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***The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins:
Entertainment or Social Criticism?**

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Introduction

The popularity of *The Hunger Games* trilogy written by Suzanne Collins did not come at once. In fact, it was not until the final novel was about to be published that the success of the trilogy became clear. The trilogy became such a success that other authors began discussing and praising it, amongst others Stephen King (“The Hunger Games” 2008). Furthermore, in 2012 the first novel of the series will be adapted into a film. But what was the cause of the success and interest? One reason might be that the protagonist is a strong, independent girl, or the fact that Collins is not afraid to show young adults the reality of war. Another reason may be the fact that the reader is able to connect to this impossible world because there are elements that relate to the world she/he lives in today.

Literature has been used as a medium for social criticism for the greater part of literary history. Genres such as the novel of social criticism and the social novel are the ones most used when wanting to have an undertone of social criticism. However, a number of critics have discussed how the *Bildungsroman* and the dystopian novel, in particular, have strong aspects of social criticism. The *Bildungsroman* genre grew in popularity in the 19th century. The work most people connect to this genre is probably Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), which has heavy undertones of criticism of how children were treated in English society during the 19th century. The science fiction subgenre the dystopian novel had a big success with George Orwell’s *1984* written in 1948. Even though it had been a popular genre even before Orwell’s novel, it had a rise in popularity during the 1950s and 60s. In this genre the author often writes of a dystopian future in a way that is supposed to work as a warning to readers that if society today does not change then the future will be a horrible place to live in.

These two genres could be found in one and the same novel or book series, as in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. In *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry have compiled a number of essays that all point to the fact that the *Bildungsroman* genre has an important part in the dystopian novel. It seems as if by applying elements of the *Bildungsroman* to the dystopian novel a new genre is created that criticizes certain parts of society and tries to convey a message to readers, especially to those who are in a position to change society for the better, namely the young adult readers. The author Ian McDonald has stated that science fiction is “the only form of fiction that is capable of dealing with today’s reality in the 21st century”, and that it is able to ask questions relating to the future that is being discussed in the society in which it is written (“What Is Right about

Science Fiction?” 2011).

It was, according to Terry Eagleton, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that literary criticism began to change into something more modern. Literary criticism became something that everyone could discuss. One reason was that the liberal part of society began to grow and fight against the absolutist state (9-10). People began to come together and discuss how what was written in literature had a connection to the society they were living in. This is still present in today’s society, in the form of social criticism. Eagleton states that criticism:

was only ever significant when it engaged with more than literary issues – when, for whatever historical reason, the ‘literary’ was suddenly foregrounded as the medium of vital concerns deeply rooted in the general intellectual, cultural and political life of an epoch... It has only been when criticism, in the act of speaking of literature, emits a lateral message about the shape and destiny of a whole culture that its voice has compelled widespread attention. It was only when ‘culture’ became a pressing political project, ‘poetry’ a metaphor for the quality of social life, and language a paradigm for social practice as a whole, that criticism could claim any serious title to exist. (107-108)

According to Eagleton social criticism is the most important form of criticism. He continues that it is not applied as much today as it was in the 19th Century. However, the popularity and rise of the science fiction genre today say otherwise, as well as novels such as *1984* and *The Hunger Games*.

The trilogy which consists of *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*¹, is a result of merging the *Bildungsroman* and the dystopian novel. The trilogy is set in a dystopian future, and throughout it the reader follows a young girl named Katniss and sees how she goes through a number of trials and hardships only to come out stronger in the end. The reader also encounters President Snow, who rules the country of Panem with an iron fist and has retained the ultimate form of entertainment for the citizens of Panem; The Hunger Games. The Hunger Games is a tournament which has been present in Panem for approximately 74 years. It was created as a punishment for the districts after they attempted to overthrow the Capitol but failed. Therefore, two children from each of the districts are forced

¹ *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire* will from here on be referred to as *THG* and *CF* respectively.

to fight to death in an arena where only one can survive and thereby win. I believe that there are clear indications in the trilogy that it is criticizing present-day society in the US, in particular the entertainment media. The author herself has indicated in interviews that her novels are indeed a critique on society in the US (2010 “Sit Down with Suzanne Collins”).

