

The Hunger Games

**Dystopian inspiration for resistance
or just more “bread and circuses”?**

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In this paper, I will consider the cultural impact of The Hunger Games (HG) franchise, including the popular trilogy of books, the movie series and related cultural artifacts. I will focus my attention on the dystopian theme of the series, asking the question of what impact it will have, if any, on society? Will the issues of classism, colonialism, imperialism and media-saturated commercialism in HG spur the public to new forms of activism? Or will the series just be one more form of trivial entertainment that serves to keep the public from seeing the horrors around them (much as “bread and circuses did in The Roman Empire).

I. Introducing *The Hunger Games*

My assumption is that most of the readers of this paper will have either read the books and/or seen some of the movies, so I will be brief in introducing the series, focusing on those elements of the plot that are relevant to the rest of this paper.

In the first installment of the HG saga,¹ the reader is provided with a powerful narrative to connect to. This narrative is set in a future North America (“Panem”) in which twelve districts are ruled by a single Capitol District. The Capitol has total control of the outer districts, taking resources and labor freely for its own use and allowing only the scraps necessary for subsistence to remain in the outer districts.

The mythology of Panem tells of a past horrific civil war in Panem in which one district (the 13th) was said to be completely destroyed and the rest of the nation was devastated. To ensure continued peace, the Capitol District instituted a cruel “Hunger Games” in which two teenagers (one male and

¹ Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2008.

one female) were somewhat randomly selected to fight to the death in a live-televised arena that is a mix of modern-American-style reality television and the Roman Coliseum. The sole remaining victor would be entitled to riches and fame.

In the first book², the reader is introduced to the character of Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who volunteers to go to the Hunger Games in place of her young sister. Over the coming days, Katniss is taken to the Capitol district to be prepared for the Games. She is horrified to see the opulent luxury of the Capital (a sharp contrast with the extreme poverty of her own home district), but is forced to “play the game” to win the commercial sponsors she needs to win the game and live to see her family again.

The remainder of the book tells of the Games and how the contestants survive but also have to grapple with the issues of morality and loyalty. In the end, Katniss finds a way to resist and win on her own terms, which of inspires the beginning of resistance to the Capitol in the districts.

The second book, *Catching Fire*,³ continues the story, showing how that “victory” in the Hunger Games, is a hollow-kind of victory. Katniss is stuck being a spokesperson for the supposed largesse and generosity of the Capitol, when in fact a brewing civil war is surrounding her. The plot twists and turns with Katniss' loves ones being torn from her, and finally Katniss herself escaping Capitol control.

Finally in the third book, *Mockingjay*⁴, the reader learns the terribleness of war and the fact that

2 Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. (New York: Scholastic Press 2008).

3 Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games - Catching Fire*. (New York: Scholastic Press 2009).

4 Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games - Mockingjay*. (New York: Scholastic Press 2010).

there are no “good guys” in war, even in the supposedly just ones.⁵ By this point, Katniss is suffering from severe PTSD. She has lost many of her loved ones and by the end of the book, survives to find love, family and freedom, but is never the same again.

This short plot summary does not do justice to the complexities of the plot. Many significant and presently relevant issues come up in the story, including the role of fashion in our society, the role of the Third world in providing both cheap labor and natural resources to the First World, the role of the young in fighting the wars that middle aged and elderly people start, and of course the ways that the powers that be manipulate and control oppressed classes of people, by turning different segments of the oppressed against each other. And throughout the series the reader/viewer is exposed to the issue of the mass media, since the Hunger Games itself is not only a competition but also a live-televised spectacle that unites all of the people of Panem in both fascination and horror.

II. Activism inspired by the Hunger Games

Most literature is intended to do more than entertain, but in the case of The HG series, the author, Suzanne Collins has made her intent clear:

Q: What do you hope readers will come away with when they read The Hunger Games and/or Catching Fire?

