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No Child Left Unharmed: The Image of the Child in *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract: This project seeks to examine the role of the child presented in *The Hunger Games* by comparing the image of the child to that of the adult, both in the individual districts and in the utopian city of the Capitol. By using the contrasting images, I aim to show how imagery is used to draw on the significance of the misplaced roles. Director Gary Ross uses opposing color themes to show stark differences between the Capitol and the districts. However, I feel that a further argument can be made in the way that the children and adults are expressed on screen. The image of the child is important to look at in this film, because of how the Capitol uses children—both their image on screen and by tools within this society—to manipulate the power within the dystopian city of Panem.

Keywords: *Hunger Games*, film, English

In the dystopian society of Panem and the outlying districts, the roles between adult and child seem to be confused. Shau Ming Tan (2013) writes, “as children are forced into adulthood by the mechanisms of the Games, we see adults conversely infantilized as adult disempowerment emerges as the result of its own childhood traumas.” (p. 58). Indeed, in a world where the adults place all of their hopes onto the children, the young adolescents of the districts hold the power within their own disabled societies. The Capitol—the utopian city of the wealthy—initiates this displacement by rewarding its citizens according to age. The purpose of this paper is to examine the language and imagery presented in the film in order to draw a conclusion on whether or not the roles of the adult and the child have been reversed.

Children in the Districts and the Role of the Capitol

In *The Hunger Games*, directed by Gary Ross (2012), the young citizens of the districts are able to take tesserae in order to feed other members of their family. Tessera is a token that represents a year’s worth of grain and is traded for an additional chance that their name will be picked during the reaping—the ceremony that chooses who will compete in the games. The tesserae are only one example of how the Capitol shifts the roles of power as it seeks to reward its citizens according to age, only to ultimately punish the

people in the districts by forcing the adolescents to fight to the death. Indeed, as the Capitol places the children of the districts into the role of the provider, it challenges the traditional role of the parent. Not only are the parents no longer able to help feed the family, but parents are also putting the lives of their children into danger by taking tesserae. As the Capitol rewards the children for claiming tesserae, the children bring home food for the parents, and the parents are removed from the role of the protector which should stand between the child and the Capitol.

While childhood is presented in the outlying districts of Panem as a stage in which the children become the family’s source for food—and therefore survival—both the Capitol and the Games present an image of childhood as something both skewed and completely separated from the harsh images that are shown in the districts. The first example seen in the film is how there are many children in the districts—specifically district Twelve—whereas, there are only few shots of children once the audience enters into the Capitol.

One of the best scenes highlighting how many children are in a seemingly small district compared to the children who are shown in the Capitol is the scene of the reaping. Director Gary Ross uses a panning camera movement that is both rushed and sporadic, showing glimpses of pale, washed out children awaiting the news of

who will be picked as tribute. While there seems to be rows upon rows of adolescents, there is only a brief glimpse of a small group of parents who are being guarded by a line of Peacekeepers, sent from the Capitol to act as a security force to maintain order in each district.

The plethora of children in the so-called “audience” of the reaping compared to the small number of adults who are separated and placed in the back of the crowd seems to suggest the Capitol speaks to adolescents directly, rather than to the parents in the back, whose view is obscured by the Peacekeepers. The parents are shown huddled together in the back of the open viewing area, while a line of seemingly connected men in white, shiny, plastic riot suits stands before and around them.

A brief history of the necessity of the Games is shown on the large screen in front of the crowd—a history that is very well known by the adults of the districts and most of the older children. This is one of the first indicators that the government is trying to access control over the children because it suggests brainwashing. Snow’s voice booms over the crowd, reciting, “War, terrible war. Widows, orphans, a motherless child. This was the uprising that rocked our land. Thirteen districts rebelled against the country that fed them, loved them, protected them” (*The Hunger Games*, 2012). It is during this initial part of Snow’s speech that we see how much power is placed upon the children. Snow’s words emphasize the youths’ power within their own societies as Snow separates the adolescents from their parents by suggesting the government filled the parental roles. His emphasis on the support that the government was able to give as the provider, is reiterated by his repetition of the word “them.” By repeating the word “them,” he further emphasizes the support of the government and also pushes the separated “them” further away. Not only does he use this first part of the speech to separate the districts from the Capitol, but he also uses the initial examples of the people who were displaced during the war to show a separation between child and adult.

