
Representation of Social Inequality in the Film “Wicked”: Reconfiguring Power Through Fantasy — a Semiotic Reading.

Sherlynn Yuwono, Jandy Luik, Fanny Lesmana

Communication Science Department, Petra Christian University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of social inequality in *Wicked* (2024), a fantasy musical film directed by Jon M. Chu, using John Fiske’s semiotic approach. Set in the fictional Kingdom of Oz, *Wicked* offers more than visual spectacle; it is a profound allegory that critiques hegemonic power, class stratification, and systemic marginalization. Through qualitative analysis, this study dissects the film’s signs—costume design, spatial hierarchies, character interactions, and narrative structures—to expose how social disparities are not only depicted but ideologically constructed. Utilizing John Fiske’s semiotic approach, this study aims to uncover how the film, as a subject, conveys objects in the form of signs that reproduce social inequality. The findings reveal that *Wicked* employs costume design and set aesthetics as semiotic codes to construct the image of hegemony, thereby reinforcing class disparity. Furthermore, the study concludes that the film underscores a critical message: it is not the distinction between right and wrong that determines one’s life trajectory, but rather the possession of power. The unequal access to truth and narrative voice ultimately strengthens the social divide within the film’s storyline—mirroring broader societal realities.

Keywords: *semiotics, representation, social inequality, hegemony, fantasy film.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, disparities in healthcare, education, and digital access became glaringly evident. These inequalities are not isolated to economic structures but are deeply woven into the cultural and ideological fabric of society, as theorized by Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci. Film, as a powerful medium of mass communication, often serves as both mirror and mold of such social conditions (OECD, 2021).

Talking about communication, and its advancements, means talking about the media. One of the most used medias in building culture (Fiske, 1987) is cinema. Cinema has long operated as a mirror to society, not only reflecting cultural norms and values but also

interrogating social hierarchies. In particular, the fantasy genre allows for allegorical storytelling that critiques systemic inequality under the guise of world-building. *Wicked* (2024), a musical fantasy film adapted from the Broadway production and originally Gregory Maguire's novel, presents such a critique. This paper investigates how the film represents social inequality through a semiotic analysis grounded in John Fiske's three-level model: reality, representation, and ideology (Fiske, 1987).

Before further discussing more into *Wicked's* profile,, we must first come down to its origins. The film *Wicked* (2024) is a cinematic adaptation of the Broadway musical that premiered on October 30, 2003, at the Gershwin Theatre in New York City. Both the film and the musical are based on the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) by Gregory Maguire. Unlike the widely known story *The Wizard of Oz*, *Wicked* recounts events in the Land of Oz before Dorothy's arrival, focusing on the friendship between Elphaba and Glinda during their time as students at Shiz University.

The Land of Oz is a magical realm where humans and animals live side by side. In this land, animals can even speak and serve as professors—including at Shiz University, a prestigious school of magic where the finest young witches are trained. Oz is ruled by a charismatic figure known as the Wizard of Oz.

Elphaba was born with green skin, a uniqueness that led to her being seen as strange and rejected since childhood. When she enrolls at Shiz University, she is assigned to room with Glinda—a cheerful, beautiful, and popular girl from an elite background. From the start, tension brews between them. Jealous of Elphaba's exceptional talent in magic, Glinda stirs the entire university to ostracize her.

Amidst a hostile academic environment, Elphaba begins to notice that animals in Oz are slowly losing their ability to speak and are being systematically marginalized. This discrimination drives her to seek help directly from the Wizard in Emerald City, whom she believes has the power to change the situation.

However, upon arriving in Emerald City, Elphaba discovers a bitter truth: the Wizard is the mastermind behind the oppression of the animals. He maintains power by silencing difference and enforcing conformity. The Wizard offers Elphaba power and recognition—on the condition that she joins his regime. But Elphaba refuses. She chooses to stand with the oppressed, a decision condemned by Glinda.

This choice turns Elphaba into a fugitive. She escapes from Emerald City, and just before she leaves for good, her conflict with Glinda reaches its peak—separating the two friends who once trusted each other deeply. The Wizard then announces to the entire Land of Oz that Elphaba is a villain: "The Wicked Witch of the West." Soon after, all of Oz begins a manhunt to capture and destroy her.

This research focuses on unpacking the visual, symbolic, and narrative markers of inequality in *Wicked*. Drawing on the works of Fiske, Gramsci, Hall, and Weber, the analysis aims to illuminate how film can reproduce or resist dominant ideological constructs.

Among the recent cinematic productions that embody this dual function is *Wicked* (2024), a film adaptation of Gregory Maguire's novel, which itself reimagines *The Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of the so-called "wicked" witch. With its dazzling set design, elaborate

musical scores, and emotionally charged performances, *Wicked* presents a unique opportunity to analyze how social inequalities—especially those rooted in class, race, and gender—are constructed and reproduced through semiotic systems.

The researcher was drawn to *Wicked* not only because of its 10 nominations for the 2025 Oscars, but also because the making of *Wicked* (2024) can be interpreted as a response to current social and cultural conditions. The film is adapted from Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), which was fundamentally written as a critique of traditional narratives around good and evil dualism, as well as an effort to uncover the dynamics of marginalization and power in society.

For comparison, films such as *Parasite* (2019), *Oppenheimer* (2023), and *Dune: Part Two* (2024) represent diverse approaches to portraying social issues. In 2019, *Parasite* presented a story about sharp class divides through the visual contrast between a wealthy family and a poor one. Semiotic elements like space (luxurious house vs. slum dwelling) illustrated the socioeconomic chasm at a time when global social inequality was sharply increasing.

Oppenheimer, meanwhile, explored ethical and moral dilemmas surrounding the development of nuclear weapons. The film did not only highlight the protagonist's internal conflict but also implicitly critiqued the ambition of power and its destructive consequences on global society. This reflects the atmosphere in 2023, marked by geopolitical conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war, intense debates over gender issues, and shifting moral paradigms about what is considered "good" or "evil"—leading to a public increasingly critical of power structures and social justice (New York Times, 2023).

