

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1: More battle scenes and bloodshed—to what end?

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Directed by Francis Lawrence, screenplay by Danny Strong and Peter Craig, based on the novel by Suzanne Collins

Released a day earlier than planned, to large audiences, the third installment in the *Hunger Games* series, *Mockingjay—Part 1*, continues more or less where *Catching Fire* (2013) left off.

The films, based on the books by Suzanne Collins, portray a dystopian view of a future America, Panem (from the Latin phrase *Panem et Circenses* —“Bread and circuses”), in which children are chosen by lottery every year to fight to the death to win food for their districts. (The third and final book in Collins’ series has been divided into two films; *Mockingjay—Part 2* is scheduled to be released in a year’s time.)

The *Hunger Games* series follows Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), who comes from a poverty-stricken and thinly populated coal-mining region, as she wins the Games through cooperation and skill rather than brute force.

Meanwhile a portion of the contestants and oppressed layers of the populace at large demonstrate a growing rebelliousness as they unite behind Katniss.

President Coriolanus Snow (Donald Sutherland) and his administration meet this unrest with harsh retribution, as Katniss and her teammate Peeta Melark (Josh Hutcherson) are pushed into an unprecedented second round of Games, the Quarter Quell. They tour the country in *Catching Fire*, and Katniss withdraws principally in the interests of self-preservation. However, she is being advanced by certain powerful forces as a figurehead for an apparently imminent “revolution.”

Indeed, Katniss spends nearly the entirety of

Catching Fire oddly unaware of the plans being laid for her. By that film’s end, she has apparently been convinced of the need to accept this role, while being spirited off the island on which the Quarter Quell was held, as a result of her outrage at the destruction by the government of her home district. *Mockingjay Part 1* picks up some weeks later, with Katniss reunited with her family in District 13, long rumored also to have been utterly destroyed. The district’s population, in fact, has retreated to massive underground bunkers. She was rescued, it turns out, by agents of rebel leader President Alma Coin (Julianne Moore) of District 13 on the advice of Plutarch Heavensbee (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the former chief of the Games, so she might act as the puppet leader of the growing revolt.

At first defiant and resistant to the idea of being “The Mockingjay,” Katniss eventually submits a list of demands centering on the rescue and pardon of her fellow tribute and (tepid) love interest, Peeta.

Initially resistant herself, President Coin, ostensible leader of the rebellion, is persuaded to make the deal by Heavensbee, a former advisor to President Snow who escaped Capitol City in the aftermath of the Games destroyed by Katniss. Heavensbee’s reasons have nothing to do with Katniss’ conviction or dedication to the cause of rebellion (she has none), but are down to her force of personality and the sympathy she has gained from Panem’s citizens while fighting for her life in the Hunger Games.

Katniss is directed to star in a number of propaganda films to be shown in the remaining districts as a means of improving morale. It’s quickly discovered, in some amusing scenes, that she is not a good actress, and Heavensbee and company cynically decide to send her

into some of the decimated districts and record her spontaneous reactions.

It becomes apparent that Coin, Heavensbee and the others have no regard for Katniss' well-being. The constant exposure of the girl to scenes of violent repression and death in order to capture her response on film borders on the depraved. She is sent to her own home District, 12, where the vast majority of people were killed and their bodies left in the street.

A certain attraction to the figure of a young woman from a poor background who opposes the ultra-wealthy, corrupt powers-that-be may still account for some of the success of the new film. However, to call *Mockingjay*'s story a drama is being somewhat generous. The *Hunger Games* phenomenon is dangerously wearing thin.

Although Jennifer Lawrence is an accomplished and talented actress, it is simply not fair to put anyone in the position of trying to breathe life into such superficial, puerile material. Still, she does her considerable best and, along with Hoffman, Woody Harrelson and Elizabeth Banks (returning as Haymitch Abernathy and Effie Trinket, respectively), manages to communicate what little content there is.

The rebellion Coin and company are promoting lacks any cohesion or substance. It is telling that although the story centers on a police-state wherein youth are sent to kill each other for scraps of food, the rebels are incapable of advancing one meaningful slogan, much less any sort of program beyond a vague wish for "freedom." There is no attempt to put forth any demands, merely the urge to "unite" under the banner of the *Mockingjay* to defeat President Snow. (Such an uprising tends to resemble a palace coup or perhaps one of the US-staged "color revolutions," as much as anything else.)

Indeed, the struggle reduces itself largely to one between Katniss and Snow—a personal battle in which the entire country is caught up as though by accident. While such a confrontation could be used to represent a broader situation, this is not done here. The focus is on the personal filthiness of Snow, on the one hand, and the heartsickness and desires of Katniss, on the other.

One of the major problems with this series, which we have previously commented on, is the lack of any thought-out or coherent perspective. The outlook of the author, Suzanne Collins, is decidedly liberal, and she

has explained in interviews that she wants what many people want: a better world. There is nothing wrong with that. However, in portraying the so-called rebels as little more than a heavily armed group seeking to overthrow an individual tyrant and willing to do anything to achieve that aim, the viewer receives a message wide open to interpretation.

This ambivalence has led to the *Hunger Games* series being hailed by both right- and so-called "left-wing" forces, all of which are able to project their own divergent ideas onto it.

But is the film truly ambivalent? This reviewer would say that it is not. In presenting Coin, Heavensbee and company in as ruthless and unprincipled a light as Snow, what is being suggested here? Snow's maneuverings to retain his position can reasonably be compared to Coin's willingness to sacrifice Katniss' sanity—and the lives of those with whom she sends the girl for photo ops—in order to "stir rebellion." Power—in any hands—is evil, a well-worn and false liberal assertion, seems to be the argument.

So, rebellion is not the answer: apparently, the only truly worthy pursuit is that of one's own interests. In fact, one of the few consistent themes in this series has been individualism—from Katniss' wish to run away with her loved ones in the first two films, to her deep confusion and blindness in this one. Unable to think of anything but the release of Peeta and willing to prostitute herself to achieve this end, she becomes not a hero, but a sap. This is a sad development for a character and story that did hold some promise.



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