Being Effie: *The Hunger Games* and War as a Form of Entertainment Media Consumption

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What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by? What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to rill in and die for their entertainment?

Suzanne Collins*, The Hunger Games*

Introduction

Suzanne Collins's young adult novel, *The Hunger Games*, depicts a post-apocalyptic dystopia where each year is marked by a reaping of poor citizens to fight to the death in a spectacle for the rich. The novel has spawned a transmedia production with a large online community of "prosumer" fans joining and extending the story in what Henry Jenkins defines as participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton and Purushotma 3). The textual *Hunger Games* world echoes the "global village", as the spectacle of children in combat is broadcast throughout the fictional world for the consumption of an attentive audience. Even as we are invited to recoil at the avid viewers enjoying the spectacle of the games, we ourselves are not participants but watchers, the public reveling in the private anxiety and struggles of the Games' participants. Marshall McLuhan offered the notion of the "simultaneous happening," as with shared experiences of conflict in Iraq and Egypt broadcast for the world by participants who, from the safe viewing distance of their TV screens and Twitter feeds, can feel like part of the experience (McLuhan and Fiore 67). Participants place their private experiences in a public lens, turning their own gaze into a lens for shared media experience. Suzanne Collins's

novel works as a critique of this illusion, as the watchers within her novel, represented by Effie and the Capitol citizenry, safely share in the perceived thrill of danger. The author noted the novel's origin in the public-private tension: "I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss's story came to me…I was tired, and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way" (Collins, A Conversation with Suzanne Collins). In the world of *The Hunger Games*, surveillance is televised in an illusion of democracy—akin to the exploitation Mark Andrejevic notes as the redefinition of "Big Brother" (Andrejevic 252). This politicization of the surveillance and continual monitoring experienced not only by tributes but by residents of Panem is at the heart of the reflected United States in Collins's world (Fisher 27).

Tracking *The Hunger Games* through Transmedia

While *The Hunger Games* began as a novel, it has further permeated culture through an official film adaptation as well as a range of adaptations, memes, fan-works and official tie-ins that all rebuild and extend the world of Panem (Lawrence, Hutcherson and Hemsworth). The original novel was labeled young adult: a marketing category tied with a literary narration anchored in authenticity and often —as in this case— written in first-person. Cadden notes that this style of narration immerses the reader in the identity of the character, inviting direct connection (Cadden 148). But Katniss's narrative often confronts the reader, reflecting both the dystopian world of Panem and the likelihood that the American reader of the novel is more familiar with "a world where food appears at the press of a button" than any of the stakes of Katniss's world. The distance between the consumer of Katniss's story and Katniss grows with each adaptation: in the film, the viewer is not invited into Katniss's internal dialogue, and instead is invited to watch *The Hunger Games* unfold on-screen in the same safe space as any viewer from the Capitol.

The adaptation of the book into a film is particularly appropriate given the role that film and television play within the text. The events unfold as if they were written for the immediate drama demanded by an audience. While the book was limited to Katniss's perspective, the film takes the audience out of Katniss's head and often literally places them in the role of viewers of the Games broadcast. The film begins by bringing Katniss and Peeta to The Capitol—a place of excess that, while shocking to Katniss and Peeta, is in design and luxury familiar to the American viewer as filled with hallmarks of the aspirational modern lifestyle. The traits that Katniss described as marking the Capitol citizens as other are familiar to the viewer: "They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elder person, you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren't scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success." (Collins, The Hunger Games) The cinematic gaze blurs the violence, with a shaky camera used to spare the audience the gore of the child-on-child violence. Several particularly brutal moments are rewritten, including a climax that grafts the eyes of the dead children onto a pack of genetically-engineered hounds hunting down Katniss and Peeta. But even with these changes, the spectacle remains. Like the viewers of the Games within the text, the audience for the film is drawn in by the simulation of war among children.

In the shift from textual to digital to cinematic, the web acts as a point of distribution, dialogue and creation. These online narratives provide new tension while positioning the "viewer/reader/player" within reworked frameworks of Panem. These playable narratives subvert the original identification with the protagonist further. There are two alternate reality games offering differing versions of *The Hunger Games*. The first, a fan-created ARG, "Panem October", intended to offer a sequential experience of the book's narrative focusing on a social media experience. The game came to an end just as the "official" ARG built speed, closing a community where role-playing —

and taking on an identity as a District citizen— was the focus (Rowan, Panem October). The game was a center for fan-led participatory culture, but closed thanks to official intervention. Fan-creator Rowan believed —after disputes with the film company and one stage where the site had to be closed and reopened as a less-authoritative design— that the official game had intentionally displaced it: "After a while, it became quite clear that PN's goals and objectives were very, very similar to PO's. Sometimes it was blatantly obvious that PN was carbon-copying social media or game-based moves, sometimes a mere hour —sometimes less— after the same PO postings. This doesn't come as a shock. Lionsgate, Sony and Scholastic employees were some of many watching over Panem October." (Rowan, Panem October Comes to an End)