Currently, several of *Wicked*'s competitors for Best Picture include *Conclave*—about the election of a new pope amidst Pope Francis' declining health and the Holy Door jubilee; *Anora* (which later became the winner), which tackles immigration and the life of a nightlife worker; *The Substance*, a thriller criticizing Hollywood's preference for actresses with idealized beauty over talent; and *Dune: Part Two*, a science-fiction narrative about resource conflicts and political power. The common thread among all these films is their focus on power, reflecting ongoing issues such as the U.S. presidential election and critiques of Hollywood's misogyny and ideological control over female and marginalized workers (NPR, 2025).

These films were recognized at the Academy Awards for their relevance to their times—reflecting contemporary sociopolitical realities. In that context, *Wicked* (2024) emerges as a work that not only reinterprets a classic narrative but also weaves in contemporary social issues. The difference is that *Wicked* is adapted from an American musical with a history of advocating for women's rights and lower/middle-class concerns. Moreover, the study of fantasy films as reflections of societal life remains a relevant topic in the ongoing evolution of cinema as a medium for messaging and critique.

Previous studies include *The Representation of Bullying in The Greatest Showman* by Cynthia Andriana Tjitra (2022), published in the E-Komunikasi Journal by Petra Christian University. This research examined bullying through John Fiske's semiotic lens, which dissects elements of film and television into Reality, Representation, and Ideology. Another related work is *Representation of Body Image in 'Wicked' and 'Phantom of the Opera'* by Maeve Sheils (2024), a journal article that applies cultural studies to analyze body image in both films.

That study focused on Fiske's "reality" dimension, showing how film and musical theatre reflect real-world social experiences.

Additional references include the article *Semiotics in the Chinese Theme Film of 'Seeing the Big Me with the Small Me'* by Xiaoyin Song from CheongJu University, which discusses social critique in film semiotics via melodic structures, exploring how visuals and media content act as signifiers (Metz, 1964). Complementing this, *Musical Perspective: An Analysis of How Musicals Reflect Cultural Discourse* by Alosi Morgan (University of California) introduces the concept of "cultural discourse," suggesting that musicals can shape national culture and mindset. For instance, *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda offers a new perspective on the French Revolution through the lens of American history. *Wicked* similarly reframes stigma and social inequality in the context of London politics. According to Maguire, author of the *Wicked* novel, the story aims to show how authority manipulates citizens through education systems.

Lastly, *A Textual Analysis of Songs from Wicked* by Delaney McDonald critiques the historical dominance of male writers in musical theatre—arguing that the underrepresentation of women stems from the lack of female writers and producers (Coleman & Sebesta, 2008). In London's West End, for example, male musical writers outnumber women nine to one. Without the voices and contributions of women, half the population continues to be misrepresented and viewed through a male lens (Acers, 2019).

The research gap identified here is both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, no previous study has comprehensively integrated all three semiotic dimensions—reality, representation, and ideology—to explore how *Wicked* (2025) represents and critiques power structures and social inequality within the context of American and global political discourse. Methodologically, previous studies have tended to focus on isolated elements of representation, offering limited insight into how musical fantasy films interact holistically as reflections of socio-cultural reality.

To further guide the research, the research question made through this background is;
"How was social inequality represented in the Film Wicked?"

This article positions *Wicked* within the discourse of social criticism, using John Fiske's three-level semiotic analysis (reality, representation, ideology) to dissect the mechanisms through which the film encodes and communicates hegemony. The study interrogates how symbols such as costume, architecture, and gesture operate not merely as aesthetic choices but as ideological texts reflecting broader structures of power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film as Mass Communication

Film transcends the boundaries of entertainment. As McQuail (1987) and Bahfiarti (2016) argue, film operates within the realm of mass media capable of shaping public consciousness. Unlike other forms of media, its visual and auditory capacity immerses

audiences into lived experiences, making it a potent vehicle for ideological reproduction or resistance.

Mass communication refers to a communication context that utilizes mass media, both print (magazines, newspapers) and electronic (TV, radio), which is managed by an institution or institutionalized individuals, and is intended for a large, dispersed, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience (Bahfiarti, 2016). The advantage of mass media over other forms of communication lies in its ability to transcend spatial and temporal barriers. Mass media can even disseminate messages almost instantaneously and without time constraints (Nurudin, 2017, p. 8).

According to Bahfiarti (2016), mass media—including film—has the advantage of delivering messages to widespread, heterogeneous, and anonymous audiences. Film can also overcome spatial and temporal limitations and distribute messages instantly, as elaborated by Nurudin (2017, p. 8).

Film as Mass Media

Film is one of the Big Five of Mass Media, following newspapers, magazines, radio, and television (Romli, 2012, p. 5). Films can be categorized into several types (Pratista, 2008, pp. 4–7):

- a) Documentary Film: The key characteristic is its presentation of facts. This genre deals with real people, events, and locations. Its storytelling structure is usually simple to help viewers easily understand and believe the facts presented
- b) Fiction Film: Fiction films are plot-driven and use invented stories unrelated to real events. Their structure usually follows a cause-effect logic, with protagonists and antagonists, conflicts, resolutions, and clearly developed narratives.
- c) Experimental Film: Lacking traditional plot, experimental films rely on instinctive, subjective elements such as the filmmaker's ideas, emotions, and inner experiences. They are abstract and often difficult to interpret.

Film, as a medium of mass communication, conveys messages through complex visual and audio elements like costume design, dialogue, editing, color grading, and set design. These elements generate social meaning through metaphor (Sobur, 2004, pp. 130–131).

Social Inequality: Beyond Economic Disparity

Weber (1946) expanded the understanding of inequality beyond Marxist economic determinism to include status and power. Social inequality now encompasses access to education, healthcare, and political influence. The pandemic revealed how systemic this issue is, even in so-called developed nations (OECD, 2021; WHO, 2020).

Social inequality is a phenomenon often rooted in the structural systems that shape society. Max Weber posits that social inequality arises from multiple factors including education, race, and economic conditions. Compared to other media, film demands a more serious and realistic approach to representation (McQuail, 1987, p. 14).

This phenomenon is evident in public and economic policies worldwide. For example, in 2018, the Trump administration imposed import tariffs of 25% on steel and 10% on

aluminum from most countries—including close allies like Canada, Mexico, and the European Union. As a result, certain sectors like agriculture and manufacturing experienced income drops and increased production costs. U.S. soybean farmers, for instance, lost their main export market in China due to retaliatory tariffs, causing significant income reductions and deepening economic inequality in rural areas.

