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The Hunger Games



DIRECTED BY: Gary Ross

CERTIFICATE: 12A

RUNNING TIME: 142 mins

COUNTRY: USA

RELEASE DATE: March 2012

KEYWORDS: dystopia; teenage protagonist; state control; survival

SUITABLE FOR: English and media/film studies at ages 12-16



INTRODUCTION

Every year in the ruins of what was once North America, the evil Capitol of the nation of Panem forces each of its twelve districts to send a teenage boy and girl to compete in *The Hunger Games*. A twisted punishment for a past uprising and an ongoing government intimidation tactic, The Hunger Games are a nationally televised event in which 'tributes' must fight with one another until one survivor remains.

Pitted against highly trained tributes who have prepared for these Games their entire lives, Katniss is forced to rely upon her sharp instincts as well as the mentorship of drunken former victor Haymitch Abernathy. If she's ever to return home to District 12, Katniss must make impossible choices in the arena that weigh survival against humanity and life against love.

BEFORE VIEWING

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

One way of understanding the film's impact is to consider the success of the book among its key audience. The paragraph below is taken from the official film website for The Hunger Games:

THE HUNGER GAMES is directed by Gary Ross, with a screenplay by Gary Ross and Suzanne Collins and Billy Ray, and produced by Nina Jacobson's Color Force in tandem with producer Jon Kilik. Suzanne Collins' best-selling novel, the first in a trilogy published by Scholastic that has over 23.5 million copies in print in the United States alone, has developed a massive global following. It has spent more than 160 consecutive weeks/more than three consecutive years to date on The New York Times bestseller list since its publication in September 2008, and has also appeared consistently on USA Today and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists.

The news that the first novel in *The Hunger Games* trilogy was due to be made into a film provoked a huge buzz and helped gain the project a massive following long before anyone could actually buy a cinema ticket. The movie was a massive box-office success by grossing \$685 million worldwide against its budget of \$78 million. The film made over eight times worldwide box office takings alone. The success of the film was clearly linked to the novel – in fact, the director Gary Ross' involvement was in part inspired by the enthusiasm his children expressed for the novel.

DISCUSS:

Based on all that you already know about the novel or the film, including from the synopsis and details here, work in small groups to list all the characteristics of the film that you think might have contributed to its commercial success



BOOK-TO-FILM: BY NUMBERS

The paperback edition of *The Hunger Games* is 454 pages in length. The average film script is about 120 pages long with each page roughly equating to a minute of screen time. At 142 minutes *The Hunger Games* film would have been based on a script closely derived from the novel but about 300 pages shorter than the original therefore, inevitably, parts of the novel will have been cut.

In the press pack for the film, author Suzanne Collins is quoted as saying:

'Not all the characters are going to make it to the screen...it was hard to let them go but I don't think that the choices damaged the emotional arc of the story.'

- What do you understand by this statement? What conclusions might you draw about the author's view of the film version?
- Suzanne Collin's comment above suggests that she is attached to her characters 'It was hard to let them go'. When creating a character for a novel, one of the first things an author will consider is what they will be called. Think about the name of the heroine Katniss Everdeen. What does the name sound like to you? Thinking about the sounds that make up the name, what ideas and associations does the name suggest?
- Gale nicknames Katniss 'Catnip'. You can research the plant at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nepeta_cataria – in what ways does it link with the character in the film and book; her context and impact on other people?
- Have a look at the rest of the cast list, for example on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). What associations come to mind as you look at the other characters' names? In some cases you will be able to find out more by looking up the names in a dictionary or thesaurus.



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KATNISS EVERDEEN - POSTER GIRL

There were a number of posters created to promote *The Hunger Games* but in the final days before the film's launch, the final design appeared on billboards, on buses and in the media. It carries some important hints about the film and the centrality of Katniss, who is played by Jennifer Lawrence. Look up the profile of this actress on a website such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). How old was she when the film was made, and what other acting credits did she have to her name?

Look closely at the poster and discuss the following questions:

- What messages do you feel this image contains about Katniss' character? Look closely at the way she is photographed, and any effects or aspects of design that seem to have been added to the original image.
- Through her role as a tribute, Katniss is meant to be a part of the propaganda mechanism for Panem, the great capital city, but through her actions volunteering in her sister's place, and the way she behaves during the games she becomes a symbol of resistance. Does this poster suggest either of these identities for her?
- Katniss is pointing her arrow at us. How does that serve the purposes of the poster as an element in the film's marketing campaign?
- Finally, the poster carries the caption: 'The World Is Watching' how is that both in keeping with the story and representative of the kind of language that might be used in promotional materials?

