

The role of mass media in suzanne collins's the hunger games

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Suzanne Collins's gripping young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* is a futuristic novel with unsettling parallels to the present. The connections are evident right from the setting as the nation of Panem, consisting of the Capitol surrounded by twelve districts and a decimated District 13, is located in the ruins of present-day North America.

Television is a powerful tool in masscommunication, especially in Panem where certain broadcasts are mandatory and all broadcasts are government-sanctioned. The Capitol and District 13 uses media power for influencing Panem despite with both having oppositional aims. However, neither media power expects a third player to appear who will offer a different framework for viewing and constructing reality. This third player emerges from within the manipulation of their media gaze: Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the trilogy.

The Capitol and District 13 recognize the effect Katniss' image is capable of having on audiences. In response, they manipulate her image in their television broadcasts to foster and perpetuate particular attitudes of viewers toward themselves as governing institutions and to construct a different sense of reality.

The Hunger Games trilogy revolves around a struggle for media control and, thus, for influence within and over Panem. This paper attempts to look at the concepts of hierarchy, identity, surveillance, despotism, the role of media, and explore the events in the novel in relation to the contemporary happenings in the world.

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The Capitol comes up with the idea of the Hunger Games in order to remind the citizens about the failed rebellion of the districts against the Capitol. The Capitol screens the footage of District 13 which is said to have been annihilated while trying to quash the mutiny. The Games not only serves as a reminder but also functions as the Capitol's warning to the districts so that any spark of rebellion would be quelled at the nascent stage.

The doomed fate of the citizens is shown through the Games where two Tributes (a boy and a girl) are selected from each district, in a process called Reaping, and are made to fight to the death in an arena. The tournament is broadcast to the entire nation and serves as entertainment to the Capitol which shows the dehumanization of the citizens of the districts by the Capitol.

The idea of surveillance and the role that the media plays in it is a crucial aspect in the novel. This could be read using Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism that he coins in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975) where he considers the use of constant surveillance as an effective tool to enforce power and maintain social order.

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The panopticon, an eighteenth-century architectural structure that Jeremy Bentham designed to serve as a prison, is often cited as a metaphor to explain how power works in a society whose "institutions employ a range of disciplinary practices which ensure that life continues in a regularized, patterned way" (Lyon 7). In Collins's novel, panopticism manifests as a disciplinary mechanism that the Capitol uses to retain control over the districts.

This framework can be used to understand how the Capitol organizes Panem in a way that effectively allows it to exercise disciplinary power. To begin with, the thirteen districts that comprise Panem are isolated from one another geographically, making travel between them on foot difficult as well as hazardous.

The Capitol takes additional steps to limit people's mobility by employing Peacekeepers. The perimeter of District 12 is enclosed by a chain-link fence that ought to be electrified but seldom works as it should. While the official narrative states that the fence exists to protect the districts from predators that roam the forests beyond the town, it also holds their citizens in a fixed location, lessening the likelihood of their interaction with people from other districts.

As Katniss states, "It's to the Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves" (15). In this way, the districts are like the prisoners in Bentham's panopticon, unable to communicate with each other as a result of their seclusion in compartmentalized cells which in turn minimizes the likelihood of their uniting to promote their own interests.

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In the first chapter of his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal presents Aristotle's philosophy and defines Aristotelian tragedy as a coercive system to enforce lawful behavior in the viewer, suppressing any desire for rebellion. The Capitol follows a similar ideology wherein the citizens are made to watch the Games. The virtual experience is used to drive home the reality that the children are suffering due to the rebellious acts of the past generation and such acts should not be repeated.

The Games, then, are not merely retribution for a past rebellion, but an attempt by the Capitol to influence the attitudes of the Districts. From this perspective, we see two media techniques used by the Capitol, priming - choosing an object to present as important - and framing - encouraging viewers to adopt an attitude toward that object. That is, through the Games, the Capitol primes its audience to focus on its power. By making it required for citizens to watch the Games, the Capitol has established a framework for them to accept the Capitol as the ultimate authority.

The Capitol broadcasts a constant stream of propaganda to influence viewers' emotions and to incite fear. One such video depicts, "A broken dam in 7. A derailed train with a pool of toxic waste spilling from the tank cars. A granary collapsing after a fire" (Collins 132). These images illustrate the Capitol's representation of the destructive consequences of rebellion.

