*Alexandra Cheira*

# *"Big Brother is Watching You": The Hunger Games Trilogy as a Post-Apocalyptic Tale on the Destructiveness of All Forms of Totalitarianism*

## *About the author*

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## *Abstract*

This chapter investigates some similarities between Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as it argues that the trilogy is a futuristic dystopia of naked punishment masquerading as live entertainment compatible with Orwell's treatment of totalitarianism and the trope of Big Brother. The chapter also explores the first-person narrative voice used in the trilogy as a self-directed rhetoric of emotional detachment which is compatible with the female narrator's traumatic story and her life in a totalitarian regime. Finally, the chapter analyses the protagonist's inner voice in the context of trauma theory.

## *Keywords*

*he Hunger Games*, Big Brother, totalitarianism, panem et circenses, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

## 1 Introduction

*The Hunger Games* trilogy is a very interesting female bildungsroman narrated by their protagonist, sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, as she is forced once and again to make ethical choices as she is progressively able to make the odds in her favour. The first volume of the trilogy depicts the seventy-fourth edition of the Games, in which she volunteers after her beloved younger sister Prim has been randomly chosen and wins the game by refusing to engage in the Capitol's twisted ethics. Significantly, Katniss is even willing to kill herself so as to deny the Capitol a victor, hence thwarting the whole purpose of the game.

The last volume of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, tells the story of the united fight of the districts against the Capitol from the undercover District Thirteen. Katniss unwillingly becomes "the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution, [t]he person who the districts … can count on to blaze the path to victory" [2, p. 12]. However, she later discovers that after Panem's President Snow has been overthrown, a new form of totalitarianism in which she wants no part is being devised by the very same rebels who defeated him.

A futuristic dystopia of naked punishment masquerading as live entertainment in the context of a totalitarian regime's thwarted gaslighting

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The second volume of the trilogy, *Catching Fire*, traces the aftermath of the games to the seventy-fifth edition of the Games, the Quarter Quell, which marks a significant departure from the previous games. Meanwhile, Katniss is forced to visit all the districts with her fellow victor Peeta, and the first signs of rebellion – as well as her role as the bringer of hope to desperate people – are visible. In fact, although the rules stated that victors would never be considered again for another game, "as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors" [1, p. 208]. This means that Katniss, the only female victor in her district, is forced to re-enter the games. As she has been selected by the undercover rebels as the Mockingjay, "the one that survived despite the Capitol's plans, [t]he symbol of the rebellion" [1, p. 466], she is taken out of the game when the arena collapses after having managed to unite all the tributes – her would-be enemies – in their common rage against the Capitol.

politics, the trilogy as narrated by Katniss can be read as both a post-apocalyptic tale on the destructiveness of all forms of totalitarianism and a fictional trauma narrative. In fact, the narrative is "concerned with human-made traumatic situations" and is an implicit critique "of the ways social, economic and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma, [which] can be a powerful indicator of oppressive cultural institutions and practices" [3, p. 4]. In both cases, the reader is called upon to meditate on individual distress, collective responsibilities, and communal healing. This is mainly achieved by two complementary narrative devices: the striking use of Orwellian tropes which resonate in Collins's narrative; and a dialogic first-person narrative voice which alternates between detachment and emotion, which the author has used to engage the audience in such an intimacy that they feel they are participating in the story as they go along rather than reading it.

Hence, I am particularly interested in drawing similarities between George Orwell's *Nineteen*

*Eight-Four* and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy, so as to investigate the ways in which Orwell's novel has shaped the trilogy as well as the ways Collins reverses Orwellian tropes in her treatment of totalitarianism. Therefore, particular attention will be paid to the rhetoric model used in the trilogy, since it intentionally evinces the tendency to maintain the cold gaze and the reduction of emotionality to denounce the irreconcilable gap between oppressors and the oppressed, between the bizarre world of excess in all its multifarious ways the Capitol indulges in and the physical and mental deprivation the people in the districts are forced to endure in their daily lives.

## 2 The Politics of Dystopia in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy: Orwellian Echoes

Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy bears more than a passing resemblance to George Orwell's last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with regard to its particular use of dystopian tropes. For Pankowski, "the notion that Orwell himself was a crusader against totalitarianism" informs the novel, [4, p. 5]. In fact, Pankowski notably draws on Abbott Gleason's 2010 book chapter "Puritanism and Power Politics during the Cold War: George Orwell and Historical Objectivity" – which discusses Orwell's "Spanish experience" [5, pp. 73-74] – to argue that "Orwell hardened his views against fascism and totalitarianism when he fought for that 'crusading spirit' in the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1937, when he served as a Corporal for the Republican government, only exiting the conflict when he was declared medically unfit to continue following an attack in which Orwell was shot in the throat" [4, p. 5].

