independent dramas to popular westerns, from documentaries on China and North Vietnam to features starring Sidney Poitier, from anticolonialist arthouse fare to countercultural American classics. Clayton Riley was the most prolific film reviewer of *Liberator*, but the magazine also published pieces by Clebert Ford, Neal, Ossie Sykes, Russ Meek, Prof. Austin C. Clarke, Ray Ormand, Charles Michael Smith, and Bambara. Some of them contributed just a single film review. The criteria of choice must have been pretty loose; the selection of films feels rich and varied. There were, however, certain guidelines, the most important one quite obvious: usually, the reviewed films were starring blacks and addressing the black experience in the US or Africa.

The magazine's contributors had to justify their interest in cinema, or conversely: movies had to give them proof that they were worth writing about. *Liberator* grew as a publication, reaching 24 pages by August 1964 (from the initial 4 or 8) and 32 pages by November 1964 (this was its peak; in the following years,

the number of pages would fall again). Perhaps this development played a role in securing a Movie/TV section. The first film article published in *Liberator* in its very title heralded "The Black Boom."[21] Clebert Ford sensed a change in American independent cinema and a growing interest in stories about blacks, but he attributed that to the filmmakers' capacity for *realizing commercial potential*.[22] His article covered *The Cool World* (dir. Shirley Clarke, 1963) and the forgotten adaption of John Howard Griffin's nonfiction book *Black Like Me* (dir. Carl Lerner, 1964). The opening paragraph of his double review tried to sum up the images of blacks of the past few decades: *The motion picture, most influential entertainment media, was until quite recently the prime villain in creating and sustaining the stereotyped image of Afro-Americans. One bitterly remembers the stock "Stepin' Fetchit" characterizations of Willie Best and Mantan Moreland and the "I don't know nothing' 'bout birthin' babies, Miss Scarlet" portrayals of Butterfly McQueen and Hattie McDaniels. Indelibly etched in the mind is the classic ghost-Negro encounter scene in the Hollywood horror film of days not too long past with its frightened, trembling, wide-eyed Negro, his processed hair standing straight on end as he murmured the equally classic "Foots don't fail me now" a second before running directly through a brick wall*.[23]

Ford's summary of the presence of blacks in Hollywood movies focuses on the 1930s. Such entertainers as Stepin Fetchit and his imitators, Willie Best and Mantan Moreland, were the staple of racist productions of that decade.[24] The review is also haunted by the presence of *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939), one of the most successful and most contentious movies ever made. The black writer's acknowledgement that watching *Gone with the Wind* was an uncomfortable experience was nothing new. Back in 1939, the poet Melvin B. Tolson wrote for *The Washington Tribune* an article titled "'Gone With the Wind' Is More Dangerous Than 'Birth of a Nation.'"[25] Discussing the racism of Fleming's movie, then, was part of the tradition of African American film criticism. What is striking here is the cultural memory that persists even in the mid-1960s. The reference to the horror film mentioned by Ford is more difficult to place – the quote appears in several movies from the period. Maybe he was thinking of *The Ghost Breakers* (dir. George Marshall, 1940) with Willie Best, Bob Hope, and Paulette Goddard. But, more importantly, he was conjuring up a certain tradition of stereotypical representations of blacks, using the stock line *Foots don't fail me now* to make a point.[26] In this cultural imaginary, which of course does not leave a lot of space for black performers to build full-fledged characters, the decade of the 1950s is conspicuous by its absence, but Ford mentioned later, rather dismissively, that in contemporary Hollywood blacks are rendered either invisible or symbolic, including *the one Negro role usually assigned to Sidney Poitier*.[27] The fact that Poitier was mentioned in such a context points to his ambiguous status among the *Liberator* intellectuals, of which more later.

Ford's discourse emphasized the general reluctance to treat Hollywood seriously, or, even more pointedly, to bestow upon it even an elemental level of critical trust. Clayton Riley's ways of activating cultural memory were similar. In the review of *Hurry Sundown* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1967), set in 1946 in Georgia, he called the director *that Machiavellian maestro of the celluloid wilderness*.[28] The film depicts the machinations of a businessman (Michael Caine) who pressures a white

and a black family of sharecroppers to sell him their land. Riley wrote that in its retrograde style, the film presents *all the ghosts of cinema-past*. The depiction of plantations created by Preminger harks back to the 1930s, to the images from *Gone with the Wind* that were so alive in Ford's review. The persistence of racist imagery, according to Riley, signifies that there was no progress in cinematic representation and that nothing has changed at all: *What is perhaps more incredible is that you saw this flick twenty, twenty-five and thirty years ago with the same whining negroes* [sic!] … *Patiently, you await the arrival of Butterfly McQueen and Willie Best, and realize that only death and disappearance have kept them away*.[29] By no means a critical success, Preminger's film evidenced Hollywood's industrial decline in the mid-to-late 1960s.[30] In the optics of *Liberator*'s reviewer, asserting a place within the cultural field that could be characterized as averse to mainstream Hollywood, it was also proof of US cinema's hopeless anachronism, which did not foster any kind of racial progress.