In contrast, the official "thecapitol.pn" site is a sleek marketing campaign centered on messages from The Capitol to registered "citizens", fans turned virtual residents. The site and corresponding Facebook page are themed as media hubs, with flashy headlines alongside Effie's "Capitol Couture" magazine. We participate in this media blitz as we do in Twitter revolutions, taking in messages of conflict alongside fashion trends and social updates. *The Hunger Games* alternate reality game (ARG), as a mediated experience designed to cross social networks and create a virtual spectacle, offers a reminder that in this text, readers are Effie, not Katniss. The game centered on The Capitol, using URLs ending in ".pn" to show their direct connection to the fictional Panem and inviting Facebook users to create a District Identification Pass and "migrate" to Panem to participate in the pre-Games festivities.

Part of the alternate reality of *The Hunger Games* film marketing took the form of an online fashion blog dedicated to profiling Capitol citizens, with Effie Trinket put forward as a particular style icon. The text profiling Effie is part parody: "Whether she is chauffeuring her latest Tributes or walking the boulevards of the Capitol, Effie maintains an exquisite profile that demonstrates her spirit and the pride she takes in her work." (Lionsgate) Discussions of Effie's style were also used to market film tie-in products, with a quote from Effie Trinket proclaiming "The odds are never in favor

of homely nails" alongside a color guide for China Glaze's "Colours from the Capitol" nail polish line. With ironic names from "Smoke and Ashes" to "Hook and Line", these components of the ARG and marketing campaign invited fans to take Capitol citizens as style icons—imitating not the tributes, but those who profited from and viewed the tributes' spectacle (Lionsgate). The site also reblogged current fashion trends considered appropriate for Capitol citizens, such as Miu Miu's "glitter bootie" and other high-fashion designs with modern elements and hallmarks of conspicuous consumption. The "Capitol Look" was held up as something to aspire to, a strong reversal of the suspicious and mocking gaze that Katniss brings to the excessive fashions in *The Hunger Games* text. While the attire of Katniss Everdeen as tribute is the stuff of Halloween costumes, the fashions of The Capitol are red carpet ready. The citizens of the Capitol—and Effie—are aspirational models, not foes to revile or fear.

A third game based on *The Hunger Games* universe further complicates play inspired by the text. "The Hunger Games Adventures" borrow the mechanics and styles of social games common to Facebook (Lionsgate). However, the cheerful style of animation and emphasis on non-violent depictions is strangely at odds with the original text: it softens the world, so that even the act of hunting for food is accomplished without blood. The player is invited to create a new character who starts outside of District 12, learning from Katniss and Gale but ultimately following a very different path through the districts that the original narrative doesn't explore. The all-ages-friendly emphasis of the game rewrites the threat of war or political unrest, focusing instead on quests as non-threatening as rescuing Prim's lost cat or helping out the local baker. At the same time, it brings players alongside the text's narrative, but focused on a personal journey. Players in "The Hunger Games Adventures" experience the games as distant observers, not participants.

Virtual Panem as a Global Village

Thus in *TheCapitol.PN* and *Hunger Game Adventures*, the village metaphor is explicit: players become active participants in the culture of Panem. *TheCapitol.PN* played out a virtual reaping, ultimately encouraging players to view the release of the film as their opportunity to go witness the games themselves. Both games released narrative elements gradually —essential to an ARG's structure— reinforcing the idea of *The Hunger Games* film release as a simultaneous happening—although the war depicted is not "real," the prosumer fan is invited to experience it as such. The use of Facebook as a site of interaction is not coincidental, as Nash has noted, Facebook's immediacy of contact and localization of a global public push it towards a realization of McLuhan's construct of the "global village" (Nash 11). Facebook itself is a platform where media converge, but furthermore a place where cultures—both real and imagined—converge, echoing Jenkins's model of "convergent culture" shaping a global village.

The relationship of these communities with the violence of *The Hunger Games,* and the "real" violence of the world, is most often as spectators sharing the fragments of a simultaneously experienced event. The simultaneous happening is marked by the sharing of private experiences from participants — not unlike the in-the-moment, present-tense narrations of the book version of Katniss Everdeen— with watching parties able to interrogate, reblog, speculate, and actively "participate" in the event. McLuhan marks such happenings as characterized by the collapsing of physical space so that distance is no longer a factor in the sharing of knowledge (McLuhan and Fiore). While McLuhan was writing about the impact of television and film, social media takes these events to a next level of immediacy. This can often be overwhelming – consider the processing of the news of the Boston Marathon, the MIT shooting, the bombings in Iraq, the Texas plant explosion, and other tragedies from around the world all within a short time span. If everything is a crisis, experienced in real time, can anything be a crisis? If all images of war and death occupy the same weight on a Facebook feed, are the real images any more or less compelling than those from the fictional state of Panem?