The aim of this essay is to show that *The Hunger Games* trilogy could be seen as a critique of present-day society in the US, in particular its need for entertainment. Characteristics of dystopian novels and of the *Bildungsroman* will be discussed in order to highlight aspects of social criticism in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The essay will begin by discussing the political elements in the trilogy. A discussion on how media and surveillance play important parts in the novels will then follow, and finally, this essay will discuss the impact entertainment has on society. This will be discussed by keeping in mind how social criticism is used in literature, and specifically in literature written for young adults.

The Political Elements

“[D]ystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality”. (Booker 15)

This section of the essay will discuss the occurrence of political elements in *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the parallels they have in present-day society in the US.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the society the reader encounters is dystopian. The country of Panem, which is seen through the eyes of the heroine Katniss, is divided into its ruling group in the Capitol, and the rest of the population in thirteen districts. The names Panem and the Capitol are in themselves answers to how the society in the novels work. Collins’ Capitol is a clear symbol of the Capitol Hill located in Washington today. They are both located on higher ground, although the Capitol in the novels is described as being located amongst mountains. They are both the central part of the country, where decisions which will affect the public are made, and they are both the basis for how the surrounding country/city has been divided, in both cases into districts.

There has been another Capitol in our world apart from the current Capitol Hill in Washington, namely the Capitol of Ancient Rome also known as the Capitoline. This Capitol was the symbolic center of the Roman world when Rome was most powerful. The word Capitol comes from the Latin word *caput* which means head, capital, and leader. Collins has stated that elements of her story, in particular the Capitol, have strong references from Ancient Rome (“A Conversation with Suzanne Collins” 2).

It is no coincidence that Capitol is a homophone of capital. The Capitol in the novels has not only money but power over the people in the surrounding districts, just as the capital in US society today has the control, and the power of money. But both of these societies need consumers. In Collins' trilogy the citizens of the Capitol are brainwashed into consumerism. It is the only way they know. Even though the people living in the districts are a part of this consumerism, since they are the producers, they are never really included.

The word Panem is Latin and translates as bread. However, at first reading the meaning of Panem may have a number of interpretations. It can be argued that Panem has a connection to the American airline Pan Am, or that it is a play on the word pan-American. In fact, pan-American is a possible interpretation of Panem since the prefix pan means "including all people" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 1260), and Panem includes all the people, even those within the Capitol. However, since Collins herself has stated that she was inspired by Greek and Roman history, it is most likely that she is referring to the Latin word for bread. This discussion will be expanded in the final discussion section of the essay.

Panem is described as being the result of natural disasters, possibly caused by human hands, and wars that destroyed what "was once called North America" (THG 21). Relating this to Booker's quote at the beginning of this section makes it clear that the society that is critiqued in *The Hunger Games* trilogy is indeed the US. Since the circumstances that led to the destruction of North America in the trilogy all have counterparts in society today, this seemingly short and unimportant background story seems to send a message to the reader, a message that this could happen to us as well. Katniss has a moment of reflection in *Mockingjay*: "...our ancestors don't seem much to brag about. I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn't care about what would happen to the people who came after them." (99) Arguably, the kind of thinking that Katniss has is present in today's society as well. The public today is made aware through politicians and researchers that a change has to happen soon, before it is too late. One example of this is Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), in which Gore argues that a global change has to happen in order to save our climate. By applying this perspective to the trilogy a question may be asked: Are we already too late in being able to save our climate and is a dystopian future inevitable?

If the Capitol is a symbol of the upper class and state in the US, then District 13 could be interpreted as a metaphor for the military. While the citizens the Capitol live in luxury and complacency, the citizens of District 13 are taught from an early age that they have

to fight to survive and are forced to live under controlled circumstances. These two places in Panem have in a way the equal amount of power, but in different ways. The Capitol has the political power in that it is known to all of Panem and controls it with its rules and the Games. District 13 has gained its power through nuclear power, weapons and a clear war strategy. Since they both have acquired nuclear power, they are forced into a form of stalemate. However, it is because of District 13's war strategy and realization that they need the other districts on their side, that they are able to overthrow the Capitol. The citizens of District 13 are the complete opposite of the citizens of the Capitol; they are not afraid to fight and are not distracted by any form of entertainment or comfort. In fact, it is questionable if they even know what leisure is.