A: Questions about how elements of the book might be relevant in their

⁵ Troyer, Marty “Indicting Violence: A Pacifist Review of “The Hunger Games” trilogy” *Houston Chronicle* (March 22, 2012) <http://blog.chron.com/thepeacepastor/2012/03/hunger-games-indicting-violence/>.

own lives. And, if they're disturbing, what they might do about them.⁶

This call to action has been echoed by at least some of the people involved with The HG movie series, most notably Donald Sutherland (the actor who played President Snow), who told *The Guardian*⁷ newspaper of the UK that he hopes the movies inspire young people to “take action because it's getting drastic in this country,” and that he hopes that the movie will stir up a “revolution” or at least some kind of drastic political change. He echoed this same sentiment in another interview in which he said that he chose to be in this movie because of the potential he saw for the movie to spark political change.⁸

As a tool for prompting change, the dystopian form is an apt tool, since it “forces diagnosis of what went wrong, how to keep your humanity in crisis, and begs for solution,”⁹ hence many commentators have noticed the possibility for the HG franchise to spark political and social change. An obvious point of discussion has been the role of food in HG as an example of class distinction (and how this corresponds to present-day concerns regarding both food insecurity and obesity¹⁰), while others have broadened their lens to see connections between HG and the Occupy movement,¹¹ including at least one

6 “A conversation - Questions and Answers – Suzanne Collins, author of the The Hunger Games” *Scholastic.com* <http://www.scholastic.com/thehungergames/media/qanda.pdf>.

7 Carroll, Rory “Donald Sutherland: 'I want Hunger Games to stir up a revolution'” *The Guardian* (November 19, 2013). <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/19/donald-sutherland-hunger-games-catching-fire>

8 Keyes, Rob “‘Catching Fire’ Interview: Donald Sutherland on President Snow’s Debatable Villainy” *Screenrant.com* (November 2013) <http://screenrant.com/hunger-games-catching-fire-donald-sutherland-interview/>

9 Troyer, Marty “The Hunger Games: The Book vs the Movie” *The Mennonite* (April 2, 2012) http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-4/articles/Hunger_Games_The_book_vs_the_movie.

10 Mardoll, Ana. “Hunger games: Feast and famine” *AnaMardoll.com* (November 7, 2012) <http://www.anamardoll.com/2012/11/hunger-games-feast-and-famine.html>, see also Herman, Todd “Hunger is not a game” *ToddHerman.com* <http://www.todddherman.com/philanthropy/hunger-games>.

11 Baer, Barbara Lee “Occupy the Hunger Games? Well, yes, actually” *Occupy.com* (May 3, 2012) <http://www.occupy.com/article/occupy-hunger-games-well-yes-actually>, also see Campbell, Christopher “The Hunger

Mennonite reviewer.¹² Others have focused on the ecological message, seeing a parallel between the extractive and exploitative economies of Panem and the world today.¹³ And finally some commentators see connections between the Panem Empire and the current US hegemonic imperial regime.¹⁴

In the context of the HG, an obvious question is where is God in all of this? While the author is Catholic,¹⁵ nowhere in the HG books is there a reference to God or overt religiosity. Certainly there are elements of civic religion (such as the liturgy and rituals of the Games), but this is not expressed in religious language. In an article in *First Things*, Jordan J. Ballor and Todd Steen argue that the lack of religion in HG means that the “only hope that the residents of Panem have is in themselves,” and that the perspective of HG is fundamentally pessimistic, unlike the true hope of the Christian faith.¹⁶ However, this perspective ignores the real power that comes by way of human solidarity (which I believe can be initiated by the Holy Spirit, even if the Spirit's presence is not recognized).

Games – It is really a metaphor for the Occupy movement?” *ScreenCrust* (March 30, 2012) <http://screencrush.com/hunger-games-occupy-metaphor/>, also see Hood, Wilson “Occupy Panem: Class conflict in both the Hunger Games and the ‘Occupy’ Movement” *Campus Blueprint* (March 24, 2012) <http://campusblueprint.com/2012/03/24/occupy-panem-class-conflict-in-both-the-hunger-games-and-the-occupy-movement/>.

12 Thiessen, Vic “Catching Fire turns up the heat” *Canadian Mennonite* (December 24, 2013) <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/catching-fire-turns-heat>.

13 Pangioti “If the Hunger Games can't ignite an eco-rebellion” *Earth First Journal* <http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/reviews/if-the-hunger-games-cant-ignite-an-eco-rebellion/>

14 Clawson, Julie “Life under empire” *Sojourners* (April 2012) <http://sojo.net/magazine/2012/04/life-under-empire>, also see Clawson, Julie “Dangerous Hope under the Hunger Games” *Mennonite World Review* (March 27, 2012) <http://www.mennoworld.org/blog/2012/3/27/dangerous-hope-hunger-games/>.