First, Snow uses three examples of people who were affected by the war: the widows, the orphans, and a motherless child. In the first instance he uses widows and removes the father, the strongest provider of the family—who coincidentally is also missing from the protagonist’s home. He then lists orphans and a motherless child. By giving an example of an orphan who has lost both parents and then reiterating a child who is “motherless,” he further removes not only the father and both parents, but also the nurturer, the mother. Once he has removed the parents from this first part of his speech, he replaces the parental roles with the government. He recites, “Thirteen districts rebelled against the country that fed them, loved them, protected them” (*The Hunger Games*, 2012). While he is careful to include the betrayal of the citizens, he also cleverly includes that, even when the families were not separated by the war, the main provider was the Capitol. The Capitol fed, loved, and protected the citizens. This suggests that not only did the Capitol act as a provider before the war for its citizens, but also that when the children had lost one if not both of their parents because of the war, the Capitol was the only source for protection, sustenance, and love.

Ross reiterates the point that Snow is speaking directly to the children by panning the children’s faces and actions—as they grasp for each other’s hands—while President Snow’s voice booms over the crowd. By showing the children reaching for one another, Ross is able to further show that there are no parents or guardians to cling to. Although there are brief images of war and a deserted land on the large screen that is in front of the crowd, the majority of the scene shows the children’s reaction to the speech, or those who are preparing themselves for the reaping. President’s Snow’s removal of the parent’s power within the society is clearly shown in this moment because by addressing the children in this way, he is giving them a sense of false power and protection. He seems to suggest that the government will stand in place of the parents as a source of protection and support, but ultimately, they will have to face their own battles. In the next section

of his speech, he reminds the young men and women that while the Capitol is meant to act in a parental role to all members of the society, the children are the ones who must be punished for actions of the districts.

As images of war are shown on the large screen in front of the crowd, the President's words continue with a story of how the "traitors were defeated" but that one event would remain in place as a reminder: "And so it was decreed, that each year, the various districts of Panem would offer up in tribute, one young man and woman, to fight to the death in a pageant of honor, courage, and sacrifice. The lone victor, bathed in riches, would serve as a reminder of our generosity and our forgiveness. This is how we remember our past. This is how we safeguard our future" (*The Hunger Games, 2012*). Snow's speech at first seems to include his audience in the utilitarian goal of the games—to sacrifice the few to benefit the many—but his first person pronouns seem to suggest the government benefits from the tribute's sacrifice, not the districts who are involved.

Snow first uses a possessive first person pronoun, when he states that the "lone victor" will "serve as a reminder of *our* generosity and *our* forgiveness." These pronouns qualify the generosity and forgiveness as belonging to the government of Panem, rather suggesting that they are inclusive of every citizen. Although the government of Panem places a small amount of power into the hands of the children by enabling them to provide for their families by taking tesserae, it is clear that the majority of the power will remain within the Capitol. By emphasizing the importance of the young men and women's role within the games, Snow also seems to suggest that the adolescents' roles within their societies are also the most powerful. The image of the child within the districts, therefore, is of a person who holds highest rank within their society, however small that society might be.

Representations of Children in the Capitol

Although very few actual children are shown in the Capitol, the majority of adults appear childlike. While the young men and women of the

districts are shown wearing either black, gray, or pale blue clothing—as in the instance of the reaping scene—the citizens of the Capitol appear like overgrown children because of their bright florescent clothing and garish, overdone appearances. The two settings are further contrasted by difference of camera movement and distance of the shots. While the people of the districts are shown using a rushed and jumpy camera movement that only catches glimpses of a person, the citizens of the Capitol are shown using a steady camera movement that pauses gracefully at each group of people from a distance. Both men and woman appear with highly stylized makeup and hair, which is reminiscent of youth.

