

## REVIEW ESSAY

### *The Hunger Games* Trilogy as a Text for Education

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Suzanne Collins's dystopian Young Adult novel series, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, released from 2008 through 2010, triggered not only world-wide fandom, but also provoked extensive examination by literary scholars and cultural critics. The enthusiastic reader-response to the novels echoes the success of the Harry Potter series (1997-2007) and *The Twilight Saga* (2005-2008); yet, ironically, this popularity of the text (and its movie adaptations), together with the fact that the primarily targeted audience is the young adult community, raises skepticism about the work's literary value. Many scholars and instructors therefore reject the idea of using the novels for educational purposes—although it is generally agreed that the genre of dystopia allows for the discussion of extremely important social and cultural issues by way of defamiliarization. As M. Keith Booker contends, “[B]y focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (19). Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry note how utopian and dystopian literature may turn their readers more inclined to political action (7); however, reading such texts for pure pleasure, or reading them in an educational context may make a huge difference in the desired outcome. While Melissa Ames underlines that the younger generation may not be as apolitical as studies recurrently imply (8), undoubtedly, “strategic instruction [of dystopian texts] often increases their overall impact” (16).

There are, however, notable differences between dystopia for adults and for a younger audience and, unfortunately, the general association the average reader brings to Young Adult novels is that they have an overall focus on romance (that preferably manifests in a love triangle), even if that romance is placed in a dystopian future. Such associations discourage literature teachers from including much of Young Adult fiction in their course material, even though several critics urge the utilization of such texts—especially dystopian novels within this realm of material—claiming that they help envisioning better alternatives to our present (Wolk 668), and they may especially be helpful in social justice education (Glasglow). *The Hunger Games* trilogy rightly qualifies as Young Adult literature, yet Collins's series

transgresses many boundaries, including generic ones, as several critical texts argue. Accordingly, what mostly dominates critical literature about the trilogy is not the thorough examination of Katniss's love life, but a focus on the diverse aspects of the dystopian world of Panem—a post-apocalyptic version of today's USA—the author presents, emphasizing how the novels link to our contemporary world via the themes of dictatorship contrasting democracy, the practice of scapegoating and marginalizing, the connection between political power and media, and technological development threatening human survival. Presenting the complex relationship of such up-to-date issues calls for teaching the trilogy in secondary schools, as well as in colleges and universities within and outside the boundaries of the US.

The deepening academic interest in popular culture studies that has paved the way to substantial scholarly responses to highly popular texts becomes indispensable in making sense of *The Hunger Games* phenomenon. Not only is it intriguing and refreshing to see what may contribute to a text's wide popularity in the twenty-first century, but it is also a responsibility—scholarly and educational alike—to use texts of such acclaim to generate discussions about the diverse anxieties of our contemporary world that surface in the space of speculative fiction. While Collins's trilogy has been subjected to severe criticism concerning especially its presentation of violence and the theme of war to a relatively young audience, it must not be forgotten that we live in a spectacularly violent world that sees various forms of war and, thus, it is even more crucial to make the younger generations understand how the novels extrapolate these present anxieties into an imagined future, and how they are more relevant in comprehending our own lives than they may possibly seem at first glance. In fact, as Allison L. Downey argues, the increasingly violent nature of media presentations have made young people “desensitized to violence” (33); as a result, confronting students with issues of violence has become, I believe, a responsibility that teachers must take.<sup>1</sup> That this is a most complex task is reflected in the ample and varied critical works that soon followed the publication of the trilogy. From 2012 through 2015, McFarland alone published four volumes of essays on Collins's trilogy, targeting literary scholars, as well as students and teachers of higher education, demonstrating the necessity of providing accessible critical material for purposes not limited to scholarly research.

Although these books of criticism do not directly focus on how to integrate Collins's novels into various curricula, all four reflect the notion that the authors propose teaching them to young adults. Tom Henthorne, for

instance, claims that his *Approaching The Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis* (2012) “is designed to help with the digestion process” (7), but his work proves an easily understandable, brief, yet scholarly guideline for those who may want to think over some of the main themes of the trilogy, and possibly bring them into a classroom environment. Henthorne’s work includes a biography of Collins, which, actually, would be dispensable, as the various essays make concrete references to Collins’s life when the author thinks they are relevant. It also presents a glossary of terms and characters, which do not provide much revelatory information to anyone who has read the novels, but may be useful as a quick reminder before discussions and, finally, it lists several questions for further study, all of which give some limited, practical help for teachers who opt to work with the text—though not providing help with tips in methodology. Another reason why the essays included may be of serviceable assistance to those interested in teaching *The Hunger Games* texts is that the various chapters are divided into numerous sub-chapters with larger font-size headings that give quick information on what exactly is covered in the given section, making the volume easy to use for educational purposes. On the whole, however, the volume shows errors of a hasty response to the series: repetitions of ideas, at times even supported by the same quotes, are disturbing, especially when a more logical arrangement of the topics would have eliminated them. In addition, the non-essay material (60 pages out of 200) seems more like a filler, and the long, four-and-a-half-page sub-chapter on Collins’s *The Underland Chronicles* appears to be off the focus of the volume, and the topic is unnecessarily repeated in the questions section.

