Intertextual Irony of Post-9/11 American Social Structure in Mean Girls (2004) by Mark Waters

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Abstract

This research explores how the movie Mean Girls (2004) reflects the social structure of post-9/11 America using intertextual irony and stereotypes. Following the 9/11 attacks, American society experienced significant cultural and social shifts that influenced various media, including movies. This study analyzes how the film critiques social hierarchies and collective trauma while examining power dynamics and identity struggles in the context of high school as a microcosm of broader social tensions. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a literary sociology approach. The analysis draws on Julia Kristeva's intertextuality theory and Stuart Hall's stereotype theory to examine the interplay between the film's narrative elements and the sociocultural changes after 9/11. Primary data includes scenes and dialogues from the film, while secondary data comprises academic articles and news reports discussing the societal impacts of the tragedy. The findings reveal that the film employs intertextual irony to critique social exclusivity, power struggles, and the reinforcement of stereotypes. It also highlights the pressures of conformity and the challenges faced by marginalized identities. The study underscores the role of media in reflecting societal tensions and facilitating critical discourse on historical and cultural transformations. This research contributes to the academic understanding of popular culture by demonstrating how films like Mean Girls serve as both entertainment and a medium for social critique, particularly in addressing adolescent behavior and social dynamics within a historical context.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, film has evolved into one of the most dominant and influential mediums of communication. Its ability to reach a very wide audience makes film an effective means to explore contemporary issues, ranging from social change and the environment to individual and group identity in the midst of globalization. Film itself is defined as a visual art as well as a cultural artifact, consisting of several elements, namely narrative, music,

cinematography, and acting. It serves as a means to convey messages, stories, and emotions, as well as to reflect and critique societal values. It offers a layered narrative that combines elements of art, ideology, and psychology (Brown, 2016).

More than just entertainment, a movie like *Mean Girls* (2004), with a classic formula often used in teen drama comedies, engages with complex societal structures and historical moments. That unique touch is what makes it different, making it fertile ground for academic exploration. Directed by (Waters, 2004) and written by Tina Fey, *Mean Girls* (2004) shows how popular culture intersects with broader social commentary, especially in the context of post-9/11 American society. Therefore, it shows that movies are part of popular culture as well as a complex medium that involves multiple layers of cultural meanings, purposes, and impacts (Storey, 2009).

Mean Girls (2004) emerged in the early 2000s, a period when many Americans began to reflect on their social and cultural values after the 9/11 attacks. This tragedy was the largest terrorist attack in history that shook the United States. The collective trauma of post-9/11 created a shift in focus in film narratives, from external threats (such as terrorism) to domestic and social issues, although these were not always explicitly addressed in the film narratives themselves (Quay & Damico, 2010). *Mean Girls (2004)* encapsulates this shift, utilizing the microcosm of a high school to allegorize societal hierarchies and fears.

Using intertextual irony, the film critiques the social structure of post-9/11 America while depicting identity struggles, group dynamics, and power negotiations. This research focuses on two main questions that form the basis and purpose of the analysis. First, how does *Mean Girls* (2004) use intertextual irony to reflect and respond to the social structure of post-9/11 America? Intertextual irony in this context refers to the way the film connects its narrative and symbolism to the events and social dynamics that emerged after the 9/11 attacks. Secondly, this study also investigates how the stereotyped characters in *Mean Girls* (2004) illustrate power dynamics and the overcoming of social fears in post-9/11 American society.

By analyzing these aspects, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how popular films reflect significant social and cultural changes in a particular historical context. This research is important because it highlights the relationship between media and sociocultural change. This research also has significance in several important aspects, including the following. First, it contributes to the study of film and popular culture, where it enriches the academic discourse on how teen films reflect changes in the social and cultural order.