Criticism of genre filmmaking

Equally harsh was *Liberator*'s take on Hollywood genre filmmaking. Not keen to accept the formulas and simplifications which were the essence of popular genres, the critics often treated them as a warped mirror of America itself. On a simple positive/negative binary scale, the majority of film reviews published in *Liberator* were negative, sometimes very much so. The cultural products that would really enrage the reviewers were often examples of mainstream entertainment, like the James Bond episode *Goldfinger*, the western *The Professionals* (dir. Richard Brooks, 1966), and the thriller *An American Dream* (dir. Robert Gist, 1966). In a telling gesture, each of these films, in their perceived artistic and ideological failures, captured an important truth about the country and the West in general.

Consider Riley's take on *The Professionals*: *The Westerns, the spy films are all part of America's way of saying that it has nothing to say*.[31] Riley was the most insightful of *Liberator*'s film critics and he could – and often did – appreciate good filmmaking craft. Even so, he disparaged Hollywood's crass commercialism and lamented that his countrymen were still susceptible to the industry's tricks. Riley also perceptively analysed ideological patterns in American films. In case of *The Professionals*, he observed that the protagonist played by the black actor Woody Strode is, in line with the Hollywood tradition, loyal and subservient to white characters. Riley often linked the supposedly escapist genre narratives to the wider world, for example recognizing *shades of Vietnam* in fragments of dialogue from Brooks's movie.[32]

One of the first film reviews published in *Liberator* was L. P. Neal's take on *Goldfinger*. Although produced by a British company, *Goldfinger* was partially set in the US and was a box office hit there. Neal wrote that James Bond *is the most incredible agent ever dreamed up in the wishful fantasies of the Western mind* and that *the movie oozes with the stench that is Western culture*.[33] Neale singled out the film's racism towards Asian characters and provided a far-reaching interpretation, equalling the 007 with the colonial power of the West: *She* [The United States] *maintains her power through terror in Alabama, Congo, and South Vietnam. A million or so James Bonds, white and Negro, are her last hope*.[34] The feminized US spreads "her"

colonial terror not only abroad in the Cold War context of containment (the Vietnam conflict had been escalated by the US administration by May 1965) but also at home. Here Neal referenced the civil rights movement and the violent reaction to it in Birmingham and other American cities. For the critic, entertainment was interesting only insofar as it pointed, sometimes unwittingly, to larger social concerns. The review of *Goldfinger* is one of the best examples of radical criticism published in *Liberator*. The magazine's anticolonialist, anticapitalist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist politics receives in it its fullest expression. Neal's fearless account of the movie may have been a way of asserting *Liberator*'s distinctiveness from the mainstream press, for example *The New York Times*, where *Goldfinger* received a different treatment. Bosley Crowther was disappointed that screenwriters *are involving him* [Bond] *more and more with gadgets and less and less with girls* and did not mind the series' racism, adding that *Shirley Eaton is delectable as the girl who is quickly painted out, and Harold Sakata is traditionally sinister as a mute Oriental who is adept at throwing a razor-brimmed hat*.[35]

More moderate approaches to Hollywood movies can also be found in *Liberator*, for example, Ossie Sykes's review of *Cheyenne Autumn* (dir. John Ford, 1964), which recognizes a shift in the western genre towards a narrative that actually takes into account the perspective and interests of Native Americans. Overall, genre filmmaking was always analysed in *Liberator* through the perspective of the ideology espoused by the magazine. Hollywood movies were at best perceived as reactionary and at worst as forcing an imperialist ideology. Mainstream films were not the cultural products these black authors were looking for or counting on their support in their emancipatory activities.