District 13, on the other hand, wants to prime its audience to think about the strides it is making in the rebellion. In this way, it hopes to frame the rebellion to show Panem's citizens that the Capitol can be overthrown if they support District 13 and to project itself as a preferable replacement. District

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13 tries to present Panem with a different version of reality than what the Capitol has constructed.

Both the Capitol and District 13 try to construct an image of Katniss that suits their purpose. The Capitol publicly displays Katniss as a bride to subdue her image of a potential rebel. District 13 also aims to construct a different image of Katniss. Realizing Katniss' ability to influence audiences, District 13 intends for her to fill an important role within the rebellion's media output as the actual leader, the face, the voice, and the embodiment of the revolution.

The Capitol also effectively uses Peeta and constructs his identity too. His interviews are especially important considering his popularity with viewers. The Capitol begins to use broadcasts of Peeta to influence viewers' attitudes about the war and Katniss. They capitalize on Peeta's outburst that Katniss knew nothing about the rebellion which could be detrimental to District 13's projection of her as the rebellion's fiery leader and give credibility to the Capitol's construction of a Katniss who is helplessly in love and a victim to the exploits of District 13.

Media literacy refers to the ability to understand how media messages are constructed

and the ability to use media to create effective messages for particular purposes. Early in *The Hunger Games* Katniss describes what she understands is "the real message" of the games, revealing that she has been decoding media usage before the series even begins (Collins 18).

Throughout the rest of the series, Katniss' media literacy expands to the point that she is able to actively manipulate the media using the same methods used against her. She is also guided in the process by the people around her. Haymitch teaches Katniss that her words and actions, or the way she presents herself, on camera can have an effect on people. He urges her to frame herself with a personality angle that will influence her audience to find her desirable.

He further notes, " It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived" (Collins 135). Haymitch's strategy of selecting an angle for viewer perception is similar to the strategy of reality television producers when it comes to casting.

She learns through Cinna, the designer, those appearances are imperative to the Games, as making a positive impression could mean the difference between life and death.

The various outfits of Katniss designed by Cinna in the trilogy change the audience's perception of her. As the District produces coal, the Tributes were colored with coal for many years. Cinna, however, adds a twist to it. Instead of coal, he dresses Katniss based on the trigger, i. e., fire. That becomes Katniss's identity - the girl on fire - even during the rebellion. Cinna successfully projects the Tributes from District 12 as powerful contenders in the spotlight.

Katniss is able to develop her own framework for reality by proving through her actions inside the arena that rebellion is possible from within a powerful panopticon structure. Katniss is able to undermine the media institutions'

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powers, precisely because she is part of the society in which that institution wields control.

One of the first times Katniss primes and frames reality differently from the Capitol's purpose is when she creates a literal frame for Rue, a young tribute from District 11 who is killed in the arena during the seventy-fourth Games. Her gesture is an act of rebellion against the brutality of the Games.

While in the arena, Katniss realizes that by being romantic towards Peeta, she is able to ensure gifts from her sponsors for herself and Peeta. Another time that Katniss' actions provide a new framework for Panem is in the infamous scene with the poisonous berries. Katniss encourages Peeta to take poisonous Nightshade berries with her but the Games are ended soon enough and Peeta and Katniss are both declared victors.

Through her calculated actions, Katniss has provided a new framework that suggests to Panem that the Capitol does not have absolute power and that resistance is possible. Her public execution of President Coin establishes a new framework for Panem's citizens: a framework that allows citizens to realize that Panem can survive under different conditions than either the Capitol or District 13 would have provided.

A look at Collins's inspiration behind writing the series is imperative to understanding the relevance of the novel to contemporary society. In an interview with Scholastic, Collins said that she drew from the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur when coming up with the idea of Tributes for the Games.

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She added that the coverage of wars in Iran and Afghanistan contributed to her story. The depictions of these wars in reality television led Collins to imagine the dystopian setting of Panem, where violence becomes a major form of entertainment. One can trace how the bestiality of war has remained unchanged throughout eons.

That Collins was able to seamlessly weave the Greek myth into the narrative of a futuristic world shows that there has been not much change, let alone progress in the society. Although the novel is set in a futuristic period, the events are no different from current happenings.

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