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Popular Culture as Resistance:

The Dual Critique of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract

This essay aims to examine Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, a dystopian novel, using Marxism, a utopian ideology, and also to highlight the dual critique presented by the book. This essay will use Marxism's view on ideology and mass culture to analyse *The Hunger Games*. The essay argues that the power structure in the novel is critiqued from a classically Marxist perspective, based on class theory. Because the novel has a reality-show inspired element it also addresses more postmodern ideas as well, i.e. ideas of late capitalism and its influence on today's society.

The Hunger Games was published in 2008, the same year that the financial crisis hit America. The book follows 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen who lives in District 12 in the future dystopian world of Panem. The leaders of Panem live in the Capitol, from where they control the twelve surrounding districts with an iron fist. Part of their control is enforced by the Hunger Games in which a boy and a girl from each district compete until only one survivor is left each year.

The essay finds it interesting to bring out the Marxist critique in *The Hunger Games* since it is written by an American author and has found most of its popularity in America, a country that has a complicated historical relationship with Marxism and communism ever since the Cold War. The Marxist critique in *The Hunger Games* makes the book quite radical, especially considering its place of publication and the socioeconomically fraught time in which it was published.

The Hunger Games contains two different kinds of critique: the book's critique of today's society, and the main character's critique of the fictional society in which it is set. The essay suggests that readers of *The Hunger Games* have found that by reading about the main character's critique of the society she lives in, they might themselves become more interested in viewing their own society in a more critical way.

1. Introduction

Suzanne Collins's novel *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian novel published in 2008. It received critical acclaim and it soon became one of the most popular dystopian novels. It is very much part of popular culture. In today's society people often argue about the merits and effects of popular culture and mass entertainment. This tradition started during the late 18th century, after the industrial revolution. With the industrial and democratic revolutions came popular culture, journalism and the press. The emergence of these things spurred debates over their impact and consequences. Thinkers began to examine cultural shifts and theorizing over the changes. Karl Marx was someone who viewed mass culture, and particularly the press, as something positive. He wrote about the press: "It is the spiritual mirror in which a people can see itself, and self-examination is the first condition of wisdom" (Marx and Engels 165). Late Marxism, on the other hand, sees mass culture as a means for those in power to maintain their control over people. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called popular culture "easy pleasures" and they believed that the consumption of these easy pleasures made people docile and content. They also believed that mass culture rejects individuality: "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned" (Adorno and Horkheimer 154). Many postmodern Marxist critics, including Ernest Mandel and Fredric Jameson, have discussed what they call late capitalism. During World War II, many economists believed that capitalism was dead, but it got an unexpected revival during the late 1930s and -40s. The "new" capitalism is characterized by a globalized market, multinational corporations, and mass consumption. Ronaldo Munck, professor of sociology, argues that "the postmodernists seemed to be proclaiming the death of society and the rule of culture. As culture was/is an expansive and ever-inclusive concept, this tendency towards conceptual inflation was, perhaps, inevitable. So, not only has culture gained a more important role in critical social analysis but there are those of extreme tendencies (for example Baudrillard) who argue that 'everything is culture'" (Munck 113).

This essay will use Marxism's view on ideology and mass culture to analyse Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. Though *The Hunger Games* is not particularly Marxist in itself, the power structure in the novel is critiqued from a classically Marxist perspective, based on class theory. Because the novel has a reality-show inspired element it also addresses more postmodern ideas as well, i.e. ideas of late capitalism and its influence on today's society. This essay argues that the novel performs a dual critique, where the book's protagonist critiques the society within the book at the same time as the book itself critiques the society of which it is part. Furthermore, the essay explores whether it is possible to critique contemporary popular culture while simultaneously

being part of that very same culture. Does a book's status as popular culture undermine its ability to critique? As will become clear, *The Hunger Games* contains a good deal of Marxist critique, which makes its popularity in the United States quite surprising, considering their complicated relationship to Marxism and communism. Does this mean that the novel's absorption into popular culture weakens its critical edge?

