

DEFYING TYRANNY: ACHIEVING POLITICAL ESCAPE VELOCITY WITH *WICKED*

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Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) sizes up Galinda (Ariana Grande) upon their initial meeting on their first day at Shiz University in *Wicked* (2024, dir. Jon M. Chu). Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

One hundred and twenty-five years since its publication, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) remains America's favorite object lesson in exposing false idols. Due in part to the massive popularity (and continued iconicity) of the 1939 MGM film-musical adaptation, most audiences today remember the dramatic conclusion to the story in the same way. In a fantastical realm far from our own called Oz, four intrepid friends—a Cowardly Lion, a brainless Scarecrow, a heartless Tin Man, and a brave young girl from Kansas named Dorothy—follow an enchanted yellow brick road, seeking a mythical wizard to fulfill each of their heart's desire. Much to their surprise, they discover that the wizard is merely a base illusionist, a former circus performer (and putative con artist) who accidentally landed in this alternate universe, convincing its

people of his unparalleled power through the use of elaborate technical artifice.

What fewer readers might recall, however, is that in the original children's book, the intricate workings of the wizard's ruse are fully detailed: audiences learn, for instance, that the Emerald City he lives in is not actually green at all. Rather, the wizard requires all the city's residents to wear green tinted glasses that give his capital its apparent emerald hue. Moreover, in the book, the four companions have the opportunity to expose the wizard's charade and reject his offer of help (an offer incumbent on them killing his nemesis, the Wicked Witch of the West). But they ultimately choose to maintain his secret and discharge his murderous request in the hopes that he will in turn grant their wishes.

Baum's book then, offered a modern American fable about both the workings of unjust and unearned power *and* ordinary people's collective complicity in its grand designs. At the zenith of the industrial revolution, that complicity is perfectly encapsulated by the newly emergent capitalist subject's willingness to see radiant green in the absence of any such color because believing the lie compensates for

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their own real material lack (most evidently of upward mobility and access to a world of unattainable commodities, but also, and more tragically, the impossibility of achieving a non-coercive version of the good life). By depicting the democratic possibilities of chosen friendship grounded in communal values and mutual uplift—essentially, the utopian promise of the story’s central characters as they forge a powerful bond born of shared losses—Baum’s book can be read as a radical warning about the seductions of capitalist ideology. Baum implies that this belief structure, organized as it is around the personal accumulation of wealth and value, undermines the potential solidarity between people from different walks of life by pitting them against one another as they doggedly pursue getting what they *think* they want from the powers that be: namely, the conferral of recognition, status, and validation for human qualities they already intrinsically possess. It turns out, for instance, that despite lacking a physical brain, the Scarecrow is endowed with an exceptional intelligence that saves his friends from countless scrapes; and despite having long ago been magically deprived of his beating heart, the Tin Man is the group’s *symbolic* heart and soul, a deeply empathic, emotionally expressive and loving companion to them all. Thus, neither character necessarily needs the wizard’s approval or recognition, as they already exercise their innate abilities throughout the story.

Such contradictions were woven not only through the content of Baum’s fantasy, but also in its physical form. The original hardcover edition was a veritable treasure of early consumer culture, the edges of its pages lined in gold leaf, with its story printed in full color alongside W.W. Denslow’s exquisite illustrations. The book was itself a work of industrial magic; yet the novel’s plot offered a searing critique of the “facades of color, glass, and light” that were the hallmarks of early consumer society.¹ These included figurative and literal emerald cities like department stores and world’s fairs that used elaborate visual illusions to train potential buyers into a new form of consumer citizenship.² Ironically, the book’s physical form was also a material manifestation of those illusions come true, complicating (and potentially undermining) the force of the story’s critique with its own enchanted appearance, which seduced readers into seeing it as a precious object to be coveted and displayed.

The exceptional cultural durability of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* carries forward those complications and contradictions across time, particularly through its countless direct and indirect film adaptations. These include the 1939 MGM film-musical directed by Victor Fleming, which presented the Technicolor Land of Oz as a cinematic

escape from the depredations of the Great Depression; John Boorman’s dystopian, experimental science fiction film *Zardoz* (1974), where the Wizard is presented as a false god using eugenic science to control a population of so-called savage outlanders; and Universal Pictures’s 1978 cult classic, *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet, featuring an all-Black reimaging of Baum’s American Ur-text, which recast Oz as a parallel universe sidereal to the decaying world of the African American urban ghetto. Today, this illustrious history of adaptations and sequels is rapidly being eclipsed by the unparalleled popularity of *Wicked*, which tells the backstory of the Wicked Witch of the West and her discovery of the Wizard’s tyrannical rule over Oz long before the arrival of Dorothy and her friends. Originally a best-selling revisionist novel published by Gregory Maguire in 1995, it was adapted into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical by Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman in 2003, and is now a global smash-hit movie directed by Jon M. Chu. This 2024 film seems, much like its original source material, poised to become the American Ur-text of its century. (The feature adapts the first half of the musical; Chu’s movie of the second part is scheduled for release in November 2025.)

Given its colossal box office success, the light-speed meme-ification of its press tour, the sheer volume of social media send-ups of beloved scenes and characters, and the equally voluminous cultural criticism aimed at explaining its political meanings, the blockbuster film adaptation of *Wicked* might now be considered the world’s most widely recognized and consumed version of Baum’s original story. I aim to explain its massive contemporary popularity by returning to film scholar Richard Dyer’s classic formulation of entertainment as a mass cultural product that responds to real or actual needs within a society that are not being met. Questioning the traditional ideological reading of popular media as a form of utopian escapism, Dyer stresses the role that entertainment plays in invoking complex feeling states in audiences that may allow them to simultaneously confront difficult, painful, and seemingly intractable social and political realities, while also momentarily coping with them through the pleasures of aesthetic forms, from the percussive syncopated rhythm of tap dancing in Hollywood musicals, which might invoke feelings of power, mastery, and coordination in a factory worker whose manual labor is tied to rote industrial work, to the sense of sublimity incited by slow, wide-angle shots of wilderness landscapes that may allow the alienated urban dweller to symbolically touch unspoiled nature. Dyer explains that the affective sensibilities of entertainment—a utopian *feeling* or aspirational potential rather than a fully formed program of social

transformation—might be best understood as “temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment. . . . It is not *just* leftovers from history, it is not just what show business, or ‘they’, force on the rest of us, it is not simply the expression of eternal needs—it responds to real needs *created by society*.”³