The military in the US today is both a major and a powerful part of society. It can be argued that some of the people that choose a career in the military do so because they find no place for themselves within other parts of society. Some are not rich or educated enough to be part of the upper classes, and therefore choose to join the military. Of course, some people choose it because of the honor of serving their country. However, as in *The Hunger Games*, the military holds a certain power that the state wants and needs to have. The state stands for the theoretical part of society while the military is the part of action. The difference between the novel world and our world is that in the US the state and the military are not in conflict with each other, instead they work as one. In fact, a number of people in places of power in the state have a military background.

In *THG*, Katniss is used as a pawn in the Capitol's games to induce fear in the people living in the districts. In *Mockingjay*, she is once again used as a pawn, but this time by District 13 which wants her to be the icon of their rebellion. Sara Gaden uses John Locke's argument that a strong element in literature written for young adults is the individual versus society, which later could evolve into a group of individuals who together form a group to take on society, which describes what is happening to Katniss in *The Hunger Games* (59). Gaden argues that not only does society affect the individual, but the individual affects society too, and it is through the choices that the individual makes that a society can evolve (59). It is Katniss' choice to be a part of the rebellion that starts the revolution in Panem. And it is her choice over and over again that makes things happen in the trilogy. However, a single person could not have the power to do such a thing if his or her reason for doing it was not important enough. And Katniss' motivation is one of the most common ones in literature written for young adults: Freedom.

In the beginning of *The Hunger Games* trilogy Katniss is fighting for her life in

the games, but throughout the novels she finds that she is fighting for something even more important: Freedom, and the freedom of people like her in the other districts. There is a saying about literature written for young adults: “You may lead a child into the darkness, but you must never turn out the light” (qtd. in Hughes 156). In *The Hunger Games* trilogy the light that is always kept on is Katniss’ fight for freedom. Freedom is also seen as the core of American values; it is what one should strive to have. The lack of freedom is something that has triggered a number of movements in US society. Throughout US history, there has been the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, just to name a few. These were all cases where certain people’s rights and freedom were non-existent, and the realization of this caused them to revolt against it.

Lauren L. Reber discusses how an author of young adult literature has a dialogue with the reader, and through his/her novels send a message to the reader (8). She argues that the reader and the heroine/hero are merged together through identification, so the reader believes that since the heroine/hero is able to change the world then so can she/he. Since it falls on young adults to make a change, they need all the encouragement they can get. And through following Katniss on her journey, the reader learns what kinds of decisions she/he should make. The difference between the reader and Katniss is that “[t]he reader can rejoin the real world armed to redress its evils” (24).

It is not only Katniss who is set as an example or used as a pawn. All the children that lost their lives in the Games are used by the Capitol to induce fear in the districts, and by the rebels to invoke revenge. This is an extreme use of children in society, and we have nothing like this in society today. There is, however, a common knowledge that when something goes wrong in our society, it is the children that take the hardest blow. And when a decision is made, where children have no say, they are the ones who will have to deal with the consequences sooner or later.

To use children as an example in society relates to how children are depicted in the *Bildungsroman* where the reader follows an adolescent on a journey of trials which will test his or her abilities, knowledge and skills, and through this learn vital things which will help him or her further on in life. All of this can be adapted to *The Hunger Games* trilogy where the reader follows the young and fatherless Katniss, who has been forced to grow up too soon and take responsibility for her family. But through this she has learned vital things which turn out to save her life.

Throughout the novels, Katniss is put through a number of trials which makes her the heroine she is in the end. She is forced to face the horrors of the Games twice, but it

turns out that these Games taught her what she needed to know in order to conquer her final trial, which is to defeat Snow and destroy the Games. And through these trials she has found who she really is and gained her freedom. This is a technique of writing which is found in novels of the *Bildungsroman* genre. These trials that the protagonist encounters often represent the parts of society that need to change for society to work as it should. Thereby a form of social critique has been made.

There are six themes that are often part of the dystopian novel; science and technology, religion, sexuality, literature, and history (Booker 21). In *The Hunger Games* trilogy a number of scientific accomplishments that have been made use of are mentioned, for example the fact that plastic surgery has evolved into the extreme. This is seen, amongst other instances, in *Mockingjay* where the reader is introduced to a woman who has surgically altered her features to look more feline; she has even implanted whiskers in her face (372). Katniss herself is taken aback when she enters the Capitol and sees what people living there look like and wear; everything has been taken to the extreme. For the citizens of the Capitol there is nothing wrong or special about having whiskers or green tattoos that cover ones face.

