

Politics and the Sacrifice of History:

Real World Political Implications of the ‘Hunger Games’ Phenomenon

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“The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly.” *Andre Monglond, French historian.*¹

The film adaptations of *The Hunger Games* book trilogy reveal the effects of political ideology against the best intentions of those involved. The trilogy of novels contains a complex critique of war and violence that includes a radical political vision of the future imbedded in an allegory of the present. Although author Suzanne Collins was involved with writing the screenplay for the *Hunger Games* movie and was credited as a producer in both movies released so far, there were necessarily some aspects of the first two books that were omitted. It is in the decisions as to what to keep and what to exclude that the impact of politics is made visible. Will these initial exclusions from the film adaptations result in fundamentally different implication for real world politics, or can the radical political potential present in the novels be recovered in the remaining film sequels?

Two significant details from *The Hunger Games* novel, the first book in the trilogy, were omitted from the movie, as well as a variety of other details of lesser importance. First, the social and political history leading to the imposition of the Hunger Games competition, the annual fight-to-the-death between 24 children ages 12 to 18, was condensed even from the brief description provided in the novel. In the movie, the historical context of the first rebellion in the nation of Panem is restricted to the Capitol’s propaganda film version of history. From this perspective the original conflict appears as

an unjustified attack on the benevolent central government, just one episode in an inevitable, repetitive cycle of war and temporary peace in which good and evil are in an eternal, mythical struggle. In the book, protagonist Katniss Everdeen reflects on the history leading to the initial formation of the nation of Panem from the ruins of North America, a history that is recited on the day the children are chosen by lottery to participate in the “games.” “Reaping Day” always commences with recitation of the history of Panem’s emergence out of the “ashes of North America,” these are the inherited remains of “The disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained.”² This clearly ties the future to a long period of climate change catastrophes and ongoing struggles over the consequent food and water shortages.

The second significant detail sacrificed to the movie-making process was the character of Madge Undersee and the subplot involving the origin of Katniss Everdeen’s “mockingjay” pin which she wears into the arena for the 74th Hunger Games. The sacrifice of this character from the movie script creates a narrative hole concerning the history of resistance and rebellion by the districts against the Capitol, and recasts the structures of political alliances that occur in the arena and between the districts outside the arena. These political alliances are nearly invisible in the first book of the trilogy, but become increasingly central to the story in the subsequent books. Additional details about the history of the bird on the pin were also deleted from the film adaptation of the second book of the trilogy, *Catching Fire*.³

In a scene committed to film but deleted from the final cut of *Catching Fire*, President Snow recites the story of the origin of the mockingjay, that it is the biological

descendant of the “muttation” jabberjays and wild mockingbirds. Only male jabberjays were genetically engineered with the expectation that the mutant species would die off or be exterminated. The jabberjays were “an organic spy mutt” with an enhanced capacity to mimic voices and were used to “record” rebel conversations and return to the Capitol’s command center to repeat what they had heard. However, the rebels learned of the jabberjay mission and subverted it, sending false information back to the Capitol. After the original war for control of Panem, the jabberjays escaped into the wild and mated with mockingbirds, resulting in the “mockingjay” as President Snow indicates, “A species that shouldn’t exist, an offspring from our neglect that is beyond our control.” In this deleted portion of the scene, Snow declares his intentions toward the “human mockingjay,” Katniss Everdeen, if she cannot be contained, “I will have to terminate her, and not just her, her entire species has to be eliminated...the other victors.” This moment in the film script is almost an exact quote from an interview with author Suzanne Collins nearly four years earlier at the time of the soon to be released third book of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*. Collins explained, “Now the thing about the mockingjays is that they were never meant to be created. They were not a part of the Capitol’s design. So here’s this creature that the Capitol never meant to exist, and through the will of survival, this creature exists. And then it procreated, so there are now mockingjays all over the place....Symbolically, I suppose, Katniss is something like a mockingjay in and of herself. She is a girl who should never have existed.”⁴ This biological and political history of the origin of the mockingjay helps to place the events surrounding the 74th Hunger Games in the broader and more politically charged context of an ongoing rebellion with its origins in the conflict that gave rise to the birth of Panem. The sacrifice

of these details has important implications for interpretation of the allegorical meaning of the films.

The remaining film adaptations of *Mockingjay* may be challenged to remain consistent with the “real world” political implications of the allegorical history of rebellion found in the trilogy. The movement from book trilogy to their film adaptations may inadvertently result in the “re-mythologizing” of the allegorical history of rebellion, resulting not in a potentially radical challenge to contemporary politics but instead providing a much more traditional and more easily understood narrative of the hero, or in this case the heroine—Katniss, thereby losing much of the political resonance the books had for their readers’ own real life experience. How are these deletions then to be understood in the context of contemporary real world politics? Collins’s trilogy takes on contemporary politics and culture to provide a glimpse of an alternative, radically different future, but with the film adaptations eliminating crucial details of the historical context of the future society and the history of the rebellion against political domination, the radical critique of war and violence found in the trilogy may be sacrificed to the business imperatives of the entertainment industry. The business imperative of most importance, of course, is profits, which may be the driving force behind the omissions, although it appears impossible to separate the artistic from the monetary motivations as justification for the elimination of some of the important details in the transition from print to film.