Published in 1949, Orwell's novel "arrived at the birth of the cold war between the Soviet and American blocs, soon after Winston Churchill fixed the phrase 'the Iron Curtain' in the language and as a 'Red Scare' gripped American society" [6, n. p.]. Therefore, Roger Luckhurst argues, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "remained one of the most significant and contested cultural products of that era of ideological struggle between capitalism and communism, its influence surviving long beyond the actual year 1984" [6, n. p.]. Edward Pankowski agrees that "[o]ne compelling argument for Orwell's influence over time is that Orwell outlined a society that contained, if not the details of what a totalitarian society taken to the extreme might look like, then at least the logic of what such a world would resemble" [4, p. 8]. In addition, Luckhurst selects a key factor to explain the novel's enduring popularity, namely the fact that it "managed to embed key abstract notions about 'totalitarianism' – a political term that emerged in the late 1930s – in striking concrete images, visceral and easy to grasp: the Thought Police; thought crimes and 'doublethink'; permanent 'telescreen' surveillance and the notion that 'Big Brother is Watching You'; and ending with the terrors of Room 101 as a vision of the dissolution of the self" [6, n. p.].

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This enmeshing of theoretical perceptions into compellingly solid representations of totalitarianism, I would argue, is also a staple of Suzanne Collins's trilogy: the Peacekeepers, armed forces at the service of the Capitol who keep the peace by smashing any hint of rebellion in the bud; the active encouragement of enmity and suspicion among the districts by the Capitol so as to prevent a joint uprising; and its most striking expression, the Hunger Games – televised games designed to keep the once rebellious districts in check by making their children kill each other in gladiator-like style – in which Orwell's slogan "Big Brother is

watching you" acquires a disturbing new level of changing the private and personal into a degrading public spectacle open to the voyeuristic gaze of the privileged few who will never experience first-hand the horrors of the games. In fact, Collins acknowledges a reversed form of Orwell's "doublethink" – which Malcolm Thorp accurately sums up as "the process of holding two contrary opinions as truth simultaneously, in spite of contradictions" [7, p. 11] – in the *Hunger Games* as a device for rationalising and validating false premises posing as the truth for both unwilling players and eager audience.

Hence, both novels can be argued to present instances of gaslighting narratives, consubstantiated in the fact that totalitarian regimes offer false narratives to the oppressed masses, deliberately making people doubt their perceptions and therefore anxious and distressed. Such a political regime does, in fact, draw from the inequality of the power balance that is made to tip in favour of the regime by making people feel vulnerable and afraid of a brutal backlash if they so much as question the regime. The most extreme example of the ability of totalitarian regimes to reinforce their power by annihilating any form of resistance is the graphic scene of Winston's torture, in which he is asked to agree that the torturer's hand shows five extended fingers – even though the thumb is hidden – if that is what the Party says. After all, O'Brien tells a disoriented Winston, "[w]hatever the Party holds to be truth, is truth" as "[i]t is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party" [8, p. 261]. Therefore, Utku Gürel's argument that in Orwell's novel "reality is in the hands of government, which has the power to influence every concept and discourse" since "[t]he main aim of the totalitarianism is that it undermines the individuals' right to lead their own life in which they possess autonomous thoughts free from the absolute truths imposed by the main ideology of the state" as it "aims to dictate what you think and how you behave" [9, p. 55], can also be extended to *The Hunger Games.*

In this light, Gürel's contention that Orwell's Oceania is "a stereotype of the despotic nation states of the 20th century so its authority depends on political indoctrination by the state institutions and the surveillance of the law enforcement agencies" [9, p. 47] is equally valid in the different context of Collins's *Hunger Games.* Likewise, Gürel's argument that "[w]ar is an apparatus of the Party assigned to stabilize the current established regime" [9, p. 47] can be transposed into the inception of the Hunger Games, as described by its female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen. In fact, Katniss clearly emphasises the power balance wholly favouring the Capitol to the detriment of the districts, which have been dearly paying for their joint insurrection for the past seventy-four years via the random sacrifice of two children per district who are forced to fight to the death as a forceful reminder of their inability to ever throw off the all-powerful Capitol [10, pp. 20-21]. Therefore, Gürel's discussion of the devious maintenance of power through physical and mental deprivation in Orwell's Oceania is particularly apt in the context of *The Hunger Games*:

> In order to keep the wheels of the machine turning, the production capacity of the industry is maintained to fulfill the vital needs of the Inner and Outer Party members, military inventory and intelligence organization, instead of providing a standardized form of living for healthy and educated individuals. Industrial potential is not channeled to supply food, clothing, medicine and practical tools for the masses in order to improve their living conditions, health care and food diet. Winston, for example, constantly suffers from 'a varicose ulcer above his right ankle' but never mentions a social insurance or any medical institution for treatment. A high level of living triggers higher expectations and awakens the liberal senses of people by drawing them off the dullness and desperate struggle of survival in which proles and the Outer Party members strive for bare subsistence. Well-fed, both mentally and physically contented citizens are negative subjects for the oligarchical state. [9, p. 50]