In Western society today cosmetic surgery has become more and more common. The need to be attractive, because of social and cultural pressure, has increased the number of performed cosmetic surgeries (“The Psychology of Appearance” par 1-3). Although surgical enhancement such as the feline-like woman in *Mockingjay* is not as widely accepted in our society, there is actually a woman living in the US today who has done almost the same surgical alterations. However, as noted above, it is not widely accepted to have such extreme surgical procedures performed. Nonetheless, the need to look perfect, like the movie stars, supermodels, and some people on reality shows, has put pressure on people to look a certain way, not only in the trilogy but in the US society today. In fact, Keith J Petrie et al. report that from the year 2000 to the year 2007 the amount of cosmetic surgery performed in the US increased with 59%, and in the year 2007 alone, approximately 12 million procedures were performed in the US (“Influence of Television on Demand for Cosmetic Surgery” 244). They also state that one of the major reasons for people deciding to have cosmetic surgery is because of reality shows that put focus on people’s appearances (244). So, as long as there is the social and cultural pressure to look attractive, one might even say perfect, there will be a need for cosmetic surgery. But what the trilogy seems to be asking is how far people are willing to go to fit in. It is only the citizens of the Capitol that have surgically enhanced their features and they have done this because of the need to look young, but more importantly, to fit in in the society they live in.

An even more controversial scientific development in Panem, according to the standards of our world, is the Capitol's mutations [*sic*]. Through manipulating nature and its inhabitants the Capitol has created creatures and places that are supposed to do whatever the Capitol needs them to do, such as jabberjays [*sic*] (*THG* 52), and trackerjackers [*sic*] (*THG* 225). But it turns out that the Capitol does not have any real control of the mutations they created; the jabberjays become useless for the creators and even, in a way, turn against them. In US society today, experimental testing in the area of science and technology has become important, for better and worse. NASA is at the forefront of technology, and the military tries to find new ways to protect the country. As is known from history, weapons may quickly change hands and turn against the creators. One example of this is nuclear weapons which were first produced in the US during the so-called Manhattan Project in the 1940s. The invention of nuclear weapons came from the human need to have the upper hand in battle - the urge to create the ultimate weapon. However, once the people involved in the so-called Manhattan Project succeeded in doing so, all they found was that it could lead to their own destruction, just like the Capitol's mutations turn against the Capitol itself. Such use of technology is one of the most common themes in dystopian novels.

The use of propaganda in the novels, especially *Mockingjay*, is another important factor. It is used both by the Capitol and by the rebels to get as many people as possible to join their cause. While the Capitol calls it advertisement and/or entertainment the rebels go as far as calling it "Airtime Assault" (123). This form of propaganda is common in the whole Western world today, but is probably connected to the society in the US considering Collins is born and raised there. Just like the Capitol and the rebels battle for the most attention and most followers in *The Hunger Games* trilogy; as do the Republican Party and the Democratic Party battle for votes in the US today. And throughout the months leading up to the Presidential election, the citizens of the US are bombarded with information and promises through every available media.

In *The Girl Who Was on Fire*², Leah Wilson has compiled essays which discuss *The Hunger Games* trilogy. In, "Panem et Circenses", Carrie Ryan argues that the way in which Collins depicts the use of propaganda in *Mockingjay* has a connection to the way in which war is reported in today's society (107). She states that all media is about the ratings, and compares reportage of war to Reality TV, which I will discuss further in the last part of the essay. Ryan makes an interesting point when she, without clearly stating it, questions who

² This book will from here on be referred to as *GWF*.

really has the power in society. By stating that it is the editors and producers who have the power over the shape and message of everything in the media, and that this choice over what will be shown to the public is what decides what the public knows and thereby thinks of it, begs the question, who really has power in society (108-109)? Is it the leader of the country or is it the editors and producers behind the media? The same question can be asked in *The Hunger Games* trilogy; is it President Snow who has the power or is it the Gamemakers? In the end it is the Gamemakers led by Plutarch Heavensbee that come out on top. Heavensbee has orchestrated all of the rebels' propaganda and through it won over enough people to overrun President Snow. From this information one might argue that media is the most powerful weapon in society, and not only in the society within the trilogy but in present-day society in the US.