Globally, these inequalities are intensified by economic, political, and exclusionary policies, making it harder for vulnerable groups to access essential resources (OECD, 2022). In Indonesia, inequality is apparent in stark disparities between urban and rural areas, and among economic classes, where access to quality education and healthcare remains limited for the poor (BPS, 2023; World Bank, 2021).

Efforts to reduce social inequality require redistributive policies such as improved access to education through scholarships and vocational training, equitable healthcare services, and fair regulations (UNDP, 2020). Governments play a crucial role in crafting inclusive public policy, while the private sector can contribute through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and public-private partnerships (Bappenas, 2022). Civil society must also participate actively in community organizations, critique unjust policies, and use digital platforms to voice aspirations and find innovative solutions to inequality (Putnam, 2000; Sari & Santoso, 2021).

With that, in conclusion, social inequality can be identified through characteristics described in existing social theories. It includes not only asset distribution but also disparities in access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities, all of which are harder to reach for marginalized groups.

Representation and Ideology in Media

Representation, as Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes, is a cultural process that goes beyond depicting reality—it constructs it. This construction often aligns with the dominant ideology, which Gramsci (1971) terms “hegemony”: the process by which consent is manufactured through cultural means rather than force.

Social inequality has long been a focus in various forms of media, including film. Film history shows that this issue is often raised as a reflection of real-world social conditions. Film has the power to represent class conflict in deeply emotional ways, encouraging audiences to understand the inequality that exists in everyday life. Compared to other media, film requires more realistic and serious approaches to representation (McQuail, 1987, p. 14).

From early cinema, films like *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang portrayed dramatic class conflict between industrial workers and elite rulers, while *Modern Times* (1936) by Charlie Chaplin critiqued industrialization's impact on ordinary people. In America, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based on John Steinbeck's novel, depicted the suffering of migrant workers during the Great Depression. *Do the Right Thing* (1989) by Spike Lee exposed racial tensions and systemic injustice in urban settings. In Europe, *La Haine* (1995) from France highlighted the anger of marginalized youth in suburban ghettos, while *The Class* (2008) showed sharp social contrasts in the educational system. More recently, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) from the UK

and *Parasite* (2019) from South Korea—despite not being Western—resonated globally, showing how economic disparity and racism remain urgent issues.

McQuail also notes that film uniquely portrays social reality in a deeper, more emotional way. These representations often reflect prevailing ideologies and either reinforce or challenge government authority.

Hegemony

Hegemony is domination achieved not only through physical power but also through ideological consensus accepted by subordinate groups. Antonio Gramsci argues that hegemony maintains the stability of a dominant group's power by shaping thought patterns, values, and norms that are accepted by society. This happens through control over ideology, media, education, and culture, all of which shape worldviews that benefit the dominant class (Gramsci, 1971).

Supporting elements of hegemony include:

- a) **Control Over Ideology and Culture:** This is exercised via media, education, religion, and art, where dominant narratives are widely propagated and accepted as legitimate societal values.
- b) **Influence of Social Institutions:** For instance, educational systems often promote the perspectives of ruling classes while neglecting or devaluing the experiences and values of marginalized groups.
- c) **Media and Mass Communication:** Media heavily influences public perception. By controlling news and how information is presented, media can distort social reality to serve dominant interests. Hegemony in media shapes a worldview that reinforces the dominant group's values and normalizes social inequality (Gramsci, 1971).

Semiotic of John Fiske

Semiotics is the study or method of analyzing signs. Signs are tools we use to navigate the world and interact with others (Sobur, 2009, p. 15). The term originates from the Greek *semeion* (sign) or *seme* (interpreter of signs). It corresponds with the term “semiology,” the study of meaning systems composed of signs and symbols (Arconada, 2023).

Semiotics examines how meaning is formed from signs in images, texts, or scenes in film and other media (Mudjiono, 2011). The meaning of an object isn't limited to its explicit message but also forms a structured sign system (Barthes, 1988; Kurniawan, 2001 in Sobur, 2009, p. 15). Fiske & Hartley (2003, p. 22) explain that semiotics has two main focuses: the relationship between signs and their meanings, and how signs are combined into codes.

Fiske (1990) divides media semiotics into three levels; 1) Reality: Use of culturally coded signs (gestures, accents, setting); 2) Representation: Technical codes (camera angle, costume, lighting); and 3) Ideology: Deep-seated meanings that reflect and reinforce power relations.

Ideology not only mirrors social reality but also actively shapes audience perceptions of what is “normal” or “natural.” For instance, a film might portray protagonists with luxurious fashion and elegant surroundings, reinforcing class stereotypes and supporting dominant social

structures. Media ideology debates center on whether media merely reproduces existing values or has the power to disrupt dominant narratives.

1. Though originally developed for television, Fiske's framework is applicable to cinema, especially since both use visual and auditory codes. Their difference lies in narrative depth and complexity—TV is often episodic, while film delivers meaning in more condensed yet layered form.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research approach. According to Guba and Lincoln (1984), qualitative research emphasizes naturalistic paradigms and tools that align with non-statistical, interpretive methods. The researcher does not rely on numbers or quantifiable data but instead applies in-depth qualitative analysis to interpret the symbolic meanings within the visual and narrative texts of *Wicked* (2024). Moleong (2018) further affirms that qualitative methodology centers on meaning-making processes rather than measurement. In this context, the researcher explores how signs function within film texts using the semiotic framework developed by John Fiske.

The researcher collected primary data from a home-video copy of *Wicked* (2024), provided by Universal Pictures for research purposes, with a total runtime of 160 minutes. The method used was documentation through screenshots to capture specific visual symbols and *mise-en-scène* relevant to the study.

Selected scenes were chosen based on their alignment with criteria from the Academy Awards for categories such as Best Production Design and Best Costume Design. The research method involves Fiske's semiotics, with three analytical foci. Data analysis followed several key steps derived from media analysis frameworks (Stokes, n.d.), which consists of;

- a) Reality: How the costume, set design, and character's gestures contribute into the film.
- b) Representation: How the reality codes is shown through the lens of the film, and;
- c) Ideology: The argument in which the media ensures through its reality and representation codes.