The need for cinematic realism

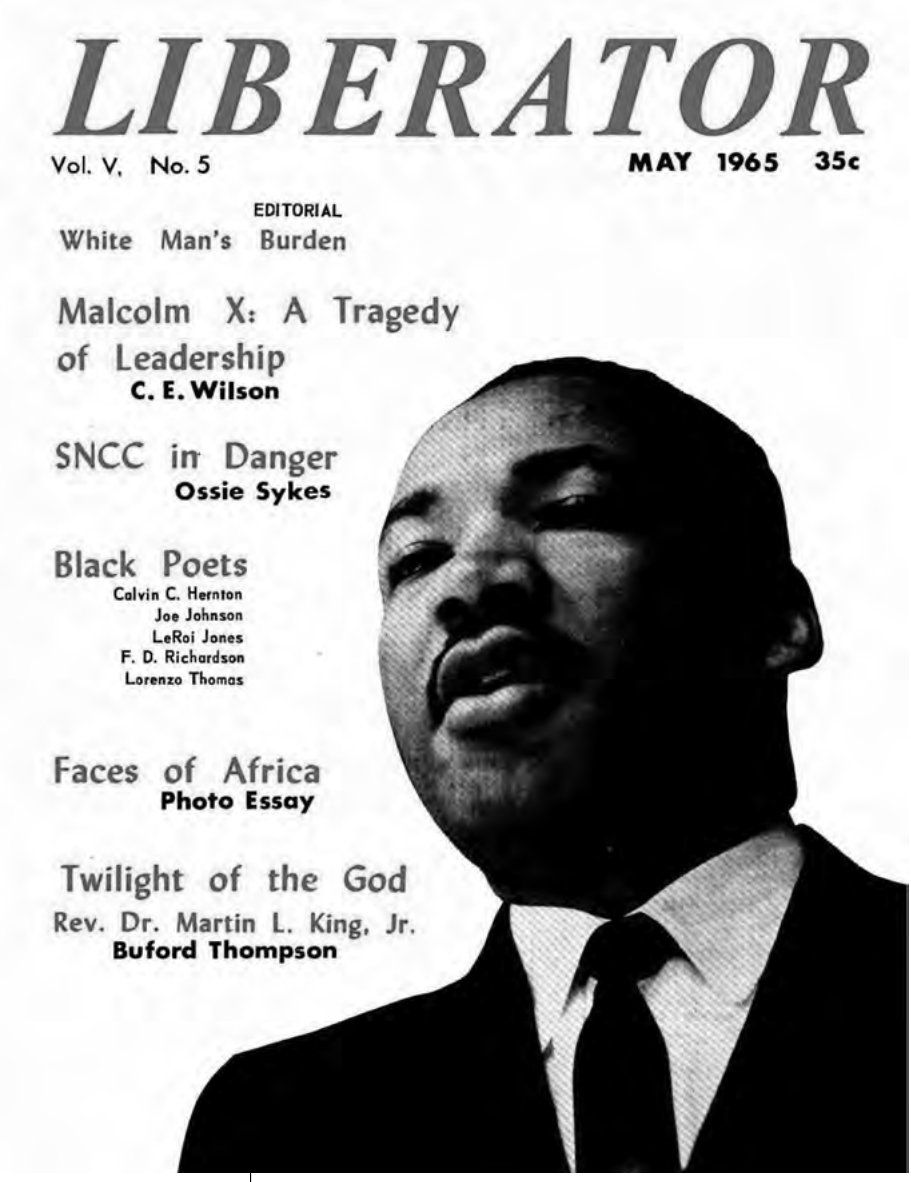
Another important aspect of the magazine's critical project was the need for cinematic realism noted in several reviews. One of the films that were warmly received by *Liberator* was *Nothing But a Man* (dir. Michael Roemer, 1964), an independent drama about the daily life of a black couple in Alabama. Clayton Riley wrote a sensitive, empathetic review which framed the release of the film as a unique event. The critic praised it for *spontaneity and naturalness* and noted that it *comes closer to being a "natural" than most pictures one encounters today, and for simplicity that frequently is both eloquent and beautiful it has few peers*.[36] As the chief theatre critic of *Liberator*, Riley was also very much attuned to the quality of performances, and his take on *Nothing But a Man* included perceptive observations on acting. He admitted that it is difficult to evaluate performances which are *deliberately underplayed*, but he shared his enthusiasm for the black cast of Roemer's film.[37] The review is not uncritical – Riley thought that the white director's vision of a black life was not fully convincing – but, together with Ford's "The Black Boom" article, it signals the need for cinematic realism, the appetite for multi-faceted representation of the daily life of African Americans.

