

Why does *The Hunger Games* strike a chord?

By Christine Schofelt and David Walsh
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Directed by Gary Ross, written by Ross, Suzanne Collins and Billy Ray, based on a novel by Collins

The Hunger Games opened this weekend to record-breaking box office figures. Friday alone brought in \$68 million, and by Sunday morning, according to Deadline.com, Lionsgate had “revised upwards its worldwide total to a massive \$214.25 million.”

Based on the first book in a popular trilogy for young readers by Suzanne Collins, also a co-writer of the screenplay, *The Hunger Games* (directed by Gary Ross) depicts a future North America now named Panem and divided into 12 districts, in which a popular uprising has been violently quashed decades before. A thirteenth district was entirely wiped out in the repression.

Panem’s citizens are strictly confined to their respective districts. As punishment for the defeated uprising, labeled an act of “treason” by the authorities, each district is also obliged to send one girl and one boy every year—chosen by lottery—as “Tributes” to the Capitol, where they participate in the Hunger Games, a televised combat staged in uninhabited terrain (a different one each time) that lasts until only one survivor remains. The reward is food for the winner’s district.

Neither the book nor the film is a major artistic achievement, but they have collectively struck a chord with a wide audience. Is there a significance to this? Some of the prominent features of *The Hunger Games* might help provide an answer.

At the center of the story is Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence from *Winter’s Bone*), who lives in District 12, formerly known as Appalachia. Her father died in a mining accident some years before the film begins. Katniss has turned to sneaking through the occasionally electrified fence that bounds the district to hunt illegally with a friend, Gale (Liam Hemsworth), in order to feed their families.

While the area’s forests and hills are a cool, rolling green, the town is made up of mud streets and old wooden houses. The people are on the verge of gaunt, and a few quick scenes are deliberate and effective restagings of Dorothea Lange Depression-era photographs. The whole of District 12 has been patterned on that epoch, as if it had been knocked back in time in the wake of the uprising.

Coal mining is still one of the few jobs in the area, and apparently no safer than it is today. The novel notes that hundreds of years of mining have forced the men further and further underground in search of coal, which is then shipped to the wealthy Capitol. Accidents and explosions such as the one in which Katniss’ father was killed are common.

On the day of the “reaping,” when the boys and girls are selected for the Hunger Games, huge screens have been set up in

the town’s square, camera crews and riot gear-clad “Peacekeepers” swarm at the edges of the crowd of children and teenagers—the contrast between the technology available to record and broadcast every aspect of the horrific Games and the lack of so much as pavement for the populace is sharply drawn.

Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks), sent from the Capitol as the escort for the District 12 Tributes, exhibits a maniacal devotion to the Games. Her attire is a mélange of styles and eras, like the majority of characters from the Capitol. The malevolent President Snow, played by Donald Sutherland with a cold gentlemanliness, whom we meet later, is attired as a 19th-century robber baron sans top hat.

The sets are likewise designed to underscore the social difference, and a few are commentaries in themselves. In one of the eeriest sequences, the grooming center to which the Tributes are taken on their arrival in the Capitol resembles nothing so much as a morgue. The young people are laid out on hard, cold surfaces and passively receive their washings, waxings and combings out by functionaries who barely acknowledge them if they do say anything. Even before the Games begin, the Tributes are socially dead.

Many disparate elements are thrown into *The Hunger Games*, some more successfully than others. Collins has told interviewers that the story came to her when she was watching television and, while changing channels, the lines “started to blur” between a “reality television” program and scenes of the Iraq war. (*School Library Journal*)

The Hunger Games are presented as a reality show, hosted by Caesar Flickerman (Stanley Tucci), before a national audience legally obliged to watch. The recurrence of ancient Roman names and the name of the country itself, Panem, presumably taken from the famous phrase, “bread and circuses” (in Latin, *panem et circenses*), seem meant to highlight the gladiatorial character of the spectacle. President Snow chillingly makes it quite clear to a subordinate who reveals sympathy for “underdogs” that the annual event remains a means of political control and intimidation.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars (along no doubt with the Vietnam conflict, in which Collins’ father served) make themselves felt. First, impoverished families can earn food and supplies by submitting their children’s names additional times to the Games’ lottery. Within the less affluent districts at least, the poorest and most desperate are therefore more likely to be chosen. In effect, they are “economic conscripts” for the death games.

From the appearance of menacing hovercraft and the heavily armed (and hypocritically named) Peacekeepers to the Games’ control room, in which technicians manipulate the conditions of

the competition and, on one occasion, launch fireballs (drone strikes?), the numerous references to America's destructive and repressive military power seem clear.