To ensure data validity, this research applies theoretical triangulation. Sutopo (2006) outlines four types of triangulation: data, investigator, methodological, and theoretical. This study uses the theoretical triangulation, relying on Max Weber's (1978) theory of social inequality, which identifies distinctions between social status, access to power, and cultural values. These are analyzed in tandem with Fiske's semiotics, creating a multi-perspective analytical model that reduces subjectivity and enhances reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wicked Constructs Differences in Social Status through Costume and Spatial Hierarchies



Figure 1.1: Glinda's iconic Bubble Dress and her initial inspiration, as stated by Tazewell, 2024.

Source: Interview from Elle Fashion and *the Making of Wicked*, 2024.

The juxtaposition between Glinda's haute-couture wardrobe and Elphaba's dark, minimalist attire is a clear visual metaphor for social stratification. Costumes here serve not only aesthetic but ideological functions, encoding privilege and marginalization. This aligns with John Fiske's assertion that,

"Clothing is not just a cover for the body, it is a social signifier. The clothes we wear communicate messages about class, gender, sexuality, and social position" (Fiske, 1989, p. 3).

In *Wicked*, Glinda wears a bubble dress—a gown characterized by a voluminous, balloon-like silhouette, particularly around the hemline. According to fashion curator Elizabeth Way;

"The bubble dress is a fashion silhouette in which the hemline is tucked under to create a balloon-like effect. It often expresses a whimsical, playful femininity, and became popular as a couture and theatrical statement" (Way, 2021).

Color in costume is equally symbolic. According to the journal article *"Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America"* (2012), pink was historically associated with boys due to its connection with strength and bravery. Only post-WWII did pink evolve into a symbol of femininity and luxury, especially in Western consumer culture. Rutherford and Baker (2021) explore this transformation in their discussion of the "Princess Bubble" aesthetic, which has been commercialized by Disney and embedded into popular culture. According to Rutherford, pink brings Glinda's femininity a new meaning; instead of empowering grace, it instead supports luxury and consumer culture (Rutherford, 2021).



Figure 1.2: Wicked 2024's Elphaba and the original Elphaba from the Wizard of Oz, and their initial inspiration as stated by Paul Tazewell.

Source: Interview from Elle Fashion and *the Making of Wicked*, 2024.

In contrast, Elphaba's costume remains consistently black, paired with a pointed witch's hat. The color black traditionally connotes elegance and wealth—particularly among the aristocracy in 14th-century Europe (Refashioning Renaissance, 2014)—but gradually became common among the working class as materials and dyes became more accessible (Silvana Editoriale, 2009). In fictional narratives, black is often used to symbolize power or evil. In medieval Christian iconography, witches and devils were portrayed in black to signify rejection of divine light (Bible Boulevard, 2012).

One of Elphaba's most distinctive features is her green skin. From a semiotic color perspective, green can symbolize nature and growth, but also jealousy and abnormality (Fiske, 1989). Victoria Donovan (2010) suggests that Elphaba's green skin visually confronts the audience with a challenge to conventional binaries of good and evil, reinforcing Wicked's progressive narrative about social stigma and hegemony. In popular culture, green-skinned characters such as Shrek and the Hulk have similarly embodied "the Other."

In Shrek (2001), the titular ogre is feared by society despite his gentle nature. Executive producer Aron Warner explained, "*We made Shrek green to make him instantly unrelatable—he's a monster to everyone but the audience, who gets to see the real him*" (DreamWorks, 2001).

Likewise, the Hulk in Marvel Comics was made green due to a printing issue, but the color persisted and became associated with uncontrollable strength and a misunderstood identity (Stan Lee, 1984).

Film scholar Brady Hammond (2013), in his article "Greenface," argues that green skin is often used to transfer old racial stereotypes into fantastical contexts, allowing films to address social and racial issues indirectly. Hammond writes,

“It is not the aim here to suggest that using green to represent a real-world skin color is something new; instead it is to remind that cinema is a complex art form and even seemingly mundane films are filled with political issues that directly relate to the period in which they are released.” - (Brady Hammon, Greenface, 2013).

Elphaba, therefore, occupies a symbolic position where her green skin marks her as dangerous or deviant, yet her moral arc reveals her as compassionate and just—a reversal of stereotypical villainy.

This symbolism is most vividly captured in the film’s “Defying Gravity” sequence. Elphaba receives her black cloak and broom, symbolizing her break from societal expectations. Her broom, traditionally a domestic object, is repurposed here as a symbol of self-agency and transformation (Davies, 2009).

Wicked (2024) prominently features costume designs that draw from Edwardian and haute couture aesthetics, each carrying rich cultural and semiotic implications. Edwardian fashion, originating in the early 1900s, is characterized by high collars, corseted silhouettes, elaborate trims, and structured tailoring—often associated with aristocracy and conservative upper-class values (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). Meanwhile, haute couture, a French term meaning “high sewing,” refers to custom-fitted, luxurious garments crafted by elite fashion houses, often symbolizing exclusivity, wealth, and artistic prestige (Arnold, 2001). In the film, characters like Glinda are often dressed in extravagant, high-structured garments with ornate detailing and voluminous skirts—visually aligning her with elite power structures.

Applying John Fiske’s (1987) semiotic theory, these costume choices operate within the code of reality, where appearance, dress, and bodily presentation act as signifiers of class and ideological alignment. Through this lens, Glinda’s haute couture ensembles connote hegemonic femininity and privilege, while contrasting with Elphaba’s more austere black attire, which signifies resistance, marginalization, and ideological opposition within Oz’s social hierarchy.

