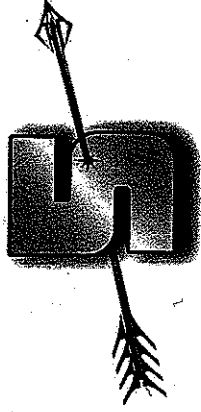


22. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 213.
23. Nagel, "Moral Luck," 60.
24. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 236-237.
25. Nagel, "Moral Luck," 60.
26. *Ibid.*, 62.
27. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 5-6.
28. Collins, *Catching Fire*, 21.
29. *Ibid.*, 118.
30. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 358-359.
31. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 133. However, Kant translates this expression somewhat idiosyncratically as "Let justice reign, even if all the rogues in the world should perish."



THE JOY OF WATCHING OTHERS SUFFER

Schadenfreude and the
Hunger Games

Andrew Shaffer

They certainly don't have a problem watching children murdered every year.

—Katniss Everdeen, in *Catching Fire*¹

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!" Claudius Templesmith, the Hunger Games announcer, says. A timer in the upper-right corner of the screen begins counting backward from sixty seconds; once it reaches zero, the tributes will be free to move off their metal platforms.

"This is going to be one for the ages," Soren tells his friend, Atticus. They're watching the Hunger Games at Caesar's Bar & Grill, one of the most popular sports bars for Game watching in the Capitol. He raises his glass in a toast: "To Panem."

"To Panem," the blue-skinned Atticus replies, clinking his glass against Soren's. They chug their drinks.

The latest scientific research points to chemical origins of the “devilish” emotion: a 2009 study implicates the hormone oxytocin as a key ingredient in the degree to which we feel *schadenfreude*. In a study featuring fifty-six participants, researchers were able to increase participants’ feelings of *schadenfreude* by simply administering oxytocin with a nasal spray.⁵ Although hormones such as oxytocin may point to a biological basis for some of the differences in the ways we experience *schadenfreude*, it’s still an emotion that is easiest to examine on psychological and philosophical grounds.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) believed that *schadenfreude* was an inevitable result of human society. Within a social context, we are conditioned to judge our own well-being by comparing our status to that of others. In a world where many enjoy advantages that we may not think they deserve, *schadenfreude* is the great social equalizer. “The harm that befalls another makes him our *equal*,” Nietzsche wrote. “It appeases our envy.”⁶ In this view, by taking someone else down a notch, we feel better about ourselves and elevate our own social standing.

Nothing elevates one person above another quite like watching him or her die. In the Hunger Games, we see *schadenfreude* in its most extreme form. Capitol citizens cheer on the deaths of the tributes inside the arena in an unparalleled public display of bloodlust. But even in our society, violence and suffering always draw a crowd. How else can we explain the public’s fascination with live televised sporting events, in which the threat of crashing and burning—in most cases figuratively, but in the case of NASCAR, quite literally—is omnipresent? Yet even though our collective interest in dangerous entertainment is tough to dispute, *schadenfreude* as brazen and extreme as that of the Hunger Games is, thank goodness, rare in our culture.

“The Dying Boys and Girls in the Arena”

If the Hunger Games seem too horrific to be real, let’s travel back in time a few thousand years to ancient Rome. Suzanne Collins drew on the Roman Colosseum as a real-life inspiration for Panem’s Hunger Games. “I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games,” Collins has stated, “which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment.”⁷ How did Roman citizens justify *their* enjoyment of the slaughter they applauded in the Colosseum? Although some gladiators were volunteers, many who entered the Colosseum for combat and execution were criminals, runaway slaves, or traitors. The spectators could therefore persuade themselves that justice was being served in these instances, and this belief gave them free rein to cheer as the gladiators fought to the death or were ripped to shreds by the lions.

Could the crowd at Caesar’s Bar & Grill believe that justice was being served by the Hunger Games? Unlike the criminals facing judgment in the Colosseum, the tributes are innocent civilians; the only crime that Katniss, Peeta Mellark, and the tributes from the other eleven districts have committed is to have been born outside the Capitol. Could that be “crime” enough, though? The Hunger Games exist as a reminder of the past rebellion that the Capitol quashed. In those Dark Days, humanity nearly went extinct in the clash between the Capitol and the districts. The Treaty of Treason, signed between the warring parties, brought peace to Panem and established the Hunger Games. Could the Capitol’s citizens rationalize their enjoyment of the Games by seeing the killing of tributes in the arena as a just punishment meted out to the rebellious districts?