Such calls for cinematic realism had been long present in the writings of American film critics. Significant discussions of this kind took place in the 1930s, when the American Left was a strong proponent of cinematic realism coupled

with modernist and democratic interests.[38] Importantly, in many of these debates, "realism" was defined quite loosely and could mean many things. However, usually, it signalled a more inclusive approach to representation, whether of the working class or ethnic/racial minorities. *Liberator* positioned itself as an emancipatory project and realism was often perceived as a valuable tool in the struggle. Providing the possibility to show groups, conflicts, and social phenomena thought to be beyond the realm of cinematic narratives, such realism could be an asset in the struggle against imperialist US politics and cultural imagination. The same need that propelled a dismissive attitude towards genre filmmaking encouraged critics to speak highly of 1960s cinematic realism, embodied by *The Cool World*, *Nothing But a Man*, and probably also by *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), praised by Riley for its *shocking candor* and hailed as *the greatest film* [he has] *ever seen*.[39]

The same need for authenticity and realism, however, produced a considerable level of mistrust when critics encountered narratives which strived for authenticity but could not achieve it. These productions, as reviewed in *Liberator*, constitute a separate category of sorts: films which, according to the critics, falsified reality and black experience and conformed to Riley's grim observation that *all theater and film as we have come to understand it – as the form has been permitted to develop in this country – has been an extreme and calculated falsehood*.[40] Film reviewers of *Liberator* were generally sceptical about formal experiments (for example elaborate editing in *The Pawnbroker*, dir. Sidney Lumet, 1964, and in selected sequences of *Easy Rider*, dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969). But they were also critical of the supposedly liberal efforts to present the black experience and problems of the revolutionary decade of the 1960s. Such films as *Sweet Love, Bitter* (dir. Herbert Danska, 1967; inspired by the life of the jazz musician Charlie Parker), *Dutchman* (dir. Anthony Harvey, 1967; based on Amiri Baraka's play), *Uptight* (dir. Jules Dassin, 1968; a loose remake of John Ford's *The Informer*, 1935, focusing on black revolutionaries in Cleveland), and *Putney Swope* (dir. Robert Downey Sr., 1969; a satire in which a black man becomes an advertising executive) were all considered misfires, panned for either *racial confusion* (*Uptight*)[41] or *inconsistent intentions* (*Putney Swope*).[42] *Dutchman*, wrote Riley, had a *naturalistic approach*, which, according to the critic, was one of the reasons why he found the film *a dismal failure*.[43] Cinematic realism – an aesthetically and ideologically undefined category in these writings – as revealed in *Nothing But a Man*, was, for *Liberator*'s critics, a more persuasive option than what they labelled as naturalism. Moreover, Hollywood's liberal efforts at depicting race relations, most notably in *Uptight*, were usually perceived as unsatisfying compromises. Since the magazine, throughout its ten-year run, published a vast array of political essays, pamphlets, and analyses, commercial and independent cinema was approached with these calibrated political concerns in mind. According to *Liberator*'s contributors, not a single mainstream American movie of the 1960s was capable of capturing and depicting radical black politics. Thus, satires like *Putney Swope* or faux biopics like *Sweet Love, Bitter* were evidence that the progressive politics of the era and the politics of the film industry were incompatible. *Liberator* saw a solution to this problem in the possibility of creating a distinct black cinema.

Liberator 1964, vol. 4, no. 7 (the cover of the July issue)



Liberator 1965, vol. 5, no. 5 (the cover of the May issue)

Creating a distinct black cinema

As if to complement the magazine's anti-integrationist strategies in the field of cultural criticism, *Liberator*'s reviewers signalled the need to create a distinct black cinema – not only featuring black actors and actresses and directed by black directors, but also produced by African Americans. In the 1950s, such attempts could be observed, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, given the criticism described above, in the realm of genre filmmaking. In the aforementioned first film review published by *Liberator*, "The Black Boom," Ford asked in the last sentence: *Whatever became of Harry Belafonte's Harbell* [sic!] *Productions?*[44] The name of the company is misspelled here – it should be Harbel Productions – but August 1964 was indeed a good moment to ask what had happened to it. Belafonte was the black Hollywood star of the 1950s, and at the end of the decade, his newly established production company made the science fiction film *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (dir. Ranald MacDougall, 1959) and the noir *Odds Against Tomorrow* (dir. Robert Wise, 1959). Belafonte entered film production intending to challenge racist stereotypes and simplifications of mainstream Hollywood.[45] However, Harbel Productions completed only these two features and Belafonte's career suffered in the 1960s due to reasons still open to debate.[46] The company tried to navigate the field of mainstream filmmaking and find a niche for black-produced genre pictures. Harbel's films were not box office hits, however, and in the 1960s Harry Belafonte doubled down on his activism in the civil rights movement.