In addition to the moment of inspiration from “channel surfing” between “reality” television shows and Iraq war coverage in 2006, Suzanne Collins’s says the novel also was inspired by the classic Greek myth of “Theseus and the Minotaur.”⁵ The myth’s

theme of political punishment revolves around the story of a conquered Athens which must submit “seven youths and seven maidens” as tributes to the more powerful Crete where the children are thrown into a labyrinth containing the Minotaur waiting to devour them. In addition to this Greek myth, inspiration for the Hunger Games arena came from ancient Roman gladiator games requiring a “fight to the death,” with the story of Spartacus guiding the details of the gladiators’ rebellion. Critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno⁶ also relied on an analysis of myth, specifically the mythic structure of sacrifice, to understand the way sacrifice is used to consolidate political power in real life, but this analysis can be applied to the trilogy as well. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the critical theorists reveal how the development of reason reverts back into its own “mythic” structure to create a system of social and political domination that is every bit as oppressive as the “mythic nature” enlightened reason intended to escape.

Critical theory’s understanding of the use of ritual sacrifice helps to clarify the development of political domination not only in the real world, especially that leading to fascism in the middle of the 20th century, but can also illuminate how the Hunger Games sacrifice of children helps the ruling powers consolidate and maintain their own ability to dominate the people of Panem. For ruling powers to maintain their control they must create the impression that their power is inevitable, that their political domination has the characteristics of the “mythic nature” that enlightened reason was supposed to have overcome. Assurance of continued political domination importantly relies on a history that seems to be inevitable, like fate and of mythic proportions, so that resistance and rebellion seem futile. Examining the political process of imposition of a mythic

understandings of history, specifically with respect to war and violence—and resistance to them—reveals what may be lost in the transition from the novels of *The Hunger Games* trilogy to the entertainment medium of film. Lost in this translation from book to film may be the radical political vision that inspires many readers, a subtle but important shift in its allegorical implications. Real world parallels to the trilogy’s story of mythic history and political rebellion can be identified with the help of political philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, with cast members from the movies also providing their own views on the relationship of the futuristic story to current political events.

Sacrifice, Myth and Political Domination

Like Suzanne Collins’s reliance on the “Myth of Theseus” as an inspiration for *The Hunger Games*, the critical theorists began exploration of individual identity and political ideology with discussion of the transition of archaic myth into modern enlightenment, and the subsequent reversal of “enlightened reason” back into a mythic structure. This critical analysis initially establishes the relationship between *mimesis*—a word of Greek origins usually translated as ‘representation’ or ‘appearance’—and sacrifice.⁷ Western Enlightenment’s development of reason, argue the critical theorists, made possible the escape from mythic nature, from the fateful necessity of nature’s domination of humanity. However, with Enlightenment’s reversal, reason is made as oppressive and dominating as the mythic nature it first sought to escape.

Horkheimer and Adorno link ritual sacrifice with the development of rationality, detailing how the “impulse of *mimesis*” is used to establish control over nature, including human nature. *Mimesis* departs from its basic “liberatory” form, which enables the

development of individual self-identity, into a “perverse” form used by fascists to intensify the social and psychological persecution of their victims, as found in anti-Semitism and racism.⁸ Critical theory’s analysis of *mimesis* and identity can also be applied to the propaganda and sacrifice practiced by the government of Panem, epitomized in the arena during the annual Hunger Games. The Capitol’s ritual sacrifice of tributes is used to reinforce its power to dominate the districts, extending its control beyond resources and territory to Panem’s inhabitants’ ability to critically think past their current situation, to envision an alternative future free of political domination. The Capitol’s history of rebellion is a “mythic history,” a tool to justify and legitimize the power of domination. The mandatory television viewing of the brutality of the sacrificial ritual of children killing children is a form of “reality” entertainment intended to reinforce acceptance of the Capitol’s power to dominate the districts. However, the spectacle also creates an opportunity for the subversion of the logic of sacrifice and domination on which that power depends.⁹ As President Snow observed, “Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem.”¹⁰

Critical theory’s anthropological understanding of *mimesis* connects practices of ritual sacrifice to the development of human reason. Discussion of the shaman’s use of the powers of *mimesis* during acts of ritual sacrifice emphasizes the “ruse” at the heart of sacrificial ritual, where an object or living being of lesser value is exchanged for something of greater value. In return for sacrificial victims, the shaman obtains god-like power over nature. Applying this to the trilogy, in Panem the ritual sacrifice of tributes brings its rulers the power to control the nation. For the critical theorists, the earliest

conversion of mythic reason, from simple explanation of the world to its potential control and use, took the form of ritual magic—the precursor to science—which does not organize nature conceptually as science does through example, but instead operates through *mimesis*. The specificity or uniqueness of the object of sympathetic magic is at the heart of the priest’s or shaman’s attempts to influence events. In ritual magic, the unique characteristic of the sacrificial victim is what gives access to the greater power for which the ritual is designed. However, this ability to represent something in common between the victim and the greater power begins the movement toward a logical discourse that culminates in science and math and their progeny—technology. *The Hunger Games* brings together the power of sacrificial ritual with all the brutal potential of perverse *mimesis* available in advanced technology.