The young appearance of the adults in the Capitol translates into a strong obsession for youth; however, perhaps the biggest example is the culture's obsession with the young tributes of the Games.

As soon as the tributes are chosen in their districts—which is a televised event—and are taken to the Capitol, the young men and women are given a stylist to help them achieve a more acceptable look for the competition. The tributes' success in the Games is closely tied to the type and amount of sponsors they receive, as many of the citizens of the Capitol sponsor a tribute by sending those supplies during the games. Haymitch—the lone surviving victor from district Twelve of the Games who serves as the mentor to tributes of district twelve—first instructs Katniss on how to stay alive during the game: "You really want to know how to stay alive? You get people to like you" (*The Hunger Games, 2012*). Not only are the tributes' behaviors important, but their appearances and the personas that they choose to take on are important as well. The young men and women often dress up to play popular character types, because the amount number of sponsors that a tribute receives is directly affected by how the tributes are shown during televised interviews and events. Some of the contestants from the more successful and dominant districts—referred to as career tributes—arriving with names like "Glimmer" and "Marvel," are shown as provocative and powerful, and are trained with

basic survival skills and little mercy for the other contestants. Others from the less wealthy districts are either given a youthful appearance or a highly sexualized one. The contestants who are given a puerile demeanor are often the ones who lack the most skill and will have to heavily rely on the sympathy of sponsors, while the contestants who are shown as seductive are the more powerful and thus more likely to gain a sponsor's support because of their sex appeal.

In "The PR Wars: *The Hunger Games* Trilogy and Shakespeare's Second *Henriad*," Eskin (2012) discusses the importance of the public figure and the similarities between the protagonists in both *The Hunger Games* and the *Henriad*. In her article, Eskin specifically addresses how the image of the public figure is controlled, which is best shown by examining how Katniss is changed once she enters the Capitol. Eskin suggests that Katniss's image is manipulated by two specific people, her mentor Haymitch—who is in control of advocating for sponsors—and her Capitol-appointed stylist, Cinna. In the film, Katniss ultimately takes on the image of a young woman in love, which is hoped to gain popularity among sponsors as well to mask some the rebellion that she exhibits early in the film by showing resistance toward the Capitol. As Eskin explains Katniss's transition into her image provided by the Capitol, she writes, "Working for her survival, her public relations team fires up the country. As willing participants in the District 12 tributes' rise to prominence, neither Snow nor his Gamemakers realize the political implications of her growing popularity" (p. 181). Katniss's image ultimately serves as the symbol for the uprising of the districts, which is a further example of how images of children are important in the film.

The image of the child in the Capitol both idealizes and imitates youth. Not only do the citizens turn the young tributes into overnight celebrities by dressing them up in garish costume and televising interviews, but they also imitate the young contestants by purchasing youth for themselves. As Collins (2008) writes in the first *Hunger Games* book, the adults in the Capital

"effectively prey on and feed off young people, surrounding themselves with the paraphernalia of the youth at least in part because it gives the illusion that they are still young" (p. 81). The citizens in the Capitol purchase youth by either transforming their bodies with surgeries or prostituting the young victors of the Games. Indeed, much like in the districts that surround the Capitol and the Games themselves, the adolescents serve as susceptible prey for the citizens of the Capitol.

In "Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in *The Hunger Games*," Shau Ming Tan (2013) further discusses the importance of adolescent tributes, specifically Katniss, the young heroine of the film: "Children are lost and voices are silenced, and as Katniss fights against the dictates of society that demand this sacrifice she becomes 'the girl on fire,' fighting against the impotency of the burning child's cry, demanding that the adult world take notice" (Shau Ming Tan, 2013, p. 55). While the Capitol exploits the image of the child, the tributes who are selected represent a sort of purgatory between childhood and adulthood in which the children have to either die or become immortalized by the Capitol in their current state. Katniss's struggle during the Games is not only on for her own survival, but begins to take on a much larger significance as she refuses to conform to the Capitol's idea of what a child in the games should look like.

