

The Hunger Games: Reality or Phantasmagoria

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Abstract

The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins is a dystopian novel that addresses a story of a sixteen-year-old Katniss driven to fight to the death against other teens in the games while the rest of the country glued to their TV to watch these. The government aims to strengthen its power through these games and suppress any revolting attempts of the citizens. Suzanne Collins's novel is implicitly or explicitly the description and critique of the war news and reality shows, and competitions in these shows. Collins appears to suggest rescuing the future by focusing on the current predicament of human. This paper discusses how people read the false reality and continuing violence screening from reality television shows and argues how media contents fascinate and dehumanize them.

Keywords: *The Hunger Games*, reality TV, media, hegemony

1. Introduction

Reality TV programs murder reality and it disappears. Such programs screen out violence; the contestants award a prize for mocking, humiliating, relentlessness and aggression; the contestants are fictional that display themselves on the screen as real. The earliest examples were quiz shows that were highly attractive for those who desired to win large sums of money (Brooks& Marks, 1988). Likewise, Mead (2006) argues that such shows as *Queen for a Day* includes weeping stories of four non-celebrity women who influence a voting audience for the crown of the episode's queen. In another show *Candid Camera*, people watch the reactions and embarrassments of the unsuspecting public. In later years, 1973, PBS broadcast *American Family*, as a documentary program dealt with divorce and homosexuality, and *Cops*, real-world police, and their street activities. In 1992, *The Real World*, an MTV program that screened the seven young strangers who shared the same apartment in New York for several months. *Survivor* and *Big Brother* track the everyday activities of the stars and drop them regularly until one is rewarded in the finale. *American Idol* and *Star Search* screen the talents of non-stars who are in pursuit of recognition and popularity. *Blind Date* and *Eliminate* track a couple's everyday activities. An *American Family* and *The Real World* track every day of the celebrities and aim to capture attention to their real-life issues. Ellen DeGeneres, Oprah, and Jerry Springer invite the spectacle to one-on-one interviews between host and guest. Lastly, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *The Price are Right* aiming to capture attention to ordinary people who wish to win a prize.

Audience acceptance and cheap production costs give the much business to the television network once compared to comedies and dramas because of the spontaneity of the material and low staff writer fees, the stars in these shows are cheap to hire and inexpensive and less set costs. The reason these programs become remarkably reputed is the visual gossip; the viewers find the character's life on reality shows more entertaining and engaging than their own lives. Likewise, Andrejevic (2004) argues that in *Temptation Island*, the FOX series, the audience has the role of keyhole private detective. They can spy on the relationships between separated couples and romantic couples. In the same regard, the viewers become more absorbed in celebrities' lifestyles and not their own. Besides, they include a high level of interactivity that captures impatient teens' attention easily since the programs is shorter than a drama or comedy. Mead (2003, 2004) argues that other reasons why such television shows as *Survivor* have become popular are that motivating factors are voyeuristic pleasure, para-social interaction, and emotional release. On the other hand, documentaries aim attention at informing and educating the viewer about the geography and culture of remote life and people, teens and older age group find them more lifeless and duller than reality television shows.

Considering these, in this paper, I argue that *The Hunger Games* implicitly or explicitly highlights the catastrophic effects of reality television programs through a teenager's story. I also discuss how these TV programs dehumanize and desensitize those who cannot read these virtual representations.

2. *The Hunger Games: The Media Illusion*

The Hunger Games trilogy occurs in an undefined future in Panem, North America. The capitol, the rich high-tech city circled by twelve poverty-stricken districts regulated and controlled by the Capitol. Katniss Everdeen, the inhabitant of the District twelve, of which the citizens die of hunger. Any revolt against Capitol is punished just as District thirteen have deserved before. The Capitol organizes the Hunger Games and calls teens of twelve districts to participate, one girl and one boy from each district to fight to death in an arena while being telecasted. The achiever and his/her district deserve food and abundance. The games supply entertainment for the Capitol and reminds the districts the power and hegemony of the Capitol. It underscores the control of the government.

Suzanne Collins's, *The Hunger Games*, inspired while channel surfing underscores that the basic concern of reality TV programs is humiliation, physical suffering, and bullying. Teenage contestants have to fight-to-death on live TV with other teenagers for Panem¹. While the actors of the games are interested in bread, one can see that, the Capitol², the ruling government, from the technologically developed utopian city acts a centralized government enforcing their authority

¹ Panem originates from the Latin word panem et circenses, meaning "bread and circuses". In this paper, I intend to use Panem as "bread". However, it also implies a political dominancy, a sovereign state to keep the citizens satisfied with their leaders who provide cheap food, "bread" and entertainment.

