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The Hunger Games Article

“Why The Hunger Games' Katniss Everdeen is a role model for our times”

by Suzanne Moore

All hail Katniss Everdeen of The Hunger Games trilogy. If you are the mother of a pre-teen girl, you will know the whispered relief around these films. "About time. Go!" If you would like your teenage daughter to see something other than the underclass sobbing on a crass talent show, orange twenty-somethings Botoxing themselves, or girls who are just "naturally thin" and who giggle when their clothes just drop off, then you will already know about them. If, like me, you simply would like to see a young woman not defined by her relationship to men, crack open the pick 'n' mix.

Clearly I am not alone. Nor is my youngest. *Catching Fire*, the sequel to *The Hunger Games*, has had the fourth biggest box office weekend opening in history. Ever since the first film came out, my daughter read the books by Suzanne Collins and we have a shrine to Peeta, Katniss's fellow contestant.

The books are neither warm nor easy, but then dystopian futures of totalitarian states (Panem, as it is called) only work when they're not so far from the imagination. In *The Hunger Games*, the rich and powerful control the Capitol and dress in grotesque Gaga-ish costumes while the poor live out in the Districts and are treated with increasing contempt.

This is a police state where "peacekeepers" kill and torture. Hegemony¹ is maintained by giving them very little – that's why Katniss learned to hunt illegally – but staging huge spectacles: each District is "reaped" to find two people who are chosen for the televised Hunger Games.

So this is a satire on the kind of TV that its target audience watches. The games are a brutal contest to kill every other contestant. It is the logical conclusion of reality TV: survival of the fittest. At the centre of this is Katniss, played by the sparky Jennifer Lawrence, who is seen on red carpets in apparently awful outfits. What do I know? Every time I read these gown-downs, as I call them, I like the ones the fashionistas hate (Bjork wearing a swan being my all-time favourite). We have seen Lawrence being chatted up on camera by sleazoid Jack Nicholson, who, to be fair, is only three times her age. And we have seen her lose it in front of the paparazzi, screaming: "Stop. Stop. Stop." So she isn't just acting cool, she is cool and aware that she wants to keep her body healthy-looking, not a size zero.

The obligation to be a role model is daunting and modern. I can't remember wanting to be anyone other than Mr Spock and David Bowie. The female bit is blank – my memory is only full of girls I did not want to be or never imagined I could be.

Since then, we pretty much have a roll-call of politically correct heroines, but still have to go some way back to find tough, independent women, from Linda Hamilton in *Terminator*

¹leadership or dominance, usually over another group of people

to Sigourney Weaver in Alien, or Tarantino's fantasy of Uma Thurman in Kill Bill. Japanese cinema has produced some magnificent female characters, and, of course, we rewrite the "final girl" of the horror genre: in which, after several women have been raped/killed/tortured, the final girl turns the table and survives.

Lately though, for teenage girls, we have had Twilight's mopey and passive Bella Swan. Buffy the Vampire Slayer is long gone, so to see Katniss (more akin to Neo in The Matrix) as resilient and smart and reluctantly becoming a symbol of a revolution is quite something. Guys fall in love with her but she really has better things to do: the uprising. Unlike Russell Brand's fluffier talk of revolution, the movies do not shy away from the violence and executions that accompany the suppression of dissent, with the great Donald Sutherland's watery eyes conveying pure evil as the president.

For a glossy Hollywood product, the movie echoes 70s cult movies like Rollerball. But what feels different now is to have the main character as more than a love interest. The little girls sure do understand.

We have seen Olympian Rebecca Adlington weeping because her body is not "bikini ready", we have Oscar-winning Emma Thompson saying, at 54, she has to take whatever role she can get ... Yes, I know this is posh self-depreciation, but all female actors say this. When did cinematic progress for women stop? The early 80s? Tough, complex female characters have migrated to TV with Hollywood lagging behind – Borgen, The Killing, Homeland et al (although Carrie's jitters are now tiresome).

Sure, Katniss is an idealised fantasy anti-authoritarian heroine. She is also confused, stubborn and vulnerable. What she isn't is either "girly" or interested in riches. She makes her bow and arrows to bring down the system. Nothing is said about gender. She is taller than one of her partners and it's her physical and mental prowess that we root for.

Seeing our young heroine survive whatever the system throws at her, shooting a flaming arrow across a cultural landscape barren of images of young, self-contained female strength, is brilliant.

The world depicted here is of gross inequality, mass surveillance, brutal crushing of dissent, where the young are sacrificed and where there is real hunger. A fantasy of the future? So go Katniss Everdeen, as they say: "Happy Hunger Games. And may the odds be ever in your favour." After all, it's just a game. Just a movie.