The Capitol’s propaganda presents the history of Panem as one of progress, interrupted historically by the rebellious districts whose children become sacrificial victims in tribute to those who see themselves as more advanced and culturally developed. However, the people of the districts have a contrary view of this history, one similar to critical theory’s judgment of the process of Western Enlightenment. The critical theorists argued that although shamanistic magic honors the uniqueness of the individual, in its attempt to influence the mythic or fated character of the world (the endless repetition of nature) it initiates a conceptual process that reduces nature to category and example. Science later extends this demythologizing or “disenchantment” of the world, but at the expense of individual uniqueness. Historical “progress” from magic to science, myth to enlightenment, is therefore also a story of regression, of return into the mythic, of renewed confrontation with fateful necessity, but now in the form of

society rather than mere nature—as political domination of the individual.

Enlightenment’s self-history of human reason relies on the core concept of progress, often stated as the gradual extension of control over nature for the purpose of human self-preservation.

Critical theory’s contrasting view of the history of Enlightenment is exemplified in Walter Benjamin’s discussion of Klee’s painting titled “Angelus Novalis.” Benjamin describes this angel, which is pushed backwards by a wind from Paradise, as the “angel of history” looking to the past, “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage...This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”¹¹ After Panem emerges from the remnants of ecological collapse, widespread hunger and warfare, the Capitol imposes an economic and political system on the people of the outlying districts that includes both physical and psychological domination, but couches this process in terms of progress.

End of History, Return of Myth

The trilogy’s political vision is strongly influenced by classics within the genre of dystopian speculative fiction, including George Orwell’s *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Kurt Vonnegutt’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, as well as others. These dystopian classics have in common a strong political commentary and critique of society. Collins has incorporated many elements of these novels into the details of her own.¹² These borrowed dystopian elements are placed in a new context that includes an implied critique of contemporary American politics, especially that found since September 11,

2001. In interviews, Collins emphasizes that her intent in all her work is to write about war and violence in order to help young people understand their implications for their own lives. The trilogy includes clear references to incidents involving American actions during the war in Iraq, including those of torture at Abu Ghraib.¹³ Like the Capitol’s propaganda film that omits crucial aspects of history in order to consolidate power, the U.S. government created its own mythic history in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks. This process of myth-making by American leaders to further the agenda of American empire has been explored by Sheldon Wolin in *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*.¹⁴ The allegorical elements of the trilogy point to an analysis not significantly different from that of Wolin, “Inverted totalitarianism is only in part a state-centered phenomenon. Primarily it represents the *political* coming of age of corporate power and the *political* demobilization of the citizenry.”¹⁵ *The Hunger Games* trilogy also references the political demobilization of the citizens of Panem, but through the process first pioneered by the ancient Romans, the system of *panem et circensis* or “bread and circuses.”

As Wolin argues, an important part of the transition to a “totalitarian” system is the creation of a new myth to explain the resulting politics. Following the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration began a process of “myth-making” that imposed a new narrative on the nation, one that envisioned the U.S. as empire.¹⁶ The new mythology drew heavily from religious, especially Christian, iconography and was reinforced with images repeated for days by the mass media. This mythology characterized the world simply as a struggle between irreconcilable forces of good and evil, with everyone having to take sides. An unusual new aspect of the post-9/11 myth-making was its enhancement

through technological means, “The mythical is also nourished from another source, one seemingly more incongruous than the scientific-technological culture. Consider the imaginary world continuously being created and re-created by contemporary advertising and rendered virtually escape-proof by the enveloping culture of the modern media.”¹⁷

Wolin’s book was published in 2008, the same year as *The Hunger Games*, with Collins’s book publication essentially coinciding with the meltdown of Wall Street as the financial crisis hit full stride in September of that year. Collins clearly references abuses from the Iraq war that began in 2003, so both books can be seen as centrally critical of U.S. government administration of the period, but even more so as critiques of the social and cultural environment that facilitated the war.

The Hunger Games publishing team was well aware of the political implications of the novels and worked with the film studio in an attempt to preserve the critical focus of the first book as it went to the big screen.¹⁸ In the transition from book to screen the publishers wanted to assure that the film “not become the thing it’s criticizing.”¹⁹ They understood the books were written “in the heart and frustration of the Bush era,” and the plot focus on the deaths of children was recognized as non-exploitative—using “violence as a critique of violence.”²⁰ The actors and director of the first film were also aware that there were clear connections between the books and the complaints heard by the Occupy Wall Street movement that was taking place at the same time as filming of the movie. Evil incarnate in the character of Coriolanus Snow, President of Panem, is played by Donald Sutherland who wrote an extended letter to film director Gary Ross, prior to filming, about the meanings of political power and how it applied to this role. Sutherland goes so far as to assert that the trilogy is an allegory of “this imperial power, this

oligarchy of the multi-rich, the 0.1%.”²¹ Directly connecting the themes of the trilogy with Occupy Wall Street he foresees that out of the ”Occupy” movement, “Out of these people will come a leader...it’s time,” a leader like Katniss Everdeen who Sutherland characterizes as “more dangerous than Joan of Arc.”²² Director Gary Ross, who also co-wrote the screenplay with Collins, would be inspired by Sutherland’s observations on the “nature of power, and the instruments of power” to write two film scenes for President Snow in his rose garden, where the relationship between power, hope and fear would be highlighted.

