

Real or not real: History and media in The Hunger Games

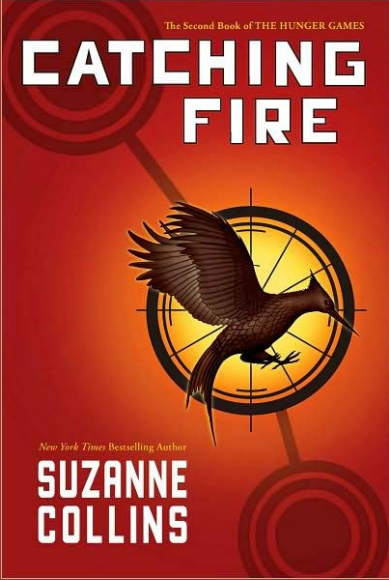
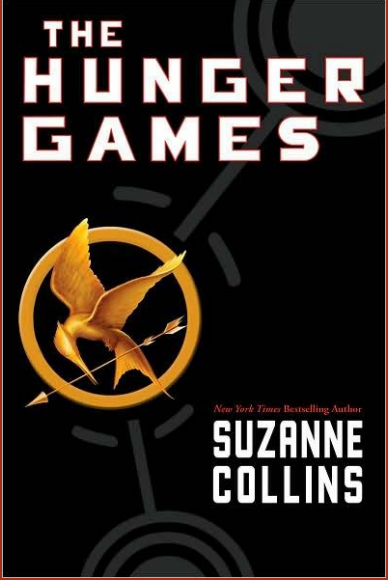
Author: Katherine Nofziger

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Real or Not Real: History and Media in *The Hunger Games*

Katherine Nofziger | History Honors Thesis

What does historicizing
The Hunger Games (2008)
by Suzanne Collins reveal
about its post-9/11 context?

The Hunger Games Series

The Hunger Games (2008), by Suzanne Collins
“The rules of the Hunger Games are simple...The last tribute standing wins.”

THG increasingly included on “Best Dystopian” lists with famous titles like *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *1984* (1949) by George Orwell.

- *THG* trilogy sold in 56 countries in 51 languages
- 65+ million book copies sold
- *THG* spent 5+ consecutive years on New York Times Bestseller List
- *THG* film grossed \$700 million internationally

This thesis explores:

- *THG*’s historical context
- Media and government portrayal in *THG*
- How *THG* became 21st century dystopian icon

THG’s Historical Context

THG’s Historical Context: Post-9/11 and the 21st Century

“In addition to millennial and post-millennial discourses, the catastrophic events of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath have created a new political context that is already generating an abundance of creative and critical writing.”

- *Twenty-First Century Fiction What Happens Now* (2013)

9/11 - Shattered feelings of Western triumphalism and “End of History” thesis.

US government’s “big and little” lies spread by mainstream media

- Iraq War (2003 start date)
- US government’s reasons for invading Iraq untrue
- 2002: Falsification of Private Jessica Lynch’s abduction at hands of Iraqi forces

State of Media in the US

- Media Oligarchy- Big Five media corporations control media in US: Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch’s, Viacom, and Bertelsmann.
- Millennials’ increasing media skepticism. 2010, 40% of Millennials agree news media has positive impact; 2015, drops to 27%.

THG’s Historical Context: Intersecting Reality TV and History

“It is not surprising that criticism of reality TV programs which involve humiliation of some kind or another should provoke the question: what do these programs say about the society that chooses to watch them for entertainment?”

- *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences* (2012)

Manipulation by reality TV producers and the audience’s voyeurism toes ethical lines.

- Schadenfreude at contestant’s misfortune and humiliation
- Causes desensitization and voyeuristic thrill in audience
- Over the past decade, programming increase in absurdities and oddities

- *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *The Real Housewives*

Real or Not Real: A Challenge to the Audience

The Hunger Games tells the dystopian story of Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark as they fight to survive the Capitol and the Hunger Games. Dystopian fiction is *a fictional portrayal of a future society with negative social and political developments we must avoid*.

According to *THG*, what negative social and political developments must we avoid?