The essay begins with a brief background to the book: its writing and publication, as well as its reception - both in media, by reviewers, and by fans. The essay then moves on to introduce the concept of dual critique, i.e. how the book's protagonist critiques the fictional society at the same time that the book itself critiques the society of which it is part. After that, the essay introduces Marxism and the Marxist critique that is used in *The Hunger Games*. The subsequent section is the analysis, which is divided into two parts: dual critique and Marxist ideas in *The Hunger Games*. The analysis section on dual critique is divided into three sub-sections: Katniss' critique of the society in *The Hunger Games*, the book's critique of today's society, and the connection between the two critiques and how they support each other. Lastly, there is the conclusion, which, in light of what has come before, tries to answer the question of whether it is possible to formulate a critique of contemporary popular culture from within.

a. Background of the book and writing

The Hunger Games is a young adult novel published in 2008 by Scholastic. The novel is the first book in a trilogy of the same name. *The Hunger Games* is told through the narrative perspective of sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen who lives in the dystopian world of Panem. Panem is located in North America and consists of the wealthy Capitol, which is surrounded by twelve poorer districts. The event known as the Hunger Games started after the districts had tried to rebel against the Capitol. During the rebellion, the 13th district was destroyed. When the Capitol had regained control of the districts the Hunger Games were initiated as a punishment for the districts' rebellion. A boy and a girl between the ages of 12 and 18 are selected through lottery each year from each district to compete in the Hunger Games. The lottery is called "the reaping" and the day of the lottery is "reaping day". There can only be one victor, one survivor. The games are televised and it is mandatory for the inhabitants in the districts to watch them: "To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others" (19). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write: "Under monopoly, all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show

through. The people at the top are no longer interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art” (Adorno and Horkheimer 121). Katniss is not chosen for the Hunger Games, but her younger sister Prim is. In a desperate attempt to protect her sister, Katniss volunteers to take her place. Katniss enters the Hunger Games arena along with 23 other tributes, including her classmate Peeta who is the male tribute from District 12. Katniss has an advantage in the Games because her father taught her to hunt when she was little. After her father’s death, Katniss started hunting with Gale Hawthorne, a boy from the Seam, the poor neighbourhood in District 12 where Katniss grew up.

According to Suzanne Collins the basis of *The Hunger Games* is a mix between the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur on the one hand, and the Roman gladiator games on the other. In the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, Athens had to send fourteen boys and girls to Crete where they were thrown into a large maze, called the Labyrinth, where the monstrous Minotaur ate them. Theseus volunteered to go, which makes Katniss a sort of futuristic Theseus. In an interview, Suzanne Collins said about the Greek myth: “Crete was sending a very clear message: ‘Mess with us and we’ll do something worse than kill you. We’ll kill your children’” (Collins Interview Everett). This is the basis of the Games in Collins’s story. Collins’s tributes in the novel are sent to what she calls “an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment” (Collins Interview Everett). Before writing *The Hunger Games*, Collins did a lot of research on Spartacus, the Thracian gladiator who was one of the leaders in the slave uprising against the Roman Republic. Collins researched both the historical Spartacus and also the Spartacus represented in popular culture. The movie *Spartacus* is one of Collins’s favourite movies. There are many similarities between Katniss and Spartacus. Susan Dominus, staff writer at *The New York Times*, writes: “Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war” (Dominus).

Collins’s father was a great influence for many parts of the book. He was a military specialist, a historian, and a doctor of political science. He made sure that his children understood why wars occurred, how they played out, and the consequences. Katniss’ hunting abilities are also based on Collins’s father: “He grew up during the Depression. For his family, hunting was not a sport but a way to put meat on the table. He also knew a certain amount of edible plants” (Collins Interview Everett). Katniss’ father is the one who teaches Katniss to hunt and how to recognise what is edible. He does so in order for her to be able to provide her family with food, since they are very poor and cannot buy everything they need. Collins has a

very close relationship with her father and that relationship inspired Katniss' relationship with her father. Collins has talked about the anxiety that comes with having an absent parent, something she experienced when her own father served in Vietnam. This anxiety is clear in Katniss who lost her father when she was very young, an experience that also forced her to become more of an adult herself.