As with Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023), the astonishing public response to *Wicked* suggests that many viewers understand the movie to provide a clear and unequivocal message about the current political landscape. It thus responds to the real collective need for an imaginative mapping of the seemingly apocalyptic state of the world (i.e., an easily digestible answer to the philosophical questions “why are we here?” and “how did we arrive at this place?”) and an affective solution or behavioral model for how to navigate a way forward through this murderous terrain. The most unabashed hot-takes on the movie tell audiences that Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo), the putative “Wicked Witch of the West,” is clearly the scorned Black feminist radical speaking truth to power, while Galinda (Ariana Grande), the supposed “Good Witch of the North,” is the narcissistic and untrustworthy white liberal feminist willing to sell out her friends for access to privilege and status. By these lights, the falsely wise and faux-benevolent Wizard (Jeff Goldblum) is essentially a version of Donald Trump, a power-hungry, patriarchal ideologue willing to exploit xenophobia toward Oz’s most marginalized subjects to maintain his power. The film is, consequently, a morality tale about the horrors of top-down power, and the solution on offer is the passionate rebellion against it by idealized multiply marginalized subjects like Elphaba (a Green/Black, queer, butch-femme). It is hard to argue with the surgical precision of this interpretation. Yet while so many viewers felt they had adequately and convincingly “read” the film’s political message through an ironclad logic of intersectional social justice, what remains obscured by these allegorical readings is an honest account of what psychological need(s) *Wicked* is responding to in the present moment. Without debunking or refuting these popular takes on the film, I intend to expand the collective understanding of *Wicked* as a political allegory, in order to better grasp its larger affective project of getting audiences to *feel through*, properly mourn, and ultimately release their hold on their lingering attachments to illegitimate authority in its many different guises; or, in Elphaba’s inspiring words, delivered in her anthem “Defying Gravity,” to stop “playing by the rules of someone else’s game.”

In Baum’s original children’s fable, the story’s utopian core rests in the promise of unexpected friendship among

misfits aspiring to belonging. At the time of its first publication, the book spoke to an unrequited need for collective solidarity (among workers and immigrants in particular) in the face of the tidal wave of consumer society and its activation of individual desires, fantasies, and wishes above the power of shared interests. Yet, it is ultimately the very desire to belong, to fit in, or to compensate for perceived personal lack that leads the four friends to buy into the wizard’s fraudulent promises. More than a century later, society having collectively trod the yellow brick road of capitalist ideology nearly to the point of oblivion, *Wicked* takes the logical next step beyond Baum’s intentions. Both the Broadway and cinematic adaptations of Maguire’s novel speak to US-Americans’ individual and collective need to *stop* seeking recognition, belonging, love, attention, and affirmation both from a system designed to “bring them down,” and from its base representatives—the narcissistic billionaires, fatuous presidents, and maniacal tech bros—who function as failed stand-ins for legitimate parental power and authority. Each of these new (tech, corporate, financial) wizard-like figures serves their own selfish interests while distracting the public with a constant bombardment of glittering promises of self-actualization. This message is especially pronounced in Chu’s version of *Wicked*, which might be considered a sort of “re-release” of the Broadway play (using the same plot, characters, and musical numbers) in the era of “disaster nationalism.” As political theorist Richard Seymour argues, this is a historical context defined by pronounced xenophobia and political demonization in response to the perceived “liquidation of social distinction” (between Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, the more and less valuable). The primary goal of this nihilistic politics is not, as pundits of “muscular capitalism” frequently declare, economic prosperity, more efficient government, and greater individual freedoms, but the ironclad maintenance of caste or class hierarchy in its most pernicious forms.⁴

The film’s genius lies in the fact that it honestly admits that cutting ties with the desire for recognition from distorted or pernicious sources of authority, while morally right and politically necessary for collective survival on Earth, is still unbearably painful, risky, and confusing—especially so for those who benefit even marginally from the maintenance of an unjust system of hierarchy enabled by the celebration of inane leaders. Thus, the film argues that parting ways with the sources of one’s greatest pain is a struggle that must be *fully* felt through or emotionally processed, lest people too easily fall back on their nostalgic longing for the comforts of (white supremacist heteropatriarchal) ideology,



Galinda wipes a tear off of Elphaba's face as they dance in unison at the Ozdust Ballroom. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

regardless of whether they themselves are white, Black, mixed-race, queer, gender nonconforming or otherwise. Herein lies an important revision of Dyer's classic account of entertainment, which ultimately stresses the ways that mass media in general—and the musical in particular—tend toward masking, managing, or resolving societal contradictions in order to maintain the status quo or undercut the material demands of marginalized constituencies.⁵ By contrast, I would hazard that *Wicked's* appeal lies in its canny decision *not* to knit together the seams of its ideological critique, letting the wounds of failed friendship and broken promises of solidarity, the refusal to be complicit with unjust power, and the rejection of inauthentic recognition bleed for all to see. The film does not end with utopian solidarity, a seamlessly choreographed final musical number, or even the toppling of tyrannical power by the oppressed. Rather, it concludes with the more humbling, emotionally gut-wrenching but finally *honest* necessity of parting ways, where two friends accept their ideological differences—Elphaba utterly rejecting any compromise with entrenched power, while Galinda remains committed to “making good” from within the workings of the Wizard's corrupt government—by singing in unison with a mix of genuine love and resentment: “I hope you're happy / now that you're choosing this. / I hope it brings you bliss. / I really hope you get it / and you don't live to regret it.”

