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The Makings of a Contradictory Franchise: Revolutionary Melodrama and Cynicism in *The Hunger Games*

by JOE TOMPKINS

Abstract: This article examines *The Hunger Games* franchise (THG) as a case study for how capitalist media cynically mobilize revolutionary desire as a commercial strategy. It integrates ideology critique and media-industry analysis to examine THG as a melodramatic fantasy that, on the one hand, bids spectators to enjoy the act of desiring class revolution in the films while, on the other hand, deploying various textual and paratextual strategies that invite audiences to be cynical about such desire. As such, THG epitomizes the contradictions of spectacular “revolution”: asking viewers to simultaneously buy into and deconstruct the mediated pleasures of class war.

Marx and Engels begin *The Communist Manifesto* by arguing: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed. . . . Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”¹ In depicting the most general framework for class analysis, Marx and Engels reconfigure the history of social relations into a “more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.”²

A similar ur-narrative plays out in the blockbuster franchise *The Hunger Games* (THG), a transmedia production consisting of four films based on the novelistic trilogy of the same name by Suzanne Collins. Distributed by Lionsgate, the films are explicitly about class struggle and popular rebellion. They take place in the futuristic dystopia of Panem, a postapocalyptic plutocracy where a not-so-veiled

1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 222.

2 Marx and Engels, “Communist Manifesto,” 230.

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civil war looms between a lavishly rich Capitol and its outlying districts, each in varying states of poverty, where people work to extract resources for Panem's elite and starve in the process. Ruled by the despotic leader President Snow, the Capitol and its destitute territories mirror the actualities of global capital, as plutocrats preside over vast inequalities of wealth and brutal forms of apartheid. In dialectical fashion, the districts struggle to resist the power of the Capitol while the Capitol strives to subjugate the revolutionary power of the districts, and this antagonism persists amid glaring oppression and a militarized police force that masquerades under the Orwellian guise of peacekeeping.

At the heart of this struggle is the titular "Hunger Games," a televised death match between twenty-four teenage "tributes," all hailing from the districts and locked into a survivalist competition that hinges on equal parts brand recognition, brutal violence, and audience approval. The ostensible purpose of the Games is ceremonial: to commemorate The Dark Days, an erstwhile rebellion wherein the poorer districts tried, and failed, to overthrow the Capitol, forcing the revolutionary vanguard underground in the seemingly abandoned District 13. But the Games' true function is symbolic violence in the guise of entertainment, a ritualistic reminder of the sheer power of the Capitol and the futility of rebelling against it. In short, the Games exist to keep class conflict at bay, or, to paraphrase Guy Debord, to manifest a social relationship mediated by spectacle.³

Naturally, this same spectacle also makes for blockbuster entertainment, an ironic hallmark given the films' penchant for self-reflexivity, whence the horizon of media power turns back on itself to become its own integrated object.⁴ As Sady Doyle puts it in relation to *THG*, the franchise basically is what it critiques. Not only do the films invite us "to abhor the idea that people would watch children fight to the death . . . [while] showing us riveting scenes of children fighting to the death"; *Mockingjay—Part 1* (Francis Lawrence, 2014) in particular "asks us to be skeptical of 'revolutionary' media and celebrity, while giving us a 'revolutionary' blockbuster fronted by Jennifer Lawrence."⁵ Indeed, much like Lawrence's star power, the sign value of her character, Katniss Everdeen, is shown to be synonymous with her screen presence: once embedded among the rebels, Katniss effectively stars in their propaganda videos. So deployed, Katniss becomes the Mockingjay, an iconic symbol for both the revolution and the franchise.

The upshot of this allegorical twist is a generally "smart" blockbuster that mirrors the promotional realities of our own media-saturated culture.⁶ As the propagandistic

3 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>.

4 Debord describes the "integrated spectacle" as the highest stage of a spectacular society in which the spectacle has "integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it." Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998), 9.

5 Sady Doyle, "Mockingjay's Contradictory Revolution," *In These Times*, November 24, 2014, http://inthesetimes.com/article/17397/mockingjay_review.

6 See, for example, Danny Leigh, "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2: 'A Smart Blockbuster,'" *Financial Times*, November 19, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/88ac0bbe-8ed1-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b?mhq5j=e6>; Ben Sachs, "Mockingjay—Part 1 Is the Most Cynical Hunger Games Yet," *Chicago Reader*, November 27, 2014, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-hunger-games-mockingjay-part-1-francis-lawrence-jennifer-lawrence-suzanne-collins/Content?oid=15739300>.

maneuvers in *Mockingjay*—*Part 1*, for instance, appear to reflect the commercial publicity for the films (or is it the other way around?), the franchise invites us to see through the power of public images by, in effect, thematizing that power in the context of class war. This war is then redoubled in the films' online promotional materials, where it assumes the form of social media marketing, viral videos, and celebrity intertexts—all of which end up recentring the role of media power as part of *THG*'s commercial appeal.

Indeed, it is as if the films and their marketing extensions were saying, "We know that you know that blockbusters about class revolution are really nothing more than commercial hype, but precisely because you know this—because you're too smart to succumb to the promotional charms of the films—you can knowingly indulge their publicity." Against this backdrop, the spectacle of class war is made to fit blockbuster hype, or, what is the same thing, the films' depiction of class war is made to shore up a highly integrated commodity system in which, as Debord might say, the reflexive reality of media "no longer confronts the spectacle as something alien" but as part of the very reality that it spectacularly depicts.⁷ Far from subverting the power of blockbuster media, this gesture arguably reinforces it.

At the same time, *THG* unfolds according to a melodramatic story line that, in similarly reflexive fashion, dramatizes the system of class relations that precipitate a spectacular society. Much like *The Communist Manifesto*, in fact, *THG* tells the story of an entrenched class system that is composed of ruling and oppressed classes, and it does so, also like the *Manifesto*, from the melodramatic viewpoint of the oppressed. That perspective, in turn, helps to authenticate the call to revolutionary action by locating moral virtue with the rebels and villainy with the rulers while also dramatically heightening the back-and-forth clash between "two great hostile camps," "two great classes directly facing each other."⁸ No doubt that clash takes on a markedly different form in *THG* when compared to the *Manifesto*—more "cyber-feudal," perhaps, than capitalist—but it still recalls the "simplified class antagonisms" of Marx and Engels's famous work, the stark dichotomies of which make it easy for the reader to identify class villainy and desire its defeat.⁹ Hence "where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat" in the *Manifesto*, the violent overthrow of the Capitol lays the foundation for the revolutionary sway of the districts in *THG*. And where both texts represent class suffering to motivate revolutionary desire, both also foretell how the suffering victims will eventually overcome the regimes of class despotism.¹⁰

7 Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 9.