Media and Surveillance

This section of the essay will discuss how media and surveillance play important parts in *The Hunger Games* trilogy and how the use of media in the trilogy has counterparts in present-day society in the US.

The term "Big Brother is watching you" is used in George Orwell's *1984* and means that the characters in the novel are never really alone (3). They are always watched by the state and its leader, in this case known as Big Brother. The same can be said for *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where cameras follow Katniss' every move. In the trilogy, however, it is not just Big Brother that is watching, but almost every citizen of Panem.

Walking around in a major city today one will encounter a large number of surveillance cameras that observe people in silence. But how many more are there that we do not see? Katniss asks herself the same question as her journey progresses in the novels. In *THG* she believes that she and Gale are safe in the woods, only to find out in *CF* that the woods had been under surveillance all along. This notion of always being watched by someone, especially by the state that has power over you, begs the question of how much freedom one really has. Katniss realizes quickly that she is just a pawn in the Capitol's games, and later in Coin's fight for power, but she uses this to her advantage to gain her freedom in the end. Collins states in an interview on the Scholastic website that she wishes that the novels will beg questions that the readers find relevant to their own lives, and then be encouraged to start asking more questions. And if they find out that disturbing parts of the trilogy are relevant to their lives they will know what to do about them ("A Conversation with Suzanne Collins" 3).

Once Katniss becomes a part of the Games she is always aware of the cameras, and as a result she is never able to be herself completely. Present-day society in the US is one that is becoming more and more media oriented, cameras are almost everywhere. With the risk of being seen by the state, people's actions are bound to change. This is known to be the main reason for surveillance and security cameras; just the notion that they are present should prevent people from performing acts of crime.

Although Katniss is always *aware* of the cameras, she and the reader never actually *see* them until they are introduced in the form of a pair of cameramen in the final novel. This sense of not always knowing when one is being watched is bound to change how people behave in everyday life. With the expansion of surveillance cameras in present-day society in the US, the same difficulty that Katniss faces in the novels might soon apply to citizens of the US.

As mentioned above, development within the area of technology is one of the most important elements in a dystopian novel. In Collins' trilogy the technology used for surveillance has not exactly evolved. The cameras are still quite the same, but the use of them has gone to the extreme. Cameras are present at every public place around Panem, making it impossible for people to live a completely free life.

In *Mockingjay* we find out who it is that really holds the power and influence of the people. Surprisingly, it is not Katniss. It is perhaps the most unlikely people: The Gamemakers, the people behind the cameras. Lili Wilkinson makes an interesting point when she divides Panem up into three groups of people: "the Watched, the Watchers, and the Engineers" (*GWF* 69). The Gamemakers in this scenario are the Engineers. The Watched and the Watchers differ throughout the trilogy, and are turned upside-down in the end. But the Engineers remain the same. Plutarch, a Gamemaker himself before he switched sides to the rebels, is the perfect representation of the Engineers. After designing and controlling the Games, he moves on to arrange the rebels' revolution, and in the end he becomes secretary of communications in the new Panem (*Mockingjay* 441). The fact that this was the second position of power to be appointed, after the leader, is one of the reasons one might ask the question if Panem has learnt anything at all from previous mistakes. Being a secretary of communications in Panem basically means being the producer of everything that is broadcasted, in other words a television producer.

However, Plutarch may be the one person in the trilogy that sees the world and its people for what they really are. At the end of *Mockingjay* he has a conversation with Katniss in which he says: "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 poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction." (442) Plutarch may after all be the voice of not reason but truth in these novels.

The quotation by Plutarch about the history of Panem brings up a certain part of our own history, which is how society in the US went through a change after World War I. This "sweet period" after a state of horror sounds like the Roaring Twenties which for some people were a time for celebration since they had won the war and come out better on the other side. But as Plutarch says, "we're fickle, stupid beings" and as it were it was not long until something came along that changed people's minds. That something was the Depression, which occurred during the 1930s. During the Depression economy failed and people were forced to think solely about themselves, and thus proved that collective thinking only goes so far, like Plutarch said. And once again the world came face to face with another world war. This connection between the trilogy and our world seems like more than a coincidence. It is interesting to note that Collins drew inspiration from stories she had heard from her father, who grew up during the Depression ("A Conversation with Suzanne Collins" 3). Thus another message can be found in Collins' trilogy, that we should learn from our old mistakes and that a sense of community is of vital importance.