Symbolically borrowing the central terms of its most beloved song, “Defying Gravity,” the film defies the gravitational pull of easy reconciliation with the powers that be. This pull is obvious in America's mind-numbing culture of conformity to authoritarian rule. But it is also embedded

in the traditional logic of the classical Hollywood musical genre, a style of storytelling whose magnetic center has historically managed and dispelled bad feelings, primarily over seemingly irreconcilable social differences and cultural contradictions, through the alchemical magic of choreographed song and dance. Since the 1930s, the most prevalent form of the mainstream filmed musical generally involves a performative ritual of collective action on stage and screen but substitutes orchestrated entertainment for real societal or structural change: recall that *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952) reconciles Hollywood's egregious failure to properly credit African Americans, women, and queer people for their contributions to the entertainment industry by making one overlooked female performer (Debbie Reynolds as Kathy Selden) a successful film starlet and ingenue.⁶ Similarly, a half-century later, the film adaptation of *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) smoothed over the virulent sexism and classism of 1920s US-American urban life, where showgirls and sex-workers live in low-rent tenements scraping to survive, by giving audiences one woman's (Renee Zellweger as Roxie) revenge fantasy against her cheating lover as a gateway to her becoming an infamous celebrity. To be clear, I absolutely adore these musicals, but unlike them and countless others, *Wicked* has managed to be a mainstream hit while resisting what Fredric Jameson astutely calls the utopian or “fantasy bribe” of easy ideological resolution through the achievement of fame, notoriety, false community or inauthentic cross-class solidarity.⁷ In my view, learning something about the cyclical return of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in various forms as an American cinematic Ur-text might offer a better grasp

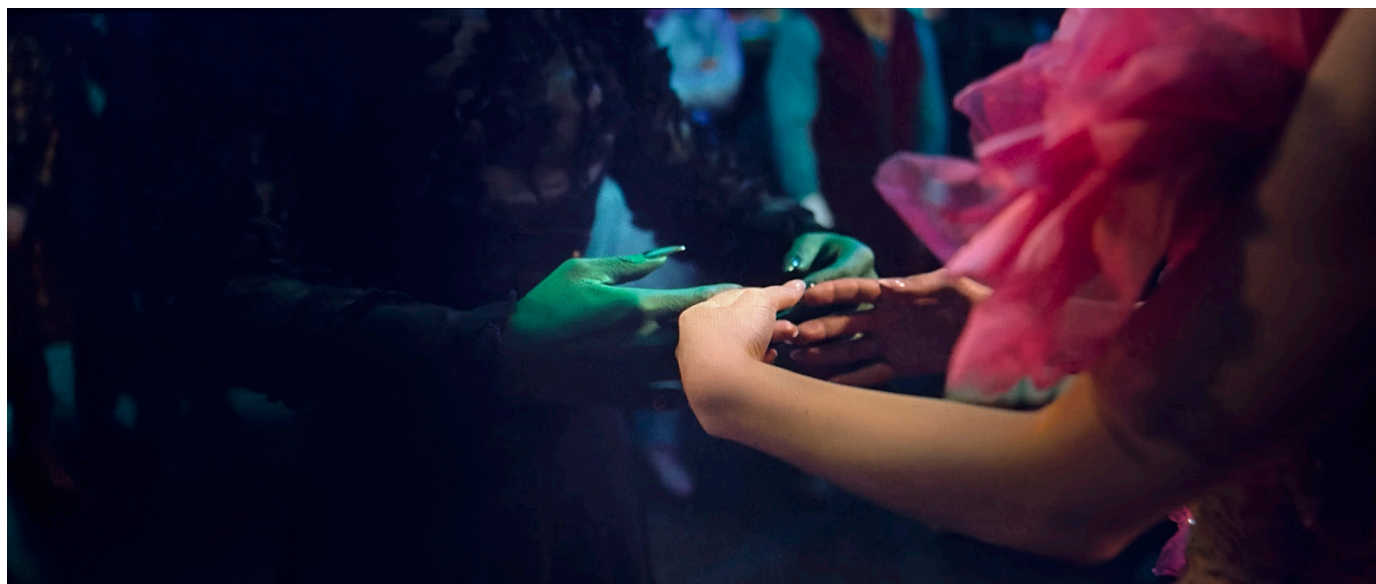
on what is required today to similarly resist the allure of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and the more quotidian desire for *popularity* and *being liked* as compensatory logics for society's own refusal (or inability) to mature in a collective sense. Or, put simply, to outgrow the petty need to feel superior to others as a basic condition of individual psychological security.

If Baum's original children's novel is a story about how people come to compromise with entrenched power in order to get some modicum of their heart's desire, *Wicked* is about the corrosive psychological effects of a culture built on false idols and the damage done to meaningful personal growth when one's entire life is structured around seeking recognition and validation from the very sources of their greatest pain. This is a logic that Lauren Berlant famously called *cruel optimism*, "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility," which involves a passionate holding on to the things in life that hurt us the most in the hope that they will ultimately yield our greatest wishes and desires.⁸ *Wicked* transplants Baum's original critique of commodity culture on to contemporary xenophobia. Elphaba, a powerful witch untrained in the use of her magic, is a social outcast both within her family of birth and her peers. Born with green skin and the product of an illicit affair, she is immediately shunned by her father and largely parented by a group of loving, intelligent animals, including her loyal nursemaid Dulcibear (voiced by Sharon D. Clarke), with whom she feels a strong kinship. As a young adult, her latent magical talents land her a seat at the vaunted Shiz University, where her new mentor, Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh), gives Elphaba hope that her

talents as a powerful witch may impress the Wizard of Oz, granting her legitimacy in the eyes of the most celebrated man in the land. (As Morrible croons to Elphaba early in the film: "Many years I have waited / for a gift like yours to appear. / Why, I predict the wizard / might make you his magic Grand Vizier!") At Shiz, Elphaba encounters another aspiring witch, Galinda, a beautiful, blonde-haired social climber and self-styled popular girl desperate to gain the attention of Madame Morrible and make a name for herself.

The story of *Wicked* is largely about the complex interplay of "loathing," fascination, and finally, begrudging love between these two ambitious young women, who despite vastly different upbringings, and diametrically opposing surface appearances, seem to share an urgent need to be seen and recognized. *Wicked* focuses on their psycho-social dynamic—one born of Elphaba's childhood experience of ostracism and Galinda's insecurity at being celebrated for her beauty and popularity despite having no real magical abilities. In the process, it links the willingness to give over collective power to figures of illegitimate or corrupt power to a toxic culture that raises *both* outcast and so-called popular youth to locate their self-worth in external sources of authority that do not have the interests of young people at heart.

