

**THE HEROIC EPIC
OR
FEARING THE REALITY OF
A DISAFFECTED FUTURE:
THE HUNGER GAMES
FILM SERIES**

ALEXANDRA MĂRGINEAN

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Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan
Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan
Coperta: Alexandra Mărginean, Monica Balaban
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B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București

Tel.: 021.315.32.47

www.editurauniversitara.ro

e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

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FOREWORD

The world of cinema productions and literary works is heavily populated with dystopic realms and post-apocalyptic stories. One of the reasons why authors and producers envisage such extreme worlds is perhaps the dire straits in which we can find ours. And one aspect of that is environmental issues and worries regarding the shortage in global resources. *The Hunger Games* series voices, sometimes in a subdued and indirect manner, the worldwide common concerns about an overpopulated, resource-depleted and, moreover, polluted planet, which is struggling to find sustainable ways to cope with scarcity and toxicity. This critical state is accentuated by extreme weather conditions which seem to baffle expectations, impact resource production and people's lives, as well as make us wonder about the imminence of an event that would indeed destroy life on the planet as we know it. As people have come to witness floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes of impressive magnitudes, unusual illnesses or the outbreak of long-forgotten viruses or infectious diseases considered contained by medication and vaccines etc., there is, even for the most practical-minded people, at least a modicum of psychological strain and apprehension whether we are not headed and preparing for something worse. This event that may be worse than anything that we have experienced could be orchestrated by man, in the guise of a biological weapon or a war using state-of-the-art technology, or even a natural disaster.

The other reason for the plethora of dystopic images in contemporary cultural products is a sense of impatience of people against the background of worldwide economic, political and even religious tensions. A significant event was the September 2001 attack – relatively close to the turn of the millennium – on the World Trade Center, and the loss of lives that it generated. In America, “The attacks heightened awareness of global events for a generation of kids, shattered

their illusions of a peaceful world, and changed perceptions they had of their nation as almighty and invulnerable.”” (Howe qtd. in McEvoy-Levy, 2018: 204) The event, subsequently referred to as 9/11, created collective trauma. In the past few years, the world has been further radicalizing itself in a way and to a degree that can give us pause. A lot of political stances have changed course, leaders have seen a tendency to voice their thoughts in a more open, straightforward and not always diplomatic discourse. Perhaps there is something to be gained from this attitude that on its positive side can be viewed as transparency, but, on the other hand, on its negative side, it resembles intolerance and may yield unwanted results of a large scope. We may concur that the multiplicity of dystopic cultural objects have been both the result of, and anticipating a tense situation and have, consciously or unconsciously, paralleled its build-up.

Hence, I have chosen to render this vein by looking at what I consider the most representative production of the above-mentioned tendency or trend, due to its dimension, popularity and humongous resources of all types involved. In the light of what I have stated above, my endeavor is therefore not only a scholarly one. It is, perhaps even primarily, a social enterprise as well. As a cultural object, the film trilogy of *The Hunger Games* reflects society and mindsets. It is thus worth investigating the collective consciousness (and unconscious) in order to see, after all, where we all stand, what makes up our mentalities profile and psychology nowadays, what is the atmosphere of people's mind. This study is therefore far from being a merely theoretical exercise. A mass production such as *The Hunger Games* may offer valuable insight and intimations regarding that, all the more so since it is both a hugely successful literary piece and a blockbuster, and is a trilogy, which has expanded its presence in the public sphere and awareness over quite a few years, having a more lasting impact and proving that its content is not a matter of fleeting whim or transient fashion, but a constant vision here to stay. *The Hunger Games* series reunites, in its complexity, most of the elements present in the type of dystopic cultural products

mentioned above, constituting at the same time a thorough and relevant representation of people's conceptualizations and mental atmosphere in contemporary times.