While Henthorne tries to give help in processing the trilogy by focusing on the most important themes and issues that the novels raise, chapters in the other volumes published by McFarland demonstrate more varied ways in which Collins’s dystopia may be used in miscellaneous courses. Part IV in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games*, edited by Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark, for example, is dedicated to explorations on how the trilogy reveals thematic parallels with other notable works of literature, including classics, and how, thereby, the novel series fits into the literary tradition beyond the obvious influence of New Woman literature as noted by Sara Kay Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2). The essays in part IV in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games*, connecting the novels to the *Second Henriad* by Shakespeare, then to feminist science fiction, Young Adult science fiction, as well as to the *Twilight Saga*, and the *Harry Potter* series offer creative ways of

thinking about *The Hunger Games*, as well as building it into courses that survey literature of various kinds.

*Space and Place in The Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels*, edited by Deidre Anne Evans Garriott, Whitney Elaine Jones, and Julie Elizabeth Tyler, thinks of teaching and learning in a satisfyingly broad sense. The articles in the volume aim at examining “the ways that Collins’s trilogy has already begun to make changes and produce sites of study” (Garriott, Jones, and Tyler 5). Many of these essays directly highlight the pragmatic use of the trilogy in a young person’s life and present, thereby encouraging their readers to become sensitive people, who consciously seek and act for positive change. Carissa Ann Baker analyzes “society’s relationship to earth” as the main theme of the trilogy (198), deserving special mention, since Young Adult literature has barely been included in ecocriticism (199). Baker contends that “Panem’s condition [. . . is] a warning about the destructive nature of some technology, apathy, and oppressive structures that eliminate natural relationships,” enhancing the participation of young adults in debates on global environmental issues (199).

A similarly important social impact may be generated by some of the other essays in the volume that point out how the trilogy may trigger meaningful discussions about difficult and even painful topics. Ann M. M. Childs highlights how Collins’s texts may assist in learning sympathy (102), while Adam Levin argues that making Jewish readers aware of the parallels between the trilogy and Holocaust literature would allow a discussion of the Holocaust trauma to occur in a safe space (124). Levin’s article implicitly claims that not only the Jewish community could benefit from such an approach, but the trilogy is also suitable for teaching history and Holocaust literature to a wider audience. The Holocaust theme is also observed, for instance, by Anthony Pavlik, whose argument explores the fascist nature of the totalitarian state of Panem, using Umberto Eco’s essay, “Ur-Fascism” (Pharr and Clark 30-38), and also confirmed by the visual imagery of the first *The Hunger Games* movie, directed by Gary Ross (Limpár).

Examining all four books of criticism more closely reveals a ubiquitous effort to identify the various meeting points between the dystopian world of the novels and the contemporary real world. This phenomenon is, so to say, “natural,” when one investigates a dystopia, since the role of the genre, as Booker points out, is “social criticism” (18). What makes *The Hunger Games* novels unusual within this natural scope of analysis is that the links between cultural phenomena in the trilogy and those in the

contemporary “real” western world are not only numerous but also very direct—so much so that when Valerie Estelle Frankel explores the theme of artificiality, she claims that Collins’s treatment of the Capitol’s culture, especially as it manifests in the application of reality shows, suggests that what we confront in the novels is not “just a dystopian future; it’s the dystopia of present-day America” (Pharr and Clark 49)—a claim repeated in a broader sense by Garriott, who also sees Collins’s text as social criticism of contemporary society, more precisely, “as a rhetorical text that provides insight into the use of the gaze in our present reality rather than as a text that warns readers about a potential future” (Garriott, Jones, and Tyler 161), making the trilogy attractive and easily accessible to younger readers.