To feel a sense of justice, we usually need to see the perpetrators of a crime actually punished. Can the punishment of random stand-ins provide us with the satisfied feeling that

justice has been served? There is a long-standing idea in Western society of “the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons.” Even though it’s not part of our current legal system (sons are not literally punished for their fathers’ crimes), it’s a concept found in the Bible: “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the sons for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me” (Exodus 20:5). So it’s not unthinkable that the crowd at Caesar’s might feel that some measure of justice was being achieved by punishing the tributes for their ancestors’ “crimes” against Panem.

Still, it’s hard to understand how the Capitol audience can ignore the fact that children are being slaughtered, especially when the first blood is shed inside the arena. Even given the mandatory nature of the Hunger Games viewing, how can otherwise moral citizens suddenly become bloodthirsty spectators who cheer for a tribute to deliver a fatal blow? It’s tough to believe, but that’s exactly what happens. Listen to Katniss describe the callous indifference of Capitol residents to the value of the lives that are being taken in order to supply them with entertainment: “It’s all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event [in the Hunger Games] occurred. ‘I was still in bed!’ ‘I had just had my eyebrows dyed!’ ‘I swear I nearly fainted!’ Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena.”⁸ Such a lack of empathy for the tributes suggests that there must be other forces at work that allow the Capitol’s citizens to take such pleasure in viewing the Hunger Games.

“Savages”

Dehumanization—denying someone the status of personhood—is a technique used by oppressors to lure a populace into enjoying the suffering of others. In the twentieth century, the Nazis pioneered new dehumanization techniques to get German citizens to support the extermination of the Jews. The Nazis used

popular media, posters, and schools to broadcast the message that the Jews were somehow less than human. “The Nazis knew well that widespread cruelty requires [a belief in] the claim that the victims of cruelty are not persons,” writes contemporary scholar John Portmann. “Many societies perceive outsiders, enemies, and criminals as beyond the ‘social contract.’ Convinced that outsiders need not be treated with the respect due to insiders, those who delight in harm suffered by outsiders may then throw ordinary moral reflection to the wind.”⁹

Of course, just because a victim is considered less than human doesn’t mean that people will necessarily enjoy watching him or her suffer. Some Nazis who insisted that they were just doing their job, claimed that they took no pleasure in exterminating Jews. But once a victim has been reduced to the status of a subhuman, it becomes easier for many people to give free rein to their *schadenfreude*.

We don’t know what role Capitol propaganda plays in dehumanizing district residents, since we never really get a true Capitol citizen’s view of the Capitol’s tactics. But we do know that the Capitol’s citizens regard the tributes, along with the rest of the inhabitants of the districts, as “barbarians.” This is partly due to their appearance. District 12 coal miners, for instance, have hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, broken nails, and sunken faces. District inhabitants are also exceedingly hairy compared to Capitol citizens, which no doubt makes them look more like nonhuman animals than human beings in the eyes of their hairless detractors. The prep team takes great care to remove all traces of hair from the tributes, shaving, waxing, and tweezing every last bristle and nub from Katniss’s body in an attempt to make her appear more “human.” After Katniss is cleaned and dressed for the Games, Flavius, a member of her prep team, exclaims, “Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!”¹⁰

Customs are unwritten social rules that define what is and is not acceptable in a culture. When customs concerning grooming and manners differ among societies, as they do between the

Capitol and the districts, they become an easy way to identify someone as less than human. While Effie Trinket commends Peeta and Katniss for their “decent manners,” she can’t resist tossing in a barb about the conduct of last year’s tributes: “The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my digestion.” (One wonders how it sat with her digestion to watch this same pair being slaughtered in the arena soon thereafter.) Katniss sensibly observes that the two kids were from the Seam and had probably never had enough to eat on any day of their lives. “When they did have food, table manners were surely the last thing on their minds,” she says.¹¹ When Effie later reports that she’s been promoting Katniss and Peeta to sponsors, in part based on their having “successfully struggled to overcome the barbarism of [their] district,” Katniss quips, “Barbarism? That’s ironic coming from a woman helping to prepare us for slaughter.”¹²

The Gamemakers take dehumanization to its greatest extreme in the 74th Hunger Games by literally transforming deceased tributes into subhuman *mutations*, growling and snarling human-wolf hybrids. They are the ultimate insult to the districts. “Even in death, we own you,” the Capitol seems to be saying. “You’ll never be anything more than animals.”

Since the tributes are barbaric savages in the eyes of the Capitol’s citizens, it’s easier for the citizens to enjoy watching innocent tribute children suffer. In fact, imagining that the tributes are subhuman is offered as a suggestion of how Katniss might survive the 74th Hunger Games:

“Katniss, it’s just hunting. You’re the best hunter I know,” says Gale.

“It’s not just hunting. They’re armed. They think,” I say.

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”

“Not people,” I say.