15 Blake, Donald L. “The Political and Religious Overtones of Hunger Games” *Washington Times* (March 31, 2012) <http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/worlds-best-selling-book/2012/mar/31/religious-and-political-overtones-hunger-games/>.

16 Ballor, Jordan J. and Todd Steen. “Hope and the Hunger Games” *First Things* (April 2012) <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/04/hope-and-the-hunger-games>.

Fundamentally the real question of the value of HG as a cultural phenomenon is that of *action*. Thus far there has been no widespread HG-inspired “revolution” as Donald Sutherland wished for, but there have been some examples of activism spurred by the ideas and story of HG.

The best known HG-inspired action discussed in the popular media has been the organizing done by the Harry Potter Alliance (a group of fans of the Harry Potter series of books who seek to engage in real-world social action inspired by the ideas of the book), which has included the production of a powerful *YouTube* video with the message “The Hunger Games are real”¹⁷ and a website that calls for fans of HG to “take back the narrative” and not allow the message of the HG to be diluted by corporate interests that only want to encourage higher rates of consumption.¹⁸ This project has led to a number of local projects being conducted by HG fans in a variety of areas of social justice concern as well through the “We are the Districts” Project.¹⁹

Spontaneous grassroots actions have also used HG imagery as a means to expose injustice. In Oklahoma, members of the Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance and Cross Timbers Earth First unfurled a huge banner with the HG’s Mockingjay symbol (and the slogan “the odds are never in our favor”) as part of a protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, an action that has resulted in the arrest of participants and initial charges of bio-terrorism being recommended against the participants by local

17 “The Hunger Games are Real” *HP Alliance/YouTube.com* (November 20, 2013) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmVJaBuoEYA&feature=youtu.be>.

18 “Join the resistance” *Oddsinourfavor.org* <http://oddsinourfavor.org/about>.

19 *We are the Districts Project* <http://wearethedistricts.tumblr.com/>.

law enforcement.^{20 21}

Also very recently, LGBT rights protestors in Russia have used HG imagery as part of a protest in Moscow²² and in a parody protest video on Youtube.^{23 24}

III. Commercial Use of The Hunger Games

We cannot ignore the fact HG is a multi-million dollar franchise, with 26 million books being sold

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- 20 Dinger, Matt. "Oklahoma County DA receives Devon protesters' petition" *The Oklahoman* (January 25, 2014) <http://newsok.com/oklahoma-county-da-receives-devon-protesters-petition/article/3927019>, also see Golgowski, Nina "Glittery banner leads to terrorism hoax charges against Oklahoma City protesters" *New York Daily News* (January 13, 2014) <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/glitter-leads-terrorism-hoax-charges-protesters-article-1.1578622>, also see "Keystone XL protesters' glittered banner leads to 'terrorism hoax' arrest" *Aljazeera America* (December 19, 2013) <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/the-stream/the-stream-officialblog/2013/12/19/glitter-on-bannerleadstoterrorismhoaxarrestsatpipelineprotest.html>, also see Monahan, Lisa "Anti-fracking activists protest at Devon Tower in downtown OKC" *News9.com* (December 13, 2013) <http://www.news9.com/story/24218313/anti-fracking-activists-protest-at-devon-tower-in-downtown-okc>, also see "Radio Interview with attorney representing 'terrorism hoax' case" *Earth First Journal Podcast* (January 14, 2014) <http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2014/01/14/radio-interview-with-attorney-representing-terrorism-hoax-case/>, also see "Release: Anti-fracking activists arrested on 'terrorism hoax' charges issue statements" *Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance* (January 8, 2014) <http://gptarsandsresistance.org/release-anti-fracking-activists-arrested-on-terrorism-hoax-charges-release-statements/>.
- 21 As of January 2014, the Oklahoma County District Attorney reports that no evidence has been submitted to him by the Oklahoma City Police and that he will not file state charges against protest participants until receiving this evidence.
- 22 "LGBT Issues raised at Sochi 'Hunger Games' Rally in Moscow" *Queer Russia* (February 16, 2014) <http://queerussia.info/2014/02/16/4358/>.
- 23 Chapman, Matthew "Sochi sponsors stance on gay rights targeted in hunger games parody" *BrandRepublic.com* (February 12, 2014) <http://www.brandrepublic.com/go/news/article/1230979/sochi-sponsors-stance-gay-rights-targeted-hunger-games-parody/Brandrepublic.com>, also see "Hunger Games Sochi 2014" *Youtube.com* http://youtu.be/UyTD5Kxd_c.
- 24 Interestingly enough, one Australian commentator claims that HG has a homophobic message: "Imagine if you could make a film that pandered to the worst prejudices and false grievances of the most ignorant, privileged and socially paranoid; a film that was not only homophobic, but also cast queer stock characters as decadent overlords hell bent on sacrificing god-fearing children." - Stacey, Daniel "Does The Hunger Games perpetuate ugly LGBT stereotypes?" *Daily Life.com.au* (November 13, 2013) <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/does-the-hunger-games-perpetuate-ugly-lgbt-stereotypes-20131113-2xf3w.html>.