It is not only the names of places that hold significance in Collins' trilogy; the names of characters do as well. The two most interesting ones are Plutarch and Seneca. These characters are both Head Gamemakers in the novels. Seneca designs the first Games and Plutarch the second tournament, as well as the districts' rebellion. They are the ones that see both sides of Panem, but they are never really part of either. They are observers and they control what the citizens of Panem should and should not see when they watch the Games.

In our world Seneca and Plutarch were biographers, who wrote about powerful people during the Roman Empire. L. van Hoof states that they both discussed anger in their works, but in different ways. Seneca wanted anger to be completely replaced by virtue, while Plutarch believed that man had to learn to control his anger in order to be a better man (61). But they also observed people living in the major cities in the Roman Empire, both the powerful and the everyday man. And it was from those observations that they received their inspiration. Seneca and Plutarch in *The Hunger Games* trilogy uses in a way anger to control the tributes of the Games. By creating scenarios where anger is inevitable they hope that this anger will be used to create the ultimate form of entertainment in Panem – murder on live television.

In order to find counterparts in today's US to both the Seneca and Plutarch of

the Roman Empire and of the trilogy one must ascertain who it is that discusses and reports on the people in power. In present-day US the public receives information about the people in power through journalists and news reporters, and it is performed through different kinds of media. However, since media and society has evolved staggeringly since Seneca's and Plutarch's time it is almost impossible to find just one counterpart to them. The fact is that news programs and newspapers today often report their news in a subjective way. And what is reported is not always the whole truth.

As noted before, Katniss' journey in the trilogy follows the structure of the *Bildungsroman* genre. However, what difference does it make when the heroine of the story is under constant observation and scrutiny from the public and the state? The result of the heroine's journey in the *Bildungsroman* novel is supposed to be the discovery of her identity. Throughout the trilogy, Katniss has to play a role. And it does not matter whether she is aware of the cameras or not, simply the possibility that she is being watched makes it impossible for her to be herself. But somehow Katniss does find her identity and it is due to another function in the *Bildungsroman*, namely two characters that represent the alternatives she has. In Katniss' case these characters are Peeta and Gale. Peeta represents the tolerant and sympathetic side, while Gale represents the intolerant, rash and more brutal side. By choosing Peeta over Gale, Katniss has also chosen what kind of person she wants to be by associating herself with people like that.

Entertainment's Role in Society

This third and final discussion part of the essay will take into account entertainment's role in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. It will address the parallels between the entertainment in the trilogy and the entertainment available to the public today in the US.

As mentioned above, six themes are often dealt with in the dystopian novel. Collins' has created a seventh, which is a mixture of technology and culture - and that is entertainment. Through *The Hunger Games* trilogy she is thereby able to show how extreme people's need for entertainment may become.

The use of symbols in Collins' trilogy does not only include the Capitol and Panem; the title of the trilogy may in itself have more meaning than what is given in the novels. Katniss mentions during her time in the Games that a reason for their name is that the contestants in the Games often go hungry during their time in the arena. However, from an outside perspective it is possible to interpret the name *The Hunger Games* as not only the hunger for food but the viewer's hunger for entertainment.

Megan Whalen Turner's makes an interesting point when she states that "every generation projects its fear: runaway science, communism, overpopulation, nuclear wars and, now, reality TV." (par. 4) Collins has herself stated that her inspiration for the trilogy occurred when she was flipping through TV channels and noticed the juxtaposition between the war coverage and the reality shows ("A Conversation with Suzanne Collins" 2). But why are reality shows of importance to how our society functions? This was the best part of the science fiction genre according to McDonald, the fact that it is able to ask a question to the universe, get an answer back, and look at how the world could change. So how does the entertainment in *The Hunger Games* trilogy relate to the entertainment given to us in our society today?

To begin with, the Games in the trilogy are very similar to some of our reality shows on TV. There is for example *Survivor*, a show where the viewer follows a number of people at an unknown location where they have to use their skills and knowledge to survive, but each week one of the contestants is voted off. These reality shows always have to change and evolve to keep the audience's attention. In the case of *Survivor*, the places become more rough and remote, and the contestants are given fewer and fewer luxury items to help them survive. In parallel, *The Hunger Games* trilogy asks its reader the question: How far are we willing to go to be entertained?