The same can be said of *The Hunger Games*, in which the wealthy, extravagantly clad dwellers of the Capitol – the elite ruling class equivalent to Orwell's Inner Party members – sharply

contrast with the food- and medicine-deprived inhabitants of the districts – Orwell's masses. Food, in particular, is the object of minute observation: for instance, in District 12 – Katniss's home – something as usual as plain bread is a commodity which must be traded for poached game, as not every citizen can afford it otherwise. There is a particularly harrowing scene in chapter six of *Catching Fire*, in which the new victors of the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, are the guest stars at President Snow's food-stuffed party. A newcomer to the Capitol, Katniss is not used to its lavish displays of multifarious plates stuffed with exotic delicacies and wants to sample everything until she is too full to eat anything else. When she announces that out loud, two guests reveal the secret for being able to fulfil her wish to taste all the food available: by making themselves puke with the help of some unknown liquid, they can keep on eating and having fun, and they proffer the wineglasses filled with the liquid [1, pp. 76-79].

Like Oceania, which "deliberately has difficulties in managing its economy and industrial capacity in order not to distribute enough food and products of everyday use to the market" [9, p. 55], so is scarceness in the districts "not derived from miscalculation or from lack of economics, rather economy is directed to deficiency by deliberate mismanagement" [9, p. 55]. The Capitol, in the footsteps of Orwell's Ministry of Plenty, "pushes scarcity and starvation forward", deliberately ensuring that "[t]he diet of the proles and the Outer Party members are below the required standards for sustaining a healthy body" [9, p. 55]. In fact, "[w]hile the Party elites" – and the Capitol – "have access to gather white bread, sugar, chocolate and wine", Winston "can scarcely buy dark-colored bread, saccharine tablets, bad coffee and Victory Gin" [9, p. 55], which "gave off a sickly, oily smell, as of a Chinese rice spirit", since "the stuff was like nitric acid, and moreover, in swallowing it one had the sensation of being hit on the back of the head with a rubber club" [8, p. 7].

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "[t]he distribution of quality foodstuff takes place in the black markets where Julia illegally purchases them" [9, p. 55]; in *The Hunger Games*, it is in the Hob, the black market in District 12 known as the one and only place to trade in forbidden items, such as liquor or poached game. In both Orwell's and Collins's novels, these banned goods are costly, but although black marketing and distribution of quality items are illegal, both the Party and the Capitol "tolerate black marketers, smugglers and bootleggers" [9, p. 55]. Yet, their perhaps surprising leniency can be accounted for by the fact that, since the masses "are regarded as cogwheels in the machine used for maintaining necessary labor for keeping the wheels of the economy turning in order to fulfill the luxurious necessities of the ruling class and financial expenses of the Thought Police, intelligence units and military" [9, pp. 61-62], they should be given a minimum of contentedness by being made to feel they can get away with minor transgressions – and, whenever possible, stupefied by strong liquor into submission – so they will not think of major offences against the regime.

In addition to this insidious way of making the odds always in favour of the Capitol, in a parodic subversion of the Games' motto "May the odds be ever in your favour" – repeatedly directed to the tributes who enter the arena year after year and are perfectly aware that their odds may be predetermined by their ability to gain the spectators' favour as much as by the arbitrary thwarting of the rules by the game-makers – Gürel points out that "[t]he authority mastering the entire social, historical and psychological discourses manifests the truth" [9, p. 55]. In other words, totalitarian regimes have perfected

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Like Orwell's novel, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is also a dystopia, "a distinctly 20th-century extension and inversion of the long tradition of the utopia, the imagined *eu-topos*, or 'good place'" which "typically envisage the relentless forces of a technologised society extending its power over the human race, offering a nightmare of the individual crushed by inhuman state forces" [6, n. p.]. Critics seem to agree that "one of the crucial questions about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is whether Orwell is interested in the potential for opposition to the totalitarian state, or if his last book offers only despair" [6, n. p.] given its ending. In fact, whether it is regarded as "principally anti-fascist", in the sense that it is "a chilling realisation of the totalitarian imaginings of the German or Italian fascist state", or "a humanist lament that is so despairing that it ends up building a monument to anti-humanism" [6, n. p.], the fact remains that Orwell's protagonist ends up becoming another puppet of the regime, even if such transformation is achieved under unimaginable duress, as specifically highlighted in Malcolm Thorp's careful synopsis:

> The misfortunes of Winston Smith, Orwell's anti-hero, reveal the political system of the ruling state of Oceania in *1984*. Winston's mid-life identity crisis leads him to question the wisdom of, and even to develop hatred for, Big Brother, that enormous face on posters in London. While no one knows if Big Brother even exists, he does personify the reality of power within Oceania. For the slogan 'Big Brother Is Watching You' becomes, as the story progresses, more than a simple platitude. Winston begins his rebellion with the thought that the state might control almost anything, but man still has a few cubic centimeters inside his skull that are his own which the all-pervasive Thought Police cannot penetrate. He discovers that this is not necessarily true. His rather amateurish dabblings into treason, as well as his illicit affair with the Anti-Sex league deviant, Julia, are from the beginning carefully monitored by the Thought Police. Through his ordeal of arrest and internment, Winston learns about the reality of power. After enduring the horrors of psychological rehabilitation, including an experience in the infamous Room 101, Winston emerges as a mindless puppet who in the end, along with the rest of the masses, loves Big Brother. [7, p. 9]