Suzanne Collins has said in many interviews that she found the inspiration for the book series while channel surfing. She was switching between a reality show where young people were competing for money and actual war coverage where young people were fighting for their lives. She saw the similarities between the two and wanted to comment on it. She, along with many others, has seen how reality shows have evolved. They have become more popular and with that popularity they have also become more violent and severe in order to attract more viewers.

b. Reception

i. Reviewers

The Hunger Games has received many positive reviews. Award-winning author Stephen King wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that it is “A violent, jarring, speed-rap of a novel that generates nearly constant suspense and may also generate a fair amount of controversy. I couldn't stop reading” (King). He also writes, “Reading *The Hunger Games* is as addictive (and as violently simple) as playing one of those shoot-it-if-it-moves videogames in the lobby of the local eightplex; you know it's not real, but you keep plugging in quarters anyway” (King). Award-winning young adult author John Green called the book “brilliantly plotted and perfectly paced” (Green) in his review of *The Hunger Games* for *The New York Times*. He writes that though the concept might not be completely original and though the writing is not spectacular, it is still a very strong novel: “the considerable strength of the novel comes in Collins's convincingly detailed world-building and her memorably complex and fascinating heroine. In fact, by not calling attention to itself, the text disappears in the way a good font does: nothing stands between Katniss and the reader, Panem and America” (Green). Susan Dominus wrote in *The New York Times* that the novel is “forcing readers to contemplate their own roles as desensitized voyeurs” (Dominus).

The Hunger Games bears many similarities to Koushun Takami's novel *Battle Royale*, and has been critiqued for it. Susan Dominus wrote: “The parallels are striking enough that Collins's work has been savaged on the blogosphere as a baldfaced ripoff”

(Dominus). Dominus does, however, defend *The Hunger Games* by writing: “There are enough possible sources for the plot line that the two authors might well have hit on the same basic setup independently” (Dominus). Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist, would have defended *The Hunger Games* by saying that “there is nothing real or original, we have only simulations, we can only copy” (Munck 114). The story of *Battle Royale*, published in 1999, takes place in an alternate timeline where 50 secondary school classes are randomly selected and forced to fight until only one student from each class is left. Despite the fact that the program is supposedly a form of military research, the outcome of each battle is aired on television. However, one of the characters discovers that the program is actually a means of terrorizing the population, much like in *The Hunger Games*.

ii. Media

Just like the media in *The Hunger Games*, the media in our society has focused on the love aspect in the novel. In the novel, Katniss and Peeta are labelled as “star-crossed lovers”. Katniss uses the star-crossed lovers angle as a strategy to win (and survive). She realises that by playing up her feelings for Peeta, she will receive gifts from rich sponsors who have fallen in love with their love. The real-world media focuses on the love part, missing the strategy part.

In the real-world media, there is a lot of focus on what is called “Team Gale” and “Team Peeta”. Members of these rivalling teams are people who want to see Katniss end up with either Peeta, the male tribute from District 12, or Gale, Katniss’ friend and hunting partner. There are websites devoted to each team where fans can buy merchandise with prints to show they support that particular team. There are t-shirts, mugs, stickers etc. with prints that say “Keep Calm and Vote Team Gale/Peeta”.

A synonym for late capitalism is media capitalism which points to how reliant late capitalism is on media. Jameson argues that “the media constitutes one of the more influential new products of late capitalism” (Felluga Modules). By ignoring the critique that *The Hunger Games* presents the media is acting as expected according to late capitalism. It is a part of the capitalist system. As Jameson said: “We become increasingly reliant on the media’s version of our reality: a version of reality that is filled predominantly with capitalist values (Felluga Modules).