²Capitol, in *The Hunger Games*, technologically developed, utopian city in which wealthy and powerful people live. It is also the name of the dominant and tyrannical government of 12 Districts.

over the contestants and the citizens of the districts. Suzanne Collins argues in “A Conversation Interview” that such programs as *Survivor*, *The Real Housewives*, and *Runway Project* have the capitalist hegemony over people, affect, or change their beliefs and behaviors and their sense of ‘reality or unreality’ and ‘desensitize the audience’ by forcing them to watch people humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffer physically’ (Trierweiler Hudson, H., 2017, ‘Q&A with Hunger Games Author Suzanne Collins’). Suzanne Collins's, *The Hunger Games* serves close reading of reality television shows such as *Survivor*, *Project Runway*, *The Biggest Loser*, and *The Bachelor*, and the likes.

As the *Bildungsroman* and the dystopian novel genre, *The Hunger Games* contribute to the social criticism of the reality television shows; it addresses that if society today does not change its stance towards these shows, the future will be a dreadful place to survive; it, as a fiction also echoes the reality of the 21st century. *The Hunger Games* as a science-fiction novel deals with the betrayal of the world through these shows. The trilogy provides the political argument that lie behind the story; Capitol's, as a central government figure, asserts dominance over the contestants and people in twelve districts and control their thoughts and life. It as the symbol of money and power, brainwashes the citizens and force their children to fight-to-death in the games. Katniss, the protagonist of the novel is portrayed as a symbol of doubt and fear for the people in the districts. In the course of the novel, Katniss discovers the rules of the games; Capitol's motto is ‘survival of the fittest’, the best looks pulls many sponsors; obey, or you will be murdered villainous; pretend loving and be the slave of the Capitol. One can see that Katniss takes place the game for ‘Panem’, however, in *Mocking Jay*, the last installment of the trilogy, she reads the game, protests, and rebels against the Capitol.

Suzanne Collins says that *The Hunger Games* inspiration came to her while flipping through TV channels and noticed the connection between the war coverage, and the reality shows (Margolis, R. 2008, ‘A Conversation with Suzanne Collins’). Although *The Hunger Games* suggest a hunger for Panem, it implicitly or explicitly argues the audience's hunger for entertainment. In these shows, participants learn to adapt and do new selves;

‘the participants try on newer, cleaner, brighter, more desirable, or simply different selves that they can parlay into social capital. Not only do they adopt clothing and hairstyles, but they incorporate qualities, attitudes, behaviors, gestures, movements, and skills, to the extent that there is no distinction between identity and image’ (Morreale, 2005, p. 2).

Morreale argues that *Survivor* and other reality shows are a sort of fulfillment that comes from becoming, and not having, a sort of commodity. While filming the show takes almost a month, the audience watches it only for thirty or forty-five minutes, and they call it ‘reality’ and try to build their lifestyles according to that thirty or forty-five minutes. In other words, thirty or forty-five-minute show seduces and illusions the audience. The seducing fictionalized appearances construct new identities and lethal realities for them.

In *The Hunger Games*, the citizens of twelve districts watch the games passively and cannot recognize the Capitol's power behind. Likewise, reality shows screen out illusionary images for the audience all around the world. These shows produce and proliferate illusionary realities for the audience. The excessive illusionary reality mesmerizes them and hence, they cannot read the real story behind. In *The Hunger Games*, Portia, a stylist, and Cinna, a stylist partner prepares Katniss for a showcase, and they both design haute couture costumes for Katniss to capture the attention of the audience and sponsors. However, Katniss feels like a 'plucked bird', and, becomes the created figure for the cameras that 'forge an emotional connection between the viewer and what's on their screen' (Arrow, 2012, p. 81). Katniss, as desperate for 'Panem', acknowledges the primary goal; this show and haute couture costume will offer bread and butter for herself and the districts. And hence, she prepares herself for the ruthless individual competition and decides to do the games with the rules, and challenges these games individually.

Likewise, in reality shows such as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *Fear Factor*, *The Bachelor* and *Dancing with the Stars'* contestants accept and sign over the harsh contract articles. Below are some of the contract articles of *The Real World* published by Sophie Schillaci in The Hollywood Report 2011:

1. You may die, lose limbs, and suffer nervous breakdowns.
2. If you undergo any medical procedures while in the shows, they carry the risks of infection, disfigurement, death.
3. You may be humiliated and explicitly portrayed 'in a false light'.
4. Interacting with other cast members carries the risk of "non-consensual physical contact" and should you contract AIDS, etc. during such an interaction, MTV is not responsible.
5. You don't have STDs, but accept that other people on the show might. (18)
6. You're not pregnant and you won't become pregnant before the show's done filming. If you do become pregnant, you'll tell the Producer immediately--and pregnancy is grounds for dismissal. (38)
7. If you get kicked off the show, it will be filmed. (14)
8. You can't change your physical appearance during filming, without the Producer's express permission. (26)
9. You are granted the Producer's blanket rights to your life story. (49)
10. The Producer can do pretty much anything they want with your life story, including misrepresenting it. (49)
11. Your email may be monitored during participation. (20b)
12. You promise not to hide from MTV cameras in establishments where they can't film. (20a)
13. You authorize the Producer to have total access to your school records, government forms, and your credit history. (19)
14. The production crew can show up at your personal house at any time to film and/or to take anything they want, as long as they return the objects once production has ended. (20a)