8 Marx and Engels, "Communist Manifesto," 222.

9 Both Mark Fisher and Daniel Zamora have argued that *THG* represents a class system that is more "cyber-feudal" than capitalist, which is to say a system that expropriates wealth by "extraeconomic" means (e.g., military, political) rather than through the mediation of the market. Mark Fisher, "Dystopia Now," *Mark Fisher ReBlog* (blog), <http://markfisherblog.tumblr.com/post/39217506447/dystopia-now>; Daniel Zamora, "Rebel without a Cause," *Jacobin*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/01/hunger-games-review-capitalism-revolution-mockingjay-suzanne-collins>. Marx and Engels refer to their own "simplified class antagonisms" in "Communist Manifesto," 222.

10 Marx and Engels, "Communist Manifesto," 222.

All together, this dynamic of media reflexivity and revolutionary melodrama finds expression in a Hollywood blockbuster that affords viewers the chance to confirm their own savvy relationship to spectacular revolution by calling attention to the very apparatus of publicity that renders that spectacle a branded commodity. In accordance with the logics of reflexivity, *THG* supplies a “morality tale about the dangers of a political system where the wealthy dominate,” only to couch that tale in a viral marketing scheme that revolves around—and asks us to identify with—a spectacular “Capitolist” system.¹¹ Accordingly, the franchise gives us a way to see through this setup—to be in the know, as it were—to cultivate an attitude of cynical awareness with respect to its own blockbuster-entertainment status. The result is a branded media space that bids spectators to enjoy the act of desiring class revolt while at the same time *not* taking that desire too seriously—staging an experience of militant class war that reflexively piques our very awareness of its fantasy construction.

The following sections aim to delineate that process, first by exploring the melodramatic structure that appeals to revolutionary desire in the films and second by examining the (para)textual techniques that invite audiences to be cynical of such desire in the realm of consumption. I argue that consumers are ultimately positioned to engage *THG*’s fantasy of class revolution ironically, in the process of reflexively seeing through it.

Revolutionary Melodrama and the Dictatorship of Class. As a way of organizing revolutionary desire in the films, *THG* constructs a melodramatic worldview that approaches the problem of class structure through the moral binaries of victims and villains, pathos and action, and spectacular scenes of suffering that cry out for retribution.¹² This mode of representation relies on spectacular exploits of revolutionary heroes who convey the “good” of class rebellion while inviting audiences to feel sympathy for the oppressed victims.

In schematic terms, *THG*’s class melodrama begins in the context of the Games. Here career tributes hailing from the wealthier districts (i.e., Districts 1, 2, and 4) enjoy the superior training and abundant resources of elite academies, which put them at a tremendous advantage during the competition. To the spectator, these tributes, who typically volunteer for the Games, appear positively evil in their desire for the kill, and they collude with one another once the contest begins to monopolize the limited cache of weapons, food, and water (the “cornucopia”). Meanwhile, tributes hailing from the poorer districts (Districts 10–12) enter the Games reluctantly, because their poverty makes them less likely to survive the contest. Nonetheless, families have the option to receive extra rations of grain and oil (“tesserae”) in exchange for additional entries in

11 Steven Zeitchik, “What ‘The Hunger Games’ Really Means,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/24/entertainment/la-et-hunger-politics-20120324>. For more on the logics of mediated reflexivity, see Mark Andrejevic, “Reflexivity,” in *Keywords for Media Studies*, ed. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

12 This formulation synthesizes arguments about melodrama made in Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Christine Gledhill, introduction to *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987); and Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

the “reaping,” where tributes are selected by lottery. This system applies to all twelve districts, but the poorest families are most likely to exchange reaping entries for food, so they have a greater chance of being selected for the Games. These circumstances underscore the class divide that propels the competition, and they disclose a world where “pitting every district against the others” is a way of maintaining class structure.¹³

This structure becomes even clearer in the context of District 12, the poorest of the thirteen districts, where occupants work all day to mine coal for the Capitol and Katniss spends her time hunting game to avoid starvation. Against this backdrop, the destitution of the districts is juxtaposed to the wealth of the Capitol, where Panem’s richest and most powerful citizens spend their days “decorating their bodies” and “waiting for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment.”¹⁴ When Katniss finally arrives at the Capitol in the run-up to the first Games, she is awestruck by the “oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces” whose extravagant resources confirm that they have “never missed a meal.”¹⁵ As her character puts it in the first book, a single “tribute meal,” which appears “at the press of a button” in the Capitol, would take Katniss and her family “days of hunting and gathering . . . and even then it would be a poor substitution for the Capitol version.”¹⁶

By the same token, when Katniss and Peeta Mallark (Josh Hutcherson) attend a dinner party at the Presidential Palace in the opening scenes of *Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013), the ostentatious decorations and extravagant food spread make it abundantly clear to them (and the spectator) that not everyone suffers like the people in the districts. At one point, two “Capitol people” enjoin Katniss and Peeta to eat more luscious cuisine, even though, as Peeta says, he cannot stomach another bite. The partygoers respond with a lavender elixir that is meant to induce vomiting: “Drink it,” they say, “it makes you sick . . . so you can go on eating!” Katniss’s horror-struck reaction, narrated in the book, captures the stark class dynamic at hand: “All I can think of are the emaciated bodies of the children at our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can’t give. More food . . . And here in the Capitol they’re vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It’s what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun.”¹⁷ Thus while both tributes (and the audience) have firsthand knowledge of people starving in the districts, residents of the Capitol are shown purposefully wasting food for enjoyment—indeed, they are so overrun with sustenance that they are literally puking it up! But because spectators are located in the same contradictory position of Katniss and Peeta as they bear witness to this grotesque scenario, we, too, are afforded their class-conscious perspective of coming to realize that the true “evil” of the Games is on display here, in the routine practices of Panem’s upper crust, who glibly waste foodstuffs otherwise denied to (and provided by) the poor.

13 Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 19.

14 Collins, *Hunger Games*, 61.

15 Collins, *Hunger Games*, 56.

16 Collins, *Hunger Games*, 65.

17 Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 80.

Overall, this class dichotomy winds up rehearsing a melodramatic contradiction that captures not only the divergent experiences of class privilege on display in the Capitol but also the underlying relations of class domination that underwrite the Games. To wit, those relations are inscribed at the very heart of the competition, but they also call attention to a long-running trope within the tradition of revolutionary melodrama by which, according to Elisabeth Anker, “human actions are often dictated by social position” and “individual characters are often the metonymic substitute for economic or social classes.”¹⁸ This method of characterization goes a long way toward explaining Katniss’s resentment toward the Capitol’s “delicacies,” but it also helps to underscore how the animating tension of *THG*—the class conflict between the Capitol and the districts—can be interpreted to reveal something significant (possibly even subversive) about the real-life society that produced it.