The Social Barriers through the Set Design of *Wicked*

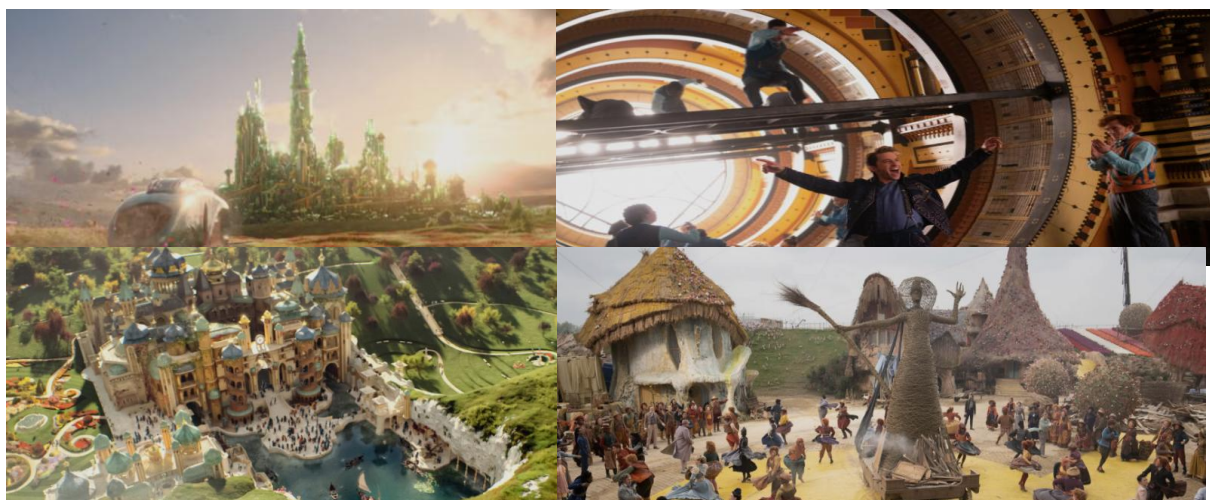


Figure 1.3: (From right to left), The Emerald City, Shiz University, Library of Shiz, and Munchkinland in the Kingdom of Oz

Source: *Wicked*, Universal Pictures, 2024.

Narratively, Oz is visually segregated into zones of abundance (Emerald City) and scarcity (Munchkinland). Emerald City is constructed in Art Deco and Edwardian splendor, symbolizing elitism, while Shiz University is modeled after elite American universities, revealing the exclusivity of knowledge and power.

Emerald City being the Wizard's homeland—frequently referred to by critics as an “American fairytale”—was inspired by the World's Fair held in Chicago in 1893, known as the “White City.” The phrase “American fairytale” was first introduced in the 1900 novel *The Wizard of Oz*, referring to Dorothy's journey into a magical world after being swept up by a tornado. In the original story, Emerald City serves as the palace or “end of the tale.” In *Wicked* (2024), however, spatial representation within Emerald City (see Figure 4.33) is used to depict class structure: tall, expansive buildings for the elite, contrasted with lower, open areas for the Munchkins (Delloria, 2021).

Shiz University showcases a fusion of Indian, Moorish, and Gothic architectural elements. Crowley integrates domed structures and geometric ornaments influenced by Mughal architecture, suggesting opulence and exoticism (Architectural Digest, 2024). The result is a grand, multicultural educational institution—similar in architectural tone to Hogwarts in the Harry Potter franchise—symbolizing elite knowledge and cross-civilizational prestige.

In the “Dancing Through Life” sequence, the Shiz University library set plays a central role in conveying the film's core themes. Designed by Nathan Crowley, the library features circular, rotating bookshelves that disrupt conventional spatial logic. According to Crowley,

“This is a rotating bookshelf because everything in Oz has a very circular shape to it. In the library, they don't have regular shelves. Nothing is regular in Oz, but at Shiz, the bookshelves are curved. And in this case, you walk up to get your book.” (Crowley, 2024, as cited in Entertainment Weekly).

That being said, knowledge flows in spirals and surprises—mirroring the disorderly and magical essence of Oz itself. The library's design, therefore, becomes a metaphor for how Oz's social and intellectual structures challenge traditional epistemologies. This spatial segregation is not incidental but rather part of what Gramsci (1971) would identify as cultural hegemony.

Gestures and Speech Patterns Embodies Difference in Status

In television theory and popular culture, John Fiske emphasizes that gesture (body movement) and dialect (speech patterns) are part of the social codes used by media to implicitly convey meaning. These are not merely technical or stylistic elements, but symbolic communication tools loaded with significance about social class, identity, and power. As Fiske notes:

“The semiotic codes of television include those of appearance, dress, gesture, posture, facial expression, and dialect – all of which signify social meanings and distinctions.”

— John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 1987, p. 4

Elphaba's assertive body language and deep vocal tones contrast with Glinda's melodic, soft-spoken lines. These auditory and gestural codes delineate not just personality but social acceptability, echoing gendered and racialized tropes.

One of the most significant moments in shaping the narrative of *Wicked* (2024) occurs when Glinda first appears before the Munchkins. The scene opens with visuals of a cheering crowd of Munchkins, and one of them shouts:

Munchkin: *"Good news! The Wicked Witch of the West is dead!"*

This line does not only serve as a narrative exposition but also as a value statement—the word “Good” is explicitly used to legitimize someone's death as something positive. In contrast, according to Stephen Schwartz in his interview with *The New York Times* (2003), the choice of the word “Good” at the beginning of that line was deliberately crafted to introduce moral ambiguity from the very start of the story. In that article, Schwartz stated: *“We wanted the audience to feel immediately confronted with the idea that what’s considered ‘good’ is often a matter of perspective.”*

In other words, the word “Good” doesn’t just reflect a joyful mood—it also implies the existence of a social construct regarding who deserves to be called “good” or “evil.” After the cheer, Glinda launches into her iconic opening monologue:

Glinda: *"Are people born wicked? Or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?"*

This question opens up a broader discussion about how identity and perception are shaped—particularly through social and cultural influences. One of the ways the film communicates this is through the gestures and dialects of its characters.

Next is the *Defying Gravity* sequence. The positioning of Elphaba at the center of the stage and screen—particularly in scenes like *Defying Gravity*, where she is surrounded by guards but visually elevated above them—is not merely an aesthetic blocking choice but one loaded with ideological meaning. In John Fiske’s semiotics, this can be interpreted through the levels of representation and ideology, where a character’s physical position and spatial occupation are not just about who is being seen, but who is symbolically perceived as holding power.

The film’s final monologue excerpt is as follows:

Guard (ensemble): *“No one mourns the Wicked!”*

The first word of the film is “Good,” while the last word is “Wicked.” This is no coincidence. Stephen Schwartz, the lyricist of *Wicked*, deliberately chose “Good” as the opening word to create irony and to critique the binary narrative of good versus evil found in traditional fairy tales (*The Guardian*, 2006).

Throughout the film, these words are deconstructed. At first, “Good” sounds objective. But after witnessing Elphaba’s journey, the audience begins to realize that “Wicked” is merely a social label imposed by those in power to suppress difference and resistance.