As Philip Rahv pointed out in the same year *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, "[i]n the prisons of the M.V.D. or the Ministry of Love suffering has been converted into its opposite – into the ineluctable means of surrender", in which the victim not only "crawls before his torturer" but also "identifies himself with him and grows to love him". In the end, Rahv rightly concludes, "[t]his is the ultimate horror" [11, p. 745]. The final caveat, June Deery surmises, is therefore as follows: "[w]hat is insidious, what Orwell was warning against, is that those who are being thus transformed will not be aware of it", since "[i]f any resistance exists, it will simply be co-opted by the practice of doublethink" [12, p. 123].

In the case of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, there is no such ambivalence. In fact, Collins's novels are clearly interested in the resources of human resistance as embodied in their female protagonist. In this light, the major difference between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the trilogy with regard to their treatment of totalitarianism is their very different ending. In fact, whereas all hopeful reminders of personal resistance in Orwell's novel are "systematically dismantled by the Party's reprogramming in the closing chapters of the book" [6, n. p.], Collins's feisty female protagonist is able to literally make the totalitarian regime in which she lives implode by becoming the symbol which unites the districts against their common oppressor while retaining her fundamental integrity – and maintaining her sense of self. In fact, Katniss refuses to be another pawn in the Games and plays by her own rules – which involve a clear-cut distinction between right and wrong:

> [Peeta] 'I don't know how to say it exactly. Only... I want to die as myself. (...) I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not.' [Katniss] 'Do you mean you won't kill anyone?' I ask.

> [Peeta] 'No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. 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.' [10, pp. 141-142]

This early conversation with fellow district tribute Peeta Mellark, on the eve of their entrance into the arena, voices a sentiment that will reverberate throughout the novels – the wish to retain one's fundamental selfhood – which, characteristically, is clearly articulated by Peeta, the wordsmith who voices fundamental truths that Katniss also lives by, although she is unable to formulate them as such.

When her younger sister Prim is selected the very first time her name is entered at the Reaping, Katniss volunteers as a tribute to save Prim from certain death at the Games due both to her young age (at twelve, she would be among the youngest) and to her physical frailty (which would disallow her from competing against, let alone beating, stronger tributes). That instinctive gesture, which emphasises Katniss's already acknowledged protectiveness of her sister, marks her out from the start as a highly unusual tribute as such selflessness is very seldom seen in selections.

Actually, with the marked exception of the strongest and most dangerous Career tributes in Districts 1 and 2, who train from a very young age and volunteer for the Games as a badge of personal honour, Katniss's volunteering is the first ever in District 12. However, unlike the Careers – who are used to winning the Games through a combination of sheer ruthlessness, significant physical strength and expert combat skills, as well as a total lack of empathy, compassion or moral scruples which is highly revealing of the successful indoctrination they were subjected to from a very young age and proves the extent to which Panem's totalitarian regime has effectively brainwashed the minds of its more vulnerable citizens through its gaslighting narrative – Katniss has neither volunteered for personal glory nor is she willing to compromise her moral values (assuming the Careers still have them) to win at all costs.

The total contrast she poses against the other tributes is enhanced in her extended protection of the youngest female tribute, twelve-year-old Rue, who reminds her of her sister Prim, and is especially present when Rue is fatally wounded by an arrow that Katniss was unable to deflect, and which targeted herself. After all, as Collins reminded her editor in the different context of Prim's almost random death at the end of *Mockingjay*, "This is not a fairy tale; it's a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned" [13, p. 15].

In fact, although alliances within the Games are customary, they are a commodity that does not entail either friendship or even any kind of liking: the stronger tributes usually wipe out weaker opponents by working as a pack and will only afterwards turn against each other until the last tribute standing. Conversely, Katniss truly mourns Rue's passing: at Rue's behest, Katniss sings for her the same song she used to sing her sister as life slowly drains from her body. Afterwards, Katniss – who never cries – sobs over Rue's body, and "[s]lowly, one stem at a time", she gathers an armful of wildflowers and "decorate[s] her body in the flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors" [10, p. 237]. This flowery tribute to a fallen friend will go a long way in the televised Games – especially in Rue's district.

## 3 *Panem et Circenses*: Televised Violence Posing as Entertainment

The story which Katniss narrates takes place in an imaginary country, Panem, "the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" [10, p. 21] and which was formed by "a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens" [10, p. 21].