before the first movie was even released²⁵ and record-breaking ticket sales to the movies.²⁶ Beyond the direct sales of the books and movies, there is also a huge market of materials published for fans.

More troubling is the use of the HG franchise to market products that seem to be contrary to the radical message of the series. One such example was the *Subway* restaurant chain, that held a sweepstakes to send a lucky customer on a “victory tour”²⁷ and also encouraged fans of the HG to *be bold* by eating a *bold* sandwich.²⁸

Even more outrageous is the “Capitol look” being marketed by CoverGirl cosmetics,²⁹ which features twelve “custom looks” inspired by each of the twelve districts of Panem as well as the outrageous fashions of the residents of the Capitol District in HG, a profoundly incongruous action given the negative way that the fashions and style of the Capitol are portrayed in HG.

The commercial influence of the HG series extends in other bizarre directions including HG-themed birthday parties for elementary school children³⁰ and young adults,³¹ as well as HG-themed

25 Springen, Karen. “The Hunger Games Franchise: The Odds Seem Ever in Its Favor” *Publishers Weekly* (March 22, 2012) <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/51167-the-hunger-games-franchise-the-odds-seem-ever-in-its-favor.html>.

26 Barnes, Brooks “Hunger Games' ticket sales set record” *New York Times* (March 25, 2012) http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/26/movies/hunger-games-breaks-box-office-records.html?_r=0.

27 Hall, Hillary. “The Hunger games are. . .real?” *IMClass.com* (November 29, 2013) <http://imcclass.com/category/subway/>.

28 “Subway Hunger Games commercial” *Youtube.com* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVtB40CjyQo>

29 Heinzekehr, Hannah “On the CoverGirl Capitol Collection and the Economy” *The Femonite* (November 14, 2013) <http://www.femonite.com/2013/11/14/on-the-covergirl-capitol-collection-and-the-economy/>, also see “Hunger games Covergirl Capitol Look commercial” *Youtube.com* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENQGWPNU690>.

30 My son (then 6 years old) was invited to such a party last year!

31 Burrell, Jackie “Throw a Fabulous Hunger Games Party” *About.com Young Adults* <http://youngadults.about.com/od/18th-birthday-party/ss/Throw-A-Hunger-Games-Party.htm>.

chocolate bars³², bottled water,³³ and a line of action figures and other toys being sold at ToysRUs.³⁴

And predictably there is a surge in the popularity of archery that has been credited to the popularity of HG,³⁵ as well as an unofficial HG-themed survival guide.³⁶

IV. The Challenge of reading and engaging with culture from the perspective of faith

From the perspective of Anabaptist Christianity, the HG cultural phenomenon raises a complex set of issues: (1) the issues of injustice that are present in the society of both fictional Panem and the non-fictional present day, (2) the issue of violence (both in its potential to harm, but also in its potential to bring change), and (3) the issue of commercialism and its role in encouraging destructive kinds of consumption. These issues make one ask the question – should we engage the HG cultural phenomenon, and if so, how?

But before one can engage with a cultural text, one must be able to read it through the various tools of cultural hermeneutics. There are three primary tools that I think are relevant in considering the HG: (1) James. K.A. Smith's consideration of liturgy and rituals,³⁷ (2) Vanhoozer's question about what the

32 "Hunger Games District Chocolate Bars" *Geekalerts.com* (November 25, 2013) <http://www.geekalerts.com/hunger-games-district-chocolate-bars/>.