Layered into the narrative of this compromised friendship is the growing xenophobic climate of Oz, where its animals, formerly occupiers of respected positions in society, are increasingly being silenced, excluded from public or civic life, and even caged (a phenomenon never before seen among Ozians). In the land of Oz, animals historically



Elphaba and Galinda align their hands in a gesture of solidarity. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

lived alongside humans as sentient, intelligent beings capable of complex critical thought, education, and political participation. By the time the film's story begins, however, animals have increasingly become targeted as enemies of the state—as Elphaba's favorite history teacher, the brilliant billy goat Dr. Dillamond (voiced by Peter Dinklage) fearfully explains to her: "We animals are now being blamed for everything that goes wrong. Forced from our jobs. Told to keep silent." Being an outcast herself, Elphaba feels deeply identified with the cause of the animals, ultimately pleading with the Wizard to intervene and protect this endangered population.

The big reveal of the first part of the movie, however, is that the Wizard himself is the architect of the attack on animal-kind, using them as a convenient scapegoat to maintain his rule over Oz. This first part's famous and much beloved denouement—punctuated by Elphaba's epic battle hymn "Defying Gravity"—ends with Elphaba and Glinda (now Glinda after publicly changing her name in a performative gesture of solidarity with the animals) painfully parting ways over this shocking turn of events. Elphaba literally defies the gravitational pull of tyranny by boldly flying away from the Wizard's tower as a rogue witch aiming to end his reign. Glinda remains behind to become the public face of the Emerald City.

Instead of focusing on the depredations of economic poverty, as Baum did at the turn of the twentieth century, *Wicked* instead focuses on the *emotional* poverty of the managerial classes (all the lead characters, including Elphaba, the daughter of Munchkinland's governor, are members of the middle and ruling classes—what sociologist Musa al-Gharbi might call "symbolic capitalists"—who, despite their appearance of civility and progress, are explicitly understood as "small-minded" and intolerant of difference).⁹ This has produced a culture of unacknowledged, unnecessary, and self-destructive social climbing in a system that is contemptuous of meaningful diversity, easily swayed into a malicious campaign against the animals, and quick to trade collective flourishing and uplift for even the bare promise of individual power and status. Though *Wicked* was first published three decades ago, it now deeply resonates as a story about the psychological costs of racial capitalism. The plight of the animals stands as a clear parallel to the contemporary immigration crisis, in which presidential authority has yet again figured migrants as a convenient enemy of US citizens. (Oz himself later sheepishly admits: "Back where I come from, everyone knows the best way to brings folks together is—give them a really good enemy.") The fantasy ideal that the Wizard pedals is

that the diminishment of legitimately earned positions of power, authority, and respect by members of Oz's animal population will clear space for the advancement of once marginalized humans like Elphaba and privileged ones like Glinda alike—thus, the Wizard parasitically feeds on symbolic capitalists' psychological need for superiority and rank regardless of their so-called minority status.

Meanwhile, the paradox of Elphaba's social shunning explicitly underscores the continued tenacity of anti-Blackness, even in a visibly racially diverse land like Oz (Black, Asian, Latinx, queer, and disabled actors, writers, and crew populate both the literal and imaginative landscape of every major production of the staged musical, as well as Chu's feature). For example, if emerald green is the most venerated color in all of Oz, the iconic hue of its capital city and its leader's defining sartorial characteristic, why *wouldn't* Ozians worship the one and only green-skinned member of their population? This glaringly obvious, but oddly unspoken question, hangs over Maguire's original literary text and the staged musical, but it clearly resonates more than ever, and in strikingly new ways, in its filmed adaptation. The answer provided by the film, of course, is that Elphaba is "really" Black, both literally played by a Black queer actress, and signifying cultural Blackness with her beautifully coifed braids and sparkling green nails. Ozians fear not so much the existence of a green human being, but the signifying power of the color emerald in the literal and figurative hands of a powerful racial Other.

Thus, the film adaptation of *Wicked* is explicitly a story about the loneliness and isolation that racial capitalism breeds, even among its seemingly most nourished members, and how their consent is achieved through the fantasy of social recognition by entrenched and fraudulent power (including Elphaba's fantasy that the Wizard will save her from a life of social ostracism by "de-greenifying" her and Glinda's desperate desire for the corrupt Madame Morrible to recognize her "heart's desire to become a sorceress," even while Morrible cruelly states she has "no faith" in Glinda). Yet, unlike the clichéd moralism of liberal social justice discourse, the film acknowledges and honors certain politically incorrect desires—the desire to be popular, to be upwardly mobile, to be freed from degraded social distinction, and to be recognized, valued, and celebrated by people with status and power. And, in further contradistinction to the success/uplift rhetoric surrounding inclusivity-obsessed liberal capitalist entertainment narratives, the film also tracks the process by which one might instead shed those tainted but addictive desires themselves, not with judgmental self-flagellation, but with self-compassion, curiosity, and

grace. This is arguably *the* fundamental emotional need that the film offers to its contemporary audiences: one for a loving, self-compassionate structure of feeling that can account for and acknowledge the deep will to power within every citizen of a toxic culture, and, at the same time, boldly provide emotional building blocks for replacing this system with more life-affirming social relations, ones in which each citizen might look to their peers, not phony political gods, and say (as Glinda says to Elphaba near the end of the film): “You can do *anything*!”

Following the logic of the film, that trajectory requires that friendship be established as a form of internal, mutually generated recognition between equals that attests to their shared worth and unique capabilities. While the friendship between Elphaba and Glinda is intensely fraught, riven by inevitable and all-too-human episodes of inauthenticity, posturing, and, ultimately, a parting of ways, throughout its brief efflorescence it nevertheless retains some kernel of mutual understanding, with each young woman seeing through and past the emotional defenses of the other. Early in the film, Glinda arrogantly states, “I could care less what other people think,” to which Elphaba cannily retorts: “You ‘*couldn’t care less*’ what other people think [looking her up and down]. Though I doubt that’s true.” Later, Prince Fiyero (Jonathan Bailey) observes of Elphaba: “She doesn’t give a twig what anyone thinks.” Glinda corrects him: “Of course she does. She just pretends not to.” Each sees in the other a desire to both be her authentic self *and* belong to a community grounded in fellow-feeling. This balance is nearly impossible to attain in an Ozian culture that demands conformity as a prerequisite to inclusion and solidarity. The

film centers friendship as a fundamentally transformative and ethical alternative to the prevailing cultural narrative of a subordinate subject who must turn to a more socially and politically dominant “master” for recognition, thus realizing their full potential. Instead, the film argues that friends must look toward each other and accept the painful but generative judgement of their peers, a judgement that allows one to be seen in a particular way that confirms you “can do anything.”