iii. Fandom

While the media focuses on “Team Gale” vs. “Team Peeta”, many people in the fandom call themselves members of “Team Katniss”. Katniss has become an inspiration to many. She is a strong female character without being ruthless. Part of her success in the Hunger Games is her ability to love and care about others. Many people look up to Katniss because she is flawed but still tries hard to grow and learn. As opposed to the violent aggression of some of the other tributes, Katniss displays personality traits that are usually labelled as feminine: she is nurturing, gentle, compassionate and merciful. Even though she does kill other tributes, she never hunts them. She fights and kills in self-defence or to defend people she cares about, and not for the pleasure of killing as some of the other tributes. Katniss is not portrayed as a heroine because of her ability to fight. In fact, she is portrayed as a heroine despite of it. Katniss shows young people that personality traits that are usually seen as feminine and weakening can actually make you strong. She starts a revolution through love, not violence. Katniss is not a saint. She has flaws and she does fight well, but these are not her defining personality traits. This is what makes her a modern heroine in the eyes of many fans. She is a relatable character as well as someone to look up to.

Since the release of *The Hunger Games*, archery classes have become hugely popular, especially among young girls. Many archery schools have long waiting lists and in some places, children are unlikely to get a spot in a class for up to six months. Some instructors also say that the interest in animal shaped targets has increased tremendously. Before *The Hunger Games*, archery teachers were met with disgusted sounds when they took out the animal shaped targets, especially from the younger girls. Now, however, the animal shaped targets are much more popular than the traditional bullseye targets.

2. Approach

a. Dual critique

The Hunger Games presents two levels of critique: one level is in the fictional universe, and the book itself constitutes the other level. The book’s protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, critiques the society which she is a part of. The society in the book is in many ways very similar to our society, which makes it easy to see it as a realistic dystopian future society. *The Hunger Games* critiques reality shows and their extreme entertainment, thereby addressing the late Marxist idea of multi-national or late capitalism. It also critiques war and different strategies of war (for example hunger).

b. Marxist critique in *The Hunger Games*

Marxists believe that the economic systems that structure human societies are what creates the human experience. They also believe that differences in socioeconomic class is much more significant in creating divisions between people than religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. As Lois Tyson puts it: “For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’” (Tyson 54). In *The Hunger Games* the people in the districts are the “have-nots” and the people in the Capitol are the “haves”. For Marxism, art is part of the “superstructure”. It is “an element in that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as ‘normal’, or not seen at all. To understand literature, then, means understanding the total social process of which it is part” (Eagleton).

According to Marxism, all literature reflects the material and historical conditions in which it was written. Tyson writes about literature: “it is a product of the socioeconomic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it so. Because human beings are themselves products of their socioeconomic and ideological environment, it is assumed that authors cannot help but create works that embody ideology in some form” (Tyson 66). For Marxists, literature can be used in two ways: it can reinforce an ideology, or it can inspire the reader to criticise ideology.

The later works of Karl Marx focus on economics and the workings of society as a whole, but early Marxist works are more focused on the study of human behaviour. Though Karl Marx himself saw literature and the press as something positive, late Marxism has a negative view of popular culture. Late Marxism focuses on how popular culture works to transmit ideology to unsuspecting citizens in a seemingly innocent way. Tyson sees this shift in focus as “a natural extension of Marx’s own interest in human behaviour and experience” (Tyson 62).

Marxist theory is a very broad subject and defining Marxism is complicated even further by the fact that many different thinkers influence Marxist theory. There is a distinct difference between traditional Marxism and postmodern/late Marxism. According to traditional Marxism, it is possible to get past ideology and in that find some essential truth. Late Marxism, on the other hand, thinks that ideology is a part of our culture and that it is part of what we refer to as “reality”. After the fall of communism and the Soviet Union, many believed that Marxism was dead. However, Marxism has “continued to have an important influence on critical

thought” (Felluga General). Fredric Jameson, an American literature critic and Marxist political theorist, has been called one of the most influential contemporary Marxist thinkers. He has “attempted to make sense of the continuing staying power of capitalism and the ways that capitalism has transformed since Marx wrote his critiques in the nineteenth century, addressing such issues as multi-national (or late) capitalism, the power of the media, and the influence of postmodernity on Marxist debate” (Felluga General).