There is a reason why I chose to focus on the films rather than the books. At a first glance, as someone who has been fond of reading all her life, and as an academic, my natural tendency, in a world in which (young) people prefer the synthetic pill of a movie over the laborious, time-consuming task of reading (which, unlike watching a film, is not perceived as entertainment), would have normally been to choose the books for analysis. On the other hand, having graduated an MA that included, among other modules, some on the history of ideas, music and visual studies, I believe that I have some awareness regarding the value of a good-quality cinematic production. Especially in the case of a worthy film, the impact and the complexity of the representation is greater, thus rendering or translating more methodically and exhaustively the collective mind (or mentalities) of the time.

My intention is, therefore, to approach the study of *The Hunger Games* movie trilogy from the double perspective of the consumer of a cultural object, as well as the vantage point of the specialist/academic in cultural studies. I will also have, at the back of my mind, therefore, all the criticism that I have read of city and identity studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, imagology, feminism, as well as linguistics and pragmatics, but I will try to do justice to the regular reader, keeping the language available to non-specialists.

In the way that I have structured the book, I have had in mind the passage from general and more accessible realities, to the progressively complex and/or more subtle ones. Hence, the first chapter introduces us to the universe of the three films of the series, by recounting the events presented in each, as they appear on the screen. It familiarizes us with the world and characters of *The Hunger Games*. Chapter two interprets the phenomenon and institution of the hunger games, as well as the power seat of The Capitol and its administration from a social, anthropological and

psychological point of view. Here, we reveal, on the one hand, The Capitol as an image of the Capitoline hill in Rome, as well as the American Capitol, deriving all the implications of these parallels, and, on the other hand, the games as a scapegoating device, as well as a carnivalesque activity. Linguistic interest is shown in the next chapter. *The Hunger Games* series also has a special vocabulary, which we probe into, also noticing the symbolical synthetic nature of the characters' names. Chapter four explores the architecture of the games, in the two opposing micro worlds that are, both concretely and metaphorically, miles away from each other – the districts and The Capitol – and the hunger games environments, as all these greatly contribute (especially when we think of the game arenas) to the viewing pleasure and the suspense created in the movies and, consequently, to their success. Chapter five analyzes thoroughly aspects that pertain to a totalitarian, Big Brother type of society, with the paramount role played by television and the thorny problematic that it raises, and the impact that such a state has on the psyche. The sixth chapter looks at the most important symbols of resistance – the mockingjay, fire, the white rose, sounds and songs, video feeds and signs of all sorts – making a repertoire of the various forms in which they insinuate in the story, as well as their hermeneutic above and beyond the immediate context, the knowledge of which, nevertheless, is crucial for catching the entirety of implications derived from them. Lack of such knowledge would maim the complete understanding of their meaning, and of the allegories that get created based on them. Also, we may notice that the very combination of these symbols in the way in which they have been mixed proves the fact that the producers address learned members of the audience as well as the ones merely looking for pure thrill and entertainment. Last but not least, the chapter on fashion could not be missing from a film series that detaches itself by the attention granted to this aspect and the use of impressive *haute couture* items. This chapter is placed at the end, not necessarily having to do with any complexity or subtlety of

meaning – in the logic announced above; it did not particularly reflect my concerns with the object of my endeavor. However, it got added with the awareness of having done injustice to the trilogy, had I omitted a discussion of fashion from my book.

Overall, I would characterize identity, psychology and imagology as the main focus of this work. This does not mean that the other aspects are less thoroughly approached. After all, they are all interconnected. Also, my intention was to keep close to the material offered as a primary source, the details that the films supply and the construction provided for the consumer *per se*. In other words, I tried to avoid falling into the trap of over-interpretation, or of a too theoretical appraisal which always tends to lose the meanings conveyed by the cultural product between the lines. I strived, so to speak, to stay faithful to the nature and intention of the object of my analysis, as I feel that too many studies nowadays tend to play upon general ideas connected to the item that they are investigating, derailing from the symbolical fodder supplied by the actual material, and forgetting to connect hermeneutic with the textual proof present in it. This, along with all the aspects mentioned in this foreword, and a personal preference for the topic and main idea of the films have offered me the guiding lines for the conception of this book.