With *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* movie premiering in November, 2013 there was a mix of marketing that can be examined in the light of that original desire of producers and publishers to avoid re-inscribing the politics criticized in the books. For each of the films released so far, there was an attempt to link their releases with attention to the issue of “hunger” in the real world. *Catching Fire* promoted a website (www.hungergames.com) that provided information on how to donate to the anti-hunger charity “Feeding America,” and also provided solid information on issues of hunger through additional cooperation with the United Nations’ World Food Program. On the other hand, more traditional marketing tie-ins to the movie also were prominent; especially the “Cover Girl” cosmetics line entitled the “Capitol Collection,” which, at best, had an ironic understanding of its own complicity with the culture of consumption’s avoidance of the more difficult entanglements with issues of hunger.²³ Alternatively, in an attempt to inject radical political content into the dialog surrounding the premiere of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, the radical environmental group Earth First! attempted to link its concerns for the environment with the trilogy’s storyline. In spring

of 2013 the *Earth First! Journal* ran an opinion piece that anticipated revolutionary political actions, “On November 22, when the second film in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *Catching Fire*, is released, I think we should anticipate every shopping plaza surrounding the corporate theaters to be ransacked, with every police station demolished (or the “Peacekeepers” as Katniss Everdeen knows them), and every building controlled by the State (“The Capitol”) occupied and turned into revolutionary day care centers where young children can be cared for while the rest of us are ripping up concrete and planting fruit tree forests across interstate super highways.”²⁴ Obviously, this vision of a radical political event coinciding with the premiere of the blockbuster movie did not take place. The author of this radical vision clearly recognized the unlikelihood of the event, but was making a broader point concerning the political potential of popular culture:

Those of us who dream big should view these books, albums, shows and films as opportunities to speak broadly to the masses of people beaten down by apathy and consumerism. The rational and intellectual critique tells us that this phenomenon of rebellion-themed pop culture is an outlet for dispossessed people to feel a vicarious rebelliousness through fictitious characters or celebrities. But if we refuse to view it this way, and instead see them as symbols and tools for anxious insurgents to run wild with (as Anonymous did with [*V for Vendetta*](#)), then we can turn a small release valve into a gaping hole for a twisted human society to tear its way through industrial civilization and find something better outside of it (yeah, eat your heart out, Derrick Jensen!).²⁵

The overall approach of the young cast members to their blitz of promotion surrounding the premiere of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* focused on the innocuous issues of how well they all got along, who had the best kisses on set, and how much fun it is to be around Jennifer Lawrence. However, Donald Sutherland, in his lower profile interviews promoting the film, returned to his earlier thoughts about the need for real world rebellion if not revolution, led by an uprising of young people, “I hope that they will take action because it's getting drastic in this country.’ Drone strikes. Corporate tax dodging. Racism. Denying food stamps to ‘starving Americans’. It's all going to pot. ‘It's not right. It's not right.’”²⁶ The seriousness of Sutherland’s concern is reinforced by his long personal history of leftist politics going back to the 1960s with his opposition to the Vietnam War and his support of the Black Panthers.²⁷ But even Sutherland does not expect true revolution anytime soon, rather he steps back from the stronger political statements he made at the time of the release of the first film to indicate that the youth of today are more likely to work within the system than overthrow it, “They might create a third party. They might change the electoral process, they might be able to take over the government, change the tax system.”²⁸

Jennifer Lawrence, in an interview with *The Guardian*, was asked if she thought a rebellion like that in *The Hunger Games*’ districts could take place in the United States. Lawrence responded, “I do, it did. I think that we live in a world where history repeats itself, I don’t think anytime soon. I think that rebellions can happen, when there’s enough people with the same voice, but I also think it’s something we are very aware of in this movie and these books. And a part of this world and the consequences of this kind of thing, the consequences of idealism and killing people over it, and then ending up with

just more death and not really a great ending. Just because it's a rebellion doesn't mean you're going to get what you want." Lawrence's response is more in keeping with the "mythic" understanding of history that consolidates the power of political domination than one of radical political opposition. On the politics of Katniss Everdeen, Lawrence understands her character as motivated by concerns for those close to her, "She's very reluctant, because she really just wants to get out with as little death as possible. She is very aware of the consequences of war. But she's very gung-ho because she's living in a government where it's just not fair. When her own family and when the people close to her start to get affected by it, it becomes easier for her to stand up for it."²⁹ Lawrence's understanding of Katniss Everdeen again repeats the "mythic" understanding of history, its endless repetition, attributing to real world politics an inevitable violence that is the consequence of "idealism" rather than seeing violence as part of the exercise of power in pursuit of economic domination and psychological control of others. Political conflict is reduced to the expression of mythical forces of good and evil, with individuals caught up by chance in the injustices and conflicts found in eternal cycles of war and violence.