Belafonte's career reflects the entanglements of politics and cinema in the 1960s. For many blacks, entertainment was an important field of battle for social and racial justice. *Liberator*'s critics would pay attention to the production side of the film business, exposing the power balance in the industry and the possible exploitation of the black cause by white filmmakers. Poitier's career, for example, was treated with ambiguity. More often than not, critics pointed out his limited agency as an African American star in movies written, produced, and directed by whites. Certain articles criticized the tendency to desexualize or imply the homosexuality of black characters. The review of *The Pawnbroker* suggests that *Sidney Poitier was more interested in fried chicken than a woman in "The Defiant Ones," never kissed his wife in "A Raisin in The* [sic!] *Sun," and so on, ad infinitum*.[47] Some movies with Poitier were considered preposterous, for example *The Lost Man* (dir. Robert Alan Aurthur, 1969) in which the actor plays a black revolutionary. Russ Meek wrote not so much a review as a scathing pamphlet, ridiculing the plot and implausibility of the whole film. He finished with a paragraph which highlighted Poitier's income: *All I have to say to Mr. Sidney ($9,000,000 earned in 1969) Poitier is… BULLSHIT. And go get "Lost Man"!*[48]

Clayton Riley was more generous in his interpretation of the Poitier phenomenon. Once again, his attention to acting encouraged him to read between the lines of the script and staging. Consider his close reading of a single moment in *For Love of Ivy* (dir. Daniel Mann, 1968), in which Poitier's character visits a white household to meet a maid named Ivy: *Witness. Sidney Poitier, as Jack Parks, reveals a level of contempt, of muted fury, that glows as fire glows, crackles like the flames that burn an ancient useless ante-bellum mansion. His performance is a masterpiece – nothing*

less – if you watch. W a t c h ! … the Black man enters the white family's Northern hacienda, looks over the goods, peeps the hygienic madhouse for what it r e a l l y is – what it really is. Tells us about them with that glance, reminds us what we think in similar circumstances. With just the look, you know… you remember?[49] Poitier's look in this scene undermines the conventional plot of the film devised by white filmmakers. According to Riley, this is the actor's moment of rebellion: Poitier interprets this scene by imbuing it with the perspective of a black man who sees through the abundance of the white household and knows that it was founded on the exploitation of black labour (including the labour of the maid whose name appears in the title). In fact, if we go beyond Riley's review and turn to the film itself, we see that Poitier's performance in this scene is understated, and he is framed from a low angle, suggesting his domination over the space of the house. The understated quality makes his acting open to various interpretations; Riley's focuses on the feelings and the perspective of "us," that is: radical black viewers.

Moments like these, however, were a rarity. Overall, *Liberator* encouraged black expression on the terms set by black artists. One of the failures of *Putney Swope*, Riley claimed, was that *specifically black consciousness is needed*, a consciousness that a white director did not have access to.[50] Interestingly, reviewing the film in *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby did not consider the racial angle important in any way; he enjoyed the inconsistency of the movie and described it with a number of adjectives: [*Putney Swope* is] *funny, sophomoric, brilliant, obscene, disjointed, marvelous, unintelligible, and relevant*.[51] An interesting footnote to this problem was the publication of an open letter titled *Introducing Chameleon Productions* in the September 1965 issue of *Liberator*. The letter informed about the creation of a new company, by Thelma Beale, George Waller and Gracie Caroll, *for the purpose of producing low-budget films with a Civil-Human Rights theme. These are to be feature-length films using an integrated technical and acting staff*.[52] It is impossible to say what happened with Chameleon Productions, as no records of their films or production plans seem to exist. It may have been an ephemeral venture that did not result in any completed pictures. But the very existence of such an enterprise confirms the need of a progressive part of the black community to produce and distribute their own films. The hopes for a distinct black cinema would partially be fulfilled in the 1970s. In the 1960s, such cinema was almost non-existent.

Into the mainstream cultural field: The case of Clayton Riley

The four tenets of *Liberator*'s film criticism described above positioned the magazine as a radical actor in the field of cultural criticism. Shying away from the belief in gradual progress, the magazine's critics demanded a different kind of cinema: one that would refuse to repeat harmful images from the past, would be set against Hollywood's commercialism epitomized by genre films, would be closer to cinematic realism, and would give means of production to black artists.