As Peter Bloom sums up this view in the *Washington Post*, “*The Hunger Games* has tapped a certain zeitgeist of global Rebellion”; its “themes of popular uprising are particularly relevant in light of the current civil unrest happening across the world.”¹⁹ Although these themes, Bloom says, take the form of “an adolescent rebellion” against “an ‘evil’ authority figure,” they nonetheless substantiate the argument that *THG* “has tapped the real anger of many, on both the left and right, who see a world emerging composed of the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ ruled by a privileged elite and their police forces.” No doubt this anger transcends the dramatic conflict of the Games, but it also signals the degree to which *THG*’s portrait of class war stages a popular desire that corresponds to the fight against oligarchy in the films. Whether we interpret that conflict allegorically—say, as the coded expression of anticapitalist ideals, aristocratic privilege, a “cautionary tale about Big Government,” a feminist rebuke of patriarchal rule, or a series of “life lessons for surviving environmental apocalypse”—it is clear that the world of *THG* is a world that appears to give expression to popular desire for radical change even though, as Bloom would have it, that expression falls short of giving us an actual blueprint for real-life revolution.²⁰

Still, the point of the films is arguably not to teach audiences how revolutions happen or how radical political praxis actually works (if it is, they most certainly fail) but to construct a fantasy space in which spectators can both desire the end of class rule (at least on screen) and take satisfaction in the resultant spectacle of revolution before them. Yet the dominant critical approach, exemplified by Bloom, has been

18 Elisabeth Anker, “Left Melodrama,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 11, no. 2 (2012): 136.

19 Bloom, “Why the Message of the Hunger Games Films Is Dangerous,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/15/why-the-message-of-the-hunger-games-films-is-dangerous/?utm_term=.a7178138e7c1.

20 Respectively, these interpretive schemes derive from Mike Doherty, “What Occupy Can Learn from the *Hunger Games*,” *Salon*, January 8, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/01/08/what_occupy_can_learn_from_the_hunger_games/; Zamora, “Rebel without a Cause”; *Fox and Friends Weekend*, “Is ‘Hunger Games’ a Cautionary Tale about Big Government?,” *Fox News Channel*, March 24, 2012, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1527269439001/is-hunger-games-a-cautionary-tale-about-big-government/?#sp=show-clips>; Katy Waldman, “Why *Mockingjay* Is the ‘End of Men’ Movie of the Year,” *Slate*, November 25, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/11/25/mockings-jay_and_feminism_the_new_hunger_games_movie_envisions_a_future_where.html; and Paige Smith Orloff, “Five ‘Hunger Games’ Lessons for Surviving the Environmental Apocalypse,” *On Earth*, March 22, 2012, <http://archive.earth.org/article/five-hunger-games-lessons-surviving-environmental-apocalypse>.

to sort through the films' cultural and political connotations in an attempt to answer the basic symptomatic-interpretive question: What do these films really signify about our cultural-historical moment? What are their true meanings, if not "adolescent" rebellion? In the next section, I move away from that problematic to address a different set of questions: namely, What is the nature of the fantasy space that permits such readings to take shape in the first place? What is the aesthetic mode that makes this kind of symptomatic critique possible and thus provides the basic fantasy coordinates whereby we might come to understand *THG* as a political allegory?

Left Melodrama. The answer, in short, is left melodrama: a theoretical category that has been developed by Elisabeth Anker to describe how revolutionary desire is rhetorically formed through the narrative and thematic tropes of melodramatic political discourse. Left melodrama takes shape, Anker says, when the standard melodramatic tropes of villainy and victimhood, pathos and action, good and evil, are articulated in a "left" political perspective such that the two become fused to "dramatically interrogate oppressive social structures and unequal relations of power."²¹ Thus, according to Anker, "[l]eft melodrama's appeal derives from the moral clarity it confers on the complex powers organizing politics and subjectivity, from its ability to identify the victims of these powers . . . from the virtuous power it bestows upon conditions of subjugation, and in the case of [revolutionary ideology] . . . from the assurance it offers that heroic emancipation can conquer the villainous source of oppression."²² In other words, left melodrama's appeal derives from the revolutionary picture that it paints for political subjects: a world divided into victims and villains, good and evil, where the sufferings of the former are dialectically linked to the oppressive actions of the latter, and where spectacular scenes of unjust suffering bestow "virtuous power" on the oppressed and generate hostility toward the oppressor.

It follows that this particular mode of melodrama, which Anker argues is endemic to revolutionary contexts, and more generally incorporates the structure of feeling common to all melodrama (i.e., the feeling for good and evil, victims and villains, virtuous suffering and heroic overcoming), does so as a way to stage scenes of unjust victimization that might affectively channel audience identification with "the people."²³ As Anker says: "Melodramas encourage visceral responses in their readers and audiences by depicting wrenching and perilous situations that aim to generate affective connections to victims and the heroes who rescue them. Using a morally polarizing worldview, melodramas signify goodness in the suffering of victims, and signify evil in the cruel ferocity of antagonists. The victim's injury at the core of the

21 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 29.

22 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 204.

23 Anker notes that the link between melodrama and revolution is well established: "Jean-Jacques Rousseau invented the term *mélodrame* and posthumously inspired melodramatic critiques of unjust authority and class inequality in revolutionary France. . . . One French melodramatist even claimed that his plays organized the 1848 revolution. After the Bolshevik revolution, Soviet leftists created and subsidized a particularly expressionist form of melodramatic theater and film and proclaimed melodrama to be the most effective cultural form to explain revolutionary ideology"; Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 210–211.

narrative divides the world and demands retribution or redemption as response.”²⁴ In this sense, the rhetorical fulcrum of left melodrama is the way it moralizes (while dramatizing) unequal socioeconomic relations, “connecting poverty with virtue and wealth with venality.”²⁵ In this, left melodrama allies itself with critiques of inequality (cinematic or otherwise) that infuse the conventional melodramatic formation of “pathos and action” with class-revolutionary implications.²⁶

Left Melodrama and *THG*. In the world of *THG*, this critique materializes by way of the hierarchy between the Capitol and the districts, as well as the victim-heroes who experience its oppressive violence. Recall, for instance, the spectacle of “vomiting for pleasure” at the Presidential Palace; here Panem’s class division is presented in such a way that audiences are encouraged to share Katniss’s disdain for “the Capitol people” (the characters who most outrageously embody that divide), and her disdain imparts a sense of “moral clarity” with respect to that opposition. Indeed, as the luxuries of the Capitol, where “food appears at the press of a button,” are juxtaposed to the hardships of District 12, where “starvation’s not an uncommon fate” and the “miners are sent into blatantly dangerous work sites,” a class system is revealed in which “the poor get the worst of it” and “the people who rule” do so while donning “coal pressured into pearls [*sic*] by [District 12’s] weighty existence. Beauty that arose out of pain.”²⁷ Such dichotomies “encourage visceral responses in their audiences by depicting wrenching and perilous situations that aim to generate affective connections to victims and the heroes who rescue them.”²⁸ In line with the tenets of left melodrama, then, these situations culminate in “big sensation scenes” that offer the “feeling for, if not the actual reality of, justice.”²⁹