A drunken veteran of the Games, District 12's only living victor, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson), is present to guide this year's Tributes from the district, Katniss and Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson), in the days leading up to the Games. Perhaps in better artistic hands this character might have provided a sharp commentary on the lingering effects of war and brutality. Haymitch's assignment to groom the next possible survivors (but more likely, victims) brings up many moral questions. Harrelson plays him well, but has not been given much to work with.

The sequences of the Games themselves, as the 24 Tributes stalk and kill one another over the course of days and dwindle in number, are the film's (and the book's) weakest and most predictable sections. Unfortunately, American fiction writers and filmmakers still find it easier to construct this sort of adventure scenario than to consider the implications of the social picture the author and filmmakers begin to sketch in this case, then pull back from.

There are several strong performances in this film, not least of which is Jennifer Lawrence's in the lead role. It is doubtful that the second half of the film could have retained what integrity it has without her talents. Lawrence brings a complexity not often evident in the book; her determination to save or try to save those around her is admirable, and there is an altruism and desire to connect with other people that is moving. Her alliance with the young black girl, Rue (Amandla Stenberg), from District 11, roughly half way through the film is touchingly rendered.

The isolation of one district from another, better addressed in the book, is finally breached as District 11 watches Rue's death and Katniss' efforts to honor her. The scene sparks a multiracial riot in Rue's home (a sequence filmed by director Steven Soderbergh).

The love story, or semi-love story, introduced during the Games between the two Tributes from District 12 is not well developed or convincing. At times, it is downright awkward.

Based on his history, we had the right to expect a competent, liberal-minded, but rather simplistic effort from Gary Ross (director of *Pleasantville* and *Seabiscuit*, writer of *Big, Mr. Baseball* and *Dave*). This is what he delivers, while occasionally revealing a visual flair. The acting is extremely uneven, suggesting that those performers capable of developing a character more or less on their own (Lawrence, Harrelson, Tucci, Sutherland) make a decent or better showing, while many of the others are left to flounder.

The book and film are very confused. They do evoke strong social sentiments in their opening scenes in particular: the fact that this is Appalachia, the coal mining motif, the semi-starvation of the population, the previously crushed revolt, the existence of the pampered, wealthy Capitol, etc. Some of this is moving, and rooted in contemporary realities.

Collins told the *New York Times* that young people needed to consider "global warming, about our mistreatment of the environment, but also questions like: How do you feel about the fact that some people take their next meal for granted when so many other people are starving in the world?"

Ross indicated to an interviewer that he was proud of the Sutherland-President Snow scenes: "I love those scenes with him [Snow]. I like how he talks about sort of the haves and have-nots, the 99 percent and the 1 percent, about the raw minerals and the resources that they get from the districts that they are needing to control, and that neo-colonial relationship is sort of articulated."

In an interview with *Citypages*, Jennifer Lawrence suggested that "We've seen this happen in history, where all of a sudden there's this government and it controls its people by keeping them separated and hungry and weak, so that they're not strong enough to fight back." Josh Hutcherson, in the same interview, referred to the Occupy Wall Street movement, adding, "I feel like in today's world, you have the 99 percent and the one percent, and there's such a disconnect between the two. That's kind of what happens in *The Hunger Games*. You have these people who fight to put food on the table and then you have the Capitol that's completely oblivious to that world."

These are admirable sentiments and the social issues are touched on in *The Hunger Games*, and, in fact, propel its most intriguing aspects, as well as the performers. The urgency created by that plays a large part in arousing a broad audience.

However, it is one thing to touch on important matters, it is another to work them through and seriously treat them. Here both book and film fall down. There is too much that is stereotyped, formulaic and shallow.

Granted that *The Hunger Games* is a book for young readers, a good deal of material, including Katniss' reactions, is treated ham-fistedly. There is no question left open as to how Katniss *feels* at practically any given moment, and many passages end with a bare restatement of what has already been made obvious.

The world and the situation in which Katniss finds herself are ripe with possibilities for deeper commentary, but so many of those possibilities are dissipated as the reader or viewer becomes swept up in the steady piling up of corpses. No definite positions are taken on a great many issues.

The claim that *The Hunger Games* "is an action-packed ode to freedom that any small-government conservative will love" or "any Tea Party sympathizer should cheer" (*Washington Examiner*) is largely wishful thinking. However, the author's confusion is perhaps summed up by this: on her list of favorite books, Collins includes Émile Zola's *Germinal*, the 1885 novel centering on a French miners' strike that socialist-minded workers hold dear, and *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding's morbid tale about a group of boys stuck on a deserted island, meant to show the rottenness of human nature.

Collins and Ross have not sufficiently challenged themselves or their readers and viewers, and the results are correspondingly patchy.

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