

## *The Hunger Games: Designing the Girl as a Spectacle*

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### **Abstract**

Since Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* was published, many analyses have pointed to the political, monetary, and even religious allegory of the text. Overlooked, however, is the central character Katniss and the effects of her control under the image-obsessed Capitol. In the televised world of the Hunger Games, Katniss is commodified by the Capitol to be stripped of her young innocence and changed into a spectacle. She must mask her natural beauty under makeup and flamboyant dress, inadvertently suffer starvation for the anorexic appeal, and ultimately lose her autonomy by sacrificing her body and emotion to titillate the audience. By scrutinizing Katniss's mental and physical transformation, I argue that *The Hunger Games* can be interpreted as a socio-cultural phenomenon of girls in popular culture today that have fallen victim to the idealized image set by the entertainment industry that confines them in the state of liminality: existing in two spaces of being an adult and child.

Keywords: *The Hunger Games*, child actor, popular culture, entertainment industry, sexualization, liminality, commodity.

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## Introduction

Untainted innocence has always attracted the public to the image of a child. The pervasive fascination of the child dates back to Victorian era which boasted the idealization and idolization of little girls that were for some authors, means of reconnecting with his own lost self (Robson, 2001, p. 3). Sadly, the gentle image of young girls is barely hanging on as the consumer culture of childhood has distorted the image of children to capture the consuming gaze. Fostered by the upsurge of mass media, commodification or objectification of children has been more prevalent and has alienated children to sway between 'normal' childhood and adulthood.

Since the popularity growth of Susan Collins's *The Hunger Games*, the young adult fiction has been discussed as an allegory of modern politics of power, global food crisis, economy and entertainment. In many of these analyses, the young girl Katniss Everdeen who is at the center of the chaos and the image-obsessed Capitol is overlooked. In the televised world of the Hunger Games, Katniss becomes an amateur actor, commodified by the Capitol to be a spectacle. The rigid makeover and training negate the young girl's natural beauty and ultimately her autonomy under the dominion of the higher power. By scrutinizing Katniss's mental and physical transformation, I argue that *The Hunger Games* unfolds the hazardous transition of children in today's entertainment industry that strips children from their normal state of growth and arrests them in a liminal state which is the main appeal for adult audiences viewing such child actors.

## Autonomy at Home

Living in one of the poorest districts in Panem did little to help Katniss's bare conditions after the death of her father followed by her mother's depression. With the inevitable tragedy, young Katniss had no choice but to substitute for the role of the breadwinner in the family.

Despite her duties, Katniss is unbounded by the domestic sphere, venturing out to the forest to hunt, forage for food and collect medicinal herbs. Nature is where Katniss feels she has control over her actions, "unencumbered by gender norms or the expectation to conform to them" (DeaVault, 2010, p. 192). According to Korpela and Hartig (2007), young people acquire natural sites as their 'special places; "the attachment to these places supports self-regulation and renewal of cognitive capacities needed to process events and experiences that challenge and balance pleasant and unpleasant emotions" (as cited in Lester & Maudsley, 2007, p. 48). Like so, not only does nature secure Katniss's identity by connecting her to the memories of her father which produces tranquility and confidence, but nature in the company of Gale also evokes Katniss to feel that "[she] can be herself" (Collins, 2008, p. 7)

Once Katniss volunteers on behalf of her sister to enter into the Games, her self-assuring lifestyle is cut short. By her selfless act, Katniss signs away her voice to the Capitol and such decision to protect and support her family by entering the Games parallels young individuals who enter into the modern labor market between ages of 16 to 19 (Sum, Khatiwada, Trubsky, Ross, McHugh, & Palma, 2014). Since there is no dispute that the Hunger Games is structured in a reality television format, Katniss is ineluctably the child actor within the frame of reality TV. However, the

consequence of her self-effacing decision to give up her autonomy to be obsequious to the rulings of the Capitol consists of exploitation and complicated experience at the threshold of adolescence. The performance and the Games created, packaged, and presented for the audience by the Capitol ultimately captures Katniss to be in the stage of liminality: not yet an adult but not quite child.