At the center of this structure is Katniss, the revolutionary hero with whom spectators are meant to identify and share in the feeling of righteous “payback” once the wrongs of class rule are eventually righted. Her role is both formal and affective in that her character functions to articulate (for the audience) clear moral boundaries between the Capitol and the districts while also helping underscore the virtuous standpoint of those who suffer from that divide. The counterpart to that suffering is, of course, President Snow, who, like Katniss, serves to embody the wider forces of class conflict in the films but whose melodramatic character goes even further in motivating revolutionary sentiment. When Snow firebombs a hospital in *Mockingjay—Part 1*, for example, Katniss is melodramatically too late to save the victims. After surveying the wreckage, she delivers a fiery “propo” (a propaganda piece) that conveys the melodramatic perspective of those who suffer from the Capitol’s military power.

24 Anker, “Left Melodrama,” 136.

25 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 212.

26 Linda Williams describes melodrama’s penchant for “pathos and action” in terms of the “suffering of innocent victims and the exploits of brave heroes or monstrous criminals,” which have the capacity to elicit “moral truths.” See Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 19.

27 These quotes derive, respectively, from Collins, *Hunger Games*, 65 and 28; and Collins, *Catching Fire*, 131 and 365.

28 Anker, “Left Melodrama,” 136.

29 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 24.

With ashes still smoldering in the background, Katniss turns to Cressida's camera and proclaims: "I have a message for President Snow: You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground. But do you see that? Fire is catching. And if we burn, you burn with us!" Shortly after the propo airs, rebels in District 7 lure a team of Peacekeepers to a makeshift death trap. The sequencing implies that Katniss's speech inspired the insurrection, but it also serves to illustrate the cycle of pathos and action that structures the narrative. Here, the suffering of the districts (the site of pathos) is spectacularly shown in contrast to the ferocity of the Capitol (the site of evil), and that spectacle in turn functions to legitimate the actions of revolutionary heroes. What develops at the narrative level is a melodramatic diagnosis of mass victimization that traces the violence of class power back to a categorically evil villain (Snow), who is then shown to inflict interminable harm on a multitude of victims, who must then perform their own rescue by overthrowing that villain (Snow) and the regime of class power he represents (the Capitol).

Such scenes are key to the story line, but they also accord with earlier canonical versions of left melodrama like *The Communist Manifesto*, which, Anker argues, work to maintain the feeling of virtue by articulating revolutionary heroism to social victimization and by melding the dynamics of social change into the binary opposition of oppressor and oppressed.³⁰ Indeed, much like the *Manifesto*, *THG* is organized in a way that "moves" the crowd (if not the spectator) to revolutionary desire at the moment "when class struggle nears the decisive hour."³¹ In the course of this "movement," which takes an explicitly anticapitalist direction in Marx and Engels, the same sensibility of "victimization and virtue, pathos for the suffering of others, and detailed spectacles of unjust persecution" comes to the fore.³² In the *Manifesto*, that sensibility becomes the sharpest as the text "illuminates class oppression by molding historical relations into stark binaries, detailing the unjust suffering of the proletariat, promising the triumph of heroism, highlighting the moral righteousness of the oppressed and employing all of these tropes with the aim to affectively motivate its reader into revolutionary action."³³

In a similar fashion, *THG* aims to motivate revolutionary desire in the spectator by insisting that the "rightness" of the districts will eventually prevail and that the collision between the classes will ultimately end in victory for the revolution. Despite the fictitious nature of this appeal, the portrait of left melodrama that unfolds thus arguably performs analogous rhetorical and affective work to that of the *Manifesto*. Indeed, it echoes the *melos* of Marx's other great canonical text, *Capital*, apropos of which, Jane Gaines has argued, "[t]he labor/capital dichotomy suggests characters acting out a scenario. Wylie Sypher reminds us that *Capital* is rife with personifications of economic concepts, his examples being 'our friend moneybags' and 'dead labor, vampire-like.' The author of *Capital* admits as much and encourages our seeing economic theory as human drama (among other things) when he says that 'the characters who appear

30 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 211.

31 Marx and Engels, "Communist Manifesto," 229.

32 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 29.

33 Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 211.

on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations.”³⁴ Thus, we might consider Marx’s theory of contradiction in terms of characters like the “puffed up capitalist” and the “cowering worker”—two “personifications of economic relations” that function, as Gaines says, to “encapsulate conflict and instill the kind of pride that can swell the ranks of malcontents.”³⁵ Gaines sums up this formulation in a passage that could just as well be used to describe the conflict between President Snow and Katniss Everdeen: “In melodrama, the rhythmic alternation works in such a way that the destinies of oppressor and victim are connected (although neither can see this connection and both continue to believe in their separateness). We, the readers of *Capital*, like the melodrama audience, see the pattern of injustice laid out before us, and we are appalled.”³⁶

In much the same way *THG* invites the audience to “see the pattern of injustice laid out before us” and be appalled by the “destinies” of its two main characters, oppressor and victim. In *Mockingjay—Part 2* (Francis Lawrence, 2015), this alternation crystallizes in the concluding moments of the film when Snow, now captured and facing imminent execution, reveals to Katniss that both have been “played for fools” by the rebel leader Alma Coin. As he tells Katniss: “My failure . . . was being so slow to grasp Coin’s plan. To let the Capitol and districts destroy one another, and then step in to take power . . . But I wasn’t watching Coin. I was watching you, Mockingjay. And you were watching me. I’m afraid we have both been played for fools.” At this moment, the destinies of oppressor and victim become clear: Snow’s status as the evil enemy dissolves, while the broader system of class domination, which has been usurped by Coin, remains. Although appearing to champion the revolution, Coin has revealed herself to be a class tyrant in the same vein as Snow—to have deviously pitted the Capitol and the districts against each other in order to clear her own path to despotic power. Thus, the final film suggests that the back-and-forth melodramatic cycle of class war will continue so long as the tyrannical conditions of class domination remain.

This helps explain why Katniss kills Coin at the end of *Mockingjay*. Because Coin intends to host one final Hunger Games involving the children of the Capitol, Katniss is made to realize that her personal quest to overthrow the class dictatorship embodied by Snow must not end with his execution; rather, it has to end the very system of class rule that Coin intends to perpetuate. For this reason, Katniss risks her own heroic status as the Mockingjay to stop it, eventually killing Coin in order to negate the power of the new regime and thereby bring forth a utopian Capitol-less (i.e., classless) society. Of course, the facile nature of this conclusion fails to smooth over the contradictions manifested in the happy ending.