1. STORYLINES

1.1 *The Hunger Games*

The 2012 first film of the trilogy opens with the scene of a televised interview organized by The Capitol, the seat of the dictatorship presiding over Panem, in which the host and the victor of the last three editions of the hunger games in a row discuss the significance of this competition. Then, the District 12 comes to the fore, where we see the poverty that people live in and meet the Everdeen family, with the adolescent Katniss and her younger sister Prim, as well as Katniss' friend Gale. In the morning, people wash and prepare for The Reaping, a gathering in which their district, as well as each and every one of the other eleven, will draw a male and a female, aged between 12 and 18, to compete against the other representatives of the neighboring districts in a fight to the death in a controlled environment and a televised show called The Hunger Games. As Prim gets picked, knowing the little girl's horror at the prospect of participating, Katniss volunteers in her stead as a Tribute. Before the chosen ones are taken by the officials, they are allowed a few moments with their families, and both Prim and Gale encourage Katniss by telling her that she stands a real chance at winning, since she can hunt, and Katniss asks Gale to take care of her mother and sister after she is taken away.

Together with the boy tribute from her district, Peeta Mellark, Katniss is put on a train going 200 kilometers per hour to The Capitol, where they can enjoy a rich meal, including champagne, pastries, sweets and colorful candy before they enter the training for the games. On the train they are supposed to have a discussion with Haymitch, their mentor, about strategies for the games, but he turns out to be a drunkard whose only advice initially is to embrace the possibility of an imminent death and to make peace with the thought that he cannot help them in any way. Katniss watches videos of previous games, in which she

sees a victor smashing the head of another child with a brick, holding it as it is dripping blood. As Haymitch comes around, he tells them that one of the most important aspects is to get people to like you, as in this way the Sponsors will contribute with basic objects that may turn out to be essential for the contestant's survival in the game. Peeta seems to be taking in Haymitch's suggestions better and more efficiently, as, when the train reaches its destination and he sees the inhabitants of The Capitol, dressed up in colorful fancy costumes and wearing strange makeup cheering for them, he waves and smiles back from the window, although the crowd looks vulgar and the people resemble circus freaks.

After Katniss is processed, meaning cleaned up, trimmed and subjected to some esthetic treatments, Cinna, her helper, is sent in to talk to her and explain the proceedings. At the night's Tribute Parade, every couple from every district will enter a huge stadium on a chariot wearing certain garments, to be presented to the sponsors in the audience. At the parade, President Snow gives a speech, welcoming the district representatives and thanking them for their sacrifice, and then uses the usual slogan of the occasion: "Happy Hunger Games. And may the odds be ever in your favor." (Jacobson, Kilik & Ross, 2012) Then, all participants retreat for a rest in the luxurious lofts of the same compound where they have been hosted.

The training period follows, beginning with some general information and indications. They are all warned not to fight one another before the final act of the games, when the surviving ones will get the chance to do that in a special arena, and are advised to get familiarized with survival tactics, as most will perish because of the rough conditions in the environment: dehydration, infections and exposure to various substances. The trainings consist in both physical tests, of survival, body strength and battle, and mental trials, such as pairing similar elements on a screen, within a certain amount of time. Everyone's scores are registered on an electronic screen, continuously counting the odds of their survival. On the final evaluation, Haymitch urges

them to show their best in their performance, as this is the time the Sponsors take notice of the contestants and choose those whom they will support. As Katniss enters the training hall and loses the attention of the officials after a bad bow shot that misses the target, provoking their laughter, she recaptures it by hitting the apple put in the mouth of a fried suckling pig resting on a platter on their table.