The author of the trilogy, Suzanne Collins, has explained in a 2011 interview that the origin of both this country's peculiar name as well as the barbaric games which take place every year are modelled on Roman culture. In fact, the original Latin phrase *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses), which refers to the simple satisfaction of the most immediate wants of the masses, was

first used by the Roman satirist Juvenal circa A.D. 100 in his *Satire X* to denounce the practice of offering free wheat to Roman citizens, as well as expensive circus games, as a tool to gain political power. Moreover, Juvenal identified bread and circuses as the last enduring cares of a new Roman population which did not care for its historical birth right of political involvement:

> In keeping with the classical roots, I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment. The world of Panem, particularly the Capitol, is loaded with Roman references. Panem itself comes from the expression 'Panem et Circenses' which translates into 'Bread and Circuses.' [14, n. p.]

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Collins has commented on the way the sadistic violence exerted by and against the child tributes in the first games turns into open rebellion in the second games, and finally into a real war that will sweep the Capitol in its wake, hence turning televised spectacle into real life for the Capitol dwellers:

> In *The Hunger Games*, (...) people are oppressed, their children are being taken off and put in gladiator games. They're impoverished, they're starving, they're brutalized. It would for most people be an acceptable situation for rebellion. And then what happens is that it turns back around on itself. If you look at the arenas as individual wars or battles, you start out in the first one and you have a very classic gladiator game. By the second one it has evolved into what is the stage for the rebellion, because the arena is the one place that all the districts that cannot communicate with each other, it's the one place they can all watch together. So it's where the rebellion blows up. And then the third arena is the Capitol, which has now become an actual war. But in the process of becoming an actual war, in the process of becoming a rebellion, they have now replicated the original arena. So it's cyclical, and it's that cycle of violence that seems impossible for us to break out of. [16, n. p.]

In this light, the Hunger Games fulfil two complementary purposes: while they are a yearly reminder of the terrible price of rebellion for the inhabitants of the twelve districts, who are forced to send their children to a gruesome death in the games long after their uprising was smothered, they are also a spectacle meant to desensitise their viewers to the actual violence taking place in the arena and further remove the districts' players from the realm of reality experienced by entitled Capitol dwellers:

> *The Hunger Games* is a reality television program. An extreme one, but that's what it is. And while I think some of those shows can succeed on different levels, there's also the voyeuristic thrill, watching people being humiliated or brought to tears or suffering physically. And that's what I find very disturbing. 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. It all just blurs into one program. 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 soldiers 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. [15, n. p.]

The re-enactment of these games, devised by Game-makers with Roman-inspired names such as Seneca or Plutarch, comes as no surprise in a society which wants to keep on punishing the

districts for their rebellion against the Capitol. Seventy-four years prior to the start of the story, there were the Dark Days, "the uprising of the districts against the Capitol. Twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated" [10, p. 21]. In order that no one from the districts ever forgot they could not win a war against the Capitol, the Treaty of Treason established the Hunger Games as a yearly reminder. This starting premise, as Collins acknowledges, is taken from Greek mythology, namely the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which will be re-enacted every year by the tributes who are on their way to a certain death:

> A significant influence would have to be the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The myth tells how in punishment for past deeds, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the monstrous Minotaur. Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: 'Mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you. We'll kill your children.' And the thing is, it was allowed; the parents sat by powerless to stop it. Theseus, who was the son of the king, volunteered to go. I guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus. [14, n.p.]

In fact, Katniss will participate in two games in which her role as a female Theseus is clearly evinced. Before the selection for the Games, Katniss had willingly run the risk of increasing her chances of being selected for the Games by entering the Reaping lottery a few extra times in exchange for food for her family when she was unable to provide it herself using her considerable skills as a huntress in the woods near her home – rather than allowing her sister to do the same. In the first Games, she pairs up with Peeta after Rue's death and is loyal to the point of preferring to die with him rather than killing him so that the Capitol may have a winner. Likewise, in the second Games in which she participates, Katniss is given the pick of the litter regarding her choice of allies, and she chooses the elderly tribute who has volunteered for a sick girl and that, given her age, has no chance whatsoever of competing against stronger, fitter tributes three times younger than herself, as well as the only two tributes who have ever won the games using their brains rather than their strength. She, too, will destroy her personal Minotaur, embodied in the country's hateful ruler President Snow, by reminding herself of who the true enemy is – the Capitol, not her fellow tributes, no matter how much some of them want her dead.

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And, although Collins does not refer to it, a big influence on the whole concept of televised entertainment is of course Orwell's infamous "Big Brother is watching you" and its whole appendage of personal espionage for political purposes:

> The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that becomes instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised. [8, pp. 4-5]

As in the hardly ironical contemporary eponymous reality show, in the Hunger Games the cameras and microphones are ubiquitous and perpetually on. However, unlike contemporary audiences that can of course choose not to watch it, the inhabitants of the twelve districts are forced to watch the Games and impotently witness their loved ones' gruesome deaths from afar. And herein lies a big difference with regard to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, since Katniss will ultimately use the enemy's most cherished propaganda weapon against himself. By accurately realising the power of the televised content, Katniss does the unthinkable – she mourns her lost friend for all the districts to see that she is not another piece in the Games:

> They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it. [10, p. 237]