Once Katniss kills Coin, she is summarily exiled to District 12, where she rehabilitates in a pastoral countryside, marrying Peeta and having their children. Here, the films diverge from the books, where, rather dolefully, Katniss acknowledges that “it is impossible to take pleasure in anything,” and that life with Peeta and their

34 Jane Gaines, “The Melos in Marxist Theory,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Questions of Class*, ed. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 59.

35 Gaines, “Melos in Marxist Theory,” 59.

36 Gaines, “Melos in Marxist Theory,” 60.

children, while “peaceful,” is also “a little tedious,” but “there are much worse Games to play.”³⁷ By contrast, the filmic epilogue seems to suggest that Katniss is at peace in her newfound domestic arrangement, living in a world beyond class politics, having forsaken the revolutionary cause for the joys of married life. Yet more than one critic has pointed out that this ending feels “compulsory” and “tonally inconsistent with everything that came before it”;³⁸ indeed, it does little to mitigate the revolutionary sentiments that structure the narrative as a whole, and thus ends up accentuating the “cracks” in the ideological outcome—cracks that sharpen the “internal criticism” of films as revolutionary melodrama.³⁹ Failing to deliver on the promise of revolution, in other words, the ending leaves us unsatisfied, longing for a world that will never come (at least not at the movies).

But still, the epilogue does little to undercut the broader portrait of class revolt that *THG* represents: a world where Katniss is the Great Savior who inspires the oppressed masses to act—the one whose heroic presence serves as an affective channel for the suffering of “the people” and whose revolutionary exploits yield a spectacle of inequality that conveys a deeper sense of melodramatic justice. As Katniss asserts on the eve of the final battle in *Mockingjay—Part 2*: “We all have one enemy, and that’s President Snow. He corrupts everyone and everything. He turns the best of us against each other. Stop killing for him! Tonight, turn your weapons to the Capitol. Turn your weapons to Snow!” Like the propo scene before it, this climactic inducement to class war typifies the way that *THG* melodramatically configures its contradictory portrait of class revolution: on the one hand, it constructs a clear moral contrast between an evil villain (Snow) and the masses of victims who vividly suffer his cruelty; on the other hand, it suggests the main obstacle to defeating that villain is the regime of class power he represents (the Capitol). Thus, Katniss’s injunction to “turn your weapons to the Capitol, turn your weapons to Snow” can be read backward to imply that class rule is bigger than individual villains, and that the real tyranny depicted in *THG* is the despotic system of class hierarchy itself.

The Reflexivity of Media Power. Because that system appears in spectacular form in the films, that is, in relation to a propaganda machine that represents the dictatorship of class power as something of an ideological problem as much as a problem of individual villains, *THG* supplies the grounds for its own self-reflexive critique. Indeed, where the propaganda battle between the Capitol and the districts that comes to the fore in *Mockingjay—Part 1* serves to heighten the melodrama of revolution in the films, it also suggests a way of resisting class oppression. As that film makes clear, the only

37 Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York, Scholastic Press, 2010), 388.

38 Roger Ebert, “The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2,” RogerEbert.com, November 20, 2015, <http://www.roger-ebert.com/reviews/the-hunger-games-mockingjay--part-2-2015>; Kenneth Turan, “Jennifer Lawrence and ‘The Hunger Games’ Deserved a Better Ending than ‘Mockingjay—Part 2,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-hunger-games-review-20151119-column.html>.

39 At best, we might say that the epilogue renders *Mockingjay—Part 2* an “incoherent text” in the sense elaborated by Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni in their famous essay on category “E” films, in which “an internal criticism . . . cracks the film apart at the scenes.” See Comolli and Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” in *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics* (London: SEFT, 1977), 7.

way to win the war between the classes is to commandeer the system of propaganda that disseminates political ideas about it. And so the film spends much time uncovering how that system works.

In the districts, for example, the constant presence of video screens and entertainment clips is intended to sustain the dictatorship of class by transmitting the Capitol's propaganda, including its publicity of the Games. Meanwhile, the rebels in the districts maintain a knowing distance from this official discourse, even producing their own propos to rally Panem citizens to the cause of revolution. The upshot of this tit-for-tat media war is a melodramatic critique of the "evils" of media power that also renders the films themselves susceptible to a certain kind of cynicism. That is, while the setup harbors the potential to situate the power of media within the broader terrain of class struggle—to demonstrate the media's imbrication with external class interests—the invitation to the audience is not so much to seize control of that power as to participate self-consciously in it, that is, to see through the spectacle so as to playfully indulge in its obvious fakery.

Hence the enjoyment to be had when we watch media spin doctors manipulate popular opinion by transforming Katniss into the star of the Games in the first film: because the celebrity image that results—the "girl on fire"—is the same one used by Lionsgate in its own publicity for the films, we are led to assume the position of "insiders" who are savvy to the very same media maneuvers that go into making *THG* a blockbuster success. Indeed, we're invited to see through the contrivance in order to take greater (cynical) pleasure in it. With respect to *THG*'s tongue-in-cheek portrayal of media celebrity in particular, films like *Mockingjay—Part 1* rely heavily on our self-reflexive knowledge of the ways in which media power operates. From that perspective, the films and their paratexts foreground the constructed nature of media images so as to establish a sense of cynical, savvy distance that ultimately works to preserve, by exposing, the artifice behind the hype.

Seeing through the Games. *THG*'s reflexive depiction of media celebrity begins with the first film, *The Hunger Games*, by portraying the Games themselves as a massively shared media spectacle that, crucially, *everyone* perceives as a massively shared media spectacle; and by accentuating the highly orchestrated media maneuvers that go into crafting celebrity personas, *The Hunger Games* reflexively caters to a savvy media audience that is already familiar with the constructed nature of televised reality. In particular, the films reveal how "prep teams" remake ordinary people (Katniss and Peeta) into glorified media stars who are then "cast" to perform the appropriate role. In turn, the characters are compelled to adopt their constructed media personas to attract loyal fans, or "sponsors," who will then pay for the survival items they need during the Games. With the help of their experienced, media-savvy mentor Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson), Katniss and Peeta are carefully staged, costumed, and made up to play "star-crossed lovers" as the Lover Boy and the Girl on Fire—two characters that, ironically enough, represent the same roles their real-life counterparts (Jennifer Lawrence and Josh Hutcherson) are cast to play in the films.