Slightly amending the popular reading of *Wicked*’s heroine, I would argue that Elphaba is the icon of the Black middle-class outcast who initially *overidentifies* with the suffering of the oppressed (without acknowledging her own material privileges and will to power) because of her personal experience of elite in-group marginalization. Though raised in relative affluence, Elphaba’s distinctly green appearance, accentuated by her all-black wardrobe, nerdy glasses, and bookish demeanor, mark her as a social misfit among her peers. Over the course of the story, she will indeed evolve into the Black feminist icon so many fans adore, but it is important to remember that she begins very much as a split subject. In her youth, she is contemptuous of the children who scorn her yet idealizes the image of the Wizard as a symbolic father figure. In young adulthood she acts as though her studies are her highest and only priority, while secretly wishing for a social life among the popular kids and the romantic attention of Fiyero, the seemingly callow prince of Winkie Country. In her public presentation, she pridefully embraces her “greenness” while in private wishing the Wizard could magically will it away. In her signature ballad, “The Wizard and I,” Elphaba sings



Glinda assures Elphaba: “You can do anything.” Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

to herself, “Once I’m with the Wizard / my whole life will change, / ’cuz once you’re with the wizard / no one thinks you’re strange! ... And all of Oz has to love you / when by the Wizard, you’re acclaimed.”

It is ultimately Elphaba’s emotional bond with the animals of Oz, a result of her being raised by the loving Dulcibear, that becomes the decisive factor in her radicalization. Only moments after Elphaba is born, her father, stunned and disgusted by her appearance, demands that she be taken out of his sight. In this devastating moment, Elphaba’s latent magical powers manifest as a form of rageful protest against being denied her father’s love. Elphaba wails (as babies are wont to do) and magically wills every item in the room to fly toward the ceiling. That initial parental denial shapes Elphaba’s entire understanding of her own “greenness” for decades to come. Her self-understanding manifests as a series of character traits recognizable to any marginalized person: an anticipatory defensiveness toward every perceived slight or microaggression (captured in her repeated script to anyone surprised to see her vibrant green skin: “Fine—let’s get this over with: No, I’m not seasick! Nor did I eat grass as a child! And yes, I’ve always been green!”) and an armored stance underwritten by her performance of intellectual superiority and emotional steeliness.

In this sense, throughout most of the narrative, Elphaba is a paradigmatic stand-in for the social justice warrior: fiercely loving toward her kin but also at times arrogant and moralizing; socially and politically courageous but often emotionally chaotic, quick to take offense, and rash in her judgments; committed to combating injustice but often over-identified with the suffering of the disadvantaged; hastily judging other people’s shallowness but seemingly unaware of her own; exhausted of being labeled as a “problem” but also secretly taking pleasure in “being a commotion.” Her magic, after all, is repeatedly depicted as a kind of explosive interruption of everyday life that seemingly always manages to uncover or point toward some hidden ideological structure beneath the placid exterior of Oz. In one instance, her sorcery even manages to literally expose the masked history of Shiz University. When, in an uncontrollable burst of anger, Elphaba telekinetically destroys the school seal depicting the Wizard of Oz, she inadvertently reveals a plaque showing the group of now-retired animal professors who once ran Shiz, thus revealing how the university’s intellectual lineage has been systematically erased by the Wizard’s authoritarian rule. But Elphaba also deeply desires to be absorbed into the reigning power structure. She imagines, like so many aspirational rebels do, that with

enough support or backing from institutional power, one can make meaningful, positive change.

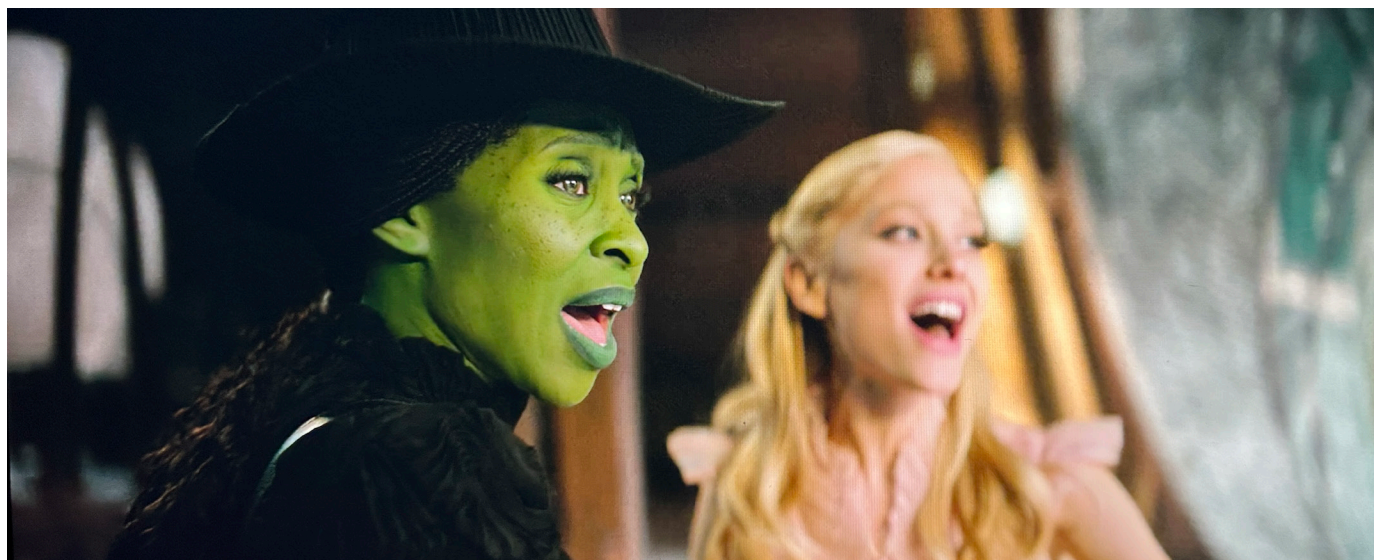
Though many see Glinda as Elphaba’s political opposite, she is in some ways simply a different version of her ill-fated friend. No doubt, as countless viewers have pointed out, Glinda is indeed a perfect allegorical representation of white liberalism, not only socially privileged and oblivious to meaningful differences but also literally styled in the film as a dazzlingly blonde, light-skinned Barbie doll. Self-centered, manipulative, and over-confident in her ability to navigate the social pecking order while claiming to help “others less fortunate than I” (the weak and vulnerable for whom she claims to have a “tender,” “bleeding” heart, like any good sentimental liberal), Glinda can be easily dismissed as an inauthentic mean girl masquerading as a saint. In one of her most cringe-worthy moments, she offers to rid Elphaba of her supposed “skin problem” when she says: “It’s my intention to major in sorcery, so—if at some future time you wanted to—address the problem? Perhaps I could—help.” It is not that Glinda has no sense of altruism, however, but rather that her desire for recognition and popularity is her priority at this point in her life. She seems to experience little to no internal struggle over her choices, not because she is evil or hateful but because, as a product of privilege, she simply thinks that attaining status is the most obviously rational way of being able to be of service to others—without status, how can you accomplish anything in a hierarchized world? (Of course, this is also what makes her altruism seem performative, calculated, and inauthentic, as when she immediately regrets her dramatic gesture to rename herself in defense of the animals: “Stupid idea, I don’t even know what made me do it!”) And, in parallel fashion to Elphaba’s desire to gain the Wizard’s approval and recognition of her innate power, Glinda is obsessed with gaining Madame Morrible’s respect and mentorship—this is the recognition of a powerful *female* role model who might legitimize and give meaning and weight to Glinda’s frequently hollow performance of hyper-femininity.

