

The Hunger Games as Dystopian Fiction

by Rena Nyman

The Hunger Games is a dystopian trilogy written by Suzanne Collins with film adaptations so far for the eponymous first novel and its sequel, *Catching Fire*. The third and final installation of the series, *Mockingjay*, is in production and is to be presented in two parts, similar to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This essay will focus on the first novel and its respective film (directed by Gary Ross), not the entire trilogy. It centres on Katniss Everdeen (portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence), a resourceful sixteen year-old girl living in the most impoverished district of Panem, located in North America. The Capitol (Panem's ruling oligarchy) holds the annual Hunger Games, a competition in which each of twelve districts must select one male and one female tribute between the ages of twelve and eighteen to be sent to an arena to participate in a death match. The last one alive emerges the victor, ostensibly to be lavished with wealth for the rest of their life. The games are broadcasted nationwide—to the Capitol, it is entertainment, and to the districts, it is a punishment for a past attempted rebellion and a reminder that they are under complete government control. Katniss volunteers as tribute, the first to do so in her district, for the 74th Hunger Games when her younger sister Primrose's (Willow Shields) name is drawn, and with several small acts throughout the novel begins to inspire a resistance.

In contrast to a utopia, an imagined perfect world, a dystopia (from Greek root *dus*, bad, and *topos*, place) is defined as an imagined world in which everything is bad. Common themes include government surveillance, poor living standards, totalitarian regimes, brainwashing, concealing of information, class dichotomies (particularly with a clear distinction and repression of the mass by the elite), police brutality, and status crimes. Some dystopian works attempt to bring light to a specific issue by playing it to the extreme while others portray dystopia as a result of a combination of several problems. As put by Sean P. Connors, "they represent an attempt on the part of writers to use literature as a vehicle to examine contemporary social and political issues that could, if left unattended, bring about undesirable consequences for people" (85). Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of the dystopia genre is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949), involving omnipresent government surveillance, heavy propaganda, and the criminalising of independent thinking. In Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938), individualism and societal advances are stamped out. Michel Foucault's "Panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) considers the use of constant surveillance, or the threat of it, to enforce power and maintain social order. *Divergent*, by Veronica Roth (2011), is another young adult dystopian trilogy being made into a film franchise; in it, the government separates citizens into groups to make society run effectively, and those who don't fit in become homeless or are killed for threatening the system.

The Hunger Games features several themes of dystopia, the most prominent likely being the metonymy bread and circuses (from Latin *panem et circenses*, which is referenced in the name of the country in the series), a concept originating in ancient Rome describing government control via the providing of enough food and entertainment for the people to be content in passive obedience. "[Collins] seems to be warning adolescents not to rely on the government for handouts and Hollywood for entertainment—because otherwise, the populous will become too corrupt and the Empire will fall" (Trites 23). There is also a separation of class, both a dichotomy between the Capitol versus the rest and the subdivision of the rest into twelve districts of decreasing living standards and government favour. In fact, in District 12, there is a further

separation between the merchants and the workers due to the perception of the other class by each. The residents of the Capitol are kept apathetic to the conditions of the rest of Panem by virtue of their extravagant lifestyles, the viewing of the games as entertainment, and simple ignorance of the outside world. The districts, particularly those greater in number (Districts 1 & 2 are most favoured), are forced to provide specialised labour for the Capitol at risk of brutal punishment, struggle for the resources to live, and, in watching their children murder and be murdered each year, are reminded that they are powerless. "Importantly, the Capitol does not only punish its traitors, it does so in a way that will remind its subjects just how much power it has" (Macaluso and McKenzie 109-110). In stark contrast, citizens of the Capitol don't think twice about wasting resources while those of District 12 fear not having enough every day. "Yet precariousness here is not a natural state which the rich are fortunate enough to rise above; on the contrary, precariousness is deliberately imposed on the poor as a means of controlling and subduing them" (Fisher 27). Furthermore, by the separation and isolation of the different districts, the Capitol keeps them from communicating, organising, and uniting.