It is clear from Suzanne Collins's interviews that she intends for her writing to be more than mere entertainment for children and young adults. She takes seriously her attempts to provide a complex critique of war and violence, and to raise critical questions about a society and culture that is permeated by them.³⁰ The intention to honor the serious critical perspective contained within the trilogy was expressed by the book publishing company and the film producers. They were especially sensitive to the need to make a movie that did not become what was being critiqued in the novels, the exploitation of violence, especially violence against children, in order to profit from its display. Director

Gary Ross and producer Nina Jacobson make clear that they kept this in mind as they proceeded with the first film project of *The Hunger Games*.³¹ Clearly, all those involved with the production tried to minimize the exploitative use of the brutality of the death of children in the film while attempting to remain true to the fundamental plot features of the novel.

However, it is not just the exploitation of children's violence and deaths that had to be guarded against in the production of the film, but also the need to be consistent with the even more fundamental social and cultural critique contained in the trilogy. With the films' sacrifice of historical context, both the relationship to environmental disaster and the widespread resistance to political domination evident in the trilogy, the ideological implications of the story may shift significantly. The trilogy's implications for real world politics likely go beyond author Collins's intentions, but are nevertheless present in the details she borrows from the genre of dystopian speculative fiction.³²

In the first film we see the dominant political power's claims for legitimacy in the "propaganda film" shown at the beginning of the "reaping" of the sacrificial children. Absent from the propaganda film is the history of environmental devastation that is found in the book. Instead of a long, multiple-century history of climate catastrophe, the official government version of Panem's history begins with "war terrible war." The first rebellion against political power is presented as an irrational uprising against the benevolent rulers of the nation. The propaganda ends with images of abundance and happiness and the words, "This is how we remember our past; this is how we safeguard our future."³³ Without the inclusion of the actual history leading to creation of the Hunger Games competition, the nation's political situation takes on the characteristics of the mythic,

putting an end to history, or at least a “re-mythologizing” of history. This parallels the real world “end of history” assertions in 1989 that argued that liberal market economies had attained an ultimate victory over competing ideologies, especially communism, thereby putting an end to historical struggle in a Hegelian sense.³⁴ This “end of history” thesis was reinforced with the mythic justifications of U.S. empire-building beginning with the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The official version of history contained in the trilogy gives the film adaptation an historical narrative like that of liberalism’s end of history thesis and subsequent U.S. administrations’ mythic history of empire. Instead of forcing confrontation with the precipitating events and the implied critique of specific contemporary social conditions, the film takes on a mythic character of timeless struggle between forces of good and evil, potentially limiting the ability to mount an aesthetic challenge to this mythic narrative itself. The film’s sacrifice of the historical details that culminated in the story’s sacrifice of children for the purpose of maintaining political power potentially re-inscribes the myth underlying the real world process of domination—against the best intentions of author and filmmakers. The ending of the trilogy is somewhat ambiguous concerning the means necessary for fully addressing the system of sacrifice and political domination, especially whether this can be accomplished through typical “liberal” politics or, alternatively, that something much more radical is needed. Contemporary political theorists help clarify those alternative—radical—political possibilities.

The Return of History

Adorno’s analysis of the “culture industry” or entertainment industry, specifically

of post-World War II America, highlights many of the concerns expressed here. His critique emphasized the impact of business and the profit imperative of capitalism to shape both form and content of art. Collins's fictional city of Panem exhibits characteristics of the *panem et circensis* of ancient Rome, with daily life in the dystopian future structured through the scarcity of food and the predominance of entertainment. The character of Plutarch Heavensbee explains the implications of the phrase "*panem et circenses*" to the rebels fighting the Capitol, indicating that the writer who used it was saying that "in return for full bellies and entertainment his people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power."³⁵ Clearly, Collins has written an allegory of contemporary American culture and global culture more generally, which is all too easily comparable to the most corrupt and brutal aspects of ancient Roman civilization.

What is unclear though is the extent to which the trilogy and their film adaptations can be seen as participants, however unwillingly, in the same practices that are critiqued. Do the readers of the books and the audiences for the movies partake of the same surrender of critical and political consciousness that are found in the book trilogy to be at the root of the future collapse of society that ultimately leads to the Hunger Games? Adorno provides commentary on just this possibility, and in reference to the same concerns, "In the case of the socio-critical novels which are fed through the best-seller mechanism, we can no longer distinguish how far the horrors narrated in them serve the denunciation of society as opposed to the amusement of those who do not yet have the Roman circuses they are really waiting for."³⁶ With more than 27 million copies of the books having been sold in 2012 alone,³⁷ and *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*

movies among the highest grossing box office sales of all time, (more than \$1.5B combined worldwide as of early 2014),³⁸ it is clear that this franchise is fully implicated in the “best-seller mechanism” that Adorno identified. Can the critical content of the trilogy, both obvious and obscure, survive the entertainment industry’s use of them for profit generation?