Clayton Riley was the most important film critic of *Liberator*. After the demise of the magazine in 1971, he did not stop writing criticism. Indeed, his career provides an example of a critic switching the cultural field and trying to position

himself in a new one without getting rid of his professional convictions. A comparison of Riley's writings for *Liberator* with his *New York Times* reviews from the 1970s, and the reactions they provoked, shows that such changes come with a cost. In *Liberator*, Riley reviewed a couple of films that in hindsight seem to open a new chapter in US cinema. The New Hollywood classics such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (dir. Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1969) signalled a change of guard in Hollywood: new directors, a revisionist approach to genres, and an unprecedented level of violence.[53] Riley was generally against excessive onscreen violence. He did not, for example, consider it a critical expression of the turbulent era (one exception being the justified violence in *Easy Rider*). He saw *The Wild Bunch* as a film *filled with the terms and form of killing for the pleasure of killing, filled with cheap and stolen gimmicks*.[54] The reluctance to acknowledge onscreen violence as both a useful mirror of violent times (filled with riots, political assassinations, and police brutality) and a direction for the 1970s cinema, put him at odds with the readers of mainstream press.

Riley contributed theatre and film reviews to *The New York Times* in the late 1960s and 1970s, including pieces on *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971) and *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971). He found the violence in Kubrick's film gratuitous and asked in the title of his piece on *Shaft*: "A Black Movie for White Audiences?" His take on Parks's film included bold, uncompromising cultural criticism: *Films like "Shaft" will be well received in this city because they provide Whites with a comfortable image of Blacks as noncompetitors, as people whose essential concern in life is making Mr. Charlie happy. It's about that big, Black, historically delicious breast of Mammy being stuffed into the collective mouth of America's White Kids of All Ages. It's about Saturday night diversions being provided by the darkies, the plantation boss striding through the cabin rows to check out some of those plump and dusky belles*.[55] Complete with the headline *A Black Critic's View of "Shaft"*, the article presented an attempt to disseminate in the mainstream press the radical language that Riley practiced in *Liberator*. *The New York Times* positioned itself in a different place within the US cultural field. These reviews, along with his longer piece on black movies, "Shaft Can Do Everything – I Can Do Nothing" from 1972, provoked a considerable response from the readers of *The New York Times* and proved divisive, encouraging the public to argue with Riley's nonconformist views. Several reactions were printed in the newspaper's "Movie Mailbag" section as letters from the readers, including one sent by Gordon Parks from Paris.[56]

Riley's adventure with reviewing movies for *The New York Times* was short-lived. After the dissolution of *Liberator*, he was looking for other places for which to write cultural criticism, and he contributed to *Ebony*, *The Village Voice*, *Newsweek*, and other outlets.[57] He also helped Martin Luther King Sr. write his autobiography *Daddy King*. As *The New York Times* example shows, he was unable to continue the project of radical film criticism in more popular outlets. In this regard, *Liberator* is an archive of progressive, leftist black criticism that could not have found its home outside the marginal realm of "the dissident press."

Reconstructing the tradition

Liberator published its last two issues in early 1971. For the magazine's critics, a distinct black cinema remained an unfulfilled project. Their writings covered the period right before the emergence of two different African American film movements: Blaxploitation and the L. A. Rebellion.[58] Perhaps the L. A. Rebellion, with its emphasis on black-produced films made by black filmmakers about the daily life of their communities, can be seen as an extension of the ideas championed by *Liberator*'s critics. By probing the cinema of the 1960s, Clayton Riley, Clebert Ford, L. P. Neal, and others continued the tradition of black film criticism, writing its new chapter.

That tradition itself has never been described as a coherent narrative. As the case of *Liberator* proves, political concerns and progressive ideology were deeply embedded in the critical efforts of black activists and intellectuals of the civil rights movement era. Far from the more moderate approach that we can find in the mainstream press and in the writings of America's most popular critics, writers from *Liberator* continued their fight for justice as viewers and reviewers. Despite shared ideological tenets, these writings are also surprisingly diverse and record a variety of differing voices.

Film criticism of *Liberator* is an important part of the political history of American film criticism. Mainstream white critics and black writers from "the dissident press" were equally, though from diverging perspectives, preoccupied with the relation between Hollywood, popular storytelling, and the broader social world. By bridging the gap between classical Hollywood cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the New Hollywood Cinema of the late 1960s, *Liberator* registers changes in the modes of spectatorship, including growing disillusion with commercially driven and liberal-minded attempts to render black life onscreen. *Liberator* may also be a missing link that can help us to understand the genealogy of James Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work*, a masterful example of film criticism which both continues the radical politics of the magazine and complicates it, adding the problems of projection-identification and emotional response to Hollywood stars and narratives.

Last but not least, *Liberator*'s legacy is alive in contemporary America, with progressive film criticism focused to a large extent on identity politics and the problem of representation. Many of the concerns shared by the magazine's authors are still very much discussed in the 2020s, including the terms on which African Americans should participate in the Hollywood industry. If we may speak of the tradition of African American film criticism, contemporary authors should look to *Liberator* as an inspiration and a source of polemical, minority views. Following Tinson's efforts to frame the magazine as a key publication of the 1960s, we should not underestimate its contribution to the US film culture of the past six decades.