In one sense, then, Glinda is far more like Elphaba than she initially appears. No less than Elphaba, Glinda, too, is deeply insecure about her place, never ultimately convinced of her own capabilities, desperate for approval from Morrible, and constantly working to keep her boyfriend Fiyero’s fickle attention. Despite what appears to be a consistently performed sense of superiority to Elphaba, Glinda also sees in her newfound friend everything that she herself lacks: real magical power, ethical conviction, and an amazing font of courage, each of which she begrudgingly acknowledges and honors at various points in the

film. Over-inflating her own popularity becomes a way for Glinda to manage her anxiety about being a fraud. Like the Wizard, it appears that Glinda has no real magical talent. Rather, her *symbolic* magic turns out to be her ability to see the potential in others, a skill she arrogantly calls attention to in her iconic song “Popular,” when she sings: “And when someone needs a makeover / I simply have to take over. / I know, I know exactly what they need.” While not comparable to Elphaba’s actual magical powers, this is in some ways the most important capacity portrayed in the film: the ability to recognize something special, authentic, and meaningful in others. Glinda displays this ability in countless instances throughout the film, including when she first lays eyes on Elphaba and gasps: “You’re green!” in a bold act of public recognition. Later, she perceives Elphaba’s emotional vulnerability on the dance floor at the Ozdust Ballroom and joins her in a beautiful duet. Near the film’s conclusion, she reminds Elphaba that she can “do anything.” Just as Elphaba overidentifies with marginalized subjects, however, Glinda overinvests in other people’s potential, often seeing their innate abilities as a reflection of her own value. By the same token, these qualities also speak to what is most admirable about each. Rather than opposites then, the two simply occupy different poles in the same dynamic or arrangement—their unexpected, brief friendship allows each to see versions of themselves through the other that they never thought possible.

While many have understood *Wicked* as clearly siding with Elphaba against Glinda’s shallow political vision, the story ultimately refuses to pit one against the other in a clear moral stand-off. Instead, it frames the two young

women as being trapped in an impossible arrangement that is the product of a structurally toxic Ozian culture (this is a story about the internal struggle of so-called progressive elites who symbolically hold liberal values but struggle to enact them as part of their everyday lives because of the countless ways they benefit from the system as it stands). That arrangement begins in the most intimate realm of the family, where some young girls like Elphaba are denigrated and put down, while others like Glinda are overinflated and spoiled. But this dynamic also extends upward to larger organizations of power, both within Shiz University and in the Emerald City at large. It is precisely these two extremes of their respective upbringings that drive the characters to seek approval from corrupt figures like Madame Morrible and the Wizard. In this manner, the movie maps the psycho-social terrain of each character’s family life onto the political landscape of Oz. It acknowledges the origins of oppression in exclusion or fetishization grounded in the family form. Both parental shunning (as experienced by Elphaba) and overvaluation (as experienced by Glinda), the movie suggests, leads to imbalanced fantasies about how status and power can make up for deep insecurity. When Elphaba fantasizes an ideal future where she is celebrated by the Wizard and all bad familial feelings are dispelled, she explicitly sings to herself: “No father is not proud of you, / no sister acts ashamed.” We see this again most obviously in Elphaba’s incredible joy at being singled out as special and worthy by Madame Morrible, and in Glinda reveling in her seemingly organic popularity alongside the attention she gets from Fiyero. Ultimately, the Wizard’s grand con over the people of Oz works because of his ability to make people



Elphaba and Glinda sing in unison, briefly imagining the potentially “unlimited” nature of their alliance. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

feel seen by power, especially through his false, sentimental performance of paternalism. As he seductively croons in his trademark song, “I Am a Sentimental Man”: “I am a sentimental man / who always longed to be a father. / That’s why / I do the best I can / to treat each citizen of Oz as son / [beaming at Elphaba] or daughter! / So Elphaba, I’d like to raise you high / ’cause I think everyone deserves the chance to fly, / and helping you with your ascent allows me / to feel so parental.” The Wizard is everyone’s emotionally available, loving surrogate father in a world where fathers are traditionally expected to be power hungry, mean, boorish, or smothering, though rarely held to account for such vile behaviors.

By setting up the Wizard as both ideological problem (an emotionally vacuous fraud with “no real power”) and false emotional solution (the image of sentimental paternalism), *Wicked* acknowledges the fundamental conflict people manage between their political commitments and their psychological desires—the film reminds viewers that even the most committed social justice warrior like Elphaba can have daddy issues. As feminist film scholar Jane Feuer and Richard Dyer have underscored, this contradiction historically has been captured in the popular Hollywood musical form itself.¹⁰ The genre traditionally does this by recurrently turning to extravagant song and dance numbers to articulate the content of various characters’ internal conflicts, while simultaneously managing, or worse, pretending to resolve them through the formal coordination of bodies on stage and screen (in other words, songs both express and then re-sublimate or *re-press* characters’ most painful struggles with an unjust society). *Wicked* is pleasing

and inspiring, I contend, for a different reason: precisely because it keeps these contradictions and tensions between individual psychological development and collective solidarity intact.