### **Redesigning the Child's Exterior**

Katniss's transformation as a child star starts as soon as she arrives in the Capitol. Since the in-between child or adult categories is seen as sacred in the entertainment (O'Connor, 2008, p. 116), Katniss cannot protect herself from the ruling of the Capitol of Panem. She must follow the rules and expectations according to the Games if she wants to survive. The moment Katniss and Peeta arrive in Panem, they marvel at the actual place they had watched on television:

The cameras haven't lied about its grandeur. If anything, they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes, like the flat round disks of hard candy we can never afford to buy at the tiny sweet shop in District 12. (Collins, 2008, p. 59)

Contrast to the flashy society, Katniss originates from a society where no one has the remotest idea about style. Rather, District 12 is preoccupied with greater longevity and obtaining a rounded figure, a symbol of achievement. Gresh (2011) rightly presents Capitol's infatuation of style over substance with that of the current society where "plastic surgery is a given, and without the touchups, air brushing, and other artistic flourishes . . . they can look beyond freakish" (p. 85). Like many celebrities or reality stars that undergo surgery or a complete makeover, Capitol is obsessed:

They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. . . But [in the Capitol] it is different. Wrinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success. (Collins, 2008, p. 124-125).

In this 'artificial' place, Katniss becomes the byproduct. Though looks are not the central aspect of winning the Games, it is significant in pulling in sponsors and procuring essentials for survival. Sponsors send useful tools such as food and medicine for the tributes as donation during the Games. Similarly, Katniss is first assigned to a manager Haymitch. In the world of acting, managers will help the child access the best acting classes, the perfect photographer and the right agents to mold their careers (Gubernatis, 2010, p. 33).

To attract more sponsors, Katniss enters the Remake Center where her prep team waxes her hairs, primps her nails, and scrubs her body clean. The stylists do not disappoint the Capitol with their "dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered grotesque" look (Collins, 2008, p. 63). Venia, one of Katniss's stylists illustrates the influence of flamboyant style in the Capitol as she is described to have "aqua air and gold tattoos above her eyebrows" (Collins, 2008, p. 61). Caesar Flickerman, the host of the Games, conceals himself "under a coating of pure white makeup" and always dyes his

hair in different color for every Hunger Games (Collins, 2008, p. 124). Clothes also have to be extensively ornate, skimpy, and showy to grab the attention of viewers. Katniss who wore leather hunting boots, trousers, a shirt and a dark long braid with a forage bag in District 12 is designed to conform to a standardized image on camera. To please the crowd for the opening ceremony of the Games, Katniss is forced into wearing a florid dress that will be lit on fire on the chariot ride into the streets:

I'm in a simple black unitard that covers me from ankle to neck. Shiny leather boots lace up to my knees. But it's the fluttering cape made of streams of orange, yellow, and red and the matching headpiece that define this costume. (Collins, 2008, p. 67)

As if attending a pageant, Katniss also undergoes rigorous training before she is sent out the raw arena. In reality, young girls go on rehearsals with their prepared acts to attract and acquire an agent to help them further their aspiring career. Such method of "dressed to the hilt, fed at banquets, tributes are interviewed in an *American Idol* fashion where like so, winners and runner ups tributes become television celebrities" (Gresh, 2011, p. 164). Coach Effie trains Katniss to relearn her walk and posture. She, however is not gentle with a young girl completely novice in this field. Instead, she smacks Katniss's hands when she tries to pull up her long dress that keeps getting caught under her heels.

The way to survival consists of constant remodeling of self even though it means being exploited emotionally and sometimes physically. In this regard, Katniss's rising status as a child star starts to demonstrate a "dangerous category in terms of its relation to the boundaries of social order" (O'Connor, 2008, p. 80). Unlike the society's understanding of natural behavior for children and what are 'normal,' Katniss and fellow young tributes are designed to sexualize their appearance.