While dystopia is a didactic genre, dystopias for young audience (Sambell 164), or dystopias by women writers (Baccolini qtd. in Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 10) tend not to discard hope, making the genre less didactic and allowing for ambiguity in a moral sense (Sambell 164). *The Hunger Games* trilogy is, therefore, suitable for debating and questioning meaning. In fact, the trilogy itself “argues for the necessity of increased awareness” of how the world operates, as Bill Clemente claims (Pharr and Clark 21). In this vein, Jamey Heit’s *The Politics of The Hunger Games* successfully extends the scope of awareness that the novels are able to raise. Similarly to the first few essays in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games*, Heit’s volume investigates the trilogy in a political context. The volume’s merit includes a separate chapter on Haymitch’s character, giving him the attention that he definitely deserves, and Heit’s theory-based discussion that simultaneously links Collins’s dystopia with examples highlighting the applicability of theory to contemporary American political life. Thus, the reader is continuously reminded of the many ways *The Hunger Games* trilogy relates to America’s past and present. Heit’s method of placing the trilogy in a most complex historical context, and drawing on important philosophy texts by Machiavelli, Plato, Confucius, Rousseau, and Hobbes convincingly justifies using the trilogy in university courses on political science. In fact, a 2015 volume in Hungarian on the politics of science fiction by Csaba Tóth, and his popular university course at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, on the same topic that included *The Hunger Games* novels (Fehér; Szűcs), demonstrate the legitimacy of using Collins’s dystopia for such a purpose outside the US, too.

The political content of the trilogy makes it a most thought-provoking read for a younger audience to make them aware that politics is characterized by massive maneuvering so that the target audience may not recognize it is

being manipulated. Collins's dystopia relies primarily on withholding and manipulating information—a highly sensitive issue in the age of informatics, and certainly not a new theme in dystopian literature. But, instead of warning against fantastically evil powers that try to brainwash people with the most intricate mechanisms, Collins calls attention to the threat that we experience on a daily basis: the manipulation and control of the individual by the media.

It is not by chance, then, that all the four McFarland publications discussed here dedicate ample space to consider the ways Collins presents the theme of being manipulated. Henthorne and Heit both offer one chapter on this topic, *Space and Place in The Hunger Games* includes two such essays, while *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games* repeatedly addresses the issue with diverging foci, and features altogether six chapters that extensively examine the role of media in the novels. These six essays, furthermore, appear under three different rubrics of the volume, which indicates their relevance to various broader topics, such as politics, aesthetics, ethics, or surveillance.

Applying different approaches, four of the above mentioned studies relate specifically to reality television within the focus on the media's function in the novels, highlighting the interactive nature of this film genre, in which the process of transformation is innate. Kathery Wright concentrates on how Collins's presentation of the reality television theme demonstrates Walter Benjamin's "assertions about the fusion of art and politics" (Pharr and Clark 99), while the same fusion is examined by Amy L. Montz with special focus on the power coming from fashion and femininity and, especially, the combination of the two. Kelley Wezner's article provides another perspective by making gaze and spectacle-centered themes in her analysis of Panem's panopticons. The topic of interactivity becomes pivotal, especially in Shannon R. Mortimore-Smith's essay, which examines the psychology of reality shows, and looks into the role of the audience as influencing factor within this genre.

While *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games* has risked unavoidable repetition by including several chapters that investigate various aspects connected to reality television, I believe that the decision to treat this important subject with numerous approaches and disciplines in the articles also reflects the centrality of the theme in the novel, and highlights that treated as a symptom of culture, reality television is worth examining. The essays may especially be useful to help address generations that have had access to an abundance of reality TV shows. As this has become firsthand experience for youngsters in the western world, the issue of televising and its

consequences may be a most effective starting point when discussing the novel and the contemporary world, bridging the imagined temporal gap between the two worlds by recognizing the similarities in the media mechanisms that effect life in Panem and in our reality. Such an approach may generate understanding of more distant, but extremely important issues—such as war, or manifestations of environmental threats—of which these readers do not have firsthand experience. A recognition that the media has power to manipulate those remote experiences through controlled, edited images and reports is one of the most important truths one should be aware of these days, as the politically passive life of the Capitol people, and its horrific consequences demonstrate in the trilogy.

The idea that reality shows and political news broadcasting are not remote in our real world, either, is a topic touched upon by Gretchen Koenig, who examines the powerful role the US media had in manipulating masses during the Vietnam War. She explicates how images of violence may turn their viewers, ultimately, to spectators who “become desensitized to brutality, normalizing the horrific images” (Pharr and Clark 41)—a phenomenon that most clearly registered not only among witnesses to war, but also among spectators of violent reality television shows. The various strategies of manipulation by media are also discussed by Heit, who repeatedly cites recent emblematic instances when the media coverage substantially influenced how the news was perceived by the audience. By pointing out the consequences of the manipulation, Heit discloses a media strategy that is comparable to what we witness, although we may not notice, on a daily basis. Heit ensures that the reader understands not only the power of media communication, but also the connection between political media abuse in the trilogy and in the present world of reality. In her *The Washington Post* blog post on *The Hunger Games*, Alyssa Rosenberg makes this link explicit, when she draws a parallel between the politics of Panem and present day political developments in the US, claiming that the real danger to democracy is “the cancer of a politics that’s governed by nothing *but* public perception, a theme that’s particularly unsettling given the contours of the 2016 election.”