The elements of the Capitol's totalitarian regime are subverted by Katniss throughout the film. "Often, Katniss's acts of resistance do not entail awe-inspiring acts of bravery and heroism. To the contrary, she more often engages in minor acts of resistance that inspire others to come together as a collective and work for change" (Rodriguez 159). Though Panem is undoubtedly a dystopia, President Coriolanus Snow's (Donald Sutherland) control is not absolute and citizens do have the power to subvert it. The first example seen is that of Katniss hunting to support her family: though it is illegal, the Peacekeepers (Panem's police force) in District 12 turn a blind eye to it because they, too, depend on her procured game to survive. Though they are instated for the purpose of keeping citizens in line and fearful via public punishment for crimes, they play a substantial part in providing Katniss and her family with the resources to live. Most importantly, however, the Capitol's pervasive surveillance and broadcasting is used against them, subverting their rule in significant ways.

Aligning with Foucault's theories about Bentham's panopticon and the results of similar practices, "the residents of the districts have fallen so completely under the control of the state that they are no longer able to resist its power. Instead, they self-monitor to ensure that they present themselves in a way that is consistent with what they assume the state expects of them" (Connors 151). The residents of the districts are socialised to censor their thoughts and Katniss learns from an early age not to bring up controversial topics; the only place she and Gale can speak freely is out in the woods. Katniss is acutely aware that she is under scrutiny both by the Capitol and the districts and is careful to moderate her actions and appearance to aid her chances of survival. After the reaping and before her departure from home, she refuses to cry or otherwise show weakness because "the more she can portray herself as a serious contender, the more likely it is that sponsors will support her and provide the kinds of resources that she will need in order to survive the Games...from the moment she volunteers in place of Prim, she is nearly constantly subjected to the watchful eye of the gaze" (Macaluso and McKenzie 111).

Foucault also argues in *The History of Sexuality* that "existing power-systems are not inevitable or fixed, but can be resisted or changed" (Chaudhuri 65). In the Games, Katniss and Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), her district partner, manage to use the fact that everything in the arena is monitored and broadcasted live to their advantage, playing the part of star-crossed lovers to curry favour with Capitol sponsors. In the end, the public's love for the love story they act out is the reason they survive their act of rebellion. By threatening double suicide, which would leave the 74th Hunger Games with no victor to celebrate and defeat much of its purpose, they show on national

television that President Snow's authority can, in fact, be undermined. Because the Capitol residents see this as a tragic, tear-jerking love story rivalling Romeo and Juliet, he is unable to publicly do anything to them.

Perhaps the beginning of a widespread rebellion is incited with Rue (Amandla Stenberg), the District 11 tribute with whom Katniss formed an alliance and a sisterly bond. Upon her death, Katniss sings her to sleep, buries her in flowers, and gives a three-finger salute toward the camera, forcing her to be seen as a young girl instead of just another piece of the games. "Rue's death...marks the moment when Katniss resolves to take a stand beyond simple survival in the first round of Games" (Tan 32). With the respect and love shown for Rue, Katniss effectively brings District 11 to stand in solidarity against the Capitol. This is shown when Rue's family sends her bread in the arena and with the uprising of the district. The display of unity is significant because citizens of Panem are socialised to think only of themselves: Capitol citizens for self-gratification, the Career tributes of Districts 1 and 2 for glory, and the district populations, such as the impoverished District 12, for survival. As a result, platonic love is systematically invalidated, which is why it is necessary for Katniss and Peeta's alliance to be sold as a love story. Even Katniss' sacrifice of her freedom to protect her sister is not compelling to them. In spite of this, her alliance with Rue is a reminder to the districts that the Capitol has not eradicated the humanity of the people.

Though dystopia is the prevailing genre of the novel, the film subverts this by playing down the social commentary and playing up the love triangle, much like the majority of Hollywood films. Truly, the way it is shown and promoted provides justifications for Collins' themes. Perhaps one of the most frequent questions asked is that of "Team Peeta or Team Gale" while the serious implications of the series are largely ignored. The emphasis is placed on the heartrending love triangle instead of the pervasive violence and oppression that most of Panem struggles against, as if we are looking at the Hunger Games in the same way that the Capitol residents do. In this way, the goal of the dystopian genre to "place a mirror before readers, challenging them to examine the world they inhabit and the obstacles it places on the path to social justice" (Rodriguez 157) is greatly undermined by the film.