Secondly, how the Games affect the people that are watching, especially the people living in the Capitol, is representative of how people living in today's society respond to what is shown on the television. While the people living in the districts are forced to watch the Games, the people in the Capitol do it for enjoyment. Katniss says in *Mockingjay* that "[t]hey're not evil or cruel. They're not even smart. Hurting them, it's like hurting children." (64) People in the Capitol have reverted back to being children, so not only do they not have a say in the society they live in, they think they hold no responsibility for what is happening, because the need for entertainment has become so great that it no longer matters in what form the entertainment comes, or at what costs.

In the US today one can see that entertainment shows take more and more room on television, while other shows such as news programs and documentaries have to take a step back. How come citizens of the US today know more about who won *American Idol*, rather than what new law has been passed? Even though most shows on TV today are sitcoms or reality shows, the people watching still have the choice to change channels or turn off the TV, a choice that the people in the Districts do not have.

This brings the discussion back to *Panem et Circenses*, which is Latin and

comes from the poet Juvenal's satires. It means that people are able to give up their rights and political freedom to have *Panem et Circenses*, bread and circuses. This is exactly what the people in the Capitol have done; they have given up their right to question the state in order to be entertained. Is this what is happening in the US today? Are people too busy watching reality shows that they forget to act out their rights and question the society they live in?

Collins has made the decision to write *The Hunger Games* completely from Katniss' point of view; this is an artistic choice the effect of which is that the reader can more easily connect to the narrator. Having a first-person narrator brings focus to how that character views the world and other characters. The reader should trust what Katniss sees and believes, and when she doubts something the reader doubts it as well. Discussing the trilogy from how narration is used suggests that Collins is trying to make it easier for the reader to relate and connect to Katniss. Although Katniss is living in a world far different from ours and goes through extreme things, the reader can follow her thought process and thereby understand why things are the way they are and why she makes certain decisions.

It is clear through the trilogy that Katniss is not a media person, in the way that she is not able to connect to the public watching. In contrast to Katniss there is the character of Peeta, who is the perfect representation of a media person. As Katniss says in *CF*: "He can use words ... He can move a crowd – no, a country – to his side with the turn of a simple sentence. I remember thinking that was the gift the leader of our revolution should have" (408). Although *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a very violent story and the characters in it are not afraid to do terrible things, Collins still makes sure to keep the light on in the form of Peeta who truly believes that there is a better way to solve a conflict than with weapons and fighting. He is the person one should strive to be, while Katniss is the person most people probably are.

The fact that Katniss chooses Peeta plays an important part in the message the trilogy wants to send. Katniss calls Peeta "the boy with the bread", since he saved her life by giving her bread, and considering the country they live in is called Panem this small piece of information actually holds great importance (*THG* 362). As mentioned before, *Panem et Circenses* meant that people gave up their rights and political freedom. Therefore, the symbolism of Peeta, being the boy with the bread, baking and giving bread to Katniss cannot be lost. By interpreting bread as a symbol of freedom and right, Peeta is giving Katniss her freedom. Therefore, Peeta's role in Katniss' life becomes even more important.

In the last novel of the series, *Mockingjay*, the reader finds out that the Capitol had previous champions of the Games killed during the rebellion to set the example that no

one is safe. “The price of celebrity”, says Beetee, a member of the rebels (*Mockingjay*, 429). But is there any connection between the celebrities, also known as the champions, in the trilogy and the celebrities in our world today? In the trilogy, the champions are rewarded for winning the Games by being moved to a section of their district which resembles the splendour of the Capitol, a section where only champions live. They are also given a large amount of money which will last them for a very long time. However, the champions are also used by the Capitol in order to benefit its needs. In fact, the wealth and safety they were given are just devices that will be used against them.

The celebrities in our world today ranges from actors to politicians to television stars, but they all have their fame in common. Most of them are given a considerable amount of money for the work that they do, which allows them the possibility to live in the finer areas of society. However, there is a price of being a celebrity in our world as well and in some ways equally as high as in *The Hunger Games*. With the emergence of gossip websites and gossip magazines the demand for pictures of celebrities has increased. Celebrities are being stalked by photographers, known as paparazzi, throughout their everyday life. By this intrusion, part of their freedom is taken away from them, and most of their privacy. There have even been a few extreme cases where either the devotion or the hate of a fan has gone too far. One example of this is the murder of John Lennon. By being a public person and having no fear of declaring what he believed, one might argue that he paid the highest price of being a celebrity.