33 Sims, Andrew. "h2o – The Official Water of 'The Hunger Games' (yep, you read that right)" *Hypable.com* (December 13, 2011) <http://www.hypable.com/2011/12/13/h2o-the-official-water-of-the-hunger-games-yep-you-read-that-right/>

34 "Hunger Games" *ToysRUs.com* <http://www.toysrus.com/family/index.jsp?categoryId=12656761>

35 Hood, Grace "More Girls target Archery, inspired by 'The Hunger Games'" *NPR* (November 27, 2013) <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/27/247379498/more-girls-target-archery-inspired-by-the-hunger-games>, also see Khaleeli, Homa "Hunger Games credited with making archery cool" *The Guardian* (July 27, 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/jul/27/hunger-games-credited-archery-cool>.

36 Stewart, Creek *The Unofficial Hunger Games Wilderness Survival Guide* (Iola, WI: Living Ready 2013).

37 Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009).

text says about the human condition and theology,³⁸ and (3) Hunter's analysis of systems of power³⁹.

A. The use of liturgy and rituals in *The Hunger Games*

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith states that culture is not an amorphous concept, but rather is the “fruit of human 'making' or cultivation (*poiesis*).⁴⁰ This fruit is created by cultural institutions that have a *telos* (aim), even if these institutions are unaware of their *telos*.⁴¹ As for the method of creation and transmission, culture is created and perpetuated by way of “liturgy,”⁴² which he defines as those practices that educate⁴³ and inculcate the imaginations of people in service of the institution’s *telos*, so that the liturgy not only takes hold of a person's mind, but also their gut.⁴⁴

Smith believes that this recognition of aims is the first step for consideration but that religious communities have other questions to ask, such as “what vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice? What does the good life look like as embedded in cultural rituals? What sort of person will I become after being immersed in this or that cultural liturgy?”⁴⁵ To answer these questions, Smith suggests that Christian exegetes of culture adopt that an apocalyptic perspective that seeks to “unmask”

38 Vanhoozer, Kevin J, Charles A Anderson, and Michael J Slesman. *Everyday Theology : How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007).

39 Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

40 Smith 72.

41 Smith 73.

42 Smith 73-74

43 Smith 26.

44 Smith 88-90.

45 Smith 90.

the reality behind a particular cultural expression⁴⁶ and then to move toward the tough questions of whether a particular form of culture is tearing at one's loyalties⁴⁷ or even leading the people of God towards idolatry.⁴⁸

In engaging with these questions, Smith does not believe that Christians will necessarily remove themselves from culture, but rather will have a deeper and more thoughtful engagement with it⁴⁹ that flows from the practice of communal Christian worship.⁵⁰ The focus for Smith is not about how culture asks us to think but rather about how culture asks us to feel, how it tugs at our *kardia* (heart).⁵¹

In the HG series, ritual plays a significant role. The Games themselves serve as both a force for creating unity. All of Panem watches and all of Panem is made to feel both lucky (for having not been chosen for the reaping), fearful (of the great power of the Capitol) and vicariously victorious. The telos of these institutions is obvious (even more so in the scene added to the film version of HG where President Snow discusses how giving people a “little bit of hope” is an effective way of controlling the masses), in that the Capitol uses the Games to maintain power and control.

In the real world of the HG franchise, multiple institutions have their own aims to achieve. Presumably the highest goal of the publishing and movie industry is to make money, through any

46 Smith 92.

47 Smith 109-110.

48 Smith 122.

49 Smith 123.

50 Smith 129.

51 Smith 25, 48, 58.

means possible, yet there are also, as discussed above, other players (the author, the actors, etc.) who may have artistic and/or political aims as well.

The question of the gut is the serious question. Does the HG franchise simply titillate, excite and distract or does it provoke the heart to see injustice? Both possibilities are present and thus far both possibilities have borne fruit.

B. What does the Hunger Games say about the human condition?

In *Everyday Theology : How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, Vanhoozer and his co-authors frame the issue of culture in this way: “What culture is finally about is what it means to be human in this place and time; what culture does is grow humanity. Culture is the gesture a people makes towards the good life. It is the gesture - a shrug, a raised fist, folded arms, cupped hands - a people makes toward God.”⁵²

To understand culture, Vanhoozer advocates the methodology of “thick description” that engages the audience in multi-perspectival and multi-level description of the phenomenon under consideration, that seeks to both understand the context of the text but also is willing to critique and even reject elements of the text.⁵³

From this place of understanding, Vanhoozer argues that Christians are called to not merely be observers of culture, but rather to be active “cultural agents” who engage with culture in such a way as