DURING VIEWING

VIEWPOINT

The novel that this film is based on is written in the first person, from Katniss' point-of-view. One of the challenges the screenwriters had to contend with was how to preserve Katniss at the centre of the story while not being able to tell the Hunger Games entirely from her point of view. There are a number of moments in the film when we do see and experience the world entirely as if we were in Katniss' shoes, with the camera literally taking her character's point-of-view so that we see things virtually through her eyes and in places, even the soundscape is from her perspective. This tends to happen at extreme moments and when she is experiencing powerful emotions, for example when searching for her sister Prim at the start of the 'Reaping' ceremony or when climbing on to the stage having volunteered for the Hunger Games.

■ As you watch, look out for any scenes that are shot from Katniss' point-of-view. Give examples of the different ways in which this effect is achieved, and the impact it has on the audience at particular moments. For example, consider how the use of a hand-held camera, the use of sound, the use of slow motion or other effects and camera movement such as rapid pans (where the camera moves quickly from one point of focus to another) add to the sense that we are experiencing things as the character herself is. (NB you can find a guide to terminology about camerawork at www.filmeducation.org/staffroom/film_in_the_classroom/film_language

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- Unlike in the book, there are a number of scenes in the film at which Katniss is not present. As you watch the film, keep a note of some of these and consider why the filmmakers felt it necessary to include them. In particular consider all the scenes in the gamemakers' 'studio' and how they add to the suspense and audience anticipation ahead of events on the ground in the 'arena'. Also consider the scenes between President Snow and chief gamemaker Seneca Crane and what they add. Note how Crane is granted a rare point-of-view shot near the end of the film in his final scene. Can you think why the director Ross may have adopted this camera angle for this scene when it was a type of shot far associated chiefly with Katniss in the rest of the film?
- The Hunger Games is a reminder of the work of specialists such as the costume designer and the hairdressing and make-up teams whose work often goes unnoticed in films with more contemporary and realistic settings. As you watch the film, make particular note of the contribution that Judianna Makovsky (costume) and Linda Flowers (chief hairdresser) make to The Hunger Games. In particular note how the costumes of the tributes in the Games themselves were distinguished (a departure from the novel) so that it was easier to spot them amid all the violent action and long shots in the arena itself.
- Finally, notice how the single account of Peeta's kindness in giving Katniss burnt bread, explored in one main passage early on in the novel, is much more slowly revealed in the film as Katniss remembers the incident in flashback. How does the editing of this memory in the film allow it to create extra tensions, and perhaps misdirection for the audience as to the relationship between Katniss and Peeta?

AFTER VIEWING

The action of the film is set in motion when Katniss volunteers herself for the Hunger Games on behalf of her district. But before the audience sees the Games take place, they are given a sense of what these are about.

- In what different ways is information about the first Games, the Reaping and the general state of society conveyed during the first twenty minutes or so of the film? Think about the ways in which hints and suggestions are given or ideas are explained. How does this compare to the way information about the Games is revealed in the novel, or in the film's marketing materials such as the trailer?
- In what ways do the filmmakers set up Katniss' volunteering herself for the games? Consider the way her relationships with her sister, and with her mother, are portrayed and think also about the characterisation of Katniss herself.

The trailer for *The Hunger Games* was criticised by some quarters of the press, saying that it gave little away about the possible violence the film might contain. Now that you have seen the whole film, go back to the trailer – find the trailer online, for example on the official website for the film – and watch it closely. What aspects of the film does the trailer concentrate on?



DESIGNING THE WORLD OF THE FILM

The first section of the film sets up clear contrasts between the life Katniss has led in District 12, and the world she is introduced to when she volunteers for the Games. It was essential that we get a very clear impression of District 12 and Panem in particular. Watch the opening section of the film from the moment Katniss leaves her sister Prim, until she enters the woods. We see the world she inhabits from her point of view. Try to describe that world from the montage of scenes that accompany her journey from her house to the security fence.

One aspect of making District 12 distinct was deciding to stick to a particular colour 'pallet' so that when Effie Trinket appears dressed in frills and purple – heralding the world of the capital, Panem – the contrast could not be greater. The production designer Philip Messina was faced with his biggest challenge bringing the monumental and artificial world of Panem to life. His task was to create a city that was both futuristic but also one that contained the kinds of spaces that were preferred under actual tyrants such as Hitler or Stalin. Do you feel he managed to achieve this feat?