### **De-sexualizing the Child**

However, it is not just the sexual appeal but the childlike characteristics that Katniss maintains which inevitably places her in an ambiguous status of a child star that is the real appealing factor for audiences. In reality, the central appeal of child stars is the smallness or immaturity of the child that makes them seem like any other 'normal' child in contrast to the size of her talent of success (O'Connor, 2008, p. 109) so the child is an object under adult control rather than subject of his or her own agency.

Likewise, Katniss and other young tributes' autonomy drown as the Capital remains the puppeteer of their move, even their consumption patterns. In the Hunger Games, cornucopia contains food and supplies essential to surviving in the Games. Yet, the amount and types of goods are regulated by the Capitol, by the wealthy and old who have no prior experience in the Games themselves. Cornucopia, a symbol of nourishment and abundance, ironically victimizes children of constant hunger and malnourishment. Katniss is kept extremely slender and small like the model child actress that after seeing the reflection of her emaciated body she confesses it is in a worse state than after her father's death.

By controlling her daily diet and also denying natural biological development, the Capitol de-sexualizes Katniss by seizing her potential curves. Layers of skin are scrubbed to expose younger skin and all her bodily hair, telltale signs of girl's bodily

development, are plucked out. Thus, Katniss enters into a state of an arrested child feeling “intensely vulnerable” (Collins, 2008, p. 61):

[The makeover process] has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty loam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the Muff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. (Collins, 2008, p. 61)

After the completion of the body modification, the stylists exclaim “Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!” (Collins, 2008, p. 62) as if they only saw the young girl as an animal to be groomed and exploited. To exacerbate her status, Katniss hunts and hurtles through obstacles as part of the Games while consuming almost no nutrition. Her habit of eating significantly less compared to the intense level of exercise harms her body. Especially for a young girl, excessive exercise on top of a low body weight can delay puberty (New, 2011). Such molding of the body to embody physical perfection is one of the qualities associated with the ultimate archetype of the “wonder child, or child star” (O’Connor, 2008, p. 105) that the entertainment industry seeks for.

Contrast to the disoriented Katniss, Flavius envies her “full body polish” and describes her body as having “not a flaw left.” The grotesque look Katniss once disparaged has now consumed her own, but she holds the gaze of the Capitol. The odd reaction by an onlooker on Katniss’s disfigured body is a spectacle on par with the main motivation of Hollywood as confessed by commentator Ellen Goodman: “The biggest success story of the entertainment industry is our ability to export insecurity: We can make any woman anywhere feel perfectly rotten about her shape” (as cited in Kale, 2011, p. 9). Thus, Katniss, as a symbol for young girls in the industry may suffer from such side effects that are obligated by the rulings. This is the life or death for the young in Hollywood. Objectified for the viewers while biologically being downsized by the control of the Capitol, Katniss stays a precocious child, trying to find herself.

### **Sexualizing the Child**

As the exalted child star, Katniss performs in the platform for entertainment to survive. Under the Capitol’s pervasive surveillance, Katniss adopts a public persona. She establishes a brand out of herself at the City Circle to impress the sponsors in the opening ceremony who will determine her fate. She disguises her true self in order to survive because “what matters to those who come for the show isn’t being, but seeming” (Coatney, 2012, p. 180).

Katniss spends rigorous time and effort on preparing for the competition to win the Games. In her dramatic entrance into the city, Katniss is instructed by Cinna to hold hands with Peeta. Feeling comfortable, she improvises by blowing a few kisses to the crowd who in turn showers her with flowers and cheers. Gradually understanding the strategy — to create drama to tantalize the crowd — Katniss plans to lure Peeta as her prey to make herself more likable by kissing his cheek and builds her own narrative in front of the camera.