Immediately after those final words are shouted, Madame Morrible, under the Wizard’s command, takes the microphone to declare:

Madame Morrible: *“Citizens of Oz, there is an enemy who must be found and captured. Believe nothing she says. She has stolen our grimoire. She is evil... that green... she is the beginning of a twisted tale, this distortion, this repulsion, this wicked witch.”*

Madame Morrible and the Wizard represent a regime that dominates mass communication. They manipulate public perception of Elphaba through their institutional

power. By inventing the term “Wicked Witch of the West,” they apply a deeply emotional label to replace Elphaba’s true identity.

In English, the word “*wicked*” literally means “immoral” or “morally wrong.” As in the musical and film *Wicked*, the term is used ironically to reveal how social labels can be weaponized by those in power to stigmatize individuals or groups. For example, Elphaba is branded the “Wicked Witch” by the authorities to justify their actions against her, despite the fact that her behavior is not actually evil (CBS News, 2024).

The Wizard and Madame Morrible exert power by controlling language—rewriting events, assigning blame, and redefining terms such as “wicked” and “good.” Elphaba’s inability to participate in these narrative constructions leaves her silenced. In Fiskean terms, her character lacks narrative agency until she forcibly reclaims it.

Transportation and Movement: The Politics of Access

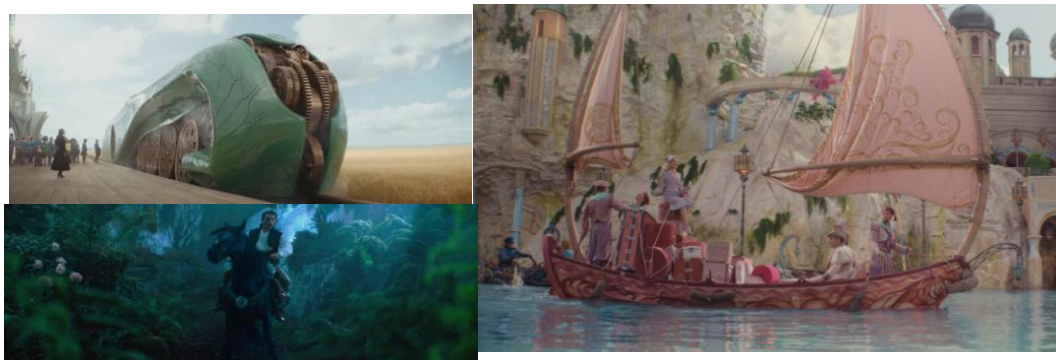


Figure 1.4: Different Transports shown in the Film *Wicked*

Source: *Wicked*, Universal Pictures, 2024.

In media studies, vehicles are often used as symbolic markers to indicate social and economic mobility (Turner, 2006). In Oz, who travels by what means—and how they arrive at their destination—is not merely part of the visual narrative but a narrative device that subtly affirms who is “entitled” to space, education, and power.

In the film, class differences are subtly conveyed through modes of transportation. New students heading to Shiz University arrive via small rowboats, creating the impression of a quiet yet exclusive initiation ritual. Glinda and other elite students travel in ornate golden carriages, symbolizing privilege and comfort available only to the upper class. Meanwhile, Fiyero appears majestically on horseback, evoking classical aristocratic symbolism of status and freedom.

One of the more prominent media symbols is Oz’s train system. As shown in Figure 1.4, the train is depicted with a sleek and luxurious exterior. Its interior is lined with cushioned seats, engraved wooden panels, and gleaming chandeliers. According to the film, the train is owned by the Wizard of Oz and used exclusively for travel to the Emerald Kingdom. Its green metallic aesthetic reflects a magical yet futuristic design. The rounded design, embellished with gold or brass carvings around the door, enhances its sense of the exclusively magical technology of Oz (Architectural Digest, 2024).

In *Wicked* (2024), the character Fiyero Tigelaar, played by Jonathan Bailey, is closely associated with his horse—symbolizing freedom and his identity as a prince from Winkie

Country. This horse, referred to as *Feldspur* in the script (though not explicitly named in the film), plays an important role in framing Fiyero's noble persona. Feldspur is a dark-colored, stately horse whose elegance and strength visually reinforce Fiyero's aristocratic status. Its gear and costume design are detailed, emphasizing the limited but lavish world of Oz.

Historically, especially in medieval Europe, only nobles, knights, and the elite could afford to keep horses. Ownership of a horse symbolized wealth and honor. In England, for instance, military officers and high-ranking officials used horses during parades and ceremonies to assert their social legitimacy (Gilmour, 2012). In art and literature, protagonists—kings, heroes, or knights—are often shown on horseback as metaphors for majesty and control over destiny. Horses often appear as part of “the chosen one” or savior narratives across media.

In one of the early scenes of *Wicked* (2024) (see 4.2.2), new students arrive at Shiz University by boat, gliding across calm waters. This visualization connects to the concept of *rites of passage* in anthropology (Van Gennep, 1960), where water functions as a transition medium from a “pre-social” phase into integration within a new social system. Simply put, it marks a character's journey from one state of identity to another. Shiz University, as an academic setting, represents a cultural field (Bourdieu, 1993). They begin as students, rowing toward Shiz, and arrive as subjects being molded by an elite institutional framework.

This is mirrored in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), where first-year students travel silently by boat across a dark lake to reach Hogwarts, signifying a severing from the mundane world and entrance into a new realm of magic, structure, and hierarchy. In *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010), characters sail into the unknown as part of a spiritual and moral quest. In all these examples, water functions as the medium by which characters cross from one phase of identity to the next.

Only the elite characters have access to magical trains and flying vehicles, while others remain static or trapped. The metaphor here is clear; access to mobility, both literal and social, is a function of power.

Narratives of Truth and Silence: The Wizard as Hegemon

According to John Fiske (1987), narrative is not merely a story—it is a structure of representation that organizes meaning and ideology. Narrative shapes how we understand the world through the arrangement of events, characters, conflicts, and resolutions. Meanwhile, Max Weber defines power as:

“Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance.”

In other words, politics or power is the ability of a social actor to enact their will, even when facing opposition from others.

Regarding the film *Wicked*, the VCE *Wicked* Study Guide (2003) identifies two major stylistic elements in its musical adaptation:

“The existence of talking animals and their subsequent silencing in Oz reflects magical realism. [...] The Wizard's authoritarian rule over Oz and his manipulation of public perception is a clear example of political drama.”