One of the most important interiors was the training hall where the various 'tributes' were supposed to hone their skills and learn new ones before the Hunger Games began. The look Messina was after was of the most 'scary high school gym' ever – do you feel he achieved this goal?

Thinking particularly about costume and set design in the film, use two or three key examples to explain how the filmmakers set up a visual distinction between life for inhabitants of the capital and those from the districts.

KATNISS' JOURNEY

In the production notes for *The Hunger Games*, the following view of the story's protagonist appears: '...Few who have encountered Katniss have been able to resist the visceral excitement of watching her find her strength, resolve and heart while under the most extreme pressure a teenager could imagine. This was certainly true for the production executives at Lionsgate Entertainment. For them, Katniss' journey jumped off the pages of Suzanne Collins' literary sensation...with such beauty and force, they felt instantly it deserved to be captured on screen.'

Take this statement apart and work out precisely what you understand the character Katniss' journey in the film to be. Remembering that there are further films to be made, in what ways do you think the filmmakers suggest Katniss has further to travel at the film's end? What clues does the film's ending suggest and what further story arcs might be explored?



AGE-APPROPRIATE?

Lionsgate, the studio who produced the film, were keen for it to receive a 12A certificate in the UK because that would enable the age group that were fans of the book to see the film and enable the film to make the best financial return. Here is the definition of what kind of film a 12A covers:

Films under this category can contain mature themes, discrimination, soft drugs, moderate swear words, infrequent strong language and moderate violence, sex references and nudity. Sexual activity may be briefly and discreetly portrayed. Sexual violence may be implied or briefly indicated.

A source of controversy about the film's release was the fact that the version screened in the UK was subject to several cuts, with the British Board of Film Classification suggesting during the film's making, and again in the final version of the movie, that certain material was too strong for the 12A certificate. It seems a number of blood-spatter moments were deemed too explicit and were cut out however some critics made the point that the cutting of these scenes had an impact on the surrounding material. Without the bloodshed, they argued, more weight was given to the repercussions of the violence on those that survive, making that aspect more disturbing. It was called 'the Bambi-effect', recalling a terrible sequence in that Disney film when the mother deer is killed but we mainly experience it through the reactions of her fawn – making it so much more heart-wrenching.

DISCUSS:

Do you feel those that objected to the Hunger Games in this way had a point? How might an argument against this criticism be made – why might showing the impact of violence on those that remain alive be morally justified?

The nature of the Hunger Games themselves – a fight for survival and a fight to the death – is not a subject to be handled lightly. The tributes are told, early on in the process 'In two weeks, 23 of you will be dead' – 10% dying from infection, 20% from dehydration and the rest in combat with other tributes.

- Using your knowledge of the book, decide which sequences or moments, if portrayed might have pushed the film beyond a 12A. You may end up with quite a long list: quite apart from the violence, there is lot of pain and suffering in The Hunger Games as well as some more 'earthy' material as Katniss is prepared for her various appearances in Panem or while she struggles to survive in the Hunger Games environment
- Think back to the way the first massacre is shown, in the first moments of the games. Try to describe what you see and hear during this scene. How have the filmmakers shot and edited this scene, and what effects do you think these techniques are intended to achieve?



EXTENSION: SOCIAL CONTEXTS

There are a number of ways in which you could 'read' the film and the novel in order to link its themes and ideas to particular moments in history, or to aspects of contemporary culture.

Choose one of the following aspects of contemporary society and, working in small groups, create a short presentation explaining how the film relates to and can be compared with the issues and ideas associated with it:

- Competitive reality TV shows of recent years (think about the way that 'stars' of some of these shows are created as a 'product' for sale, where they have a commercial value).
- TV coverage of the Olympics and particularly the creation of champions and stars (think about the way in which success is celebrated).
- Riots and social unrest and the way these are portrayed in the media (particularly consider Rue's death and her district's response to this).

WRITING A REVIEW

Once you have seen the film, you can enter FIIm Education's Young Film Critic competition. To do this, create a 250-word review of the film – either written or recorded as an MP3 file or short video – describing your reactions to the film and your expectations of it before viewing. Further information, hints and tips are available on the Young Film Critic website: http://www.filmeducation.org/youngfilmcritic/

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