After the period of time allotted for the preparations of the contenders is over, the overall results are announced on television, and Katniss is ranked very well, to Haymitch and Effie's delight and to Peeta's disappointment. Before leaving for the final destination of the games, they need to make one more televised appearance, in which Katniss presents a red dress designed by Cinna and shows the public how its lower part catches fire as she spins around.

Katniss and the other participants are injected a tracker in their arm as they are boarding a plane that takes them to an underground facility. Here, Cinna dresses her up in an overcoat that has the mockingjay pin hidden under the collar, then she enters a glass capsule elevator that takes her up into the arena.

In the game, she needs to protect herself from both the adverse elements introduced by the directors of the game to drive her to where the other contestants are, and provoke a clash between them (fire, fire balls, a crashing tree in flames), and Cato and his friends, who are trying to kill her in particular before they kill the others, as she is to them the most feared opponent. Peeta allies with her enemies as he is hoping, on the one hand, to protect himself by befriendng the most powerful players, and, on the other hand, to fight against Katniss, as he knows that her strength is superior to his. It is unclear where his allegiance lies, and we do not really know if he is playing a double game or not, and in front of whom he is really pretending – Katniss or Cato. Cato and his group corner Katniss, who is forced to climb a tree in order to escape them, but they are determined to wait patiently until she gets down from it. Katniss escapes by dropping a hive filled with killer wasps from the tree on her enemies, then allies

with little Rue from District 11, who helps her overcome the side effects of the venom from the insects she has nevertheless been stung by. But Rue gets killed by a tribute, and the organizers announce that the game can have two victors, if they come from the same district, which makes Katniss look for Peeta. She finds him hurt and camouflaged by a river, hiding from Cato and his gang, who no longer need him now and have thus become a threat. She takes care of him, feeding him and risking her life to get from the Cornucopia the medicine provided by the organizers for his wound. Also, she realizes that the people outside are manipulated into yearning for a love story between them, which the organizers are trying to orchestrate in order to deter the public's attention from rioting, giving them a preoccupation and something to take interest in. As the only ones left in the game, besides them, are Cato and a strong boy from the same district as Rue, the game director (or gamemaker) Seneca and his team release in the environment a genetically modified breed of wild dogs, who kill the last representative of District 11. Katniss and Peeta run from the dogs towards the metallic structure of the Cornucopia, as it is the highest ground in the environment and their only chance to stay alive. As they climb on it, they meet Cato there and start fighting with him. Cato catches Peeta by the neck, but Katniss shoots a well-aimed arrow to his shoulder and he falls from the Cornucopia. As the dogs below dash at him and start ripping and tearing at his body, she mercifully shoots another arrow at him to end his misery.

The artificial darkness brought inside the environment to make the chase by wild dogs more efficient and scary clears away, but their relief is curbed by another announcement from the authorities, which says that the last provision stipulating that there should be two victors has been revoked. Knowing that Katniss is the real winner who has been protecting him all along, Peeta tells her to kill him, as one of them should go back home, but Katniss has an idea. She asks Peeta to trust her and gives him some of the poisonous berries that she found in the woods at some point previously, pretending that they want to swallow

them and die together. She intuitively feels that the organizers will not like having no victor, as more revolts may outbreak as a consequence, and what she anticipates actually happens. Seeing that the system's plan is being jeopardized, the voice delivering the audio broadcasts orders them to stop, and then announces them as the winners of the 74th edition of the hunger games. They are taken back to The Capitol, where they are crowned by President Snow. Seneca finds in his chamber a handful of berries on a platter, which, we understand, is an invitation to him to commit suicide, as he has failed to tailor the game completely according to the wishes of the dictatorship, which he does.