The power of media and the tools that are used are at the center of *Mockingjay*. It is through media and its tools that the rebellion is allowed to happen, but Katniss asks herself the question if the end truly does justify the means, in particular when she sees how far people are willing to go. The rebels are discussing how to make special bombs that detonate a second time in order to kill the people that are trying to help the wounded, and in that way use people’s compassion against them (*Mockingjay* 216). Both sides of Panem defend their actions by arguing that it is all for the greater good. Coin creates a special force group which includes Katniss and a number of other champions of the Games. However, in order to keep the public on the rebels’ side and perhaps to manipulate how they feel about the war Coin decides to call the group the “Star Squad” (*Mockingjay* 300). This simple use of a name draws the focus away from the frightening reality of war towards this compelling group of people that will fight for the freedom of the citizens of Panem. The same use of names can be found in present-day US. The invasion of Iraq did not have a name when it began. However, once it became a successful mission it became known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, giving it a positive

character.

The use of television in society today has been discussed both positively and negatively, and it is represented in the same way in Collins' trilogy. Some say that television has a bad influence on people, while others state that it may increase people's knowledge and widen their views of the world. Judith Plotz has in her article a discussion about loss of childhood and what factors play a part in it. She argues that television is one of the factors since it is invasive and requires no real effort from the child who watches it (69). This may be true in the Western World today, but it is most definitely true in *The Hunger Game* trilogy. Television and media coverage is the main reason for the people in the Capitol's jadedness and indifference to the Games. Living in the Capitol they have everything they need in close proximity. The only way in which they encounter horrors is through watching television. Therefore it never seems real to them, it is after all just a television show. In the districts, on the other hand, television proves to be the medium through which they are able to stage their revolution.

When Collins was asked about reality television's role in society she said: "[T]here's the voyeuristic thrill—watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There's also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn't have the impact it should." ("A Conversation with Suzanne Collins" 1) While discussion about an author's intention should be kept to a minimum, it seems safe to argue that Collins gained inspiration for the trilogy from the society she saw around her. Media, especially television, is evolving in a rapid speed. Television screens are no longer restricted to people's homes, but can be found on trains, in restaurants, and even in cars. Instead of focusing on the real world a fake one on television screens are forced upon us more and more, making us desensitized to events occurring around us.

Conclusion

I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage... [T]he lines began to blur in this very unsettling way, and I thought of this story. ("A Conversation with Suzanne Collins" 2)

The aim of this essay was to show that *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins could be interpreted as a critique on present-day society in the US. By using certain traits of the *Bildungsroman* and the dystopian novel an undertone of social criticism can be found in the

trilogy. While analyzing the trilogy I also took into account the fact that the novels were written for a certain demographic of people, namely young adults, since they are the ones with the possibility to change society.

In my discussion I compared the society in the trilogy to present-day society in the US. Through this comparison it became clear that the parallels between the two societies were too many and too important to have them be ignored. Collins takes the development of science, society and entertainment to their extremes, but by connecting it to counterparts in today's society makes it possible for the reader to believe that this future is possible. Collins uses a number of literary devices to attain this result; she makes Katniss the first-person narrator, and she uses symbols and metaphors to name a few. When analyzing the symbols and metaphors closer a connection between the trilogy's world and ours became even clearer. The parallels between the two worlds exposed the more negative sides of present-day society in the US, giving ground to the fact that the trilogy has social critique in it.

Suzanne Collins states that she drew her inspiration for writing *The Hunger Games* trilogy from television shows and the effect it can have on people. Through her trilogy she has managed to give words and images to her thoughts and inspiration. Considering Collins is born and raised in the US, most of her inspiration comes from the things she sees around her and from the society she lives in.

In sum, novels written for young adults, such as *THG*, *CF* and *Mockingjay*, often have a message that they want readers to take with them after they have finished reading. And while there is no doubt that *The Hunger Games* trilogy aims to entertain its readers, it also sends a message. A message that a change is possible and needed in today's society.

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