3. Analysis

a. Dual Critique

i. Katniss’ critique of the society in *The Hunger Games*

In the beginning of the book, Katniss is hesitant to criticize the Capitol - not because she agrees with how the society is ruled but because she knows how dangerous it is to criticize. The only place where she feels she can say what she really thinks and feels is out in the forest, outside of the fence. But even there she is afraid: “‘District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety,’ I mutter. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder. Even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might hear you” (6). Katniss understands that what they are taught about the rebellion in school is not the whole story but she does not really care: “Whatever the truth is, I don’t see how it will help me get food on the table” (42). Her focus is on keeping herself and her family alive, not on rebelling against the Capitol. It is as James Blasingame wrote in his review of *The Hunger Games* for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*: “Citizens are so worried about where their next meal will come from that they seldom bother to think about the totalitarian government which oppresses them” (Blasingame Review). As mentioned earlier, Katniss is part of what Marx would call the proletariat, the “have-nots” of society. She, along with the other citizens of the districts, are kept in a constant state of fear and hunger by the leaders of Panem to ensure that the leaders keep their economic power, which, according to Marxist theory, is the main motivator for all human behaviour. The longer Katniss is in the Hunger Games arena, however, the more she feels the injustice of the Capitol’s government. When her ally Rue is killed she wants to hate the boy who killed her but she realises that it is the Capitol she hates: “To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It’s the Capitol I hate, for doing this to us. [...] Rue’s death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us” (236). This is the moment when Katniss starts to actively rebel against the Capitol. Katniss starts to realise what Marx hoped all members of

the proletariat would one day realise: she starts to “develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors” (Tyson 54). She gives Rue the equivalent of a funeral. By doing this she has brought districts 11 and 12 together. She even receives bread from the citizens of District 11: “For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who’s not your own” (239). Katniss is not only rebelling herself, she is bringing people from different districts together to rebel, which is exactly what the leaders of Panem fear. According to Marxist theory, the bourgeoisie (or the “haves”) keep the proletariat in “warring factions that accomplish little or no social change” (Tyson 54) in order to keep them from acting as a group and rebel against the leaders, in this case the Capitol. Katniss, herself, does not realize how rebellious her actions are. Her intention is to show the Capitol that what they are doing is not acceptable: “I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own” (237). It is actually Peeta who plants this idea in Katniss’ head. Before they enter the arena, Peeta talks about how he does not want to lose himself while he is in the arena. Katniss finds it hard to understand him because for her, surviving is the most important thing. Before entering the arena, prior to Rue’s death, Katniss does not understand what Peeta means when he says: “Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games” (142). After having lost Rue and been forced to kill another tribute, Katniss finally understands what Peeta meant. She realises, however, that she needs to be careful about criticising the Capitol even while she is in the arena. When she finds out that another tribute, Thresh, has been killed she is very upset but she feels that she needs to hide that fact: “But no one will understand my sorrow at Thresh’s murder. The word pulls me up short. Murder! Thankfully, I didn’t say it aloud. That’s not going to win me any points in the arena” (308). Peeta wants to be seen as an individual and not merely a part of the Games. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that “in the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only as long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned” (Adorno and Horkheimer 154).

District 12 is surrounded by a high chain-link fence, which is sometimes electrified. The official reason for the fence is to keep the citizens of District 12 safe from the wild animals in the forest, but the fence works just as well to keep the people inside the district. The fence is another way for the leaders to keep members of the districts, or the “warring factions” (Tyson 54), apart and make sure that they cannot band together against the Capitol.

Katniss' first step towards actually rebelling against the Capitol comes when her sister's name is chosen during the reaping, the ceremony where the tributes for the Hunger Games are chosen. Katniss does everything she can to protect her younger sister and when Prim is chosen as tribute, Katniss does the only thing she can do: she volunteers to take Prim's place. This is where Katniss becomes a symbol for the revolution simply through her actions. When she steps up on the stage, the people of District 12 show her their support: "Then something unexpected happens. At least, I don't expect it because I don't think of District 12 as a place that cares about me. But a shift has occurred since I stepped up to take Prim's place, and now it seems I have become someone precious" (24). All the members of District 12 put their three middle fingers on their left hand to their lips and hold it out to Katniss. This is an old gesture in District 12, which Katniss explains: "It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love" (24). When Effie Trinket, the escort of the District 12 tributes, tries to get the crowd to give Katniss a round of applause they refuse: "I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong" (24). Because of Katniss' actions the members of District 12, the proletariat, are overcoming their differences to rebel against the power structure and the way the bourgeoisie are controlling them.