The omission of the details of the environmental and political history of the future society could easily be justified as non-essential details having little impact on the main plot of the Hunger Games story and so could be left out with little consequence for Collins’s primary critical message concerning war and violence. But it is in the details that the potential “real world” political content most clearly emerges. *The Hunger Games* trilogy can best be understood as a warning about deeply troubling cultural and political problems in the present. A compelling interpretation of its ominous message from the fictional future can be found in the consistency of the story’s details which contain a subtle yet elaborately layered deep critique of the present. Those details include allusions to Greek myths, Roman history, and the literary inheritance from classic dystopian speculative fiction. *The Hunger Games* is a literary work of art, but like all art it has its political implications. In his essay on Charles Dickens, George Orwell connected the relationship of art in its details to politics:

“But every writer, especially every novelist, *has* a ‘message,’ whether he admits it or not, and the minutest details of his work are influenced by it. All art is propaganda.”³⁹

The dystopian world of the Capitol's hunger games can be understood as an allegory that seems to mirror and affirm politics found in the real world. It is in opposition to this politics of domination that the rebellion and eventual revolution in Panem take place. It is also in opposition to the unrelenting oppression of political domination that the "Arab Spring" of 2011 burst onto the global stage. Alain Badiou frames the events surrounding the uprisings that began in Tunisia and then spread to Egypt and beyond in 2011 as "The Rebirth of History."⁴⁰ For Badiou these events signal the emergence of an opposition to domination and oppression occurring on a global scale, "The present moment is in fact that of the first stirrings of a global popular uprising against this regression. As yet blind, naïve, scattered and lacking a powerful concept or durable organization, it naturally resembles the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century. I therefore propose to say that we find ourselves in a time of riots wherein a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signaled and takes shape."⁴¹ This return or rebirth of history is one that can result in the rapid spread of the uprising. Badiou even uses language similar to that found in Collins' *Catching Fire* to describe the potential speed of change, "The event is the abrupt creation not of a new reality, but of a myriad of new possibilities....This is the new prairie to come when the one to which the spark of the uprising has finally set fire is no more. This future prairie stands between the declaration of an inversion in the balance of forces and the declaration of an assumption of new tasks."⁴²

Likewise, Slavoj Žižek sees a return of history in the events of spring 2011 and Occupy Wall Street in fall 2011. Žižek understands 2011 as a "series of shattering events," from Arab Spring to UK riots, Occupy Wall Street and beyond, but then "The

media killed the radical emancipatory potential of the events or obfuscated their threat to democracy.”⁴³ He examines in both factual and philosophical detail these various expressions of resistance, especially Occupy Wall Street, which spread rapidly across the United States producing great visual displays for media coverage, but few mentions about what alternatives should be considered, “But carnivals come cheap—the true test of their worth is what happens the day after, how everyday life has changed or is to be changed. This requires difficult and patient work—of which the protests are the beginning, not the end.”⁴⁴ For Zizek, the day after must include the creation of new organizational forms that will be able “to reach quick decisions and realize them with whatever force may be necessary.”⁴⁵ But the usual appeal to the state and to representative democracy as currently practiced is dismissed as a road to cooptation and failure. Zizek calls for the reinvention of democracy, “Baidou hit the mark with his apparently weird claim that ‘Today, the enemy is not called Empire or Capital. It’s called Democracy.’”⁴⁶ The problem, according to Zizek, is how to “institutionalize collective decision-making beyond the framework of the democratic multi-party system.”⁴⁷ The events of 2011 were a time of “dreaming dangerously,” one of a “revival of radical emancipatory politics all around the world,”⁴⁸ but a time that was still in search of a democratic process robust yet flexible enough to stand up to the challenges that were being identified. Echoing this real world uncertainty about how to proceed with the emancipatory politics that has been unleashed, *The Hunger Games* trilogy ends with an uneasy political ambiguity that will play itself out with the remaining two movie sequels.

The ambiguity found in the ending of the trilogy concerns the politics of post-revolution Panem. As victory over the Capitol appears increasingly likely, the rebels

question whether post-revolution political structures will be adequate to address the challenges of war and violence inherited from the past. Former Head Gamemaker and now Director of Communications for the new government, Plutarch Heavensbee describes the anticipated post-revolution “republic” as a centralized government with a system of representation.⁴⁹ Rebel suspicions about this new system run deep, but Plutarch reminds them that the “republic” form of government has worked before, and asserts “if our ancestors could do it why can’t we?” However, Katniss remains unconvinced by the historical argument, “Frankly, our ancestors don’t seem much to brag about.” Like Benjamin’s “angel of history,” she sees only wars and a broken planet, evidence those ancestors cared little about later generations, but in resignation, she thinks even this “republic” idea would be an “improvement on what we have now.” Following the successful revolution, even Plutarch expresses doubts about how long the new reforms will last, “Now we’re in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated. But collective thinking is usually short-lived. We’re fickle, stupid beings with short memories and a great gift for self-destruction.” But he also adds a hopeful note that this time political prospects might be different, “Maybe we are witnessing the evolution of the human race.”⁵⁰