Collins’ experience flipping between a Iraq War news story of soldier’s death and reality TV was an inspiration for writing *The Hunger Games*. Other influences include:

- Discrepancy of wealth in the US
- Television’s power and influence
- Possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon
- Issue of war

Message for *THG*’s audience: be conscious of media consumption by distinguishing “what is real and what is not real.”

“The Hunger Games is a reality television program. An extreme one, but that’s what it is...There’s this potential for desensitizing the audience so that when they see real tragedy playing out on the news, it doesn’t have the impact it should...And I think it’s very important not just for young people, but for adults to make sure they’re making the distinction. Because the young soldier’s dying in the war in Iraq, it’s not going to end at the commercial break. It’s not something fabricated, it’s not a game. It’s your life.”

Suzanne Collins invites her primary audience to ask for themselves in the “real” world: *What is real or not real in the TV you are watching?*

How well do *The Hunger Games* audiences meet Collins’ challenge?

Positive response to THG: Non-Profits and Movements

“Collins’ trilogy has become an electrifying force for altruism - more than the other YA fandoms - and, cheesy as this sounds, maybe people will leave hoping to make this world a better place.”

- Adam Spunberg, Hunger Games Fireside Chats

“Hunger is Not a Game” - March 2012 campaign for food aid policy reform

“The Real Hunger Games” - May 2012 movement protesting food stamp cuts

Negative response to THG: Marketing and Consumerism

Subway “Fiery Footlong Collection” - 2013

- Responds to critique on inequality and food shortage with spicy sandwich



CoverGirl Capitol Collection - 2013

- Created 12 makeup looks for the 12 districts in *THG*
- Misses critique and mimics the Capitol’s propaganda campaign



Beyond the Capitol: The Hunger Games in the Real World

The Hunger Games has also been incorporated into political discussions on the 2016 Presidential Election

These examples offers perspectives on how audience interprets *THG* and how they address political satire within THG and project onto American political arena.

Stephen Colbert & “The Hungry for Power Games”

Segments include “Walkingjay,” “Chafee-ng,” and “Iowa Cornucopia Bloodbath”

- Collectively have nearly 3 million YouTube views to date

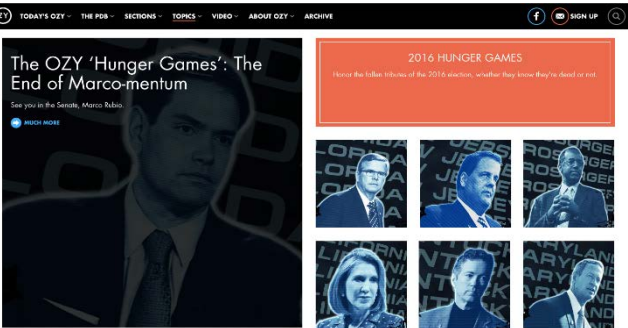
Satirizes the 2016 Iowa Caucus by comparing it to a bloody scene in *The Hunger Games*

- Dresses as Caesar Flickerman (played by Stanley Tucci), host and commentator of the Games



Other examples

- OZY.com - “2016 Hunger Games: Honor the fallen tributes of the 2016 election, whether they know they’re dead or not”



- On my personal Facebook feed - former classmates compare media and the 2016 election to *THG*



- Tumblr - user created content on microblogging platform compares presidential candidates to *THG* characters



Conclusions

Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* presents a dystopian series which engages with post-9/11 issues—including the use of media and war— for a Millennial, post-9/11 audience.

The effects of 9/11 deeply impacted how Collins presents media and war in her trilogy. The financial and critical success reveals that *THG* resonates with her American audience.

She presents refracted view of contemporary issues facing the United States. Her smartly crafted in *The Hunger Games* critiques desensitized media consumption challenges her audience to become politically literate is *The Hunger Games* has inspired both civic engagement and distortions of media pageantry.

Collins has created a new dystopian vision for a new millennium that challenges her audience to ask what is real and not real in the media around them. Whether the audience does or not is another question.

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Katherine Nofziger | MCAS Class of 2016
nofziger@bc.edu