The presentation of many-sided material on media abuse in the trilogy remains a topic central to understanding the novels, and one that relates to all the other main themes in Collins’s text, including transformation of one’s character, love and partnership, family relations, democracy versus tyranny, one’s connection to the environment, war, and rebellion, to name but a few. The interrelation of these themes suggests that the way we are allowed to perceive the world has an effect on everything our life encompasses. This

appears to be a commonplace, but to become aware of it may be vital to survival in a world that is highly manipulated; therefore, it is indispensable that a young audience should become familiar with this notion.

The theme of fighting against manipulation is tightly connected to the concept of heroism Collins works with in her trilogy. Unlike Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale* (1999), to which *The Hunger Games* novels are frequently compared, this American series works along the lines of the hero narrative. Heroes used to slay dragons, whereas today's heroes slay manipulation. How to fight this monster? Surely, the first step is to become aware of the manipulative forces that *The Hunger Games* series insists on.<sup>2</sup> Laura Miller suggests that as "dystopian fiction may be the only genre written for children that's routinely *less* didactic than its adult counterpart" (qtd. in Pharr and Clark 20), this genre provokes critical thinking; consequently, a text whose dominant theme is the necessity not to yield to manipulation, that is, the need to think critically under all circumstances, is really a good choice to teach—all the more so because Collins challenges the genre of Young Adult dystopia.

Like Katniss, Collins also makes an "act of defiance," borrowing the novels' favored term, by not fitting into a clear-cut category of genre. Collins, on the one hand, follows the twenty-first century trend of combining genres, as "popular young adult dystopian novels frequently draw from a variety of literary genres, from science and speculative fiction to the traditions of *bildungsroman* and romance" (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 10). More important, however, is Collins's unconventional use of several genres. For example, while the plot in most Young Adult texts revolves around anxieties about love—possibly a love triangle—in *The Hunger Games*, the romance plot line is subordinated to the political content, making choice rational and political, thus consistently redirecting attention to the social, cultural, and political content of the novels. Closely connected to this topic is how Collins rejects stereotypical gender roles. The unorthodox treatment of gender is acknowledged and analyzed by, among others, Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel, who present Katniss as a "male-identified" female character (Pharr and Clark 118), arguing about the hybridity or androgyny of the character (Pharr and Clark 122) that contributes to the observable hybridity of the genre within Young Adult dystopia. Focusing on another aspect of the gender theme, Jennifer Mitchell stresses Katniss's "constantly shifting gender variance" (Pharr and Clark 129) in her analysis on how gender and power relate in the trilogy. Collins also transgresses boundaries in how she closes the trilogy with an epilogue, as Julie Elizabeth Tyler discusses in depth. Her argument highlights how the narrative technique supports the notion that *The Hunger*



*Games* novels indeed provoke the audience to think. Collins's epilogue diverges from the happy reconciliation that characterizes Young Adult literature, and opens the text up to various interpretations, whereas "closed meanings, authoritative and singular versions, and definitive statements, even for one's own story, constitute the 'worse game' to play, because it is the one the Capitol has designed" (Garriott, Jones, and Tyler 43).

The transgressive nature of the novels, the dominant themes, including the detailed initiation into the life of the manipulative media, which creates tight links to reality, not only greatly contribute to the popularity of the trilogy, but also raise awareness in readers, who may become more sensitive to the anxieties of our reality. Teaching the trilogy is more than rewarding, and may have positive consequences on a social level: Collins's dystopia is "progressive or radical fiction . . . that involves collective action on a larger social scale" (Pharr and Clark 21), and making sense of the novel demands an interpretative process that may turn readers into individuals who are more likely to resist manipulative powers, apply critical thinking, and become part of that "collective action on a social scale" (21). While we, teachers of literature, like to believe that all good literary texts are capable of this effect (I certainly share this belief), we must also see that some works are more effectively able to draw readers of a certain age group in, and achieve this effect to a greater extent. *The Hunger Games* series, demonstrating a complex presentation of anxieties that may be interpreted in terms of our own world, exceeds most representatives of Young Adult dystopian fiction, therefore, it appears to be one of the best tools that the Young Adult literary market offers at the moment for such a purpose.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A. M. Simmons's article, "Class on fire: Using *The Hunger Games* trilogy to Encourage Social Action," underscores especially the violent motifs of the trilogy, suitable for raising awareness about violence of various forms directed against children, including hunger, forced labor, the use of child soldiers, and sex trafficking.

<sup>2</sup> This is where the dominating theme of media manipulation so strongly supports the positive aspects of Young Adult dystopia.

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