The leaders of Panem are very afraid of another rebellion. Any sign of rebellion is severely punished. Katniss has learned to keep her criticism to herself: "When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble" (6). By ensuring that the people in the districts are afraid to openly critique the Capitol, they also prevent critical ideas from being shared. That way, someone who is critical of the leaders might think they are alone in thinking the way they do. The bows and arrows that Katniss' father made were good enough to be sold to other people, but he did not dare, even though the weapons would most likely only be used for hunting: "My father could have made good money selling them, but if the officials found out he would be publicly executed for inciting a rebellion" (5). The Capitol tries to prevent a rebellion by pinning the people in the districts against each other. One way of doing this is by offering those who want tesserae. To get one tesserae (one year's supply of grain and oil for one person), your name will be added an extra time to the reaping bowl. Katniss explains the tesserae as "A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust

one another” (14). If the people in the districts do not trust each other they are less likely to come together as a group and rebel. As mentioned earlier, keeping the proletariat in “warring factions” is a way for the bourgeoisie, or the leaders, to keep their economic power and ensure that the proletariat does not work together to rebel against the power structure.

The gold pin that Katniss receives from a friend before leaving District 12 for the Hunger Games is a subtle rebellion against the Capitol. The pin resembles a mockingjay: “It’s as if someone fashioned a small golden bird and then attached it to the ring only by its wing tips. I suddenly recognize it. A mockingjay. They’re funny birds and something of a slap in the face to the Capitol” (42). Mockingjays are a species that was created by mating female mockingbirds and the mutations that the Capitol made during the rebellion: the jabberjays. The jabberjays were created to spy on the Capitol’s enemies and could record entire human conversations. The rebels soon realised what the birds were and used them against the Capitol. The Capitol, then, released the birds into the wild, thinking they would die off since they were exclusively male. Instead, the birds mated with female mockingbirds, creating a new species: mockingjays. The mockingjays are not as adept at mimicking human sound as jabberjays: “They had lost the ability to enunciate words but could still mimic a range of human vocal sounds, from a child’s high-pitched warble to a man’s deep tones” (43). The birds were a failure for the Capitol and Katniss’ pin is reminder of that failure.

ii. The book’s critique of society

The Hunger Games is very much a critique of today’s society and its reality shows. James Blasingame writes about the book: “One of the most compelling things about the story, however, is how familiar it seems. It feels very much like the current brand of reality television in which the “stars” are real people from dire circumstances who have fabulous wealth dangled in front of them only to have it snatched away at the last moment” (Blasingame). He, and many other critiques, sees how the book is connected to today’s society by its similarity to how reality shows and entertainment is produced, even though *The Hunger Games* takes the concept of reality shows one step further. It can be argued that the book does this to emphasise its critique of reality shows. Jameson argues that because of the mediatisation of culture, we rely more and more on the version of reality which media presents. He says that “the media constitutes one of the more influential new products of late capitalism (print, internet, television, film) and a new means for the capitalist take-over of our lives” (Felluga Modules).

Collins has said herself: “I am fearful that today people see so many reality shows and dramas that when real news is on, its impact is completely lost on them” (Collins Interview Blasingame). The tributes in *The Hunger Games* become celebrities, much like the stars of reality TV-shows in our society. Even though almost all of the tributes are going to die they are treated as stars: “The people of the Capitol are going nuts, showering us with flowers, shouting our names, our first names, which they have bothered to find on the program” (70). These tributes were just ordinary people living in the districts until they were thrown into the Games. This is, as Blasingame noted, a very popular concept in today’s reality shows. The tributes are used by the Capitol for the benefit of capitalism. They are not seen as individuals as much as they are seen for their value. Even the citizens of Panem, who watch the Hunger Games, use the tributes for their own gain. The tributes are used for entertainment and people make bets on them, on who will kill who, who will win, etc. The tributes are seen as commodities. Marx believed that capitalism had a damaging effect on human psychology and a large part of that appears in “our relationship to commodity” (Tyson 62). The tributes are used for their exchange value and their sign-exchange value, i.e. how much money and/or status they can generate for someone else. The fact that the participants in the Hunger Games are called “tributes” is another example of how they are seen for their value and not as individuals, since a synonym for tribute is token.