In the modern era, understanding the phenomenon of social media groupthink, peer pressure, and the search for identity among young people has relevance and benefits. This research helps educators, psychologists, and

policymakers in understanding how the social pressures displayed in the film *Mean Girls* (2004) affect adolescent behavior and identity in a broader context. Therefore, this research can serve as a basis for the development of education that better supports adolescents in building a healthy identity amidst increasingly strong social pressures.

Finally, this research can be used as a relevant analysis for the study of identity and power in a broader social context, especially in critical or post-critical situations. *Mean Girls* (2004) is a relevant object for understanding the social dynamics that occur. Through its characters and storyline, it explicitly illustrates how social dynamics among teenagers—including friend groups, social pressure, and identity search—affect their behavior and identity development. One of the main themes in *Mean Girls* (2004) is peer pressure itself.

Previous studies have examined the representation of injustice, identity, and stereotypes in film, but rarely have they discussed the intersection of these elements in a specific context, such as relating them to a major tragedy like 9/11. For example, the study *Stereotypes in a Multilingual Film: A Case Study on Issues of Social Injustice* by (Eriss & Khoshsaligheh, 2023) and *"The Relationship of Intertextual Emancipation of Woman in the 'Dyah Pitaloka' Novel and Book of 'Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang'"* by (Damayanti, 2020) highlight how social issues occur in films and how films as cultural products reflect social dynamics. Similarly, (Sudarisman & Muludi, 2021) explored social criticism in Joker through moral messages. However, this study differs by placing *Mean Girls (2004)* within the specific sociocultural framework of post-9/11 America, utilizing Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to fill the gap in the discourse. The previous analysis only shows part of the representation contained in the object without linking it to an important event that occurred, while in this analysis it presents the findings by linking it to a historical event that occurred by explaining the correlation between the film and the event.

According to Kristeva, a text cannot be separated from its social, cultural, and historical context. To thoroughly understand a text, Kristeva emphasizes the importance of situating it within its social and historical setting (Nasri, 2017). According to Kristeva, intertextuality is where the meaning of a text is shaped through its relationship with other texts. As such, meaning is not fixed and depends on context. The text is produced by the subject, but the meaning produced can be debated, especially through the concept of intertextuality, which shows how the texts are interconnected. In addition, the position of the subject in the text is influenced by how the text is structured and the cultural context in which it is situated. Thus, the understanding of texts always involves interaction with various cultural elements and other texts (Raj, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the American social structure contained in the film *Mean Girls* (2004) with a literary sociology approach. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows the research to explore narrative and visual elements in the film that reflect complex social and cultural dynamics in a deep and comprehensive manner. Primary data was obtained from scenes and dialogues in *Mean Girls* (2004). One example is the scene where Cady Heron enters a new environment in a public school in America, portrayed as an "outsider" who is unfamiliar with the social system in her school. This scene was chosen because, narratively and visually, it reflects themes that are relevant to the social analysis raised in this research. Secondary data included news articles and academic studies that discussed the impact of the 9/11 tragedy on American society. The articles include the following: one from JSTOR Daily titled *How 9/11 Changed Americans*, another from History.com titled *5 Ways September 11 Changed America*, and the last from a UC Berkeley news article titled *Shock, Insecurity, and Endless War: How 9/11 Changed America and the World*. These articles were used to link the social context with thematic elements in the movie, thus forming an in-depth intertextual analysis.

The research procedure is clearly outlined, including steps like rewatching the movie to identify thematic elements such as character stereotypes, group dynamics, and social hierarchy. After that, supporting articles were analyzed to contextualize these elements in the post-9/11 social framework. Scenes featuring social events that occurred in post-9/11 were analyzed using Julia Kristeva's Intertextual theory or Stuart Hall's Stereotype theory. To ensure validity and reliability, the data collected was compared with various credible sources, both from news articles and academic literature. This emphasis on comparing interpretations with credible sources reduces subjectivity and adds rigor to the analysis. Each interpretation of the movie scenes was evaluated based on Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextual irony and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. This step ensures that the analysis is not based solely on subjective assumptions but is supported by a strong theoretical foundation. In addition, the selection of scenes and articles was done carefully to avoid data bias, so that the research results can accurately represent the relationship between films and social contexts (Kristeva & Moi, 1986). Data analysis was conducted by examining how intertextual irony is used in the film to criticize the social structure and power in America.