“How different can it be, really?” says Gale grimly. The awful thing is that if I can forget they’re people, it will be no different at all.¹³

“They Say the Food Is Excellent”

Town squares around Panem are standing room only the night the Games kick off. Every television in the country is tuned in. Of course, not everyone in Panem enjoys watching the Hunger Games. There’s a world of difference between how Capitol and district citizens view them.

The Capitol citizens watch for entertainment—and that means bloodshed. Katniss reflects on what happens when a day goes by without a death: “The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do.”¹⁴ Gale recalls a previous Hunger Games in which the Gamemakers didn’t provide any wood for fires. “Half of them died of cold,” he said about the “quiet, bloodless deaths.” “Not much entertainment in that.”¹⁵ Entertainment is definitely the “name of the game” when it comes to the Hunger Games. According to Katniss, “The arenas are historic sites, preserved after the Games. Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths took place. You can even take part in reenactments. They say the food is excellent.”¹⁶

In sharp contrast, district citizens watch the Games in horror, silently rooting for their own tributes to make it out alive. “To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others,” reports Katniss.¹⁷ While the Capitol citizens get into the festive spirit, “we don’t wallow around in the Games in District 12. We grit our teeth and watch because we must and [then] try to get

back to business as soon as possible when they're over."¹⁸ On the day of the reaping in District 12, "despite the bright banners hanging on the buildings, there's an air of grimness. The camera crews, perched like buzzards on rooftops, only add to the effect."¹⁹

Katniss and Peeta's "romance" throws a wrench into the Gamemakers' propaganda machine. More than simple barbarians in the eyes of the Capitol's audience, they have become star-crossed lovers. If tributes can experience love, how can they not be persons? The lovers are not completely humanized—Katniss makes no mention of petitions to put a stop to the Hunger Games—but it's clear that the audience finds them to be sympathetic characters. Katniss and Peeta strike a chord in the heart of the Capitol's citizens. As a result, the Gamemakers make an unprecedented change to the rules of the 74th Hunger Games that would allow the lovers to both leave the arena alive. Of course, the rule change is ultimately rescinded, and in a bid to prove how savage the district citizens really are, the Gamemakers transform the dead tributes into mutations.

When President Snow attempts to avert a new uprising by forcing past victors back into the arena in the 75th Hunger Games, he believes it will show the districts that even the strongest of their citizens are no match for the Capitol. If it's an attempt to dehumanize the districts further, he wildly miscalculates, because, as Katniss explains, past victors who have become well-known to the public are not as easily dehumanized as previously unfamiliar tributes. She reflects,

It's interesting when I think of what Peeta said about the attendant on the train being unhappy about the victors having to fight again. About people in the Capitol not liking it. I still think all of that will be forgotten once the gong sounds, but it's something of a revelation that those in the Capitol feel anything at all about

us. They certainly don't have a problem watching children murdered every year. But maybe they know too much about the victors, especially the ones who've been celebrities for ages, to forget we're human beings. It's more like watching your own friends die. More like the Games are for those of us in the districts.²⁰

To make matters worse for the Capitol, Peeta announces on live television not only that he and Katniss are married but also that she is pregnant with his child. "It sends accusations of injustice and barbarism and cruelty flying out in every direction," Katniss observes. "Even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can't ignore, at least for the moment, how horrific the whole thing is."²¹ But even if she has accurately taken the Capitol's temperature, the Games still go on as planned, with every indication that the citizens are as enthusiastic in their *schadenfreude* as ever.

"These Monsters Called Human Beings"

In *Mockingjay*, even in the midst of the rebellion against the Capitol, Katniss sees that the new boss (President Coin) isn't much different from the old boss (President Snow). When she learns of Coin's plans to repeat the Hunger Games one more time using children from the Capitol, her faith in the fundamental goodness of humanity collapses. "I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despite being one myself," she says.²²

Katniss ultimately recognizes something monstrous—Kant would say "diabolical"—within human nature. The line in the sand between hero and villain has been washed away by her realization that we *all* have a propensity for cruelty: the Capitol's citizens, who celebrate the tributes' deaths in the Hunger Games; Presidents Snow and Coin, who, despite their enmity toward each other, are united in their disregard for

the value of human life; and Gale, who frightens Katniss by embracing a win-at-all-costs philosophy. The only truly innocents in Katniss's world are children such as Prim.

"Now we're in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated," Plutarch Heavensbee tells Katniss. Like many people today, he dreams of a better world in which the human race will have evolved beyond its unsavory tendencies, but he's not very hopeful that the lessons will stick. "We're fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction," he laments.²³ We can't escape human nature, he seems to be saying. We're doomed to repeat our mistakes.