[1] David Bordwell's book *The Rhapsodes* is of particular interest here, as the author tries to examine the influence of famous film critics on the broadly understood film culture (D. Bordwell, *The Rhapsodes: How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2016).

[2] See A*merican Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*, ed. P. Lopate, The Library of America, New York 2006.

[3] A. Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949*, Duke University Press, Durham – London 2001.

[4] Ibidem, p. 2.

[5] P. Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed", in: idem, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. R. Johnson, Columbia University Press, New York 1993, pp. 29-73.

[6] Ibidem, p. 30.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] Ibidem, p. 58.

[9] C. M. Tinson, *Radical Intellect: "Liberator" Magazine and Black Activism in the 1960s*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2017, p. 122.

[10] Ibidem, p. 45.

[11] Ibidem, p. 123. In the case of *Liberator*, it is difficult to establish the exact number of copies for each issue or year of publication. For example, a study of black magazines published in the 1970s described *Liberator*'s influence in general terms: *The periodical reached its largest circulation in the mid-1960s, when it was distributed in radical bookstores in Harlem, Greenwich Village, and in major cities throughout the United States* (A. A. Johnson, R. M. Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1979, p. 179).

[12] C. M. Tinson, op. cit., p. 4.

[13] Tinson writes that *"Liberator's" emergence at the beginning of the decade, in 1960-61, in many ways anticipated Black Power* (ibidem, p. 1).

[14] L. Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills 1984. Kessler *investigates a handful of the many fringe groups – political, social, and cultural – who, denied access to the mainstream media marketplace, started marketplaces of their own* (ibidem, p. 15).

[15] For a thorough overview of the movement as a translocal phenomenon encompassing the whole country, see J. E. Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill – London 2005.

[16] C. M. Tinson, op. cit., p. 81.

[17] D. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Continuum, New York – London 2002, p. 204.

[18] C. M. Tinson, op. cit., p. 125.

[19] L. Lierow, "The 'Black Man's Vision of the World': Rediscovering Black Arts Filmmaking and the Struggle for a Black Cinematic Aesthetic", *Black Camera* 2013, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 3-21.

[20] L. Neal, "Film and the Black Cultural Revolution", *Arts in Society* 1968, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 348-350.

[21] C. Ford, "The Black Boom", *Liberator* 1964, vol. 4, no. 8, p. 16.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Ibidem.

[24] D. Bogle, op. cit., pp. 71-77.

[25] M. B. Tolson, "'Gone With the Wind' Is More Dangerous Than 'Birth of a Nation'", in: *American Movie Critics…* op. cit., pp. 140-144.

[26] The origins of this saying are unclear. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory writes that *a history of displacement and a search for a better life brought with it a constant refrain – "Feet, don't fail me now!" – which resonates in blues songs and has become symbolic of the experiences of displacement among blacks.* However, the line also brings to mind the 1930s and early 1940s stereotype of a coon in the US cinema (E. Brown-Guillory, "'Feet, Don't Fail Me Now': Place and Displacement in Black Women's Plays from The United States, South Africa, and England", *CLA Journal* 2013, vol. 57, no. 2, p. 95).

[27] C. Ford, op. cit.

[28] C. Riley, "Hurry Sundown", *Liberator* 1967, vol. 7, no. 5, p. 21.

[29] Ibidem.

[30] As Thomas Aiello wrote in his study of the film and its distribution: *The film itself was a critical flop, and its production served as one in a long line of examples of white Hollywood's clumsy, ham-handed, stereotypical treatment of race before the final fall of the Production Code* (T. Aiello, "'Hurry Sundown': Otto Preminger, Baton Rouge, and Race, 1966-1967", *Film History: An International Journal* 2009, vol. 21, no. 4, p. 394).

[31] C. Riley, "The Professionals", *Liberator* 1967, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 20.

[32] Ibidem.

[33] L. P. Neal, "Goldfinger", *Liberator* 1965, vol. 5, no. 5, p. 28.

[34] Ibidem.