Through this systematic approach, the research not only reveals the relationship between *Mean Girls* (2004) and the American social context, but also provides insight into how popular media can be used as a tool for social reflection. The author hopes that the results of the research can contribute to the study of popular culture and the sociology of literature, as well as open up

opportunities for further research on how cultural products reflect and influence collective understanding of critical events in history. By providing a comprehensive analysis, this research is expected to be a useful reference for academics and practitioners interested in the study of intertextuality, cultural representation, and social dynamics (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). There are six scenes in the results of the discussion. The selection of these scenes is based on the characters presented by the main actors and their ability to directly reflect the themes contained in *Mean Girls* that mirror the events of 9/11.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mean Girls (2004) is known as a light-hearted teen movie because it depicts the fun atmosphere of adolescence while discussing social dynamics in high school. However, this movie also contains serious elements because it can represent the impact of collective trauma and social change after a major event that occurred in the United States, namely the post-9/11 incident (Muller, 2017). Using Julia Kristeva's Intertextual theory and Stuart Hall's stereotype theory, this article analyzes how *Mean Girls* (2004) reflects intertextual irony in post-9/11 American social conditions and how stereotypes relate to the collective trauma of society after the attacks. Intertextual irony and stereotypes of post 9/11 American social structure in *Mean Girls (2004)* can be described through a sociology of literature approach, which is detailed as follows:

Julia Kristeva defines defines intertextuality as the process by which the meaning of a text is constructed through its relationship with other texts, either explicitly or implicitly (Block & Kristeva, 1983).
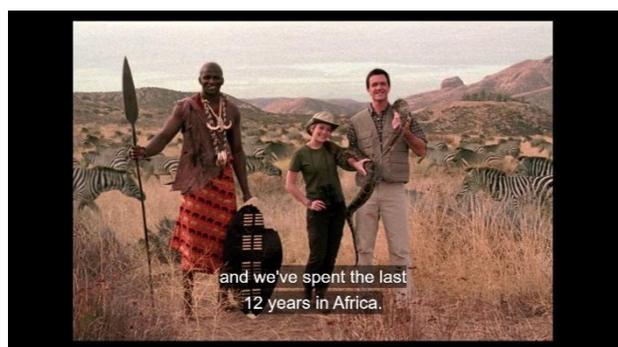
Picture 1. Mean Girls (2004) at (01.34)

Pictures 2. Mean Girls (2004) at (01.42)

In the scene above, Cady Heron, a new student from Africa who has always been homeschooled, feels unfamiliar and shocked by the social dynamics in her new high school. She is portrayed as an outsider who is pressured to conform to the norms set by the dominant group, The Plastics. Intertextual as the absorption and transformation of other texts (Martin, 2011), and in this scene creates intertextual irony because it reflects the social

dynamics in the United States post 9/11, as written in the news article about post 9/11 UC Berkeley, Shock, insecurity and endless war: How 9/11 Changed America and the world :

"Even as Americans grappled with trauma and anger at home, the attacks cleared the way for a foreign policy based on the belief that the United States can 'transform foreign societies in its own self-image,' said UC Berkeley historian Daniel Sargent. This was 'hubris,' Sargent said, with the 'consequence of exploding the credibility of America as a superpower'" (Gershon, 2016)