52 Vanhoozer 49.

53 Vanhoozer 59.

to be “catalysts of the Kingdom.”⁵⁴

Other considerations considered in Vanhoozer's book include the questions of context (what/who is “behind...of...and in front of the text”⁵⁵), the question of power interests, and the question of root metaphors. All of these concerns find their fruition in the central issues of the human condition, what does the text say about humanity and its relationship to God?⁵⁶

The picture of humanity is both bleak and hopeful in HG. Incredible acts of self-sacrifice and love are depicted, but so are terrible acts of cruelty and institutional oppression. As discussed above, God is not named as being a participant in the story, and human beings are seemingly left to their own devices to survive in a brutal, terrible world.⁵⁷

Yet, this is what the real world looks like much of the time. Where was God in the holocaust? Where was God at Hiroshima? Where is God when children are abused? This question is always there. Human beings have choices, of course, to either give into the way of brutality and survival at all costs, or to choose to keep one's sense of humanity.⁵⁸ It is in this drive for meaning that I see God, and that is why I reject the argument that there is no real hope in this story.

54 Vanhoozer 61.

55 Vanhoozer 53.

56 Vanhoozer 63-64.

57 Ballor, Jordan J. and Todd Steen. “Hope and the Hunger Games” *First Things* (April 2012)
<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/04/hope-and-the-hunger-games>.

58 A beautiful example of a call for this kind of resistance to dehumanization in the context of war can be found in: Goff, Stan “Hold On to Your Humanity An Open Letter to GIs in Iraq” *Counterpunch* (November 3, 2003)
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/11/13/an-open-letter-to-gis-in-iraq/>.

C. What are the system of power behind the Hunger Games phenomenea?

In the 2010 book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, James Davison Hunter introduces a tool of cultural hermeneutics that is very appropriate to the topic of the HG, the consideration of power.

Hunter defines culture as being a “complex of norms” or “commanding truths,”⁵⁹ that are a “product of history”⁶⁰ and the interfacing of both ideas and infrastructure;⁶¹ essentially for Hunter, culture is a “resource and source of power”⁶² that is grounded in “social networks.”⁶³

Given this definition, the primary concern for Hunter is to seek to understand the way that culture actually works, including the ways that “culture is embedded in systems of power.”⁶⁴ He believes that, unfortunately, most Christians are ignorant of way that culture works⁶⁵ and that culture must be understood as being part of a network of power. From this perspective, Hunter argues that Christians have an obligation (under what he describes as the “mandate of Creation”⁶⁶ to effectuate positive cultural change in a thoughtful way.

59 Hunter 44.

60 Hunter 45

61 Hunter 46.

62 Hunter 46.

63 Hunter 49.

64 Hunter 39.

65 See Hunter chapters 2-3.

66 Hunter 16.

Applying Hunter's ideas to the HG require two spheres of consideration: the fictional world of Panem and the real-world of today. In HG, the power distribution initially seems to be completely in the hands of President Snow and the Capitol, but as the story proceeds, the reader/viewer sees a gradual unraveling of this system of power. Resident of the outer districts are inspired by Katniss' acts of defiance and take to the streets, which in time leads to an outright civil war, between an evil fascist regime and in the end a militaristic regime of “liberators” who end up not being that different from their enemies.⁶⁷

In the real-world, HG is a multi-million dollar enterprise. Many companies and people are making lots and lots of money from the franchise. While the story of HG is filled with potent anti-imperial imagery and thought, this messaging is being coopted by corporate America.

A good example is from this *Subway* TV commercial with a HG theme:

67 The depiction of the rebels in HG reminds me of the depiction of “liberators” in the pre-WWII classic graphic novel, Thurber, James *The Last Flower: A Parable in Pictures* (1939) available online at http://www.ommas-aarden.net/Last_Flower_page1.htm.

Bold can be standing up for what you believe in.
Bold can be testing your limits and defying all odds.
And now BOLD can be found at Subway!
Fiery footlongs are a revolution in bold taste!
Sizzlin' subs like the new Sriracha Chicken melt,
drizzled in our own signature Sriacha,
made with a select blend of chile peppers
for our boldest flavor yet.

*Get yours and get to theaters November 22nd for The Hunger Games:
Catching Fire.*

*Subway! Be bold! Eat Fresh!*⁶⁸

Rarely is the corporate co-optation of revolutionary cultural ideas this blatant. Instead of the “revolution” of youth that Donald Sutherland hoped would result, instead Subway is giving youth a “revolution in bold taste.” It is obvious that the money-making puppeteers of this system of power are completely willing to sell out the telos of the author of the book and screenplay, for the sake of making money.