One of her strongest performances is playing the role of star-crossed lovers regardless of her true feeling towards Peeta. Katniss has to constantly remind herself of the “romance thing” (Collins, 2008, p. 260) while caressing and kissing Peeta because under the confines of the Games, it is about life and death. The intimacy between the two teenagers, steps out from the boundary of innocence. The performative act of star-crossed lovers parallels the current society's use of tabloids to obtain fan favor or camera time that will help bring in more endorsement deals. Such is the desperate measures celebrities will undertake in defense of their going extinct from media. Katniss is a celebrity and a commodity that is a constant subject of gaze by the audience to survive in the Capitol, or in reality, in the limelight that she has to fabricate stories to advance publicity. Surprisingly, the star-crossed lover plays an unexpected device for Katniss to discover her womanhood:

[Peeta's] hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems natural and comforting. I don't want him to stop and he doesn't. (Collins, 2008, p. 260-261)

The unsuspected sexual tension perplexes the child actress since Katniss never questioned her sexuality prior to the Games. Her asexual relationship with Gale was only a pure sense of comfort and friendship. Starting to feel uncomfortable picturing Peeta naked may suggest her growing sexual feelings for him. Also, overwhelmed with fear that she might lose him, Katniss impulsively kisses Peeta and wishes more to protect him. Thus, with the realization that she can use her sexuality to garner power for her survival, Katniss begins to wonder if Peeta's actions are genuine or not. In playing the role of a grown-up by becoming the sexual object for the audience easily mentally and physically challenges the sixteen year old and her own identity.

Until near the end of the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, Katniss is sexual in her performance. After Katniss and Peeta's win, they sit on a single plush red velvet couch which reminds Katniss of a love chair. She sits so close to him that she feels “practically on his lap” (Collins, 2008, p. 354). To add to the steam, Katniss leans her head against Peeta's shoulders to which Peeta automatically puts his arms around her. The pose they are in evokes Katniss to remember the comfort she felt during the Games when the couple tried to warm themselves together. Once unmoved, Katniss unexpectedly faces her female status and thereby adheres to the traditional gender roles.

### **The True Girl Remains**

Because the readers know Katniss's inner thoughts as she acts certain scenes for the crowd, they get a full access pass to the exploited innocent Katniss behind the scenes. In the beginning stages of the interview, the young actor captivates the crowd through her awkward appeal. Her inability to lie, act arrogant, witty, funny, sexy, or mysterious characterizes Katniss's childlike innocence and occasional awkwardness. Such natural and innocent performance of child stars is the crux of their power (O'Connor, 2008, p. 110).

During her rehearsal for question-and-answer session of the pageant, Effie instructs Katniss to fake it to make it. Katniss is puzzled and angry that she has to force herself to please the crowd. She cannot be true to herself or the crowd. Hence she evades personal questions about her life, family and her interests during practice because the

past is her identity, her keepsake not to be shared among strangers. She states that in the end, "I am no one at all" (Collins, 2008, p. 118).

Katniss's inability to perform may be the greatest virtue and alibi in proving she is a suppressed, untainted girl who is well aware of herself amidst the empowerment of the Capitol. She is placed on the outskirts of her home where her identity and care has been developed thus she is in a liminal stage, her identity questioned. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that humans were naturally good and anything that is not natural has corrupted the natural state. Thus, in this argument, Katniss cannot disguise herself because her natural self of goodness overrides her artificial one.

Rousseau distinguishes between natural and physical inequality that influences one's characteristic. He believes that people in their natural state of being are primitive and prone to be drawn to what he refers to as "self-love," or *amour de soi* (Rousseau, 1923, xvii). This connotes the pursuit of self-interest not at the expense of others and concern for other's well-being with compassion that becomes the source of virtue. In contrast, "vanity," or *amour-propre* coined by Rousseau (1923) arose later in history in which man privilege himself over others and domination became a pleasure of the rich (p. 219).

Following Rousseau's argument, Katniss is the former; her character has been formed due to her environment—a place that "puts a premium on the unaffected virtues that are rooted in her nature (Coatney, 2012, p. 185). Her efforts to uphold herself and proclivity toward compassion—protecting her family while in Seam and protecting Peeta and Rue during the Games—fit the traits that Rousseau marks as being a "natural person," untainted by the wickedness of the society. Thus while the Capitol relentlessly attempts to have full control over her, Katniss also ruthlessly pursues to "preserve [herself, and consequently become [her] own master" (Rousseau, 1923, p. 6).