Here Cady as an "outsider" is forced to conform to the dominant group's norms at school, reflecting America's fragmented social identity after 9/11. The tension between the need to create unity and the fear of the foreign or different is represented through the pressure of the dominant group (in *Mean Girls (2004)*, The Plastics) to regulate social norms. This is in line with the patterns of exclusion that emerged in post-9/11 American Society, where national solidarity was often achieved by alienating individuals or groups deemed "different.". Cady experiences not only alienation but also psychological pressure to fulfill social expectations that are new or unfamiliar to her. The social trauma she experiences at school mirrors the collective trauma experienced by American society post 9/11 as described in the UC Berkeley article. *Mean Girls (2004)* creates a deep irony through the representation of Cady as an outsider struggling to be accepted in a system that is not truly inclusive. As such, Mean Girls becomes more than just a teen movie; it becomes a reflection of the social struggles of post-9/11 America. The tension between individuality and collectivity depicted in Cady's story underscores the challenge society faces in creating solidarity without losing individual freedom and uniqueness. The movie reminds us that true unity can only be achieved through engagement between one group and another, not by uniformity that imposes one group's dominance over another. Moreover, the deep irony in the movie lies in the fact that the social system governed by The Plastics is not truly inclusive. Although the group appears to be in social control at school, their system is actually riddled with hierarchies that reinforce privilege. This reflects the way the post-9/11 society tries to create unity in a way that does not fully respect diversity. Cady, as the main character, goes through an emotional journey that reflects the tension between the pressure to fit in and the struggle to remain authentic to herself.

In additional analysis of *Mean Girls* (2004), additional academic sources can strengthen the discussion on the film's representation of social dynamics post-9/11. One of these sources is *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly* by John Markert, which discusses how films released after the 9/11 attacks reflect societal anxieties and cultural shifts in the United States. The book explores themes of collective trauma and the reconstruction of national identity, providing a broader context for understanding how media, including *Mean Girls*, addresses the psychological and sociological consequences of the event.

Intertextuality here works by connecting Mean Girls to other larger texts, another sources taken from a UC Berkeley article show how the 9/11 attacks triggered major changes in American society, both in terms of foreign policy, and in the way America understood itself. The article explains that post-9/11, America experienced a deep sense of uncertainty and anxiety, which affected the country's national identity. Just as post-9/11 America felt uncertain and disoriented, Cady had to deal with her sense of alienation and confusion in her new high school. Cady's adaptation process in trying to fit into the new norms of the school's social world-especially those shaped by dominant social groups such as "The Plastics"-is a reflection of America's efforts to "reimagine" its national identity post-9/11.

In analyzing the scene where Cady Heron faces drastic life changes upon entering a public school environment, it is essential to link this experience with the societal transformation in America post-9/11. According to an article from *UNT Digital Library* on trauma representation in television and media, collective trauma often leads to a reevaluation of societal norms and a search for stability and identity. This aligns with the way Cady, as an outsider, attempts to navigate and conform to the dominant social structure represented by The Plastics. By integrating these secondary sources, the analysis could draw a stronger parallel between Cady's individual journey and America's collective struggle to redefine itself after a significant historical event. These connections illustrate how *Mean Girls* becomes more than a teen comedy—it serves as a reflection of broader cultural shifts in post-9/11 society.

"In the shock that follows such terror attacks, people usually imagine that the world has changed forever. How exactly, no one can know. Twenty years later, after so many historical changes, the hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is a reminder of how the country has struggled to respond to the attacks." (Lempinen, 2021)

Picture 3. Mean Girls (2004) at (09.25)   *Picture 4. Mean Girls (2004) at (09.45)*

According to Hall, stereotypes maintain existing power structures by positioning some people as "dominant" and others as "subordinate" (Hall, 1997). In the scene above, there are several student groupings such as *The*

