

***The Hunger Game: Katniss in Oz***  
Reviewed by Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* is frequently compared to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The comparisons are inevitable because of the child-on-child violence which forms each work's core. The film adaptations in particular draw attention because of the visual representation of children as the victims and perpetrators of violence. However, when one examines the sensibilities and visual vocabulary of each film, it soon becomes apparent that the similarities are only cursory. Rather than *Lord of the Flies* (British Lion, 1963), I would argue that the film that *The Hunger Games* (Lionsgate, 2012) draws upon and has much in common with is *The Wizard of Oz* (MGM, 1939)

In each of these three films a child find him/herself in a death struggle for survival. In the original film adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* a group of choir boys who have crash-landed on a remote island regress to savagery. This film, along with others such as *On the Beach* (1959) *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and *Fail Safe* (1964), can be seen as a visual expression of the Age of Nuclear Anxiety. If children, often cited during this era as "the hope for the future," indeed choir boys, can regress to the most vicious and primal of states in a post-nuclear world what hope has mankind? *Lord of the Flies* can be read as a cautionary tale of nuclear-brinkmanship and an admonishment to pull back from that brink.

*The Hunger Games* also draws upon dystopian tropes. In a post-nuclear North America, a repressive regime holds an annual, televised competition, a battle-to-the-death, called The Hunger Games. The participants are children, a boy and a girl aged twelve to eighteen, from each district. The purpose of the games is to instill fear in the proletariat and to amuse the ruling class. Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen year old from a mining district, is drawn into the Games when she volunteers to take the place of her twelve-year-old sister, Prim, whose name has been randomly chosen from the pool of available girls. The movie follows Katniss as she attempts to survive the Games and return home. During the process, she inadvertently becomes the figurehead of a budding insurrection. Katniss becomes the "Mockingjay," a symbol of hope and resistance to the Capital.

In his review of the film, Stephen Rea notes that *Hunger Games* director, Gary Ross, utilizes Depression-era imagery. According to Rea, Ross "pans the sooted faces, the ragged clothes-lines, the muddy roads of District 12 [Katniss's home district] – it's like watching a gallery of Dorothea Lange photographs from the Great Depression."<sup>1</sup> The sensibility of economic desperation also infuses the book and the movie. It is not a far stretch to recognize the fantastically-coiffed and couture-clad denizens of the Capitol as the "one-percent" decried by the recent "Occupy" movement.

The film *The Wizard of Oz* is also infused with the economic desperation; one forged in the Great Depression. Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, who are scraping by and trying to keep

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<sup>1</sup> From Stephen Rea's review of *The Hunger Games*, "Games' Teem with Grin Weirdness," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 March 2012, [http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/steven\\_rea/20120322\\_Let\\_the\\_\\_Games\\_\\_begin.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/steven_rea/20120322_Let_the__Games__begin.html).

the farmhands employed, are cowed by the economic and political clout that Miss Gulch wields. As such, they yield to Miss Gulch's demands and sacrifice Dorothy's dog, Toto. "Hard times" are underscored by the color palette of the Kansas segments – black, white, and grey. The farm scenes and the funnel cloud of the tornado that sweep Dorothy into Oz draw upon the newsreels of the actual farmers and dust storms that the filmgoer would have been familiar with during this era. It is not until Dorothy gets to Oz that Technicolor bursts forth to dazzle the viewer.

Like Dorothy, Katniss, whose desire is to return to her home and family, is thrust into a journey of self-discovery and accidental hero status. Her District 12 home is painted in muted shades of greys and browns – the homes, the furnishings, and the clothing. Indeed the costumes are straight out of the 1930s with simple shirt-waist dresses for the girls and women and muted work clothes for the men and boys. Instead of a "twister," Katniss is whisked away to the Capital by a bullet train. Once there the viewer is met with eye-popping colors, Lady Gaga-esque fashions, and exquisite interiors. Indeed, one of the first shots of the streets of the Capitol includes a fleeting image of a pink-haired citizen walking a pink-tinged Afghan hound, harkening to "the horse of a different color" in the Emerald City.

Visual references in *The Hunger Games* to *The Wizard of Oz* abound. Donald Sutherland as President Snow is the evil twin to Frank Morgan's Wizard/Professor Marvel costumed as he is in a frockcoat and gloves and accessorized with his flowing white mane of hair and whiskers. Effie and Glinda, who also seemingly share a fashion sensibility, are ying/yang spiritual guides to Katniss/Dorothy. The visual clues also underscore how the characters operate in the narrative structure of the film. It is Snow/the Wizard who sets Katniss/Dorothy off on the mission of assassin to the Wicked Witch of the West/Hunger Game tributes. It is Effie/Glinda who propel Katniss/Dorothy into the role of heroine by accepting her as a volunteer in the first instance and by thrusting her feet into the ruby slippers in the second.

One can find other similarities between the two films. Dorothy has three male companions (the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, and the Cowardly Lion) who personify the qualities needed for heroism – intelligence, a noble heart, and courage. Katniss in the Hunger Games has Haymitch (her mentor), Cinna (her stylist and advocate), and Peeta (her loyal friend and co-tribute). The Munchkins proclaim Dorothy their heroine after she kills their oppressor, the Wicked Witch of the East. Katniss inspires an uprising in District 11 after she shows kindness and compassion to their slain tribute, a little girl named Rue. Neither Dorothy nor Katniss seek the status of heroine/figurehead but are anointed so by the adults in their society.

Finally, both films draw upon genres from the popular culture of their times. *The Wizard of Oz* deliberately plays with vaudevillean traditions and tropes. Ray Bolger, Jack Haley, and Bert Lahr were all major vaudeville stars. Lahr's "patter" songs, the song and dance numbers, and the "snappy," pun-infused dialog particularly between Lahr, Haley, and Bolger were all staples of their vaudeville acts. The musical numbers which underscore the emotional high-points, such as Garland singing "Over the Rainbow," were integral to

the musical-comedy film so popular with the Depression-era movie-going audience of the 1930s. Similarly, *The Hunger Games* draws upon reality TV which is the coin of realm for the franchise's tween/teen audience, specifically *American Idol* and the *Survivor* series. The "close-up," personal interviews, the audience reactions, the commentators' analysis are all part of the genre of which the film makes use of to draw the viewer in. Indeed the moments in which Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss peers into the camera with a direct gaze gave this filmgoer a moment of disquietude. Although it is the supposed viewer in the Capitol whom Lawrence/Katniss implicates with that stare, what of the filmgoer who is participating in the act of watching teens simulate acts of violence upon each other for our enjoyment? Which audience is indicted with that direct gaze?

*The Hunger Games* is a visually stunning film with an outstanding cast and high production values. It is true to the book in spirit if not in always in detail; the discrepancies are minor. The question that this film raises for this viewer is how evolved or un-evolved our "plucky" heroines have become in the intervening years between *Oz* (1939) and *Hunger Games* (2012). From a feminist and childhood studies perspective it would seem that the distance between the deus-ex-machina devices of the Witch's ruby slippers and the Capitol's hovercraft are not that far apart as might seem at first glance.