The musical arc of *Wicked* goes fundamentally against ideological and psychological resolution in two ways. First, every song in the film is self-aware about its own ideological fictions, providing a meta-commentary on the ways the characters are intentionally using the emotional highs and lows of musical performance to lie to themselves and others. Even when singing about the possibility of the Wizard “de-greenifying” her early in the film, Elphaba acknowledges that this might be a shallow or problematic desire when she says “[but] of course that’s not important to me.” The self-awareness of the musical numbers is captured in the film’s recurrent shuttling back and forth between cringeworthy moments of inauthentic social manipulation (such as when Glinda says to Elphaba in “Popular”: “Now that we’re friends, I’ve decided to make you my new project”) and brief but ecstatic moments of genuine recognition between characters (such as when, soon after, the two friends look at their shared reflection in a mirror and Glinda sincerely says: “Why, Miss Elphaba—you’re beautiful”). These latter instances are formally captured in the film’s frequent use of long-held close-ups of various characters’ faces looking directly at one another. Such moments are replete with a stunning feeling that audiences are directly watching the characters suddenly recognizing one another for who they really are. Meanwhile, taken collectively, the songs also chart a consistent movement through and ultimately out of ideological mystification. Earlier songs like “The Wizard and I,” “What is this Feeling?,” “Dancing



Elphaba and Glinda, together. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

Through Life,” and “Popular” express various characters’ aching desires to fit in with the social order, to have their perceived deficiencies cleansed or eradicated, and to dismiss their nagging feelings of doubt about the powers that be. These songs are about wish-fulfillment, the shunning of social difference, indifference to (or willful rejection of) reality, and the craving for status. But subsequent songs, such as “I’m Not that Girl” and “Defying Gravity,” begin to admit the failure of these aspirations, to uncover how the pursuit of social and political fantasies that are fundamentally at odds with who we are is ultimately soul-crushing and “comes at much too high a cost.” This arc is clear because the film unfolds each song as part of an emotional working through of these problematic desires.

Though Elphaba’s final battle cry, “Defying Gravity,” takes center stage in most cultural commentary on *Wicked*, I would argue that “Dancing Through Life” is the crux of the movie’s critique of ideology. It is by far the longest number in the film and offers a sustained meditation on the catastrophic consequences of self-delusion. Marvelously performed by Jonathan Bailey as the debonair Prince Fiyero, “Dancing Through Life” begins as a celebration of living “the unexamined life,” critiquing the university’s commitment to critical thought as a depressing form of “studying strife,” which causes all sorts of internal discomfort, confusion, and distress. Seducing his new classmates with his handsome looks, impeccable dance moves, and bold bucking of school authorities, Fiyero drops a new form of common sense on them: “The trouble with schools is / they always try to teach the wrong lesson They want you to become less callow / less shallow / but I say: why invite stress in? . . . Life’s more painless / for the brainless. / Why think too hard / when it’s so soothing / dancing through life? . . . Life is fraught-less / when you’re thoughtless. / Those who don’t try / never look foolish.” From one angle, this is undoubtedly the historically unspoken, yet increasingly publicly advertised, mantra of white, wealthy, straight male privilege—the privilege of moving through the world unfettered by worry or concern for failure or accountability—made explicitly articulate by the musical genre. The song seems to substitute the entertainment value of musical theater itself for critical thought, directly referencing the history of popular musical numbers as escapes from reality.¹¹ While the number begins with Fiyero extolling the virtues of avoiding meaningful contemplation, however, it progressively expands outward to all the relationships in the narrative. As the sequence shifts from the Shiz University Library to the Ozdust Ballroom, an illicit nightclub where all the characters go to live out Fiyero’s injunction to dance

through life, viewers see a vast range of social manipulations gone wrong.

Glinda deflects the advances of the Munchkin boy Boq (Ethan Slater), who is positively in love with her, by imploring him to ask Nessarose (Elphaba’s disabled sister, played by Marissa Bode) to the evening of dancing. This leads Boq to lie to Nessarose about his affection for her, building up false hope about their romance. Glinda and her friends also “gift” Elphaba a black pointy witch’s hat, a seemingly benevolent act that inspires Elphaba to convince Madame Morrible that Glinda should join their independent magic study course. Yet when Elphaba arrives at the Ozdust Ballroom in her new headgear, she is ostracized and laughed at for wearing such an ugly accessory, suddenly realizing that Glinda’s kindness was a ruse to publicly embarrass her. Across the arc of the song, it becomes clear that dancing through life, though a seemingly canny strategy for avoiding failure, emotional hurt, and discomfort, is, in reality, a way of steamrolling, lying, and demeaning others, at times through intentional manipulation, at others through sheer callousness.

At the end of the sequence, for a brief, startling moment, the snowballing negative emotional effects of living blithely unaware of one’s actions and the ideological realities that unfold from them dramatically crack Glinda’s cheery façade. She sincerely admits: “I feel awful.” To which Fiyero replies, “Why? It’s not like it’s your fault.” Fiyero, of course, doesn’t realize that the event is, in fact, directly Glinda’s fault; yet his statement speaks to the larger psychological desire, frequently shared by people of every political persuasion, to “dance through life” unaware of their collective complicity in larger structural or historical catastrophes. The desire to avoid being confronted with the facts about, for instance, indigenous genocide or the history of slavery (or, in the case of *Wicked*, the historical scapegoating of Oz’s animal population) ultimately emotionally inoculates people against both their collective culpability for historical atrocities and their responsibility for the everyday traumas they *do* actually have a hand in perpetrating, including abuses and harms directed toward those deemed “less than.” This attitude of convenient freedom from accountability stunts the necessary growth that follows painful learning (growth which, if allowed to flourish, could lead to mutually strengthening forms of solidarity). Suddenly intensely aware of how she has harmed Elphaba with her cruel trickery, Glinda joins her former nemesis in an improvised, wordless lyrical dance. Audiences hear the music to “Dancing Through Life” shorn of its lyrics, opening the song up to improvisation and reinvention.