[35] B. Crowther, "Screen: Agent 007 Meets 'Goldfinger'", *The New York Times* 22.12.1964, p. 36.
[36] C. Riley, "Nothing But a Man", *Liberator* 1965, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 20.
[37] Ibidem.
[38] S. Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2001, pp. 35-39.
[39] C. Riley, "The Battle of Algiers", *Liberator* 1967, vol. 7, no. 11, p. 21.
[40] Idem, "For Love of Ivy", *Liberator* 1968, vol. 8, no. 9, p. 21.
[41] A. C. Clarke, "Uptight", *Liberator* 1969, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 18.
[42] R. Ormand, "The Learning Tree/Putney Swope", *Liberator* 1969, vol. 9, no. 11, p. 18.
[43] C. Riley, "Dutchman", *Liberator* 1967, vol. 7, no. 4, p. 20.
[44] C. Ford, op. cit.
[45] Emilie Raymond wrote that *Belafonte's primary goal with these films was to eliminate demeaning caricatures of blacks, but he also hoped to offer a more complex and everyday view of African American life. Even though Belafonte was close friends with Poitier, he thought the types of roles Poitier played were growing stale* (E. Raymond, *Stars for Freedom: Hollywood, Black Celebrities, and the Civil Rights Movement*, University of Washington Press, Seattle – London 2015, p. 19).
[46] Ibidem, pp. 80-81.
[47] C. Riley, "The Pawnbroker", *Liberator* 1965, vol. 5, no. 6, p. 25.
[48] R. Meek, "The Lost Man", *Liberator* 1969, vol. 9, no. 7, p. 20.
[49] C. Riley, "For Love of Ivy", op. cit.
[50] Idem, "Putney Swope", *Liberator* 1970, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 21.
[51] V. Canby, "Screen: 'Putney Swope,' a Soul Story", *The New York Times* 11.07.1969, p. 19.
[52] "Introducing Chameleon Productions", *Liberator* 1965, vol. 5, no. 9, p. 15.
[53] See D. Slocum, "The 'Film Violence' Trope: New Hollywood, 'the Sixties,' and the Politics of History", in: *New Hollywood Violence*, ed. S. J. Schneider, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004, pp. 13-33.
[54] C. Riley, "The Wild Bunch", *Liberator* 1969, vol. 9, no. 8, p. 21.
[55] Idem, "A Black Movie for White Audiences?", *The New York Times* 25.07.1971, section D, p. 13.
[56] G. Parks, "Aiming Shafts at a Critic of 'Shaft'", *The New York Times* 22.08.1971, section D, p. 8.
[57] W. Barrett, "Clayton Riley, 1935-2008", *The Village Voice* 27.10.2008, https://www.villagevoice.com/2008/10/27/clayton-riley-1935-2008 (accessed: 30.09.2022).
[58] On relations between the two movements, see J.-C. Horak, "Tough Enough: Blaxploitation and the L. A. Rebellion", in: *L. A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, eds. A. N. Field, J.-C. Horak, J. N. Stewart, University of California Press, Oakland 2015, pp. 119-155.

Sebastian Smoliński

Film scholar and critic, PhD student at the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw. Co-author of several publications, including the Spanish-language monograph *La doble vida de Krzysztof Kieślowski* (2015), a book about African American cinema, and a Polish-English monograph of David Lynch. Recipient of the 2019-2020 Kosciuszko Foundation scholarship for teaching history of Polish film at Cleveland State University in Ohio. He is preparing his PhD dissertation about American film criticism and the construction of national identity.

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Słowa kluczowe:
czasopismo „Liberator";
kino afroamerykańskie;
ruch praw obywatelskich;
ruch Black Arts;
czarny radykalizm;
czarna prasa

Abstrakt
Sebastian Smoliński
Spojrzenie mniejszości. „Liberator", kino amerykańskie i afroamerykańska krytyka filmowa lat 60. XX w.
Artykuł stanowi rekonstrukcję dyskursu krytyki filmowej w „Liberatorze" – radykalnym czasopiśmie afroamerykańskim wydawanym w latach 1961-1971. Posługując się teorią pola kulturowego Pierre'a Bourdieu, autor sytuuje „Liberatora" w kontekście lat 60., ruchu praw obywatelskich i ruchu Black Arts, a także analizuje rolę tego pisma w kulturze filmowej epoki oraz związki między magazynem a ważnymi czarnymi filmowcami i autorami tekstów o kinie. Omawia przy tym cztery aspekty publicystyki filmowej „Liberatora": pamięć kulturową o dawnych reprezentacjach, krytykę kina gatunkowego, potrzebę realizmu filmowego oraz możliwość stworzenia odrębnego kina afroamerykańskiego. Autor skupia się także na przedstawieniu kariery krytyka Claytona Rileya, który chciał kontynuować radykalną publicystykę w prasie głównego nurtu („The New York Times"). Spuścizna „Liberatora" została przedstawiona jako kluczowa dla zrozumienia tradycji afroamerykańskiej krytyki filmowej.