When Katniss arrives in the Capitol, she is shown getting ready for her stylist, but instead of the posh salon that one might expect, her procedure is reminiscent of a corpse being prepared for burial. The citizens who are preparing her are very clinical, working over her body as she lay under a lit table in a blue shapeless smock. They even consider "hosing her down" once more before she meets her stylist. The tributes are quite literally reborn into their acceptable roles once they enter into the Capitol. After the tributes are molded into the acceptable shapes that the Capitol requires, they take part in a parade, a ranking test—to assess their skill level in the game—and then they are interviewed. This process of introducing them to the people of the

Capitol acts as a way to get sponsor attention. Because there is no presence of labor within the Capitol, the child-like adults focus much of their time and energy on investing in the games.

In “Imagination: The Challenge of Techno-Utopia,” Gruenwald (2012) discusses how dystopian literature begins to mirror societal changes, specifically in the increase of technology. Gruenwald writes, “a novel dilemma looms over the horizon: what to do with all the free time once computers and machines take over the drudgery of work?” (p. 5). Although, in the case of *The Hunger Games*, it is not necessarily technology and machines that have taken over the drudgery of work, but rather the humans who are driven into slavery by their own government. As a result of the way in which Panem is organized, the adults within the Capitol are left with plenty of free time. When the film shows the entrance into the capital, there is a plethora of people, but no one seems to be really doing anything. There isn’t even a clear view of shops, eateries, and other establishments. It’s as if all of the labor and jobs exist within the districts and the people in the Capitol have nothing to worry about, other than their favorite tribute dying in the Games. This idea, that the adults have no responsibilities, reinforces the argument that the adults in the Capitol are attempting to mirror the image of the child because they don’t have a sense of what an adult should do. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2014), an adult is a person who has “reached the age of maturity; grown-up” (“adult” def. A1). Using this understanding of the term, the people who best exhibit signs of maturity—and therefore our current understanding of adulthood—are the adolescents in the districts, rather than the citizens in the Capitol.

The Representation of Adults

In “The Child Soldier and the Self in *Ender’s Game* and *The Hunger Games*,” Murphy (2012) discusses the portrayal of the child violence in young adult fiction. Murphy writes, “understanding these stories as allegories of how adults and children perceive each other—adults as violating, deceitful, and manipulative; children as

unknowably alien, unruly, and dangerously powerful—suggests that perhaps the most crucial story told here is the conflict between children and the adults they become” (p. 199). In *The Hunger Games*, there is a huge separation between the stage of childhood and the stage of adulthood. Because the pool of tributes are between the ages of twelve and eighteen, the Games seem to be a way of downgrading the child into adulthood by either killing them off entirely—thus causing them to never escape childhood—or causing emotional and psychological harm—which causes them to act as tuned out, barely functioning adults.

Shau Ming Tang (2013) suggests that the system of the Games is put into place in order to morph the children into “agents of their family’s survival” (p. 56). “Childhood is stripped away as families and adults offer up their children as potential sacrifice. In what will emerge as a common trope throughout the series, survival is intimately linked with death—in this case, adult survival meaning child death” (Shau Ming Tang, 2013, p. 56). In order for the child to survive within the Games, they have to die as a child. Because of the reversal of the roles between parent and child, the death of a child often means that the child loses any power that they might have had—for example, the ability to feed their family by taking tesserae.