15. Under ordinary circumstances, all of this would be considered a "serious" invasion of privacy. (11)

As the articles articulate, the contestants will have to grapple with difficult situations and contest under harsh and challenging conditions on the course of screening; they may have physical and mental unrest; the Producer will monitor and control their physical and online activities; the Producer will invade and rape their privacy. It comes to say that the Producer of the show as the benefactor and master will enslave and dehumanize them through the deadly contract. Despite these ruthless and fatal articles, the contestants insist on money, fame, glamour, and career from which one can find out that reality television reinforces a world in which cultural, economic, and political forces that consist of confusion and amnesia, figure our daily lives. Once the audience is exposed to the mutual ruthless humiliation of the contestants, dozens of slang words such as 'bitch', 'whore', and 'slut' and the likes, and using violent, they take pleasure of it just as it happens in the Capitol where the citizens take pleasure in watching the brutal murders of the tribute. In *Catching Fire*, the second installment of the novel Katniss says, 'they certainly don't have a problem watching children murdered every year' (Collins, 2009, p. 204). Capitol drags the fascinated victims of the districts and games in the world of phantasmagoria - games to manipulate and mystify the districts. Through these games, people in these districts contribute to the exercise of power, Capitol. In other words, Capitol produces and exercises its power through these games and the contestants of the games. For reality television shows, people both champion celebrity news and lifestyles, fashion, gossip, and they promote war news, accidents, bomb attacks, and fights. This issue is called *Schadenfreude*, a German word, meaning enjoyment obtained from the suffering of others.

In *The Hunger Games*, one can see *Schadenfreude*. Capitol citizens entertain with the deaths in the dehumanizing games. Reality television teaches people to celebrate the suffering of others. This issue is called 'downward comparison' meaning the audience takes pleasure once they find out that cast members are superior to them. This idea constructs an environment where bullying and aggression are rewarded. Both *The Hunger Games* and reality television shows dominate and manipulate society socially and culturally. And today, plastic and cosmetic surgery serve to become extremely attractive and prominent. Women try to become and seem physically and sexually attractive like those in reality shows; they endlessly go shopping centers and buy different sizes and colors of dresses, high-heeled shoes, and other accessories almost every week and wish to look perfect, like the movie stars, supermodels and people in reality shows.

If the birth rate is higher than to be able to survive in a society, there will be a struggle for survival, and, who wins the struggle will survive, which natural selection. This struggle for survival increases with the development of technology and media in the 21st century. One can infer that if one cannot adapt to what sells more in mainstream culture, it is inevitable for him/her to be the thing that fails. Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, contestants in *Survivor*, *the Bachelor*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *The Biggest Loser* and people in life do wish to be the winners. People are in the pursuit of an example of etiquette. The aim of reality television is that acceptance, reputation, and

validation are for anyone who desires it; an amazing feeling that one becomes the center of attention.

On the other hand, interactivity in *The Hunger Games* and reality television maintains centralized governmental control over information, people, and the media. With the expansion of media networks all around the world, any information, and interactivity in games and television shows have become available and accessible. The audience interactivity enables contestants to be in or out and winner or loser. Producers, through this, engage the audience in the program and increases the level of engagement by participating in the show. In *The Hunger Games*, audience participation is closely related to pulling as many sponsors as possible. Interactivity both in *The Hunger Games* and in reality shows implicitly manifests the centralized capitalist government through which Capitol increases their ideological power over its citizens and the districts.

In *The Hunger Games*, although the gold pin of a ‘bird in flight’ is only a gift from Madge Undersee, it symbolizes rebellion and protests for the refugees with the interactivity and engagements of the audience. Lastly, not only in *The Hunger Games* but also in any reality shows, scripted showmance or fauxmance captures the attention of both the audience and sponsors. As showmance is favored more than real romance, Katniss prefers to play to the cameras in the hope of getting food from the sponsors. However, the contestant’s recognition of the scripted showmance changes the happenings in the games. For example, Katniss prefers not to kill, but die along with Peeta, the male tribute representing district twelve. Although one can find it out as a civil rebellion, it seems clear that the centralized government will punish both villainous. In such reality shows as *Project Runway*, the contestants also are recognized as ‘in’ if they play the games to the rules, if the judges find their designs super-creative, awesome, and the like, but if not, be recognized as ‘out’.

Conclusion

The media is a powerful and dominant current exists in people’s everyday lives. It produces illusionary reality through these shows as much as they can that it destroys the audience. Most people spend or, let’s say, waste their time exposing to various television programs such as soap operas, weddings, cooking programs, series and reality television programs like *Survivor*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Project Runway*, *Rihanna Styled to Rock* and the likes. These people engage in and enjoy these TV programs, they neglect that they become the participants of the capitalist system. That’s to say, they think, act, consume, and waste their lives like those constants and competitors in these television programs; they cannot produce their meaning; instead they become fascinated by the illusionary media. In this context, Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* contributes to the criticism of reality television programs and shows; it provides a verbal representation that articulates the close reading of the visual and/or virtual representation; it strengthens the critical eyes of the readers.

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