Katniss Everdeen returns to her home district after the revolution and finds it is profoundly different, nearly all of its former residents killed, reduced to bones and ashes, now buried beneath the community meadow. She is slow to agree to have children, waiting more than fifteen years, fearful of the return of the system of political and social domination she helped to overthrow. Children are taught about the Hunger Games at school, but her own children also learn from the book that their parents put together. It

contains a new history, with images of those who were lost, “Where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory....Then, in my most careful handwriting, come all the details it would be a crime to forget....We seal the pages with salt water and promises to live well to make their deaths count.”⁵¹ For the embodiment of the Mockingjay Revolution it is hope that keeps her alive, “What I need to survive is not...kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction.”⁵²

Conclusion

It is unclear what political message will be left after the multiple film adaptations of *The Hunger Games* trilogy are complete. Will it be one containing the kernel of a radically different political future, or one that easily accommodates the real world powers that be? Were the environmental and political elements of the books omitted in their film adaptations for “business” reasons, that is, to eliminate aspects of the trilogy that would be too politically charged and potentially undercut profits? If so, the film’s producers and writers have done something worse than reinforce a culture of sacrifice of children for entertainment, they have re-inscribed the real world system of dominations itself. As Adorno pointed out in his discussion of the film industry, “The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers. That is why the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims. The automatic self-reproduction of the status quo in its established forms is itself an expression of domination.”⁵³ It will only be in the unfolding of the most overtly political third book in its adaptation as two films that the basis for the decisions of omission in *The*

Hunger Games and *Catching Fire* movies will be revealed.

Although the details of history and rebellion were omitted in the film adaptation of the first two books, it does not mean the radical political implications of the trilogy have been abandoned. However, the linking of the trilogy to the Occupy movement, at least in the minds of producer, director and some cast members, is already a shift in focus from the trilogy's allegorical critique. The focus on the Occupy movement represents a narrowing of the trilogy's political critique, even if understandable as a consequence of the coincidental timing of the political movement and the filming of the first movie. This narrowing shifts the focus from a radical challenge to the current cultural and political system as a whole to the more easily digested struggle between rich and poor, or even more innocuously, that of "inequality." The first film's side-stepping of the real world issue of potentially catastrophic climate change, along with the lack of acknowledgement of the extended timeframe needed for revolutionary change, makes the implied solution to real world problems a simple matter of appealing to existing structures of political representation.

The need for something much more revolutionary is what is discussed by Badiou and Žižek, and more in keeping with the details of the novels, including the "Epilogue." As Žižek observed after those days in 2011 when the world was dreaming dangerously, "All we can be certain of is that the existing system cannot reproduce itself indefinitely: whatever will come after will not be 'our future.' A new war in the Middle East or an economic chaos or an extraordinary environmental catastrophe can swiftly change the basic coordinates of our predicament. We should fully accept the openness, guiding ourselves on nothing more than ambiguous signs from the future."⁵⁴

The inescapable doubt that haunts Katniss Everdeen after she leads the Mockingjay Revolution causes her to delay having children for fifteen years. The children create another obligation for their parents, the need to provide them with a full history of the past. It is disappointing that the film adaptations have so far eliminated some of the more radical political commentary implied in the first two books, but the third book's adaptation as two films may still recover much of the trilogy's potential for understanding and acting in the present. It is not surprising that focus on the box office successes of the trilogy and the films has already shifted the meaning of the critique they embody, but that may be the inevitable consequence of the "culture industry" of which they are a prime example. As Adorno indicated, aesthetic autonomy's "universality remains allied to ideology as long as real hunger is perpetuated in hunger for the material in the aesthetic domain."⁵⁵

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 482.

² Collins, Suzanne, *The Hunger Games*, p. 18.

³ "Deleted Scenes: A Wrinkle SC 81," from *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* movie DVD. Lions Gate Entertainment Inc.: 2014.

⁴ Collins interview with Margolis. Margolis, Rick. "The Last Battle: With 'Mockingjay' on its way, Suzanne Collins weighs in on Katniss and the Capitol." *scholarlylibraryjournal.com*. Scholarly Library Journal. Media Source. August, 2010.

⁵ Collins, Suzanne, 'A Conversation.'

⁶ The following discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of sacrifice in relation to *mimesis* is contained in detail in my "Political Muttations: Real or Not Real?" in *Space and Place in 'The Hunger Games': New Readings of the Novels*. Ed. Diedre Anne Evans Garriott, Whitney Elaine Jones, and Julie Elizabeth Tyler, McFarland Publishing: 2014 (forthcoming).