1.2 The Hunger Games: Catching Fire

The second film opens on a District 12 forest panorama. It is the winter setting of a hunting scene whose protagonists are Katniss and Gale, and during which Katniss has a panic attack while shooting some wild turkeys, and also hallucinating about shooting the boy she killed in the 74th edition of the hunger games instead of some birds. Then, on the way back from the woods to the district streets, she and Gale discuss whether he should accompany her to the train station for her departure on the tour that she is supposed to make to The Capitol as a victor. He confesses that it may be hard for him to say goodbye, even for a limited amount of time. At this point Katniss reassures him that her love story with Peeta was only an act upon which her life depended, and he kisses her. They part, as she now lives with her family in the Victors' Village.

Before going home, she passes by Haymitch's, who is asleep with his head on the table. She throws a jug of water on his head to determine him to wake up from his drunken state, as "the cameras" will arrive in an hour, and then there will be "show time" (Jacobson, Kilik & Lawrence, 2013). Upon her return home, she finds President Snow there, with whom she speaks sincerely for the first time, on his request. She agrees, as

he demands, to keep up the pretense of being in love with Peeta on the tour, in order to justify her readiness to commit suicide in the game as an act of love, not of defiance against the system, and in this way save appearances for the dictator, and save her district from a vengeful armed destruction performed by the administration. Subsequent to the president's visit, she receives the much more pleasant ones of Effie, her assistants, and Cinna, who have come to prepare the broadcasts that Katniss needs to make together with Peeta before the tour.

After a short intervention in Caesar's show on news about the star-crossed lovers' lives subsequent to their victory in the hunger games, in which Katniss and Peeta need to pretend to be well and in love before unmanned cameras, they take the train and begin their victory tour. The first stop is District 11, which appears as a highly militarized area, most likely as a consequence of the rioting acts that have followed Thresh and Rue's deaths. Effie explains to Katniss and Peeta what they are about to do, gives them their speeches on paper and, as the two appear at the grandstand before the crowd and Katniss sees the panels with moving representations of the fallen tributes, she is so impressed at the sight of Rue that she initially cannot utter anything. Peeta intervenes, but, instead of reading the notes given by Effie, he announces that he wants to donate part of their annual victor allowance (more precisely a month's earnings every year, for the rest of their lives), to the families of the tributes, arousing Haymitch, Effie and Cinna's concern. Then Katniss manages to say a few words as well, remembering that Thresh spared her life in the game, when he could have killed her, and saying that Rue was a friend whom she could not save, and whom white roses, her sister Prim and the mockingjay song remind her of. An old man reacts to her words by making the three-finger sign that Katniss made in the game, while also whistling the four-note signal, which makes all the others follow his example and put up their hands in the same fashion. This causes him to be executed on the spot by the officials before the crowd, to Katniss' revolt and despair. In tears, she confesses about her understanding with

President Snow before Haymitch, fearful that Snow might consider the incident her fault. Haymitch explains that the trip that they have embarked upon, both concretely and figuratively speaking, is never-ending, that they are mentors now and that every year the authorities will make them appear before the crowds making their private lives public, mainly as a distraction from the real problems.

In the speeches held before the people in the next districts, Katniss and Peeta stick to the cards given by Effie in order to avoid any other unpleasant or dangerous occurrences. Katniss cannot help noticing the disapproving, despising or sorrowful, disappointed looks coming from some of the women in the crowd, who judge her for her pretense. Two adolescents make the three-finger sign and are taken away immediately. A little girl offers Katniss flowers, saying that one day she will volunteer for the games as well. At night, Katniss gets nightmares from which she wakes up screaming, and Peeta comforts her, reassuring her that he has them too. In one of the districts, people are extremely agitated and a woman shouts at her to put down the cards and tell them what she really thinks. President Snow watches every move that they make, and he is shown to us in one such instance, while he is having breakfast with his granddaughter. He notices the way the little girl wears her hair, in one long braid on the side (Katniss' style) and, as he expresses his appreciation, she tells him that all the girls at school wear it like that.