68 “Subway Hunger Games commercial” *Youtube.com* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVtB40CjyQo>

Given the reality of the system as we know it, one would have to be naïve (or Donald Sutherland) to think that change can happen simply because a movie with revolutionary messaging comes out. But is it possible for people to subvert the systems of power in service to the original telos of the author?

Conclusion: It's time to do some culture jamming!

The term “culture-jamming” was coined in 1984 by the band Negativland to refer to the practice of disrupting and subverting mass media culture for positive social change.⁶⁹ The term has since been widely used, especially by the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, which refers to its website as being “a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society.”

The reality is that we will be subjected to much more commercial exploitation of the HG story by the time the final HG movie is released. It would be easy to just denounce this and move on, but the ideas of the HG are too potent to ignore.

Creative actions can be taken to “take back the narrative”⁷⁰ as well as to challenge popular assumptions, both in mainstream and activist culture. The HG provides a powerful way to engage Americans on the issues of consumerism and neo-colonialism (not only between the third and first world, but also the exploitation of rural America by the urban and suburban elite), as well as the role of the cult of celebrity in our society.

69 “Culture Jamming” *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming.

70 “Join the resistance” *Oddsinfavor.org* <http://oddsinfavor.org/about>.

For the activist community, the HG story reminds us of the folly of revolutionary violence, of how violence tends to be cyclical,⁷¹ and of how the “good guys” often become the bad guys once they resort to the use of violence to achieve political ends. In reading the HG, the character of Gale is particularly interesting. One sees him evolve from a young man who yearns to be free, to becoming a committed revolutionary, and finally to becoming willing to sacrifice even children for the sake of his cause. Gale's story echoes the story of Che Guevera, an earnest young man who sought to understand the world and its injustices,⁷² but who in the end was transformed in negative ways by his participation in the violent Cuban revolution, including Che's involvement in the torture and execution of supposed “enemies of the revolution.”⁷³

Another area of possible engagement in the HG involves the issue of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) as the consequence of war⁷⁴. HG provides probably the best recent visceral example of how trauma affects human beings. By the end of book #3, almost all of the major characters are showing signs of PTSD, with the disorder affecting them in varied ways. Even in the “happy ending” of sorts, Katniss is still not freed from her nightmares from the past. HG provides the church with a powerful tool to initiate conversations about PTSD in our community, not only for combat veterans but also for those who have survived domestic violence, sexual violence or other forms of abuse.

71 Troyer, Marty “Indicting Violence: A Pacifist Review of “The Hunger Games” trilogy” *Houston Chronicle* (March 22, 2012) <http://blog.chron.com/thepeacepastor/2012/03/hunger-games-indicting-violence/>.

72 *The Motorcycle Diaries* (film)(2004).

73 *Fidel* (film)(2002).

74 It is worth noting that Collins is the daughter of a Vietnam war veteran. See “A conversation - Questions and Answers – Suzanne Collins, author of the The Hunger Games” *Scholastic.com* <http://www.scholastic.com/thehungergames/media/qanda.pdf>.

Certainly there are dangers in any kind of cultural engagement. Depictions of violence in mass media do pose the danger of desensitizing readers/viewers to this violence and/or causing readers/viewers to miss the contextual meaning behind the violence. The chilling accounts of children, cheering at the deaths of contestants, while watching the HG is movies one such example.⁷⁵ But these cultural phenomena will be a part of our lives (and that of our children) in one way or another. The question is what will we do about it?

We have been given a gift by Suzanne Collins: a powerful fictional narrative that speaks prophetic truth about the world we are living in. The depictions of the characters in HG illustrate with heightened contrast the choices we face. We can choose to be ignorant of the problems around us (either as a part of the privileged class or as a part of a non-privileged class) and do nothing, accepting the fate that we are given. Or we can choose to fight back, using whatever means are necessary to try to craft the world we want to see. Or we have a third option – of engagement for change in ways that keep us from losing our dignity and humanity. HG provides us models of all three of these options.

Which will we choose?

75 Troyer, Marty “The Hunger Games: The Book vs the Movie” *The Mennonite* (April 2, 2012) http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-4/articles/Hunger_Games_The_book_vs_the_movie.

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