Murphy argues that the emotional detachment that plagues Katniss during the film is caused by the “weakness and irrelevance of parental figures,” which sets up “a larger pattern of deliberate purposeful violence and injury inflicted on children by representatives of the adult world” (Murphy, 2014, p. 200). The Capitol uses violence both towards and against the children, as it sets them up to be ruthless killers at the sacrifice of the other children. Murphy writes, “Katniss undergoes a similar repeated process of realizing how her violence and power are actually created by the adults in charge. The realization leads her to question the purpose of that power. From the very beginning she recognizes that the Games are a sick method of control and that the Capitol is an oppressor, but Katniss nonetheless refers to Peeta

and the other children in the arena as her ‘enemies’ or the other ‘tributes’—both terms suggesting the Capitol’s perspective” (pp. 203-204). Indeed, as Katniss struggles with the image that the Capitol has supplied her, she realizes that it is one that she must keep to insure her survival. Although she is able to question both the purpose of her power and the power of the government, she is only able to do so by showing the other citizens from her limited perspective.

Because this dystopian society is obsessed with image, the power that Katniss ultimately uses is her own. Katniss explores her power by pushing against the boundaries of her image. In the novel, Katniss reflects that pressuring the children to kill each other allows the Capitol to warn the children that they “are at their mercy” (Collins, 2008, p. 18). Although this moment seems to refer to the children who are playing in the games, the scared images of the children playing in the Games are shown for all of Panem, which suggests that the Capitol is also reminding everyone who is in charge. And while Katniss is forced to play the Game, she is able to use her projected image to inspire a rebellion within the districts.

As the images of the fighting children in the Games serve to remind the citizens of the government’s power over them—a power so strong that it succeeds in brainwashing the citizens to sacrifice their own children—violence becomes the one thing that ultimately sets the child apart from the adult. Shau Ming Tang (2013) writes, “the child’s form becomes the locus of government supremacy, the destruction of the child’s body, transforming children into commodities: objects of obsession, celebrity, and veneration” (p. 60). The images of the children of the Games provide the government of Panem the opportunity to both control the people of the Capitol through the commercialization of the child’s image and castigate the child’s body through the violence of the Games.

Shau Ming Tang (2013) writes, “If the adult world impresses violence, sacrifice, and objectification onto childhood, if children grow up as tools of their parent’s survival, if children are

denied entry into the Symbolic because the adult world denies them voice, then those children will grow into the same adults, who can only sit by and enable as these same ideologies are impressed onto their children” (p. 58). The people of the districts are as unable to escape the pattern of control as the citizens of the Capitol, who, instead of becoming trapped into a system that denies them a voice, become the voice that overwhelms and demands the televised violence. The people in the Capitol are as numb as the districts, but in the instance of the Capitol, they are unable to separate real violence from the violence that they are programmed to enjoy. The Games allows the citizens of the Capitol to luxuriate in the massacre from a distance, which in turn provides a filtering of the images—while they are very much a part of the Games, they are still removed. Katniss reflects on this removal while listening to her team of stylists talk about the previous Games: “it’s all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred...everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena” (Collins, 2008, p. 430). Indeed, the Citizens are unable to view the tributes as actual people, because to the Citizens of the Capitol, the images of the children being slaughtered on screen are just there for their own entertainment.

In the ending scene of the Games, Katniss is about to kill another tribute when he says, “Go on! Shoot, and we both go down and you win. Go on. I’m dead anyway. I always was, right? I couldn’t tell that until now. How’s that, is that what they want? I can still do this... I can still do this... One more kill. It’s the only thing I know how to do, bringing pride to my district. Not that it matters” (*The Hunger Games*, 2012). These last words of Cato—a career tribute—show that there is no transition out of the Games, just as there is no transition out of childhood. While the victors who return home are supposed to bring hope along with them, many end up being seemingly punished for their victories, as they become the mentors to the new tributes and are forced to relive the horrors of the games all over again.

In the dystopian society of Panem and the outlying districts, the roles between adult and child become confused as the image of the child symbolizes the most powerful aspect of their society. It is the image of the child, specifically the young men and women who compete in the Games, that the government of Panem uses to control its citizens. Either through manipulating the power that children hold within their own disabled districts, or the reformation of the tributes who are about to enter into the Games, the government seeks to use the child's image as a mean in which to rule.

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