

# *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2:* Worn seriously thin by now

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26 November 2015

The new (fourth and final) film based on the *Hunger Games* dystopian science fiction series, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2*, has now opened, to generally lackluster reviews and smaller than expected audiences. Francis Lawrence directed the film, along with the previous two in the series. Disconcertingly and sadly, Philip Seymour Hoffman appears in *Mockingjay—Part 2*. He died from a drug overdose in February 2014 while working on the film.

The new *Hunger Games* offering treats the climax of the struggle in Panem (a future North America) between the rebels—morally led by Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), the central character in the series—and the forces of the Capitol, the enclave where the wealthy and celebrated live, presided over by the tyrannical, Machiavellian President Coriolanus Snow (Donald Sutherland). Indeed, the film tends to reduce the conflict to a personal contest between the two, or perhaps three, taking into account Alma Coin (Julianne Moore), who fiercely aspires to Snow's position. There is virtually no social or political content to the conflict. With the death of Snow, according to what the rebels tell themselves, happiness will reign on earth.

Katniss volunteers to assassinate Snow, but instead ends up the member of a squad involved in the assault on the Capitol whose activities are being videoed and broadcast for propaganda purposes. Also part of this “star” team are her two suitors, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) and Gale Hawthorne (Liam Hemsworth). The squad undergoes various trials and adventures, losing most of its members to booby traps and other self-defense operations organized by Snow's forces, before taking part in a decisive attack. Katniss finally confronts President Snow, but he is not the only cynical conspirator, it turns out.

When the first film in the series, simply entitled *The*

*Hunger Games*, was released in March 2012, it generated a certain interest and even excitement in some quarters. It was something of an event that a major film studio was broaching questions of social inequality and poverty in the US, albeit in science fiction form and based on Suzanne Collins' books for younger readers. *The Hunger Games'* debut came only a few months after the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted and some of the film's actors perceived a connection between their movie and the protests.

We asked at the time, “Why does *The Hunger Games* strike a chord?” noting that the future Panem (from the Latin phrase *Panem et Circenses*—“Bread and circuses”) is “divided into 12 districts, in which a popular uprising has been violently quashed decades before. A thirteenth district was entirely wiped out in the repression...”

“As punishment for the defeated uprising, labeled an act of ‘treason’ by the authorities, each district is also obliged to send one girl and one boy every year—chosen by lottery—as ‘Tributes’ to the Capitol, where they participate in the Hunger Games, a televised combat staged in uninhabited terrain (a different one each time) that lasts until only one survivor remains. The reward is food for the winner's district.”

Katniss Everdeen, whose name references Thomas Hardy's heroine in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, comes from District 12, a region resembling poverty-stricken Appalachia. Her father has died in a coal mine accident. As we observed at the time, the sets and look of the first film were intended to heighten the contrast between the poverty and backwardness of District 12 and the economic and technological opulence of the Capitol, where President Coriolanus Snow holds sway (references to ancient Rome abound).

Moreover, there were obvious visual suggestions of

the Iraq and Afghanistan wars: “From the appearance of menacing hovercraft and the heavily armed (and hypocritically named) Peacekeepers to the Games’ control room, in which technicians manipulate the conditions of the competition and, on one occasion, launch fireballs (drone strikes?), the numerous references to America’s destructive and repressive military power seem clear.”

Even in the first film in the *Hunger Games* series, the intriguing elements were outweighed by the filmmakers’ social confusion, amorphousness and timidity. The presentation of the Games themselves, a special effects and action extravaganza, were the weakest and most evasive element of the film. “American fiction writers and filmmakers still find it easier to construct this sort of adventure scenario than to consider the implications of the social picture the author and filmmakers begin to sketch in this case, then pull back from,” we wrote.

By the time of Part 4, much of the initial social impetus, vague as it was, seems to have been worn away. Like the Occupy Wall Street movement, which was largely absorbed by the Democratic Party and the Obama re-election campaign, the *Hunger Games* series has degenerated into something thoroughly harmless and tepid. Many of those involved have made a great deal of money out of the enterprise.

Lawrence, who has an open and honest face, continues to make an impression. Moore and Sutherland are fine, but the material they have to work with is threadbare.

*Mockingjay—Part 2* has a few moments that suggest the characters, and the American population, are sick of war and violence. Everdeen’s retirement into purely domestic life at the end, while not entirely convincing, also hints at a disgust with the existing political system that goes beyond the limits of the film.

However, such moments are rare. The general feeling the film conveys is tiredness with the project itself, a “going through the motions” quality. *Mockingjay—Part 2* has a few bursts of action, and besides that, not much. The relationships among Everdeen and her two male admirers are largely dull and vacuous. Neither Hutcherson nor Hemsworth ever comes to life. The film is simply not interesting or lively.

It may be that everyone involved has merely grown a

little bored with a limited storyline whose more intriguing elements have inevitably been eroded. It is also possible that the original theme of social inequality now seems like old hat, that the affluent social milieu represented here, after a few rambunctious moments in 2011 and 2012, has largely settled down and either accepted or resigned itself to the policies of the Obama administration.

In 2012, Kentucky native Lawrence suggested that “We’ve seen this happen in history, where all of a sudden there’s this government and it controls its people by keeping them separated and hungry and weak, so that they’re not strong enough to fight back.” Today the actress’ principal concern seems to be that hacked Sony emails revealed that she made less than her male co-stars on *American Hustle* (2013). No doubt that was unfair, but with an income of \$52 million in 2015, Lawrence might spare a thought for those making a fraction of what every male or female film star and studio executive earns.



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