Representing War in the Global Village

These retellings across media face the challenge of war as content alongside the text's critique of contemporary representations of war in media. As Warner discusses the violence of real and fictional war is offered up in hyper-real scenarios but the fundamental connection of the consequences of violence with their apparent causes is never made, "Nobody ever holds their nose or gags at the reek of corpses, as they do in medieval paintings of the Raising of Lazarus, whereas when we read about pain and suffering and death, we empathize, and their existence belongs within the whole imaginative projection of the text." (Warner) Both the highly scripted and cleansed versions of real war and posed fictional accounts of it meet with the feeling of the simulacrum Baudrillard espoused in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Baudrillard 29). The shaky camera violence of the film depictions of *The Hunger Games* play side by side in our media with the clean night-vision image of missiles bombing Iraq or the settled debris of bombings with Syria. Filming of *the Hunger Games* movies employ shaky camera techniques to capture their images, encasing the virtual depictions of violence in a shell of authenticity meant to make the fictional seem more real. Meanwhile, images from battlefront and terrorist attacks are presented as sterile, well-lit and in sharp focus as something that could be found in a modern magazine—indeed, they at times resemble the posed portraits of tributes arrayed on the "Capitol Couture" website. This purposefully removes the gritty, realistic feel of the experience for many people.

Throughout real and fictional depictions of war in mainstream media the repercussions of our violent actions are often not shown to their fullest extent: corpses, blood, and viscera are only hinted at, rarely explicit. Often they are used for thrill in entertainment venues, ie *Saw* or "torture-porn", but seen as too objectionable for news. Meanwhile, that same grotesque reality often moves through person-to-person media such as Facebook and Twitter, as with photos taken by witnesses to explosions or shootings. *The Hunger Games* is particularly limited in its explicit depiction of violence because of the involvement of children: some decried the book as "unfilmable" because of

the child-on-child carnage (Woerner). The sensitivities we bring to such images impact our willingness to consume them. Within the collapsed experience of the global village the imposition of the limitations of humanity through depictions of these failings become unwanted guests, censored from our entertainment media and called out when depicted in our news. Within their individual depictions the boundaries between the virtual and the real happenings disappear as both aim towards a non-existent middle ground of the image as an artificial presentation that transcends and subsumes the real through the visceral quality of its presentation.

This double unbinding between real and fictional presentations of war raises implications for the ability of watchers, the Effie's, to distinguish truth from fabrication. Images from both real and fictional violence are one again presented side-by-side for consumers to peruse and enjoy at their leisure, further increasing the distance of both types of violence from their "every day" lives. For many world citizens the consumption of war spectacle remains an important factor in long term decision making (Gelpi 26; Morris 74). When the images of drone strikes and remotely controlled bombings show no causalities and the news media does not discuss those caught in the crossfire it becomes easier to accept those losses as being similar to the death of a character in a movie. After all, we see the actor return in their next film apparently unharmed or if affected we can use the transmedia and fan prosumer experiences to continue their lives in a fashion that keeps up with our personal beliefs. If viewers are consuming mediated violence and empathy does the ability of fictional stories to cross the divide further limit individual's abilities to empathize and act upon actual horrors?

For the media consuming public, views of real violence become butts of jokes and general apathy while fictionalized people elicit strong emotional responses. Even when presented with the actual outcomes of our actions on real people, the image that we portray has no immediate connection to another human's suffering unlike the connection one may experience in a theater or

while reading a book. However, the technology that has collapsed boundaries also allows for the connection and distribution of some of our most recent poignant examples of human connectivity.

The Role of Surveillance in Democracy

Mark Andrejevic speaks of Big Brother in the modern world as a concept not of cold war democratic suppression but as the small intrusions into daily life which comprise modern economic activity (Andrejevic 253). For Andrejevic, Big Brother has moved into increasing accumulation of data about individuals within a society, catering to a manufactured demand for customization in a largely homogenized mass consumer culture (Andrejevic 254 - 256). Within the world of *the Hunger Games* the surveillance that faces the residents of Panem fulfills both the Cold War and modern economy roles that Andrejevic defines. For the privileged few within the Capitol, surveillance acts as a protective cover while also guiding fashion and entertainment trends. For those residing in the economically and politically controlled districts, surveillance acts a means of both political and economic suppression that mirrors the intent of the original term Big Brother within the novel *1984*.