Such a rash act of genuine raw feeling mixed with defiance does get quick results. Before it earns her President Snow's wrath for exposing his carefully fabricated narrative of inbred suspicion among the districts for what it truly was, an attempt to coerce the people into submission by preventing them from joining their forces and therefore dividing them, Katniss's gesture marks a change in the Games – for the first time ever, a district helps a tribute who is not their own:

> [A] silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. (...) I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. (...) This bread came from District 11. I cautiously lift the still warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of District 11 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf. It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Haymitch to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own. [10, pp. 237-238]

Once more, as she acknowledges the value of the gift, Katniss uses the cameras to her advantage and directly thanks Rue's district for the bread offer:

> I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of District 11,' I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized. [10, pp. 237-238]

By doing this, Katniss is effectively disrupting the master narrative that holds districts to be natural enemies in order to win the Games by quietly offering a counternarrative which dispels the gaslighting effects of the propaganda the districts have been fed ever since they joined against the Capitol and lost.

In fact, critics acknowledge a direct link between "lies, gaslighting and propaganda" [17, p. 1037] and tend to agree that "[g]aslighting comes directly from blending modern communications, marketing, and advertising techniques with long-standing methods of propaganda" which were "simply waiting to be discovered by those with sufficient ambition and psychological makeup to use them" [18, p. 131]. In this case, by unleashing the totalitarian regime's weapon of choice against it, Katniss was ultimately able to make audiences understand how far they had been duped – and for what purpose.

## 4 Totalitarian Regimes and the Double Voice of Outward Conformity vs. Inner Resistance in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy: The Ethics of Detachment, Trauma, and Healing

There are lingering similarities between Nineteen *Eighty-Four* and Collins's trilogy in their treatment of resistance. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston dejectedly wonders if it had "always been like this", as he looks around the grimy canteen where he has lunch, and resentfully concludes that "[a]lways in your

stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to" [8, p. 62]. However, unlike the dreamy timeless quality of fairy tales, the sense that it had always been like this brings Winston a feeling of hopeless resignation against the futility of thinking of a time when things might have been different. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss shares Winston's realization that "he had no memories of anything greatly different" since in any time that "he could accurately remember, there had never been quite enough to eat, one had never had socks or underclothes that were not full of holes, furniture had always been battered and rickety, rooms underheated, … houses falling to pieces" [8, p. 62] as the Games have lasted for seventy-four years and life has always been like this. Yet, unlike Winston, she prefers to take action to improve her life in small ways, such as providing extra food for her family thanks to her skill in hunting, rather than meditate on the living conditions she has known all her life.

Orwell "explores the resistant potential of desire and sexuality, described as 'the force that would tear the Party to shreds'" [6, n. p.]. Likewise, Collins investigates the resilient potential of family ties personified in Katniss's protectiveness towards her little sister Prim – which significantly sets in motion the eventual crumbling down of the regime through Katniss's selfless volunteering to take her sister's place in the games – as well as the bonds of friendship as embodied in the relationship between Katniss and her would-be opponent turned ally, young tribute Rue, in addition to an exploration of the willingly self-sacrificing potential of romantic love which can ultimately destroy totalitarian Panem, as Peeta Mellark amply demonstrates in the first games when he asks Katniss to shoot him down, the last standing tribute, so that she at least can return home. Like Orwell, who "invokes the power of private memory to resist the state's rewriting of history and explores the reserve of the unconscious (Winston is always dreaming, dreams woven out of personal memory)" [6, n. p.], so does Collins conjure the power of the first-person narrator's lucid inner voice to expose Panem's long-lasting ruler President Snow's intellectual rationalisation of the games as a reminder for the districts as a thinly disguised validation of the individual and collective destruction brought about by totalitarianism. Unlike Orwell's anti-hero, however, Collins's heroine's inner voice is a catalyst for change.

The narrative voice in the trilogy is actually split into two very different modes of narration, which actually enhances the horror of what is being told at the same time as it furthers the reader's identification with the narrator. Hence, Katniss's outer voice, which is detachedly factual and collected, concisely states facts without passing any kind of judgment on them and reveals the persona she has adopted to survive in the oppressive political regime she lives in. Conversely, her inner voice is her emotionally charged running commentary on the facts she has previously detailed so coolly, openly questioning and criticizing the *status quo* against which at first Katniss has no intention to challenge.

The first glimpse into the way she reacts under severe pressure is actually apparent early on in the first novel of the trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, when she volunteers for her younger sister Prim. Therefore, when Katniss fiercely determines not to cry for the camera even in the first shock of having been accepted as a replacement for her sister, she is in fact hiding the feelings which would mark her as an easy target and a weakling in the games. This is signalled in the simple sentence "I will give no one that satisfaction", which indicates she will not allow herself to express emotion when that could put her at a disadvantage. However, only the reader is privy to her inner voice as Katniss has learnt "to hold [her] tongue and to turn [her] features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read [her] thoughts" [10, p. 7].