The result is a form of savvy critique that corresponds to the actual strategies of reality television dating shows, which, as Dana Cloud has argued, routinely foreground

their constructed nature so as to ironically “bribe” viewers into making investments in the world of mediated romance.⁴⁰ As Cloud describes this practice in relation to *The Bachelor*, for example, the fact that viewers actually recognize the show’s sappy, artificial character helps to reinforce its fantasy appeal. Indeed, *The Bachelor* “wins viewers to participation in an ideological discourse by tempting them not only with the fantasy, in this case, of mythic romance, but also with the pleasures of the reaction against taking the fantasy seriously.”⁴¹ In this sense, shows like *The Bachelor*, which transparently foreground their mythic status, afford viewers the dual pleasure of seeing through the fantasy and indulging in it, “producing investment through disinvestment,” which augments the (ego) enjoyment to be had in its ideological structure.⁴² The fact that viewers know full well that the fiction is a “fake” only serves to enhance our own savvy relationship to it: because the possibility for enjoyment lies in our very awareness of its illusory character, the fiction is maintained only because “better knowledge” sustains it.⁴³

By the same token, *THG* affords its viewers the chance to confirm their own savvy skepticism with regard to the ideological devices of media power by presenting its own fantasy world in a way that spectators are encouraged to “invest through disinvestment”: to adopt the cynical attitude of taking pleasure in “seeing through” the media so as not to be fooled. For example, in *Mockingjay—Part 1*, once Katniss becomes established among the rebels in District 13, she becomes the star of their propaganda videos. At the same time, Peeta is brainwashed and forced to perform for the Capitol’s propaganda, leading to a propo war that further underscores the contrived, calculated character of media representation. When Plutarch (the commander of the rebel forces in District 13) devises a series of propos for Katniss on a Hollywood-style soundstage (see Figure 1), her performance falls flat, at which point Plutarch enlists Katniss’s



Figure 1. Katniss on the soundstage in *Mockingjay—Part 1* (Lionsgate Films, 2014)

40 Dana Cloud, “The Irony Bribe and Reality Television: Investment and Detachment in *The Bachelor*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 5 (2010): 413–437. See also Katherine Sender, *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences* (New York University Press, 2012).

41 Cloud, “Irony Bribe,” 413.

42 Cloud, “Irony Bribe,” 415.

43 For more on the way “knowledge chains us to illusion,” see Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014), 94–95.

former “prep team” to proceed with the task of rebooting her celebrity image for the cause of revolution. Following an extended lesson in spin-doctoring by Plutarch, Katniss emerges as the revolutionary icon—the Mockingjay—whose same symbolic usage appears all over the film’s promotional posters (see Figure 2).

In this sense, the films both critique and become propaganda at the same time, hailing viewers as both cynically aware of the media machinations before them and thus better able to apprehend those machinations as an object of consumer enjoyment. These scenes thereby invite audiences to side with the films’ revolutionary heroes, but on the grounds that we know full well their quest to upend class rule is merely the stuff of Hollywood fantasy: that the melodrama of revolution is all the more enjoyable when it’s not taken seriously—when the apparatus of entertainment self-reflexively enjoins our own ironic investment in its manufactured character.



Figure 2. The Mockingjay image that appears on the film’s promotional posters.

Promotional Cynicism. With respect to that investment, *THG* extends the cynical pleasures of mediated reflexivity by way of a highly marketable series of cultural products. Beyond the books and films, the franchise encompasses a host of ancillary materials that run the gamut from soundtracks to action figures to board games to happy meals to clothing lines to makeup collections and theme-park attractions. But perhaps the most remarkable series of promotional paratexts are those that clearly express the brand’s revolutionary ethos.

Most notably, four online marketing campaigns make up *THG*’s “revolutionary” brand extensions. The films’ distributor Lionsgate used these extensions during the staggered release of the films, and each one continues to serve as a promotional reference point for expanding the franchise into new digital territory. That territory includes: (1) Facebook groups that encourage fans to become District “mayors” and “recruiters” of other fans; (2) a website called Capitol Couture that takes the form of a fake fashion magazine patterned after real-life style publications like *Dior* and *Ocean Drive* (and which was curated, no less, by a self-described “Capitolist” and *New York Times* fashion contributor, Monica Corcoran Harel); (3) a YouTube channel dubbed Capitol TV that, during the time of films’ theatrical runs, updated users regularly with

short-form propos and now supplies an archive of official and fan-generated content for the franchise; and (4) the official website, TheCapitol.pn, which initially permitted access to “hidden locations” inside the Capitol, serving as the de facto social media hub for the franchise.⁴⁴ All told, these platforms serve not only to market the films and their ancillary products but also to provide a set of roles and goals by which users can immerse themselves in *THG*’s engrossing brand of class-antagonistic warfare.

Lionsgate first employed these strategies in the months leading up to the debut of *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012). It began by assigning separate Twitter hashtags to various marketing events with the intention of making them go viral. For example, #HungerGames100 prompted fans to collectively piece together an online movie poster by digitally “hunting” for fragments across various partner sites. Meanwhile, MTV debuted a “sneak peak” that allowed Lionsgate to launch #WhatsMyDistrict, leading fans from the teaser trailer to the “secret” website, TheCapitol.pn, where visitors would be prompted to register their Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to be assigned a district affiliation. Once assigned, each “citizen” was granted a Capitol TV link with a unique URL, which they could then circulate to be elected as “mayors” of their respective districts. Fans were thus incentivized to keep abreast of the latest news and marketing events, and Lionsgate was able to release new information (under the user profile @TheCapitolpn) once previous updates had gone sufficiently viral.⁴⁵

Lionsgate also relied on traditional forms of movie marketing (including eighty thousand movie posters, three thousand billboards, and fifty magazine covers), but those forms of publicity were widely propagated by same social media platforms that addressed users as active participants in the course of promotion. As *THG*’s digital media strategist Danielle DePalma explained to the trade press at the time: “Fans really became this self-policing ecosystem. . . . They created a ton of social buzz and got everyone really excited.”⁴⁶ Consequently, marketers like DePalma had a way to sponge off fans’ social-media networks in order to generate more hype for the franchise.⁴⁷

This tactic occasioned a great deal of commentary when it first debuted. The *New York Times* hailed DePalma’s work as part of a “new promotional paradigm”—“the digital hard sell”—which accordingly “used social media and a blizzard of other inexpensive yet effective online techniques to pull off what may be the marketer’s ultimate trick: persuading fans to persuade each other.”⁴⁸ In other words, the trick was to get fans to enhance the value of the *THG* brand through their own participatory labor. Not ironically, that appeal took the form of Capitol propaganda, a move that

44 The URLs for these sites are as follows: Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/thehungergamesmovie/posts/284136098286739>; Capitol Couture, <http://capitolcouture.pn>; Capitol TV, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjvqqA-Egozfm2440hUESw>; and TheCapitol.pn (which incidentally comes with its own internet country code, the “pn”), <http://www.thecapitol.pn>.