To the residents of the districts within *The Hunger Games*, surveillance acted not only as a reminders and tool of their oppression by the Capitol but also as a shared point of community gathering. The residents of the district did not gather to watch the Hunger Games as entertained civilians but were required to attend showings as a stipulation of their continued existence. Failure to attend the annual displays of the show would result in punishment and probable death for at least the resistor if not the larger community as well. For many, this threat did not come into conflict with their own desires to follow the chances of the local representative and enjoy the Games as a competition in their own right.

District citizens faced a complicated relationship with their consumption of surveillance media. It allowed them to follow and connect with friends and family who may be battling in the

Games but also acted as the one point of mediated entertainment which they experienced every year. As the commentators in Read It and Weep point out, citizens of the districts like Katniss Everdeen compulsively consume the games as entertainment media, showcasing their knowledge through the memorization of complicated and detailed statistics for all of the previous players (#103 - The Hunger Games Reviewed - Part 1). This mirrors our own behavior to the modern Big Brother. Discomfort over the modern capturing and storage of information is frequently voiced when it occurs as a result of political decisions, such as the warrantless tapping of citizens' electronic communications. At the same time, as consumers, we have largely accepted the dual roles of self-measuring and customization as boons to the quality of our lives, latching onto products such as the FitBit and websites such as LifeHacker to upgrade our habits to improved, refined processes. Through this action we replace older external big brothers of the supervisor or government with our own attention and the attention of others within our communities. Measurement no longer needs to foisted onto the masses of humanity, we have moved to accept it openly and reinforce its norms as our own.

Within the novels the surveillance plays a role in the political and economic suppression similar to its implementation in the novel *1984*. Only through their consumption of the yearly Hunger Games could the citizens of the districts participate in one of the form of the democratic process allowed them, the purchasing of supplies and aid for their participants within the Games. Through the purchasing of supplemental goods the citizens of the districts were able to feel a measure of agency or control within the framework of the forced media spectacle. They were able to take the small economic gains they may have raised during that year and apply them to providing some exorbitantly priced help to their loved ones. This was a direct method for controlling the economic output of the districts, preventing most of them from rising to a level of sustainable living during the rest of the year. Although the district citizens could just as easily see the benefits of their act of agency

disappear in the flow of the games, over ridden by the contributions of other, wealthier districts or capitol citizens, mirroring today's political landscape in a post-Citizen's United US.

Finally, the random nature of the drawing for the Hunger Games is purposefully designed to maximize the focus of attention on particular individuals. The experiences Katniss has in The Hunger Games take even her most private moments and reconstruct them as public spectacle. Peeta's declarations of love and intimacy within the cave he and Katniss are hiding are broadcast to the entire viewing public, turning a personal moment for many young women into another entertainment to be consumed. Similarly, the dashboard cameras of many Russian motorists which captured the spectacular fall of a meteorite, a moment of shared awe for many people of our world, quickly became another source for cheap entertainment by many citizens in the West. People were drawn to the dashboard cameras tapes for quick laughs as they watched short videos of failed attempts at insurance fraud, traffic accidents, and general highway shenanigans. This form of entertainment acted to both distance and draw close individuals within the global village. People from within the videos were seen as fascinating examples of why those in other countries were different or weird while also using the technology of the web to draw people further into their lives. What was intended for the private use within litigation became an open technology for public consumption and amusement. At the end of the thrill with the dashboard cameras, most people of the US did not create a closer or more empathetic bond with those of Russia or around the world but instead was further disconnected from other global citizens lives after having seen them as comedy instead of documentary.

Conclusion

Modern global citizens, such as those within the United States, mirror the disposition and role of the citizens of the Capitol within *the Hunger Games*. The transmedia experience of the story

serves to echo our own disconnection from those whose world we share. Through the mediation of our everyday experiences we have come to see necessities and personal stories of others are fodder for our personal entertainment. We grant equal weighting in our consumption of media to the stylized imagery of real violence, consumer advertisements, and fictional heroes. We have even begun to turn our lens onto our own lives, viewing our own habits as both a source of distraction and avenue for a sterile, manufacturing-based optimization.

Much like the citizens of the Capitol who yearn for the pageantry of the Hunger Games to glimpse an abstracted and vaudevillian representation of life in the districts, we have begun to look around the globe for mediated representations of the lives of others. We see them as glossy photographs of wars we have begun or as interesting cultural entertainment. As Baudrillard has argued the mediated and image-based nature of modern communication has not served to bring us together into a global community of authentic interaction but instead served to enhance the divide between us as we substitute the virtual experience for the genuine. We have taken on the role of Effie from within *The Hunger Games*, secure in our role as voyeur, examining the world and lives of those around us to better understand how they may serve our personal needs for entertainment, advancement, and self-fulfillment while ignoring their needs for security, empathy, and aid.

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