Restoration to her natural state is portrayed through the state of Katniss at the end of the Games. After her victory, Katniss no longer needs to impress the crowd. She can be herself outside the arena because it is not about life and death, it is about her. Unlike her blinding fire dress in the beginning, she wears an outfit that is reminiscent of candlelight to look as "girlish and innocent as possible" (Collins, 2008, p. 353). The rest of her grooming process has been significantly toned down, allowing her to look and act her age — the harmless girl:

My hair's loose, held back by a simple hairband. The makeup rounds and fills out the sharp angles of my face. A clear polish coats my nails. The sleeveless dress is gathered at my ribs, not my waist, largely eliminating any help the padding would have given my figure. The hem falls just to my knees. Without heels, you can see my true stature. I look, very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless. (Collins, 2008, p. 348-349)

Fortunately, the memory of family balances Katniss throughout the Games. She was constantly conscious of her end game that the moment she concludes her transient life in Panem and moves back to home, she regains her autonomy, a free space to reflect back on her identity: "I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not" (Collins, 2008, p. 363-364).

Not all girls in front of the camera are as lucky as Katniss. Girls in the entertainment industry are forced to grow up fast not because they want to but because the environment they have been pushed into produces them to be so. Adored child actress like Lindsay Lohan and Amanda Bynes are now in the tabloids for their infamous and sordid lives mixed with pills, drugs and alcohol. Once sheltered under parents and free of rigid laws, a girl must mask herself to act mature in front of the public and fellow entertainers and sometimes give into the pressure of their environment. The minute she comes in contact with the real world of entertainment where image is everything; she starts to lose her identity and become absorbed in the act of being in favor of the crowd rather than to love herself.

## **Conclusion**

Katniss Everdeen was amidst the process of learning to grow up through experience in her childhood home but had little choice but to sacrifice herself to the ruling of the Capitol. By entering into the Hunger Games, Katniss becomes the child actor and embodies features that many audiences seek in a child star: she is mysterious, bold like an adult but awkward like a child.

*The Hunger Games* draws upon the sequence of a young life interrupted by the corrupt society that polices her every move and aims to reshape and redesign her mental and physical features to appeal to the public. Katniss's subjection to the system of Capitol is analogous to real life experience of young aspiring entertainers that must acclimate to the standards of the society or entertainment industry to secure a position in the media. Whether real or performed, these girls stir up drama to be on demand by the public. In this sense, they are made into a brand through forceful transformation as spectacles by tending to the needs of the spectators and the industry.

Unfortunately during the remodeling process, girls are silenced while they are instructed in what to eat, how to act, and placed in a situation to confront gender stereotypes and even sexuality. Such case augments the already existing problem amongst young adolescent girls who enter the stage of identity crisis. Consequently, child stars become enslaved in the industry to inhabit the middle-zone.

Susan Collins has written a book that condemns modern consumerism's praising the spectacle of children as objects. The mental, emotional and physical abuse Katniss endures in her way to survival is disgraced in real society. Yet, through the novel, the objectification of a girl and the dangers of the public gaze is a reminder that the phenomenon is still highly persistent in pop culture and children are sufferers of their restrictions.

There is a limit to the correlation between the real world aspiring child actress and Katniss, however. Katniss survives against the barbaric and oppressive culture of the Capitol. Underneath her struggle, she constantly battles to retrieve her autonomy and independence she once had prior to the Hunger Games by means of recapping her motive behind the participation and who she is through her father's words that "as long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve" (Collins, 2008, p. 52) and her mother's "calm demeanor . . . when handling particularly bad cases" (Collins, 2008, p. 252). As she soliloquizes her name repeatedly as Katniss instead of "Girl on Fire,"

Katniss remained cognizant of her identity. Unfortunately in the modern society, only a few girls succeed without losing herself.

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