Haymitch warns Katniss and Peeta that they are not very convincing in what they are doing and saying, and that the President must be watching with suspicious eyes. Katniss suggests that she and Peeta get married, since it will happen eventually anyway, as they are on this propagandistic journey forever, and we see a filmed insert with Peeta proposing on his knees, in one of Caesar's broadcasts.

Finally, the night of the party ending the tour arrives, and Katniss and Peeta are taken by Effie to the Presidential Palace. They get introduced to Flavius and Octavia, Effie's friends, who

amiably invite Peeta to have the pink potion of bulimia, so that he could go on tasting all there is to eat. Afterwards, another acquaintance that they make is Plutarch Heavensbee, the new head gamemaker who replaces Seneca Crane. He dances with Katniss, appearing affable and sincere, and not a particularly fervent fan of the system, as he characterizes the party as “appalling” but enjoyable as soon as “you abandon your moral judgment”, and admits to having volunteered for the job of head game designer out of “ambition”, although it is not the most secure job in the world, given the fact that his predecessor had to poison himself with the deadly berries (*ibidem*). The president’s discourse follows, in which Snow gloomily says that the public will be witnessing the young couple’s love for as long as Katniss and Peeta shall live. Then, the guests enjoy the fireworks.

After the party, while Katniss is riding the train back home, she spies, through a door left ajar, the monitor room, where various screens show the activity in all the districts, and realizes that revolts are breaking out all over Panem. The same images are watched, from a very different place, namely the presidential chambers, by Snow and Heavensbee. As official advisor, the latter makes suggestions as to what the future strategy regarding Katniss should be, and the two men reach the conclusion to spoil her public image and arouse the indignation of the district population against her. Meanwhile, Katniss reaches her district and takes Gale into the woods for a private conversation, in which she explains why she has kept up the charade with Peeta, admits to her fear and proposes him to run away.

As they discuss the matters through, they see a convoy of trucks filled with peacekeepers heading for their district. As a result of Snow and Plutarch’s joint strategy, a harsher order and punishments are about to be implemented. As the peacekeepers reach the village, their head, commander Thread, starts pillaging the households and burning people’s goods under the pretext of having found smuggled merchandise. Moreover, he raises an infamy pillar in the middle of the public square, where he flogs

Gale for having jumped on him while he was preparing to cudgel an old woman in the street. Ripper, the woman who sold Katniss the mockingjay pin, has a swollen eye when Katniss finds her by the old items fair, which the peacekeepers have set on fire. As Katniss runs to Gale's defense to the pillar, commander Thread strikes her to the ground, then applies her a blow with the cudgel. As she stands up and interposes herself between her aggressor and Gale, Thread draws out his revolver and is about to shoot when Haymitch jumps in-between (seconded by Peeta), explaining to the commander who Katniss is and that he has already made his mark, scarring her face before the wedding ceremony scheduled for the next day. The gathering disperses as the commander imposes a curfew, threatening that anyone who will break it will be shot on sight. Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta take Gale to the Everdeen home, where he receives medical care from Primrose, who turns out to be quite good at nursing, giving Gale a morphine shot in the back to appease the pain from the bleeding lashes.

As a result of yet another conversation that President Snow has with Heavensbee, and, as we infer, upon the suggestion of the latter, the Quarter Quell 75th edition of the hunger games will feature only victors of previous editions, a male and a female from every district, which means that in 12 Katniss is sure to participate, while for the male representative the choice is between Peeta and Haymitch. Upon hearing the news, Katniss goes to Haymitch to ask him to spare Peeta in the games, and finds out that Peeta was there too, asking the same thing with respect to her. Haymitch promises to volunteer if Peeta is drawn, but also warns her that if Peeta does the same for him there is nothing that he can do. The latter version is exactly what happens at The Reaping, and Katniss and Peeta are on their way to The Capitol, after the crowd says goodbye to them by making the three-finger mockingjay sign, and they respond in the same manner.

On the train, to show her support, Effie tries to add another token to the mockingjay design theme, namely the gold