In the trilogy, the narrative technique of using a young girl's narrative viewpoint thus strongly increases identification with the protagonist. In fact, the reader will naturally be more sympathetic towards a narrator who has experienced first-hand the horrific situations she is narrating, even more so when that narrator is still so young. Moreover, the narrative technique used in the trilogy masterfully engages the reader as a witness of the moral injustice experienced

by the people in the districts, as Katniss coolly describes the electrical fence that surrounds the district so that people are discouraged from going into the woods to hunt, the reaping of the twelve-to eighteen-year-old girl and boy who will represent their district in the Games, the hurried farewell to their families before they are rushed to the Games, the beatings that take place to terrorise the citizens, the public executions of those who dare defy the Capitol by using an old sign of paying homage common to all the districts... The list goes on and on.

self-contained, unemotional rendering of facts resonates with deeper meanings in the context of the violent political oppression and the ensuing rebellion which the novels depict. This is apparent in Katniss's double voice. In fact, whenever Katniss narrates an event, she invariably starts by briefly stating bare facts, which are followed by an extended commentary of what those facts truly entail. The analysis of the syntax and language functions gives away the split narrative voice from the start. In fact, whereas the outer voice speaks

***In fact, whereas the outer voice speaks in concise, neutral sentences, the inner voice is characterised by the use of longer sentences, in which feelings such as anger and resentment are discernible.***

By exerting control over the people and preventing free expression, totalitarian regimes are indeed obviously reducing the outlets of rebellion as much as they can, as "the officially proclaimed ideology penetrates into the deepest reaches of societal structure and the totalitarian government seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens" [17, p. 272]. This means living in a state of perpetual fear and distrust in which people are unable to vent their inner feelings, sometimes even to themselves, as it is less dangerous not to think and to conform. As Katniss reminds the reader very early on in the narrative, this is even more tragic when it comes to children, who can innocently threaten their families just by saying what they think:

> 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 lead us to more trouble. [10, p. 7]

The narrative voice strikingly hovers between the cold facts of survival which Katniss witnesses every day without disparaging the regime in any way and her perceptive inner voice which turns her into an articulate critic of the country's ruling class. Hence, Katniss's

in concise, neutral sentences, the inner voice is characterised by the use of longer sentences, in which feelings such as anger and resentment are discernible. This strategy may well signal from the start the traumatic nature of the facts described, "which are not so much remembered but experienced or relived" [20, p. 35]. A very striking example is Katniss's depiction of the Hunger Games:

> The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins. [10, p. 20]

The rhetoric model used throughout the novels intentionally evinces the tendency to maintain the cold gaze and the reduction of emotionality to denounce the irreconcilable gap between the oppressors and the oppressed, between the bizarre world of excess in all the multifarious ways the Capitol indulges in and the physical and mental deprivation the people in the districts are forced to endure in their daily lives.

In fact, Katniss's use of a self-directed rhetoric of emotional detachment strikingly makes the reader feel the full depressing weight of the implications of the lack of freedom in all its manifestations. In this light, as totalitarian regimes attempt to virtually control all aspects of social life (including the economy, education, art, and science) – and more importantly still, the private life and morals of their citizens – they indeed force people to self-censor their words, as virtually anyone may be a detractor. This factual, unemotional rendering of the genesis and objectives of the Hunger Games could be said out loud anywhere in Panem, as it is not judgmental, inflamed or emotionally charged in any way. However, it significantly exemplifies at a deeper level the flat monochromatic discourse encouraged by the totalitarian regime of Panem. Conversely, the passionate tirade which follows it immediately belies Katniss's neutrality and apparent conformity to the *status quo*:

> Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen.' 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. The last tribute alive receives a life of ease back home, and their district will be showered with prizes, largely consisting of food. All year, the Capitol will show the winning district gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation. [10, pp. 21-22]

This dialogic voice also suggests Katniss's experience of traumatic situations, which she objectifies so as not to feel the inevitable pain which accompanies them, and her posterior reflection on those events and repressed feelings, in which she vents her grief and anger so that she is able to heal.

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The detachment with which Katniss describes her daily life could also be compatible with her own personal traumatic story in the wider background of the oppression she experiences every day. The main provider at home through the hunting skills her father taught her, she had to cope with her father's violent death in a mining accident, and her mother's subsequent depression, when she was eleven. At the same time, Katniss was forced to feed herself and her younger sister Prim while their mother was grieving for their father. Therefore, Katniss has never forgiven her mother for neglecting her beloved sister (and herself, in a lesser degree):

> [My mother] must have really loved [my father] to leave her home for the Seam. I try to remember that when all I can see is the woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones. I try to forgive her for my father's sake. But to be honest, I'm not the forgiving type. [10, p. 10]

In addition, Katniss says that "it isn't in my nature to go down without a fight, even when things seem insurmountable" [10, p. 44]. Hence, she evinces the psychological resilience that marks so many trauma survivors, and which will undoubtedly be decisive in her physical and mental survival in the games.