Cruelty, of course, isn't the same thing as *schadenfreude*, for it's possible to be brutal and callous not for its own sake but only as a means to an end, as we see from Gale's actions. But Katniss's realization that human beings have some innate desire to see one another suffer is the same conclusion that many philosophers have reached. Like it or not, a propensity toward *schadenfreude* seems to be an inescapable part of human nature.

All Too Human and All Too Familiar

Though part of human nature, *schadenfreude* has become something of a cultural obsession in our own society. We may be collectively ashamed of our constant gawking at celebrity mishaps and *schadenfreude*-fueled shows like *Cops* (and maybe you're even one of the few who eschew such boorishness for higher-minded fare like, gasp, books!), but there's no denying that most of us love to crane our necks at cultural train wrecks. In fact, some of the characters in the Hunger Games trilogy look uncomfortably familiar. As blogger Kate Eastman points out, "The only people in Collins's universe who are remotely like us are the people in the Capitol. Glutted with food, fashion, and nationalized reality television, the cosmetically

altered, materialistic Capitol residents aren't a far cry from modern-Americans."²⁴

Arguably, even to read the Hunger Games trilogy is to indulge in *schadenfreude*. Although the characters are fictional, there's a sense of excitement when reading about the violence in the arena. We feel for some of the characters and don't want to see them suffer, but let's be honest: Would the books be as fun to read if the stakes weren't so high?

Indeed, the execution of Snow in *Mockingjay* seems to be arranged as a spectacle of *schadenfreude*, both for the characters in the book and for the reader. Had he been executed quietly behind closed doors and off-page, justice would have been served well enough. But there's a sense of closure that comes from seeing a villain get his comeuppance. We might even argue that it has therapeutic value. Did you, for instance, feel a sense of resolution when President Coin was assassinated by Katniss's arrow?

Rabbi Mark S. Glickman, writing in the *Seattle Times* about the death of terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, reports, "Part of me wanted to whoop it up in celebration; another part of me would never rejoice over a person's death, even bin Laden's. That part of me cringed when I saw the crowds celebrating in the streets."²⁵ *Schadenfreude* can be a complex emotion to unravel.

Can we ever justify our indulgence in *schadenfreude*? For Schopenhauer and Kant, the answer is no. Whether the triggering event is seemingly trivial (such as someone slipping and falling on an icy sidewalk) or profound (a tribute brutally murdered in the arena), *schadenfreude* is always devilish. But if we take Schopenhauer's advice and cast out anyone who has ever laughed at another's misfortune, we wouldn't have many friends left. We might even have to cast ourselves out, too!

It's easy to judge the patrons of Caesar's Bar & Grill for their enjoyment of the Hunger Games. Cheering the death of another human being? Horrific! Still, Katniss gives her prep

team the benefit of the doubt, pleading with Gale that they aren't "evil or cruel," despite their involvement in sending children into the arena to die for other people's amusement.²⁶ Whether *we* are willing to let the Capitol citizens—our ourselves—off the hook so easily is entirely up to us.

NOTES

1. Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 204.
2. Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 135.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), 30. For more on Kant, see chapter 4, "The Odds Have Not Been Very Dependable of Late: Morality and Luck in the Hunger Games Trilogy"; chapter 7, "Competition and Kindness: The Darwinian World of the Hunger Games"; chapter 11, "Sometimes the World is Hungry for People Who Care: Kant's and the Feminist Care Ethic"; and chapter 14, "Safe to Do What?: Morality and the War of All Against All in the Arena."
4. Warren St. John, "Sorrow So Sweet: A Guilty Pleasure in Another's Woe," *New York Times*, August 24, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/24/arts/sorrow-so-sweet-a-guilty-pleasure-in-another-s-woe.html>.
5. Simone G. Shamay-Tsoorya et al., "Intranasal Administration of Oxytocin Increases Envy and Schadenfreude (Gloating)," *Biological Psychiatry*, November 2009, 864–870.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 314.
7. "Suzanne Collins Video Interview," *Scholastic*, <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/video.jsp?PID=1640183585&bcpid=1640183585&bcid=1745181007&bc tid=1840656769>.
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9. John Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 14.
10. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 62.
11. *Ibid.*, 44.
12. *Ibid.*, 74.
13. *Ibid.*, 40.
14. *Ibid.*, 173.
15. *Ibid.*, 39.
16. *Ibid.*, 145.
17. *Ibid.*, 19.
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19. *Ibid.*, 16.
20. Collins, *Catching Fire*, 204.
21. Collins, *ibid.*, 256.
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24. Kate Eastman, "Child Star Hunger Games," *Oology*, <http://ology.com/screen/child-star-hunger-games>.
25. Mark S. Glickman, "The Appropriate Response to bin Laden's Death," *Seattle Times*, May 13, 2011.
26. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 53–54.