Furthermore, the film franchise has been marketed across several media platforms, for instance, engaging its fans in an interactive game in which they may become citizens of Panem. Capitol-inspired makeup lines have been launched as well as an online magazine depicting their fashion trends. Iris Shepard and Ian Wojcik-Andrews point out that:

By replicating the fictional Panem's fashions in this way, and by asking audiences literally to buy into the cultural life of Panem, there is a strong argument to be made that Panem and the contemporary United States are frighteningly similar, especially with regards to the media's ability to breed apathy in the face of real human tragedy...Instead of successfully critiquing the excesses of capitalism and fulfilling Collins's goal of increasing awareness about the dangers of violence, the film's emphasis on the glamour of the Capitol and the accompanying comarketing of make-up and accessories...may become the most durable aspect of the film. (193)

The focus on the trendiness of the film instead of the issues it is meant to bring into social consciousness mirrors the way information is spread in Panem. The games' tributes are displayed to the nation in much the same way—personal interviews, fashion shows, parades, and

the like—overshadowing the fact that they are soon going to be forced to kill each other as a brutal reminder of the past failure to rise above the Capitol. Although the social commentary is largely glossed over in the film adaptation, it serves as proof that such commentary and awareness is needed. "Overall, with the changes that Ross (2012) makes in his adaptation, the young adult novel written as a warning for American teenagers morphs into an entertaining film...Unsurprisingly, Katniss's role in the book as a political critic and agitator is downplayed in the movie, and her presence as a star is highlighted" (Shepard and Wojcik-Andrews 195).

The film also marks a change in Katniss as a female character as well. The novel is arguably feminist in that it subverts traditional gender norms of masculinity and femininity by giving Katniss the strengths and capabilities usually afforded to a male protagonist while simultaneously showing Peeta's strength in his desire to stay true to himself and his intuitive perception of the feelings and desires of others (most notably how he plays the crowd to garner sympathy and earn them sponsors). Rather than Peeta, Katniss is the one with experience providing for a household, who has physical skills that make Peeta's mother think she is likely to win (even more so than her son), and who is emotionally unavailable. Even as she is aware of both Peeta's and Gale's love for her, her first priority continually lies in survival and caring for her family. Though Gale, as a friend and hunting partner, is very important to her, and she later comes to trust Peeta and care about his wellbeing, romance is not even something she takes the time to think about. She plays the role for the Capitol, and wishes to protect Peeta because she believes he is much more worthy than she is, and even later in the trilogy realises she has feelings for him and needs to be with him, but she remains disinterested in pursuing romance throughout the first novel. However:

From Hollywood's point of view, a young adult movie that features thoughtful, reasoned inner monologues from a smart sixteen year-old about the possibilities of a classless society is not as commercially viable as seeing an attractive female ride into the Capitol on a chariot of fire. But then, arguably, one of the cinematic strategies that Hollywood-centrist companies employ to eschew radical change is to value movie heroines for their looks rather than their political voices, perpetuating the objectification of women. Not surprisingly, this stance is frequently replicated in the real world. (Shepard and Wojcik-Andrews 196)

The film yet again undermines her character by tying her importance in with her desirability and availability. In the same way, though Katniss had difficulty coming up with a likeable persona that she could play well for the audience, Peeta's confession of his love for her during his interview with Caesar Flickerman (Stanley Tucci) is what really makes her the darling of the Capitol. While she retains her status as capable protagonist and heroine, the shift in her portrayal as a love interest shows how our culture views female leads. "[Betty] Friedan's book [The Feminine Mystique] reiterated how women were defined only in sexual relation to men—this time as 'wife, sex object, mother, housewife'—and never as people defining themselves by their own actions" (Chaudhuri 17); similarly, the most important aspect of Katniss' character to define is often her romantic allegiance.

However, this is not uncommon in films. According to Mulvey, "spectators are encouraged to identify with the look of the male hero and make the heroine a passive object of erotic spectacle" (qtd. in Chaudhuri 31). Sue writes that media is one of the main ways social norms are enforced, and "when biases and prejudices become institutionalised and systemised into the norms, values, and beliefs of a society, they are passed on to generations of its citizens via socialisation and

cultural conditioning" (112). Female roles are often undermined and their appearances emphasized. Chaudhuri says, "its [Hollywood's] movies are thought to generate false consciousness, encouraging women to adopt and identify with the false images they perpetuate and reinforce" (22), and Sue similarly states that "women, who are evaluated in an objectified culture regarding physical appearance, come to evaluate their own worthiness or self-esteem based upon appearance and physical attributes" (170).