*Plastics, Mathletes, and Jocks. The Plastic*s as a symbol of power that maintains social dominance in the school. It shows that stereotypes reduce a person to a few essential characteristics (Hall, 1997). *The Plastics* group, led by Regina George, functions as a symbol of dominant power that determines social norms and rules. In the post 9/11 context, social control applied by dominant groups such as The Plastics can be seen as an analogy of the US government's strategy to maintain global dominance and domestic security. This is in accordance with the article *5 Ways September 11 Changed America from History.com* such pre-flight passenger screening as the use of conventional X-ray machines, which only detect metal objects, is finally being replaced with full-body scanners. (Roos, 2023)
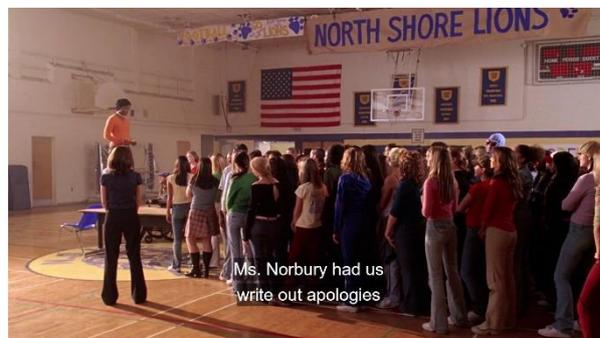
Just as The Plastics manipulated the social structure of schools, the US government uses power and surveillance to create a sense of security while maintaining control over populations deemed "subordinate". For example, in *Mean Girls (2004)* The Plastics created the Burn Book as a book of gossip and insults. As the dialog said by Regina George: "It's our Burn Book. We cut out other people's photos from the yearbook and write down comments". This book manipulates the social structure by creating a hierarchy based on fear and slander. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US government enacted the Enhanced Surveillance and Patriot Act (2001), which caused controversy because it restricted individual privacy rights and unilaterally strengthened government power. The Burn Book also illustrates how the manipulation of information is used to create tension and division. This is relevant to how the American government's control of information post-9/11 is often used to frame certain narratives that support the interests of power. Policies such as the curtailment of civil liberties through mass surveillance are a way to maintain authority and security, albeit with detrimental consequences for individual rights (USA PATRIOT ACT, 2001).

In addition, the movie shows how hegemonic power is not only coercive but also persuasive. Regina uses her charisma and position as a leader to influence her peers, reflecting how dominant actors in global politics use their influence to build consensus and legitimacy. It illustrates the way power works not only through coercion but also through manipulated consent, as in essence power is a technique of obedience through practices of power from the subject to the object not through action or something repressive, but rather manipulative and hegemonic (Jumiati et al., 2017). On the other hand, Mean Girls also provides a critique of hegemonic power through Cady's character development. As she realizes the negative effects of conformity to dominant group norms, she seeks to create a more inclusive social structure. This transformation reflects how subordinate individuals or groups can resist domination through resistance and solidarity. In the post-9/11 context, this scene is relevant to society's efforts to find a balance between security and freedom. Just as Cady chose to destroy Burn Book to create a healthier social

environment, American society faces the challenge of criticizing excessive surveillance policies while maintaining national security. As such, Mean Girls is not only a teen comedy, but also a poignant allegory of power dynamics, social control, and resistance. The film teaches the importance of respecting individuality and resisting domination that utilizes stereotypes to create fear and pseudo-order.

Picture 5. Mean Girls (2004) at (01.11.30)   *Picture 6. Mean Girls (2004) at (01.13.20)*

The scene above is a scene where the students are gathered after a riot due to the spread of the Burn Book insult book. Ms. Norbury leads this discussion and does one way to improve the situation by asking the students to admit their mistakes and apologize to others, because without realizing it, they are all victims and perpetrators behind the writing contained in the Burn Book. In the post 9/11 context, this scene shows how conflicts resulting from stereotypes and societal distinctions can be resolved through communication and recognition of equality. It reflects social hope amidst the tensions caused by discrimination against minorities. The JSTOR Daily article also notes the importance of rebuilding intergroup relations in the post-9/11 society to counter the negative effects of stereotyping and exclusion. In an article titled Shock, Insecurity, and Endless War: How 9/11 Changed America and the World, it is noted that the Muslim community has been differentiated as a result of post 9/11 (Gershon, 2016).