The ten-minute sequence ends with Glinda and Elphaba mirroring one another while others look on, Glinda delicately replicating a series of improvised dance moves that Elphaba performs as a kind of rebellious (if pained) refusal of the crowd's mockery. Together, the two model a form of mutual recognition that does not require acceptance by the crowd, that is not oriented to a higher order of power, and that is utterly spontaneous, organic, and inventive. As the back of their hands touch in a symbolic meeting of the minds, they create a mutually formed, embodied code that indicates their newfound solidarity.

"Dancing Through Life" is ultimately a blueprint for unmasking ideology on at least three levels. It visually contradicts Fiyero's convenient philosophy by showing the cruel social and interpersonal outcomes of moving through the world "brainlessly"; it models a form of mutual recognition born of the shared awareness of deep pain and longing; and it concludes by intentionally decoupling the song's lyrics from its music, in order to allow a series of spontaneous non-representational signs (Elphaba and Glinda's awkward but imaginative dance moves) to take the place of the number's original ideologically bankrupt message. It is this brief but powerful moment of mutual recognition that ultimately empowers both young women to part ways at the conclusion of the film, not from hatred or rage toward one another but an authentic understanding of one another's distinct being.

Rather than seek an inauthentic resolution, the film ends on the gracious, if melancholy, willingness to part ways. The appeal of "Defying Gravity" is not simply that it is such a stunning anthem for self-actualization, in which

Elphaba claims her full magical capabilities and declares war on the Wizard's tyrannical designs, but because it provides a road map of how to cut ties with our "cruel optimism" (yet without obliterating or morally cursing those who choose not to follow in our footsteps). In this sense, "Defying Gravity" is anarchic: it models what it looks like to choose to hew your own path when the options before you are simply unacceptable. At the core of this anarchic vision is the mere glimmer of a possibility that two members of the elite classes who inhabit different positionalities within it might actually reject the wizard's illegitimate authority, turn to one another, and act in concert to fundamentally change the structural logic of Oz. This potential for divergence from the normative trajectory of two young women aspiring to and then comfortably attaining power within a corrupt system is briefly captured in the song-within-a-song, "Unlimited," when Elphaba implores Glinda to "Come with me. Think of what we could do." She then sings enchantingly: "Unlimited. / Together we're unlimited. / Together we'll be the greatest team there's ever been. / Dreams the way we planned them." To which Glinda, briefly, but hopefully replies, "If we work in *tandem*." As they sing in unison about the potential to become something "unlimited" and invincible together, the two see clearly this alternative path, but ultimately cannot hew it together. This painful but honest discovery, that they are yet to be on the same wavelength, is an awesome lesson about the difficulty of solidarity when the rewards of maintaining the status quo are seemingly so self-evident. This realization is not without deep sadness. For even when Morrible, having disowned her former protégée Elphaba, disingenuously



Elphaba's shapeshifting form rises up in contrast to the rigid edifice of the Wizard's Emerald Castle. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

shifts all her love and attention to Glinda and gives the young sorceress an icy hug, Glinda is fully aware that this recognition is irreparably compromised, weeping tears of grief even as she appears to receive the affirmation she has so long fought for.

Like “Dancing Through Life,” “Defying Gravity” concludes with Elphaba and Glinda once again improvising a literal and figurative dance, briefly embracing just as they did in the Ozdust Ballroom, when Glinda wiped a single glistening tear from Elphaba’s cheek. But here, the final shot is one of parting ways, the figure of Elphaba’s black, formless mass, with her awe-inspiring cape and witch’s hat, visually set against the rigid hierarchical structure of the Wizard’s tower, poised to become *anything*. Just before this epic moment, the film poignantly captures Elphaba frantically plummeting from the Wizard’s tower while attempting to escape his henchmen. As she falls, she encounters her own reflection as a misfit little girl in the tower’s glittering glass structure. No longer shunning her younger self, nor seeking the validation of any external source to secure her value, Elphaba reaches her hand out to her reflection in a gesture of love and acceptance, and belts: “It’s meeeeeeeeeeeee!” It is this single act of self-motivated recognition, made possible by the experience of a flawed but invaluable friendship of another young woman, that sets Elphaba free. *The potential wish-fulfillment of every viewer may just be the genuinely achievable desire for this kind of revolutionary self-acceptance, which might grant each and every person the will to break free from illegitimate sources of authority.*

Wicked’s extraordinary popularity invites a deceptively obvious question long familiar to students of the

culture industry: how could it be that the same country that elected the bellicose, juvenile, chaotic man-child Donald Trump to the highest office of the land would, three weeks later, spend more than \$160 million at the box office to watch a Black, queer, feminist musical about defying tyranny? Put another way, why is it so easy for mass audiences to invest in cultural fantasies of collective rebellion and the pursuit of freedom, while rejecting or failing to materialize actual political transformation in their everyday lives and civic institutions? The answer is far less obvious than it seems, but it is furnished by the movie itself. What makes material change so difficult is the persistent desire to “make it” within the very system that is killing us. After all, what is *gravity* but the magnetic pull of an invisible but real force that exerts its power upon everyone? *Wicked* opens divergent paths of thinking, ones opposed to the culture-industry thesis as conventionally conceived, by honestly admitting that defying the gravitational force of ideology is incredibly hard. Few will ever achieve escape velocity. But, in the process of trying, each and every person might still be able to give others a modicum of the genuine recognition that everyone keeps seeking in vain from false idols. Solidarity, the film reminds its audiences, does not need to be pure. It may frequently fail. It may be laced with desire, hope, love, resentment, sadness, betrayal, confusion, and even repulsion (“I hope you’re happy, my friend”). But in the difficult process of trying to connect with someone other than the arbiters of popularity, power, and clout, we may discover that some kinds of love simply come at “much too high a cost.”



Elphaba reaches out to her younger self in a gesture of love, freeing herself of the childhood need for the Wizard’s recognition. Courtesy © Universal Pictures.

Notes

1. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (Vintage, 1993), 39.
2. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 39-70.
3. Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (Routledge, 1992), 26.
4. Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization* (Verso, 2024), 18.
5. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 29-30.
6. See Carol Clover, "Dancin' in the Rain," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (1995): 722-747.
7. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130-148, 144.
8. Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *differences* 17, no. 3 (2006): 20-36, 21.
9. See Musa al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 24.
10. See Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, and Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical: Second Edition* (Indiana University Press, 1993).
11. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 20.