There are several ways in which the Gamemakers try to enhance the entertainment value of the Games. First of all, it is technically not allowed to train for the Games but even though it is well known that the tributes from some of the wealthier districts train before the games, they are never punished. The fact that they are trained at combat and killing is thought to bring more excitement to the Games. Second, the arenas are built in ways that will give some entertainment. Katniss is, for example, sure that there will be wood in the arena. One of the arenas had no wood and many of the tributes froze to death: “It was considered very anticlimactic in the Capitol, all those quiet, bloodless deaths. Since then, there’s usually been wood to make fires” (39). Thirdly, the Gamemakers can control the arenas. They can control the weather and induce natural catastrophes. Katniss is chased by a forest fire which she realises is the making of the Gamemakers: “The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemakers-made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol are getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do” (173). Much like the Hunger Games, the reality shows in today’s society are not as much reality as they are controlled by the

production company. They are controlled in order to make them more interesting so that they will attract more viewers and in turn generate a profit. Adorno and Horkheimer write that “the stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers’ needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement” (Adorno and Horkheimer 144).

Over the course of history, using hunger as a weapon of war has been very popular among many leaders. When asked in an interview whether the social and political commentary of the book was intentional, Collins answered: “Yes. The socio-political overtones of *The Hunger Games* were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations” (Blasingame Interview). Using hunger as a weapon is very effective. Hunger moves the citizen’s focus from rebellion to survival. By keeping the proletariat hungry, the bourgeoisie makes sure that the proletariat will not have the time or the energy to rebel against the power structure.

The Hunger Games can also be seen as a critique of the division between first world countries and third world countries today, with the Capitol representing the first world countries and the districts representing third world countries. The further away from the Capitol a district is, the poorer it is. While the people in the Capitol live in excess, spending their time and money on luxury, the people in the districts work long days for very little money. This difference in life style comes almost as a shock to Katniss: “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 roll in and die for their entertainment?” (65). Being overweight or having wrinkles is a sign of success in District 12. This is not the case in the Capitol: “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 [...] But here it is different. Wrinkles aren’t desirable. A round belly isn’t a sign of success” (125). This difference in what is desirable and seen as success is the same as in the difference between first world countries and third world countries today. The leaders of first world countries often emphasise (and in some cases overlay) how backwards third world countries are. This is done to enforce the first world countries’ dominance over poorer countries. For example, western countries often focus on the parts of Africa where many people live in primitive conditions and let those parts represent the

whole of Africa. The Capitol does this as well: “The commentators are not sure what to say about the crowd’s refusal to applaud. The silent salute. One says that District 12 has always been a bit backward but that local customs can be charming” (46). The people in the Capitol are also very self-centred. When Katniss’ prep team (all citizens of the Capitol) talk about the Hunger Games, their focus is not on the dying children but on what they themselves were doing while certain events occurred: “Even though they are rattling on about the Games, it’s all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific moment occurred. ‘I was still in bed!’ ‘I had just had my eyebrows dyed!’ ‘I swear I nearly fainted!’ Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena” (355). This is very common behaviour in first world countries: instead of talking about an awful event, people like to focus on where they were or what they were doing when they found out about that particular event.

iii. Connection between the two critiques and how they support each other

Tyson writes that many Marxist critics are interested in cultural production such as art, music, film, etc. She writes: “For these critics, culture, in its narrower sense, is the primary bearer of ideology because it reaches many people in what seems to be an innocent form: entertainment” (Tyson 60). This can be applied to *The Hunger Games* in two ways: 1) The Games are televised and the people of Panem are forced to see them as entertainment while the Games are still a way for the Capitol to show who is in charge, and 2) The book is a form of entertainment at the same time as it critiques the society in which it is written.