⁷ This discussion of *mimesis* in the work of early Frankfurt School critical theory also can be found in an earlier more detailed treatment in "Mimetic Moments: Adorno and Ecofeminism" (Martin), which focuses more closely on the biological and psychoanalytic aspects of the term. For an examination of many of the anthropological implications of *mimesis* see Michael Taussig. An extended discussion of the relationships between *mimesis*, sacrifice and identity, from a 'green' critical theory perspective, can be found in "Sacred Identity and the Sacrificial Spirit" (Martin).

⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 168-208.

⁹ This alternative to sacrifice for political domination has been explored in my “Sacrificial Love and the Overthrow of Empire: Real World Implications of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy.” Presented March 20, 2014 at the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, Orlando, Florida. March 16-23, 2014. Unpublished.

¹⁰ Collins, Suzanne, *Catching Fire*, p. 23.

¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, p. 257-258.

¹² Martin, Bruce. “Political Muttations: Real or Not Real?”

¹³ *Mockingjay*, p. 43.

¹⁴ Wolin, Sheldon. *Democracy Inc.*, 2008.

¹⁵ Wolin, p. xvii.

¹⁶ Wolin, p. 4-14.

¹⁷ Wolin, p. 12.

¹⁸ “Game Maker: Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* Phenomenon,” from *The Hunger Games* movie DVD, Disc 2 bonus materials. Lions Gate Entertainment Inc.: 2012.

¹⁹ David Levithan, Scholastic, Inc. publisher, “Game Maker: Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* Phenomenon,” from *The Hunger Games* movie DVD, Disc 2 bonus materials.

²⁰ David Levithan, Scholastic, Inc. publisher, *The Hunger Games* DVD.

²¹ Donald Sutherland, performer, *The Hunger Games*, “Game Maker: Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* Phenomenon,” from *The Hunger Games* movie DVD, Disc 2 bonus materials.

²² Donald Sutherland, performer, “Game Maker: Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* Phenomenon,” from *The Hunger Games*, and ‘*Letters from the Rose Garden*,’ movie DVD, Disc 2 bonus materials.

²³ For the *Cover Girl* cosmetics campaign see <http://www.covergirl.com/catching-fire> .

For the movie’s partnership with the anti-hunger organization *Feeding America* see “Hunger Games: *Catching Fire* Teams with WFP and *Feeding America*.”

www.examiner.com. 30 October 2013. Web. 28 March 2014.

²⁴ Panagioti, “Catching Fire to the Reign,” in *EF! Newswire*, earthfirstjournal.org, 19 May 2013. Web. 28 March 2014.

²⁵ Panagioti, “Catching Fire to the Reign,” in *EF! Newswire*, earthfirstjournal.org, 19 May 2013. Web. 28 March 2014. (Derek Jensen has written a series of radical ecology inspired books urging resistance both before and after the coming ecological apocalypse; see *Endgame Vol. II: Resistance*, New York: Seven Stories Press. 2006.)

²⁶ Carroll, Rory. Interview with Donald Sutherland: ‘I want Hunger Games to stir up a revolution.’ *The Guardian*. 19 November 2013. 30 March 2014

²⁷ Carroll, Rory. *The Guardian*. 19 November 2013. 30 March 2014.

²⁸ Carroll, Rory. *The Guardian*. 19 November 2013. 30 March 2014.

²⁹ MacInnes, Paul. “Jennifer Lawrence on *The Hunger Games*: *Catching Fire* - video interview.” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2013/nov/20/jennifer-lawrence-hunger-games-catching-fire-video-interview> . 20 November 2013. Web. March 30, 2014.

³⁰ Margolis, Collins Interview.

- ³¹ Director Gary Ross, Producer Nina Jacobson, “Game Maker: Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games* Phenomenon,” from *The Hunger Games* movie DVD, Disc 2 bonus materials.
- ³² Martin, Bruce. “Political Muttations: Real or Not Real?”
- ³³ *The Hunger Games* film, propaganda film.
- ³⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 1989. *The National Interest*.
- ³⁵ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 223.
- ³⁶ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 68.
- ³⁷ PublishersWeekly.com, paragraph 1. March 21, 2013.
- ³⁸ <http://boxofficejo.com/alltime/world/>, n.d. 27 March 2014.
- ³⁹ Orwell, George. *All Art is Propaganda*, p. 47.
- ⁴⁰ Badiou, Alain. *The Rebirth of History*. 2012
- ⁴¹ Badiou, p. 5.
- ⁴² Baidou, p. 109.
- ⁴³ Zizek, Slavoj, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, p. 1.
- ⁴⁴ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 77.
- ⁴⁵ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 82.
- ⁴⁶ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 87, quoted from Alan Badiou, “Prefazione all’edizione italiana,” in *Metapolitics*, Napoli: Cronopio 2002, p. 14.
- ⁴⁷ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 89.
- ⁴⁸ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 127.
- ⁴⁹ Collins, *Catching Fire*, p. 84.
- ⁵⁰ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 379.
- ⁵¹ Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 387.
- ⁵² Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 388.
- ⁵³ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 185.
- ⁵⁴ Zizek, *Dreaming*, p. 134-135.
- ⁵⁵ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, p. 64.

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