The internalised preoccupation of our society with female attractiveness can lead to mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia. According the American Psychiatric Association, eating disorders can be life-threatening, and over 90% of diagnosed cases of both anorexia nervosa and bulimia are suffered by females (qtd. in Sue 181). Sexual objectification, "the process by which women are transformed into 'objects' or property at the sexual disposal or benefit of men... [stripping them] of their humanity and the totality of their human essence (personal attributes, intelligence, emotions, hopes, etc.)" (Sue 36), is a pervasive problem with media today. However, there is the possibility that Katniss' status as a protagonist and original portrayal as a character will be brought up to deny sexism concerning *The Hunger Games*, and furthermore that *The Hunger Games* will be a token to show that sexism no longer exists. The denial of sexism is a microaggression, an often unconscious reflection of "biases, assumptions, and stereotypes that have been strongly culturally inculcated into our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours" (Sue 41), that invalidates the reality of women. Microaggressions are insidious because of their ambiguous, often invisible nature, and because the perpetrators often do not act maliciously or realise that, rather than a seemingly trivial isolated event, it is a cumulative experience. This behaviour, the people who commit it without conscious discrimination, and its harmful effects to marginalised groups are perhaps best described in King's passage addressing the "white moderate" in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

Society's attitudes toward women are defied in Collins' *The Hunger Games*, but this countering is diminished in Ross' film adaptation while the issue is perpetuated, particularly by its marketing. However, the issue of social control and surveillance culture is more directly addressed, though still less focused on in the film. Soter argues that "unlike other typical fictional dystopias...it is not set in a future as distant as we might first assume, and therefore, the trilogy is not a warning of things that might happen, but a mirror of what has happened (and is happening) without our being aware of it" (129). The United States has several methods of collecting data on individuals, including but not limited to:

interinstitutional sharing of databases; camera surveillance of inner cities, vehicular traffic, employees, baby sitters, and loved ones; bar code scanning of the academic and behavioural records of school children; body scanning via drug tests, polygraphs, and thumbprint screeners; technologies for whistleblowing; devices for monitoring what other people are monitoring on their computers; and fake surveillance technologies that are intended to discipline people by making them believe that surveillance is omnipresent and omnipotent. (Ericson)

PRISM is one such method, used by the NSA to collect private electronic records that are accessible and searchable with queries by analysts. It is enabled by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act which "can now be used to gather records concerning individuals who are neither the target of any investigation nor an agent of a foreign power" (Donohue). Rather than requiring a warrant describing in detail the places to be searched and items to be seized, data is collected with approval by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. "The FISC is supposed

to operate as a check. But it is a secret court, notorious for its low rate of denial...Over the past five years, out of nearly 8,600 applications, only two have been denied" (Donohue). So, "from a cultural critical perspective, therefore, the literary text is not simply fiction: it is a reflection of the society and culture that produced it...a mirror of what already exists" (Soter 126).

"Staples stressed the negative effects of surveillance. He sees it as accentuating social inequality, signalling a decline of trust in social relations, fostering the presumption of guilt and decline of innocence, and entailing more social control" (Ericson). Surveillance culture is increasingly becoming an issue that blocks due process of law and negates the checks and balances in place to keep the government from abusing its power. This is mirrored in Panem with cameras and civil informants in the districts and the panoptic structure of the Games especially. It is something Katniss is acutely aware of and constantly works to subvert. However, "television reality programs are shown to foster not only direct surveillance, but also the normalisation of surveillance because they make it part of the entertainment format of television and, thus, good fun" (Ericson), and this keeps the majority of the public in the United States content to do nothing to combat it. Similarly, the Games are served up as an entertaining reality show to the Capitol, yet again highlighting the connection between their citizens and ours.

In the film, the social commentary through Katniss is undermined as well as her independence from romance. These things were made an integral part of the book to reflect on our own society, and the film showed it all off as entertainment. In this way, it simultaneously subverts and reinforces the themes relevant to Collins' dystopia. By presenting *The Hunger Games* as the Capitol does to its citizens, it is perhaps the most effective, albeit unintentional and easy-to-miss, mirror of the issues confronted in the trilogy. Frighteningly, with the reaction to the film and to surveillance in society, many similarities can be drawn between our citizens and the Capitol's. It is important to recognise the impact that the media has on everyone in order to deal with it properly, just as it is to recognise any parallels between Panem's dystopian government and ours. Through the examination of the film and the juxtaposition of it against the novel, we can begin to see what immediate relevance *The Hunger Games* has to our society.

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