Because the book is a form of entertainment and not a non-fiction book, it can transmit its ideology to unsuspecting readers. Since the book has become so popular many people discuss it, both online and in real life. This, in turn, leads to people seeing new things in the book and also becoming aware of the ideologies and critiques it transmits. When people discuss how Katniss critiques the society she is part of they are able to see how the book itself critiques the society we live in.

Postmodernism and late capitalism uses culture and mass culture as a way for the capitalist system to gain and keep control and power. In Collins’s book, the Hunger Games are a clear example of this. The Hunger Games are watched by every member of the society in Panem and it is a way for the leaders of Panem to control the people.

b. Marxist ideas in *The Hunger Games*

In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson writes: “For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities” (Tyson 53). This idea is relevant for *The Hunger Games* in two ways: 1) The Capitol’s motivation for keeping the districts, and 2) why the people in some districts see the Games as something honourable: the winner becomes famous and gets showered with prizes.

The people in the districts work to provide the Capitol with everything from coal to expensive jewellery. They do not have ownership over what they make which, in Marxist terms, makes them the proletariat. The Capitol, the bourgeoisie, control the districts and through that they also control the production. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie keep the proletariat in “warring factors that accomplish little to no social change” (Tyson 54). The Capitol keeps the districts separated with little to no communications between them. The only time the districts meet is in the Hunger Games arena where they are forced to kill each other. When Katniss and Rue become allies, they learn more about each other’s districts than they have ever been taught in school: “It’s interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in different districts to know about one another” (203). Marx believed that “were the proletariat of any given country to act as a group, regardless of their differences [...] the current power structure would be radically altered” (Tyson 54). Keeping the districts separated is a way for the Capitol to prevent that from happening. Because the districts are kept apart, and even pitted against each other, their inhabitants are unlikely to trust each other enough to start a revolution together.

Most people today hunger for fame and admiration in one way or another. Even Katniss is affected by the feeling of fame and stardom that comes with being a tribute in the Hunger Games: “The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can’t suppress my excitement” (70). Even though Katniss knows that these people will possibly watch her die as entertainment, their attention affects her. Through the Hunger Games, the leaders of Panem have introduced an ideology to the people, an ideology where fame and admiration are desired. According to late Marxism, culture is “the primary bearer of ideology because it reaches so many people in what seems to be an innocent form: entertainment” (Tyson 60). The leaders have used mass culture as a means of transmitting ideology to the people.

As mentioned earlier Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue: “Under monopoly, all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more

open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art” (Adorno and Horkheimer 121). The Hunger Games are a very useful tool for the leaders of Panem: “The Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it” (358). Katniss has managed to use the leaders’ own weapon against them and in doing so she has become a symbol of the proletariat rebellion: “That’s when I know that even though both of us would have eaten the berries, I am to blame for having the idea. I’m the instigator. I’m the one to be punished” (364).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the novel *The Hunger Games* has had a major impact on both youths and adults in today’s society. Katniss has, as a strong female character, inspired many girls and women to be more independent. She has inspired many to take action against injustice and cruelty. Katniss’ critique of the society she lives in inspires many readers to examine their own society and react against things they find unjust. This proves that the dual critique in *The Hunger Games* is a very effective way to spread the interest to look at a society in a critical way.

This essay has shown that *The Hunger Games* critiques late capitalism and the power structure capitalism supports, despite the fact that the novel is not particularly Marxist in itself. This essay has also shown that it is possible for a novel to critique the contemporary popular culture which it is itself a part of. Despite the fact that the media tries to focus on parts of the novel which have nothing to do with critiquing the society in order to hide the critique, many readers have picked up on the socio-political overtones in the novel. In my estimation, many people are discussing reality TV and the effect of the extreme forms of entertainment that are popular today much more now than before the publication of *The Hunger Games*, which suggests that the novel has had a great impact on the way people view the society they live in.

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