This scene is also relevant in the post-9/11 context as it illustrates the importance of cross-group communication to reduce prejudice. Heightened social tensions due to negative stereotypes of Muslims post-9/11 require open dialogue to dispel prejudices and build mutual trust. As shown in the film, this dialog is the first step to overcoming conflict and creating a more harmonious environment. Mean Girls also shows that conflict is often rooted in misunderstanding and fear. The students who previously antagonized each other eventually realized that they were all victims of an unjust social system. In the post-9/11 context, this illustrates how global tensions are often caused by a lack of cross-cultural understanding. Reconciliation can only happen when individuals and groups are willing to understand the other side's perspective.

In addition, this scene illustrates the importance of thoughtful leaders in resolving conflicts. Ms. Norbury, with her fair and empathetic approach, reflects the leadership role needed to restore intergroup relations post-9/11. In the real world, this kind of leadership is needed to steer society towards inclusivity and social justice.

In conclusion, this scene not only represents conflict resolution in a school context, but also provides lessons on how society can overcome social tensions. By acknowledging mistakes, apologizing, and opening dialogue across groups, seemingly intractable conflicts can be overcome. The movie teaches that social justice and harmony can only be achieved through the recognition of human equality and a concerted effort to transcend stereotypes and prejudices. In the post-9/11 context, Mean Girls provides an important reflection on how conflicts caused by stereotypes and social divisions can be resolved. The film implies that hope for an inclusive and harmonious future can only be realized if we are willing to break down the walls that separate us and build bridges of mutual understanding.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals how the movie *Mean Girls (2004)* reflects the social structure of post-9/11 America through intertextual approach and stereotype theory. Using Julia Kristeva's theory, it is found that the film utilizes intertextual irony to criticize the social hierarchy and group dynamics that emerged in American society after the 9/11 tragedy. The movie depicts the social pressure and identity struggle felt by individuals or groups that are considered different. The results show that characters in *Mean Girls (2004)*, such as Cady Heron and the group "The Plastics," symbolize power dynamics and stereotypes in society. The Plastics, as the dominant group, create social norms and rules that pressure other individuals to conform. This reflects the divisions that occurred in American society after 9/11, where national solidarity was often achieved by alienating certain groups.

In addition, the movie also highlights the importance of communication and recognition of equality in resolving social conflicts. In one scene, students at a school are invited to admit mistakes and apologize to each other. This illustrates an attempt to rebuild relationships between groups amidst tensions due to discrimination and stereotypes. This scene provides hope that social conflicts can be overcome through understanding and empathy. This research provides new insights into how popular culture products such as *Mean Girls (2004)* can be a reflection of social and cultural change in a particular historical context. The movie not only entertains but also critiques relevant social issues, such as group pressure, identity seeking, and power dynamics. This shows the important role of media in shaping people's collective understanding. As such, this study contributes to the study of popular culture and the sociology of literature. The findings are relevant for educators, psychologists and policy

makers to understand the impact of cultural products on adolescent behavior. In addition, this research also opens opportunities for further studies on how popular media reflect and influence social dynamics in various critical contexts. However, the film has limitations, including a lack of analysis of cinematic elements, as well as a limited focus on the post-9/11 context and has not explored the relevance of similar themes in other cultures. Therefore, future research is expected to involve a cross-cultural approach as well as a more in-depth analysis of cinematic elements. Future studies can also examine the impact of this film on the views of audiences in the modern era, especially in the context of digital media.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

As the main author and contributor, SK has an important role in the research implementation process such as being responsible for conceptualizing the research idea, collecting data or analytical tools, analyzing data, and compiling the research. As supervisors, YS and IH provided crucial guidance and feedback throughout the research and manuscript writing process, providing valuable insights during the data analysis stage and critical suggestions to improve the quality of the research. Their expertise was crucial in refining the research design and ensuring that the manuscript conformed to academic writing standards.

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