— (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2003, p. 7)

Narratively, *Wicked* adopts a progressive structure, which in this context refers to the ideological transformation of its central character over the course of the story. In narrative theory, a progressive structure is one in which the protagonist undergoes significant development—from passive to active, from submissive to critical (Chatman, 1978). Elphaba does not merely endure conflict; she resists it. She comes to realize that the seemingly neutral system around her conceals an oppressive power structure. This realization transforms *Wicked* into more than just a story about magic—it becomes a tale of resistance against hegemonic systems.

Wicked (2024) presents a consciously progressive narrative that reconstructs dominant social representations long established in Western popular culture. Unlike conventional fairy tales, which often divide characters along a strict good-versus-evil dichotomy, *Wicked* blurs these boundaries. It offers a more nuanced reality where The Wizard's control over truth and media—using public announcements, posters, and false propaganda—mirrors real-world state apparatuses. Dr. Dillamond, the silenced goat professor, serves as an allegory for intellectuals marginalized by authoritarian regimes.

Hegemony Strengthens the Social Inequality in Wicked, Shown through Fiske's Semiotic Signs.

The film's most powerful ideological statement is the notion that truth is not objective but constructed by those in power. The Wizard's regime maintains control by presenting a singular version of reality, marginalizing alternative voices.

For instance, in *Wicked*, the central conflict arises from the injustice experienced by Elphaba and the animals. Access to luxury transportation, elite education at institutions like Shiz University, and even modes of dress or speech are all markers of class and social status—differences shaped by disparities in access and knowledge.

Several findings from this study, such as access to transportation and the differing gestures of characters, are also rooted in the level of education they've received. In this context, when Elphaba chooses to leave Oz, the narrative that follows reframes her as an antagonist. The Wizard of Oz successfully constructs a story that casts Elphaba—who is actually a righteous figure—as “The Wicked Witch of the West.”

Gramsci's (1971) hegemony theory aligns here: power is sustained not through overt force but through cultural consent. The citizens of Oz accept the Wizard's truth because it is embedded in law, education, and spectacle. Elphaba's green skin becomes a symbol not of evil, but of “otherness” as defined by a fearful majority.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is visible in how the citizens of Oz accept the Wizard's version of reality. The population consents not because they are forced but because they are ideologically conditioned through education (Shiz), media (The Wizard's broadcasts), and spectacle (public ceremonies).

Another form of hegemony at work here is the concept of social consensus, in which the public fails to critically examine messages delivered by institutions or leaders (Gramsci, 1971). People quickly believe that Elphaba is “The Wicked Witch of the West” simply because

Madame Morrible says so—she has mentioned that Elphaba is ‘wicked’ due to her green skin and ideals. But both Madame Morrible and The Wizard fails to see things unclouded past Emerald City’s green. Their narrative gives the color green a whole new meaning. It’s not about who is right or wrong, but about who has the power and access to shape public opinion. Who won the ‘war’ at the end shall tell the story, as Gramsci also stated (1971).

This reflects how hegemony creates social hierarchies that appear natural, when in fact they are the result of value control by dominant groups. This is illustrated in the following diagram:

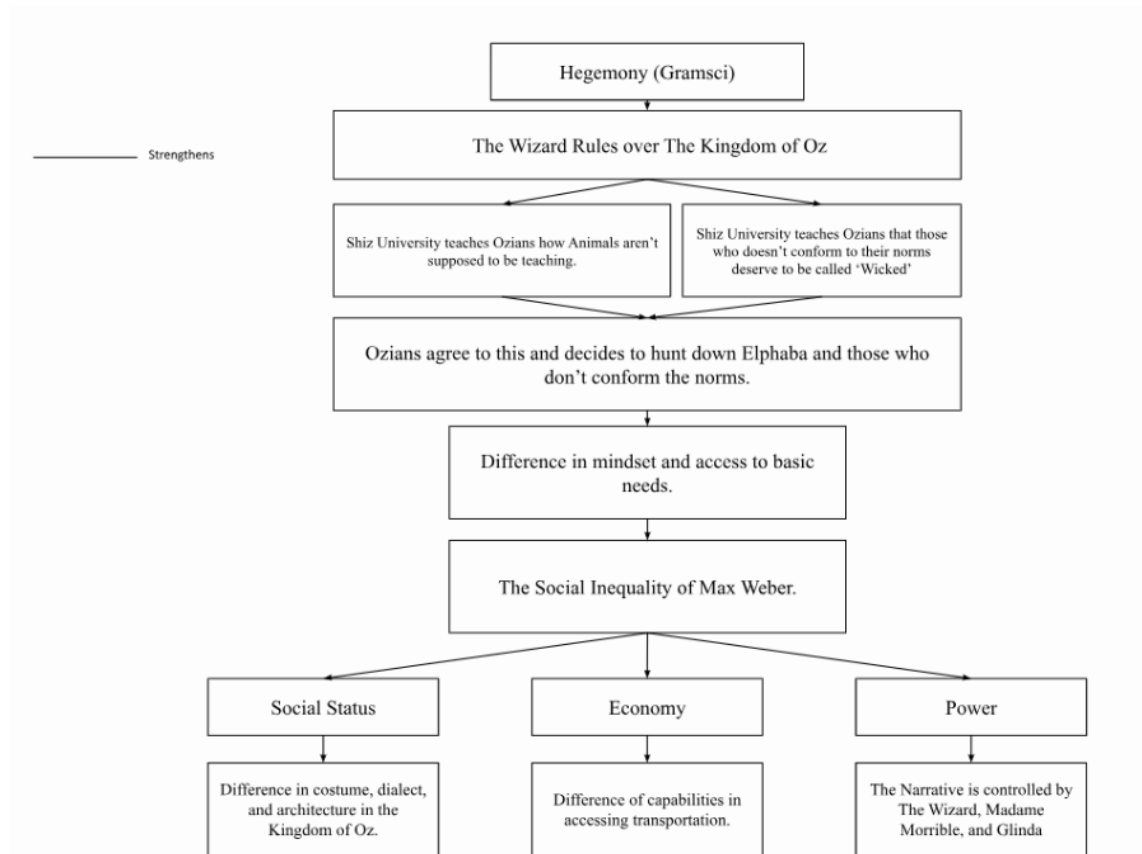


Figure 1.5: The Relationship between Hegemony and Social Inequality, as Shown in the Semiotics of Wicked

Source: Researcher, 2025.