However, in light of the definition of trauma provided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Katniss is not immune to trauma:

> [D]irect personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behaviour). [21, p. 463]

In Katniss's case, all the above-mentioned definitions apply. In fact, she has survived two extremely violent games; she has witnessed the death of people whom she was very close to, such as her young ally Rue in the first game, or her stylist Cinna, who was bludgeoned to death in front of her seconds before she entered the arena in the second game; finally, she is tormented by the image of her father's death in the mining accident. Katniss's predominant emotion when faced with traumatic events is certainly horror, which is paradoxically expressed in short, unemotional utterances.

In this light, she deals with the accompanying effects of trauma as described by psychiatrist and psychohistorian R. J. Lifton – namely, death anxiety, survivor guilt, psychic numbing, impaired human relationships and the need for new meaning and significance – precisely by carrying out a kind of talking cure, as "[f]or traumatic memory to lose its power as a fragment and symptom and for it to be integrated into memory, a form of narrative reconstruction or re-externalization has to occur" [3, p. 3]. In fact, several trauma theorists and psychiatrists agree that when a survivor is encouraged to narrate their experience while emotionally reliving it in a safe context with the therapist – or, in this case, the reader, who is called upon to bear witness to Katniss's testimony – the abnormal processing of traumatic memories in which past and present intermingle through shifts back in time (even if they are unconscious, such as nightmares) can change.

This healing process is first expressed in Katniss's inner voice, and ultimately translated into writing when she decides to honour all her beloved fallen by writing about them. The facts are thus progressively replaced by the emotions which Katniss felt while experiencing them, and which she had silenced as they could literally kill her:

> Slowly, with many lost days, I come back to life. I try to follow Dr Aurelius's advice, just going through the motions, amazed when one finally has meaning again. I tell him my idea about the book, and a large box of parchment sheets arrives on the next train from the Capitol. I got the idea from our family's plant book. The place where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory. The page begins with the person's picture. A photo if we can find it. If not, a sketch or painting by Peeta. Then, in my most careful handwriting, come all the details it would be a crime to forget. Lady licking Prim's cheeks. My father's laugh. Peeta's father with the cookies. The colour of Finnick's eyes. What Cinna could do with a length of silk … Rue poised on her toes, arms slightly extended, like a bird about to take flight. On and on. We seal the pages with salt water and promises to live well to make their deaths count. [2, pp. 451- 452]

Her "indifferent mask" can finally be put to rest as she allows herself to feel, to remember, to let herself go – and to cry.

## 5 Conclusion

The Hunger Games are reminiscent of the Roman gladiator games, both with regard to the arenas and types of fighting that take place among the tributes and with regard to the fascination they exert on the people who live in the Capitol. The novels compellingly depict the voyeuristic allure of the games as a homicidal reality show for the carefree, well-off citizens of Panem, as opposed to a grim performance of ritual murder of the districts' hopes for reunion

in the person of their youngest and most helpless representatives, the child tributes who will be slaughtered year after year.

In addition, Collins convincingly draws on Orwell's figuration of Big Brother as the so-called protector of the people to denounce the pervasive threat that constant surveillance poses to democracy and individual rights. Therefore, Orwell's Big Brother is enacted in the person of President Snow, the ruler who provides free entertainment to the privileged few who will never be tributes and therefore view the televised games with the same gusto with which true reality shows are viewed by many people in our days. By exerting control over the people and preventing free expression, totalitarian regimes are indeed obviously reducing the outlets of rebellion as much as they can, as "the officially proclaimed ideology penetrates into the deepest reaches of societal structure and the totalitarian government seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens" [19, p. 243]. This means living in a state of perpetual fear and distrust in which people are unable to vent their inner feelings, sometimes even to themselves, as it is less dangerous not to think and to conform.

In order to survive in the oppressive totalitarian state she lives in, and afterwards in the two Games she is forced to enter, Katniss has adopted an indifferent outer mask (which is however pierced, for instance, in the two Games she enters on account of her young ally's death) which sharply contrasts with the articulate thoughts she voices for herself with regard to the Capitol's politics. This narrative strategy allows only the reader to have access to them so that her unfathomable mask can be preserved. In this light, Katniss's "indifferent mask" – and, by extension, her discursive practices and the effect they have on the reader – is read in the context of trauma theories and reader-response criticism, since "the effects of the inherited latency of trauma can be discerned in the broken or fragmented quality of testimonial narratives which demand new structures of reading or reception" [20, p. 38]. Hence, the reader is in the privileged position of being privy to Katniss's thoughts, in which her resentment towards and anger against the regime which has robbed her of her innocence is well apparent.

Therefore, I would argue, the trilogy is a literary exercise in the art of striking an emotional chord in the reader by deliberately abstaining from expressing emotion while telling a story of repression. In addition, it depicts the quest for personal freedom in the politically correct voice of the oppressed – in the eyes of a totalitarian regime, that is. At the same time, the first-person narrator allows the reader to understand from the start that thinking is her way of not conforming to the daily atrocities she witnesses while she wears the armour of her outward indifferent mask.

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