45 Brooks Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/business/media/how-hunger-games-built-up-must-see-fever.html?_r=0.

46 Quoted in Ari Karpel, “Inside ‘The Hunger Games’ Social Media Machine,” *Fast Company*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.fastcocreate.com/1680467/inside-the-hunger-games-social-media-machine>.

47 For a more detailed examination of this process, see Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 160–170.

48 Barnes, “How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever.”

reportedly “helped the campaign avoid overt product placement, which tend to turn off fans, and instead let them pretend as if they were living within the environment of the story.”⁴⁹ With that pretense in mind, Lionsgate took to adopting the role of propagandist by echoing the fictional perspective of the Capitol’s own “punitive forms of entertainment.”⁵⁰ Augmenting this approach were websites like Panem Propaganda, where users could participate in one of the “largest online communities of *Hunger Games* fans” under the auspices of the “Ministry of Propaganda.” The site operated in conjunction with the megaretailer Amazon and advertised “a place where you never have to leave Panem” but can buy and browse *THG* merchandise under the watchful eye of the Capitol, “the heart and soul of Panem.”

Along the same lines, TheCapitol.pn housed the “Citizen Information Terminal,” a registration feature by which fans could file their own personal information online to receive customized “public service announcements” from “the official Panem government.” Similarly, the YouTube channel Capitol TV supplied a medium for “mandatory viewing” by means of which fans could watch a bevy of marketing materials that had been repurposed by Lionsgate but appeared as information “officially sanctioned by the Capitol for the consumption of District citizens.” Likewise, fans could visit Capitol Couture (see Figure 3), the faux fashion magazine that hailed visitors as Panem citizens eager to catch up on the latest fashion trends of the Games. The site even featured “cover stories” profiling real-life designers Alexander McQueen and Christian Dior as if they were citizens of the Capitol, and it gave promotional space to cosmetics brands like CoverGirl and China Glaze, which both introduced *Catching Fire* product lines to coincide with the film’s release. In keeping with the Capitol perspective, those tie-ins were accompanied by detailed instructions for “how to transform oneself into a style-crazed citizen”; the overall effect, one industry observer noted, was “a bit provocative, suggesting the Capitol’s extreme wealth and

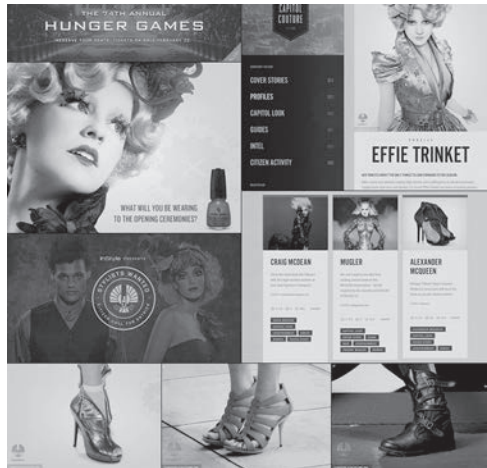


Figure 3. The website Capitol Couture (<http://capitolcouture.pn>).

49 Marc Graser, “Lionsgate’s Tim Palen Crafts Stylish Universe for ‘Hunger Games: Catching Fire,’” *Variety*, October 29, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/lionsgates-tim-palen-crafts-stylish-universe-for-hunger-games-catching-fire-1200772931/>.

50 *Variety* noted that author Suzanne Collins was “thrilled with the work of Tim Palen and his marketing team,” saying, “It’s appropriately disturbing and thought-provoking how the campaign promotes [the films] while simultaneously promoting the Capitol’s punitive forms of entertainment”; quoted in Marc Graser, “Suzanne Collins Breaks Silence to Support ‘The Hunger Games: Catching Fire,’” *Variety*, October 29, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/film/news/suzanne-collins-breaks-silence-to-support-the-hunger-games-catching-fire-1200775202/>.

frivolity satirized in Collins's book is much closer to our own world than we might want to think."⁵¹

Indeed, these sites self-reflexively blurred the lines between fictional entertainment and real-life publicity, not for the purpose of spreading class-consciousness but by enticing users into a mode of savvy participation that allowed Lionsgate to spread its properties across "multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience."⁵² Notably, that experience reflected the ruling-class perspective of the Capitol, just as it addressed its participants as self-consciously aware of the kinds of crass consumerism at work in the films. To the extent that websites like Capitol Couture and Capitol TV thus staged the luxuries of the Capitol as a proxy for media-savvy enjoyment, they also encouraged a kind of cynical distance—of "knowing" but still "doing it"—which put fans in the position of being able to simultaneously buy into and deconstruct the pleasures of conspicuous brand consumption.

The Propo Wars Go Viral. In the run-up to *Mockingjay—Part 1*, that position found equal resonance in the viral marketing campaign that was launched five months prior to the film's November 2014 debut. Following the reappearance of TheCapitol.pn

in June, the website released the "District Heroes Collection," a series of propaganda posters spotlighting individual representatives from seven districts. Each representative was dressed in a manner intended to reflect the region's respective industries, and each photo accompanied a nationalistic slogan such as "Our future is in your hands" and "Panem today, Panem tomorrow, Panem forever" (see Figures 4 and 5). In fictional terms, the posters were meant to emphasize the districts' loyalty to the Capitol, but in terms of promotional strategy, they self-reflexively anticipated the clash of media power dramatized in the film.

Soon after the posters went viral, TheCapitol.pn released a succession of teaser trailers to accompany the print-propaganda push. These trailers featured an enthroned President Snow addressing the citizens of Panem and warning that if



Figure 4. The Capitol's propaganda poster for District 9, the "grain district."

51 Adam B. Vary, "Five Things You Should Know about the Curious New Marketing Campaign for 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire,'" *BuzzFeed*, August 23, 2013, https://www.buzzfeed.com/adambvary/things-you-should-know-about-hunger-games-marketing-campaign?utm_term=.uw5gPrK7#.ioBL300qz.

52 Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 22, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

they were to betray the Capitol and join the rebels in District 13, they would face harsh repercussions.

In the first of these trailers, Snow sits atop his throne against an all-white backdrop, delivering a monologue intercut with the title cards “unity,” “prosperity,” and “sacrifice.”⁵³ As the music soars, Snow’s speech veers from grandiose to menacing, as he reminds his viewers (i.e., district citizens): “Your hard work feeds us [in the Capitol], and in return we feed and protect you. But if you resist the system, you starve yourself. If you fight against it, it is you who will bleed.” The camera zooms out to reveal an ominous scene: Peeta Mallark, who was previously taken hostage at the end of *Catching Fire*, is shown standing at Snow’s side. The video concludes with the triumphant slogan: “Panem today, Panem tomorrow, Panem forever!”