The silencing of Dr. Dillamond, a goat professor, is symbolic of systemic erasure of minority voices. His character arc reflects historical and contemporary patterns of dehumanization and academic censorship. The line, "The one thing that brings people together is a real good enemy," underscores how scapegoating is institutionalized.

This aligns with Weber’s (1946) theory of power as exercised through bureaucratic systems that render dissent invisible. The narrative of Dillamond, while secondary, becomes crucial in illustrating the breadth of hegemonic influence in the world of Oz.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Wicked* (2024) offers a nuanced and powerful critique of social inequality, embedded within a fantasy framework. Using John Fiske's semiotic theory, the analysis reveals how the film constructs meaning through a multilayered system of codes—reality, representation, and ideology. Through visual elements such as costume, lighting, and space, and narrative devices including character dialogue, control of discourse, and symbolic silencing, the film critiques hegemonic systems that marginalize the “other.”

By drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Weber's understanding of stratification, this research illustrates how *Wicked* exposes the ideological foundations of class, gender, and institutional power. The portrayal of Elphaba not as an inherently evil figure but as a victim of systemic prejudice invites audiences to reconsider how truth, morality, and power are constructed.

Wicked (2024) challenges hegemonic ideology. As outlined in the analysis from Section 4.3.4, where the structure of *Wicked* is identified as narratively progressive, Elphaba—the green-skinned witch—is portrayed as intelligent, compassionate, and courageous in standing up against injustice. She disagrees with the prevailing hegemony and the social inequalities in Oz, and she willingly allows herself to be labeled “The Wicked Witch of the West” in the process.

Once again, *Wicked* tells a story in which power is not about who is right or wrong. It's not about who is “good” or “wicked.” It's about who wins and who loses—and who holds power versus who is made powerless. It exemplifies the potential of musical fantasy to speak truth to power and serve as a medium for ideological resistance.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. Verso.
- Architectural Digest. (2024, November 21). How 'Wicked' Built Immersive Real-Life Sets, From Shiz To Emerald City [Video]. Architectural Digest.
<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/video/watch/the-blueprint-show-how-wicked-built-immersive-real-life-sets-from-shiz-to-emerald-city>
- Banwait, P., & Merriam-Pigg, A. (2019). ‘No One Mourns the Wicked’: Evolving Perspectives on the Wicked Witch of the West. In *I Want to Do Bad Things: Modern Interpretations of Evil* (pp. 123–133). Brill.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848883307_013
- Barker, M., & Brooks, K. (1998). *The audience and its media* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Barnette, J. (2023). *Witch Fulfillment: Adaptation Dramaturgy and Casting the Witch for Stage and Screen*. (pp. 1–192). Taylor and Francis.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003273431>
- Barthes, R. (1983). *The Fashion System*. University of California Press.
- Bender, S. (2016). The witch in ancient Western literature: From Circe to Medea. *Journal of Classical Studies*, 34(2), 123-139.
- Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Schocken

Books.

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Chu, J. M. (Director). (2024). *Wicked* [Film]. Universal Pictures.
- Cochran, S. (2024, September 17). How the Sets of the New Movie *Wicked* Venture Off the Beaten Yellow-Brick Road. *Architectural Digest*.
<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/how-the-sets-of-the-new-movie-wicked-Venture-off-the-beaten-yellow-brick-road>
- Cooper, C. Dior: A New Look, A New Enterprise (1947–1957). (2025). *Dress*.
<https://doi.org/10.1179//dre.2010.36.1.90>
- Connelly, S. (2020). Green Skin and Monstrous Bodies: Colorism, Race, and Representation in Popular Culture. *Journal of Media Aesthetics*, 8(2), 45–58.
- Cowen, T. (2009). *Creative Destruction*. Princeton University Press.
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/451375>
- Dargis, M. (2024, November 21). “Wicked” Review: Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande in *Oz*. *Nytimes.com*; *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/movies/wicked-review.html>
- Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 24(3), 285–290. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0033731>
- Johnson, F. W. (2025, January 2). *Wicked: Art Mirrors Our Modern Social Divides*. *The Fulcrum*. <https://thefulcrum.us/cynthia-erivo-wicked-identity>
- Fashion Law Journal. (2024, December). Counting Down the More Influential Films in Fashion. *Fashion Law Journal*.
- Fiske, J. (1990). *Introduction to communication studies*. Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. Routledge.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Gitlin, T. (2003). *The sixties: Years of hope, days of rage*. Bantam Books.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79* (pp. 128-138). Hutchinson.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
- Lexy J. Moleong. (2018). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Edisi Revi, P. 410).
- McDonald, C. (2020, April 24). A Textual Analysis of Songs from *Wicked*. *Mtsu.edu*.
<https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/items/090041a4-bf0b-4024-91f7-683ec31bc9f9>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Tjitra, A. H. (2022) Representasi Bullying Dalam Film *The Greatest Showman*. *Jurnal E-Komunikasi*.
- Rutherford, A., & Baker, S. (2021). The Disney ‘Princess Bubble’ as a Cultural Influencer. *M/C Journal*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2742>
- Rodgers, D. (2024, November 19). “I Have Definitely Been Changed For Good”: Cynthia

- Erivo Takes A Final Bow In Schiaparelli's Wicked Couture. Vogue UK.
<https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/cynthia-erivo-wicked-ariana-grande>
- Semiotics in the Chinese Theme Film of "Seeing the Big Me with the Small Me." (2023). *Art and Performance Letters*, 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.23977/artpl.2023.041108>
- Serpa, S., & Ferreira, C. M. (2019). The Concept of Bureaucracy by Max Weber. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 7(2), 12–12.
<https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v7i2.3979>
- Sheils, M. (2024). Body image in theatre: Analysing the representation of body image in *Wicked* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Figshare. <https://doi.org/%22>,
- Shepherd, J., & Wicke, P. (1994). *Music and Cultural Theory*. Polity Press.
- Solekha, A. (2024, December 2). *Kenapa Film Wicked Sukses di Box Office? Berikut Alasannya!* IDN Times.
<https://www.idntimes.com/hype/entertainment/amelia-solekha/kenapa-film-wicked-sukses-di-box-office-c1c2>
- Weber, M. (1946). Politics as a vocation. In H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (pp. 77–128). Oxford University Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press
- Weber, M. (1946). Class, Status, Party. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (H. H. Gerth & C. W. Mills, Eds.). Oxford University Press.