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## The Opinion Pages

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# Staging the Self: 'The Hunger Games'

By STANLEY FISH

Stanley Fish on education, law and society.

A couple of weeks ago my daughter visited from California. She brought with her the first volume of Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games." She read it in short order and drove to the local Barnes & Noble to get the other two. She finished them in a day, and then passed all three on to me. I devoured them and passed them on to my wife, who also read them in record time.

What accounts for three overeducated adults being so caught up in the story of a teenage girl — Katniss Everdeen — who lives in a dystopian future ruled and controlled by the decadent and cruel denizens of "The Capitol"?

Many have commented on the excellence of the pacing (you're always on the hook) and on the inventiveness with which Collins devises the obstacles — both animate and inanimate, and a few things in between — that challenge Katniss and her fellow contestants as they play a gladiatorial, televised game whose point is to defeat one's opponents by killing them and so be the last person standing.

But the technical skills Collins displays are only a part of the explanation of the novels' power. The other part is the thematic obsession

hinted at by the title: just what is it that the characters, and by extension the readers, hunger for? On the literal level the answer is obvious. Kept at a near-starvation level by their rulers, the inhabitants of the nation of Panem (bread) hunger for food, and one of Katniss's virtues is that as an expert archer she can provide it.

Food, however, is a metaphor in the trilogy for another kind of sustenance, the sustenance provided by an inner conviction of one's own worth and integrity. (Man cannot live by bread alone.) The hunger to be an authentic self is a basic constituent of the game we call life, and the difficulty of achieving that state — Polonius tells Laertes “to thine own self be true,” but forgets to provide the how-to manual — is intensified for the “tributes,” the name given to those selected by lot to be contestant-competitors who must exercise the twin skills of deception and violence if they are to survive. How can one maintain integrity in a context that mandates aggression and betrayal?

One of the tributes names that as the goal he desires more than survival. Peeta Mellark, in love with Katniss since the moment he laid eyes on her (the moment when he gave her bread), says to her, “I want to die as myself ... I don't want them to change me in there.” Katniss, who relates the story in the first-person present tense, wonders, “How could he die as anyone but himself?”

Her obtuse literalism is the flip side of her strength. “I'm not good at lying,” she says to a mentor who counsels her to make up stories about herself that will gain the audience's sympathy. With her, what you see — stubbornness, ruthlessness, impatience, rudeness, bluntness — is what you get. Her actions are not self-consciously designed; if Peeta longs for authenticity, she cannot help displaying it; and although she doesn't understand it, her very inability to play to the crowd, to be anything but herself, is what draws the crowd to her. Peeta tries to explain it to her:

“You’re so ... pure.” Another character nails it: she’s “unscripted.”

It is a great irony, then, that much of the plot turns on the one occasion when she play-acts. Aware that her safety and Peeta’s safety (more a concern to her) depend on convincing the Capitol that the two are madly in love, she connives in the manufacturing of that impression; and as a result she is condemned to maintaining that fiction (or is it one? neither she nor the reader really knows) in a succession of staged events.

Of course, in Panem, everything is a staged event, given that everything is seen by a nation-wide audience. And yet, in the midst of a relentless theatricality — Katniss is continually being made up by cosmeticians — everyone is hungry for the genuine. That is why it is so important for Katniss to simulate it, to give the people what they want, and what they want is to believe that the simulated is the real.

It is what we want, too. The present-tense narrative has the effect of creating the illusion of immediacy and as readers we fall in with the illusion, especially at those moments when the characters we are invested in engage in what feels like intimate conversation. But then the curtain is drawn back, and we realize what we had momentarily forgotten — that we are watching not reality, but a huge reality show, a pageant of bread and circuses, *Panem et Circenses*.

The question of reality is poignantly raised by Peeta, who has been captured by the Capitol and subjected to physical and psychological torture in the course of which his memories have been replaced by manufactured ones, which tell him that Katniss is an enemy whom he must kill. He has realized his greatest fear; he is no longer himself, and as he struggles to return to what he was before he suffered a “change,” he repeatedly asks of his own thoughts and perceptions, “real or not real?”

The last time he asks that question is when he seeks an assurance from Katniss: They have just made love, although the only reference to the act —

which she describes as a “hunger,” another hunger game — is the adverb “after”: “So after, when he whispers, ‘You love me. Real or Not Real?’, I tell him, ‘Real.’” But does that mean it is real or that it is just what she is telling him? We don’t really know, just as we don’t know whether the cycle of political, social and economic oppression has been broken or even ameliorated by the thousands of lives lost in the effort — successful, but to what end is not made clear — to dislodge the Capitol.

The trilogy concludes with a pastoral moment — Katniss and her two children playing in a meadow. As a genre, the pastoral is a consciously indulged-in fiction, an imaginative removal from the world of duplicity, violence, ambition, a world whose shadow nevertheless hangs over the literary effort to shut it out. “*Et in Arcadia ego*,” says Death. I am also present in the very landscape that would banish me.

“The Hunger Games” is true to the pastoral tradition when it refuses to bring us to a realm where no games are being played. No unambiguously happy endings here. In the end, Katniss is rehearsing the stories she will tell her children (who “don’t know they play on a graveyard”) and describing the exercise she uses to push away her darkest thoughts. “It’s like a game,” she admits, “but there are worse games to play.” That is the final line, the announcement not of a full but of a relative satisfaction. It is the best life can offer short of a religious vision conspicuously absent from the narrative. But it can be enough.