In the second video, released two weeks later, Snow’s “Unity” address begins in much the same way: Snow is seated on top of his white throne and flanked once again by Peeta but also by a bevy of Peacekeeper soldiers and another captive tribute, Johanna Mason.⁵⁴ Once Snow begins delivering his message of “Panem speaking with one voice,” however, the video abruptly gives way to a moment of static, followed by the surreptitious appearance of District 13’s resident hacker, Beetee (Jeffrey Wright). As his face becomes clear, Beetee furtively clues viewers into the fact that “this is pirate transmission from District 13 . . . with a message: the Mockingjay lives!” The seditious dispatch is meant to disrupt the Capitol’s misinformation campaign, but it also nicely encapsulates Lionsgate’s publicity tactic for the films—utilizing fictional propaganda to promote the actual business of the franchise.

Eventually, the propo wars give way to a full-frontal attack on TheCapitol.pn—first, with the 2014 debut of District13.co.in (as in Alma “Coin”), which was launched in the runup to *Mockingjay—Part 1* and enjoined users to “take down the Capitol” by “hacking its mainframe and exposing their lies.” In practice, this meant fans had to crisscross different social media platforms in order to unlock “secret case files” on “revolutionary heroes” (e.g., Katniss, Peeta, Beetee) and then “distribute” those case files using their own social media channels (i.e., sharing them on Facebook, Twitter,



Figure 5. The Capitol’s propaganda poster for District 6, the “transportation district.”

53 The Hunger Games, “President Snow’s Panem Address #1—‘Together as One,’” YouTube video, 1:12, June 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dCB2U9IX48>.

54 The Hunger Games, “President Snow’s Panem Address #2—‘Unity’” YouTube video, 0:52, July 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4e-qJdEAXo>.

Tumblr, and Google+). In fantasy, this also meant that users, too, could participate in the District 13 media wars by helping the rebels overtake the Capitol's online proxy, TheCapitol.pn.

This mission wasn't complete, however, until Lionsgate dispatched the promotional materials for *Mockingjay—Part 2* one year later. With the release of that film, Lionsgate effectively completed the viral "takeover" of the Capitol's online propaganda machine by announcing via Twitter that "TheCapitol.pn has been overtaken" and that the new site, Revolution.pn, featuring a caped Katniss Everdeen standing atop a monumental three-finger salute, would allow users to "stand with us" in the fight against the Capitol. In bold letters, the site proclaims: "There is no turning back. Together we will stand. Together we will fight" (see Figure 6); in this way, Revolution.pn marks a triumphant shift in the tenor of *THG* propaganda: where the online promotions once enjoined fans to adopt the perspective of the Capitol, it now, in accordance with the trajectory of the films, encouraged fans to "join the revolution" and "stand with the Mockingjay." And indeed, they could do this by registering their personal information online as "pillars of Panem" so that they might ultimately participate in "the revolution" by "distributing" (i.e., liking, sharing, or reblogging) online publicity for the franchise.

Accordingly, Revolution.pn completes the online cycle of reflexive media promotion begun by the Twitter campaigns #HungerGames100 and #WhatsMyDistrict. By aiming to commit fans to "build our communities and learn to thrive together" under the *THG* brand, Revolution.pn continues Lionsgate's marketing mission of enclosing this fan community within the promotional confines of a media spectacle that aspires to be the premier model of revolutionary, blockbuster entertainment. Just as that spectacle appears to fulfill that very mission by providing a commercial space for fans to affirm their own devotion to the franchise—to "stand with the Mockingjay," as it were—it also enacts a savvy media message that assures us, in no uncertain terms: "the revolution lives."

Locating the Real Enjoyment of Revolutionary Desire. So how do we make sense of this call for revolution in the form of interactive blockbuster promotion? What is the ultimate meaning of *THG*'s fantasy frames? Certainly its commercial paratexts make use of the idea of revolution as franchise fodder, but perhaps this sort of "bribe" is not just a matter of reflexive marketing. Perhaps it's more akin to the sorts of culture-industry products that were identified nearly a century ago by Siegfried Kracauer, when he described the "stupid and unreal film fantasies [that] are the *daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form."⁵⁵ In such fantasies "real" desires get staged even as we, the viewers, know very well that these daydreams are fake.

Of course, those desires remain implicated in the sorts of commercial schemes that go into staging a Hollywood blockbuster about class revolution. But this fact should

55 Siegfried Kracauer, "Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 292.



Figure 6. The site Revolution.PN summons visitors to “stand with” the revolution.

not commit us to the cynical orientation of *THG*’s more savvy paratexts, in which people appear to desire a fictional revolution that is nonetheless transparent to them. This savvy cynicism, which is echoed in the symptomatic critiques of *THG* as a melodramatic distortion of “real” social conditions, seems to disavow a more fruitful, less cynical approach: namely, that “everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy,” and that, accordingly, far from being taken in by unreal film fantasies, we should attempt to traverse them—to confront the underlying reasons for our enjoyment in these revolutionary fictions.⁵⁶

As I have suggested, this traversal happens not by being smarter than the films we intend to criticize or by reflexively buying into a media franchise that promotes revolution as a catalyst for cultural consumption. Rather, it happens by taking franchises like *THG* more seriously than they take themselves, by *overidentifying* with their revolutionary melodramas and responding as if they really mean what they say. This overidentification happens not in some naïve sense of being duped by the fictional representation of screen revolution, but by pushing beyond the cynical injunction to avoid being taken in by the spectacle. To overidentify, in other words, is to call attention to the act of desiring revolution which sustains itself through fantasy—taking it more literally than it takes itself—in order to force an engagement with “the Real of our desire that announces itself in the dream.”⁵⁷ Indeed, if blockbusters about class revolution perform their ultimate ideological function—maintaining business as usual—by encouraging our cynical distance from those underlying fantasies, the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the dream but to stick to the desire that sustains it.⁵⁸

56 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 95; cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).

57 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 48.

58 Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 29.

No doubt cynical ideology bids us to evade this desire by imagining that we are somehow at a distance from the “unreal” film fantasies before us. But the problem is not that we are unable to grasp this picture, or that we lack the critical wherewithal to map its symptomatic distortion in Hollywood films. The problem is that we are all the time presented with spectacular fantasies of class revolution, yet we don’t take them seriously enough. Particularly in the era of generalized media reflexivity, when promotional cynicism directs us to see through commercialized forms of class rebellion as nothing more than fantasy, we are indeed, all the time, made conscious of the fundamental antagonisms that structure our society, yet we carry on according to a capitalist media system that bids us to live out the dream of revolution as mere entertainment. *