



## **Sinister Power Games and the Final Girl: Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy**

**Sara Martín  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**

NOTE: This is the text on which the following chapter is based: “Sinister Power Play and the Final Girl: Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy”. [\*Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture\*](#), Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacey Rusnak (eds.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 155-172. It is here uploaded with permission, following the two-year embargo established in the contract. Please, for citations use the book. For any doubts and queries, contact the author [Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat).

Katniss Everdeen, protagonist of Suzanne Collins’ popular young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-10),<sup>1</sup> might not immediately appear to be a Final Girl of the type Carol Clover described in her influential article “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” (1987). I believe, however, that Katniss is certainly a Final Girl, though it is not my aim to prove here that her characterization perfectly matches Clover’s portrayal. Staiger’s analysis of a large corpus of slasher films, intended to question the completeness of Clover’s formula, shows that this is not a fruitful approach. I argue, rather, that even when the Final Girl blueprint only fits partially, as is the case with Katniss, we may gain new insights into specific female characters, their power and agency, which may allow us to revitalize current dominating appraisals.

### **Katniss Everdeen, Final Girl**

Collins narrates Katniss’ gradual involvement in the downfall of the tyranny that oppresses Panem, a post-apocalyptic version of the USA ruthlessly run from the Capitol by President Snow. Panem springs from “the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained” (*HG* 20). After the purported destruction of District 13 in that civil war, the Capitol imposes on the other twelve districts a harsh dictatorship. Inspired by the myth of Theseus’ defeat of the Minotaur and by Spartacus’ slave uprising, but also by TV reality shows (*Blasingame* 727) in the style of as *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-) or *Fear Factor* (NBC, first run 2001-6), Collins presents a scenario conditioned by how the Treaty of Treason (signed seventy-five years before Katniss’ story begins) forces each conquered, starving district to send two tributes to the annual Hunger Games: a boy and a girl, aged twelve to eighteen. These twenty-four teenagers

---

<sup>1</sup> I focus here on the novels, although my arguments also apply to the remarkably faithful film adaptations.

are expected to annihilate each other until only a winner remains in a highly-rated televised spectacle that turns them into celebrities. As Katniss reports, this is “the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy” (*HG* 21).

Katniss volunteers to replace her twelve-year-old sister Prim as a tribute and survives two Games with small acts of rebellion, unwittingly inspiring Panem’s demoralized citizens to join the insurgence led by still existing District 13. The war is won—partly thanks to Katniss’ appeal as an inspirational icon, the Mockingjay—but she eventually realizes that Panem’s democratic future is compromised. Granted her vindictive request to execute President Snow, Katniss decides to kill instead Alma Coin, District 13’s former leader and new Panem premier, when she announces a final edition of the Hunger Games with the children of the Capitol’s vanquished citizens. Declared innocent in the trial by plea of insanity, Katniss is sent back to the devastated District 12, where she finally enjoys a fragile happiness with fellow tribute Peeta.

The summary is aimed at stressing how shocking the content of Collins’ political tale is. The thesis I defend is that Katniss’ predicament is far more terrible than any her fellow Final Girls face. She survives a terrifying onslaught by not one but two psychopaths: Snow and Coin. Whereas Machiavellian villain Snow rules by terror to maintain the crumbling Panem regime alive, Orwellian villainess Coin is even worse, for she “uses fear as a means to serve her ends and then tries to hide this fact” (Heit 124). Like most Final Girls, Katniss is “intelligent, watchful, levelheaded” (Clover 207), though it takes her a while to grasp “the patterns and extent of the threat” (207) which Snow and Coin personify, mainly because of her limited access to reliable information. We do “register her horror as she stumbles on the corpses of her friends” (207), in the Games and in her village, and no sensitive reader can miss that her “paralysis in the face of death duplicates those moments of the universal nightmare experience on which horror frankly trades” (207). Katniss is by the end of her atrocious bildungsroman “abject terror personified” (201) like no other Final Girl.

The total body count in Collins’ trilogy, leaving aside the massacres caused by repression and warfare, is forty-nine: twenty-two tributes die in the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, eighteen in the 75<sup>th</sup> and nine of Katniss’ companions in the mission to infiltrate the Capitol. This high death toll indicates that the slasher bears a direct influence on Young Adult fiction, no doubt because both address teen audiences. *The Hunger Games* is indeed slasher fiction, a fact that becomes evident when we consider its similarities with the controversial *Battle Royale* (2002).<sup>2</sup> In Kinji Fukasaku’s slasher film, the authoritarian Government of near-future Japan curbs down the mounting insubordination of school children by forcing them, as Panem does, to stage a gory, lethal fight. The film’s main theme, Allsop writes, “is personal survival and the abandonment of notions of kinship, friendship and all forms of socially learned behavior” (online). Because of its nihilistic perspective and sheer brutality, *Battle Royale* raised a massive scandal in Japan and abroad. An American reviewer comparing the first installment of the series, *The Hunger Games* (2013), to Fukasaku’s film found the latter “more horrifying and, in a disturbing way, more realistic and trenchant. Where *The Hunger Games* offers only a gentle critique of the culture of competition, *Battle Royale* is a terrifying, endless howl of protest” (Rothman: online). The motivation behind this protest is, nonetheless, similar in both nations: if “the tropes of battle, survival, and the figure of the schoolchild, reflect and refract social anxieties about the Japanese future in an era of globalization and neoliberal reform, and the enduring historical conundrums of Japan’s twentieth-century history” (Arai 367), the same can be

---

<sup>2</sup> Based on a novel (1999) by Koushun Takami, also adapted as a manga series (2000-5) by the author and illustrated by Masayuki Taguchi.

said for Collins' trilogy and America. The slasher remains popular among the young in any narrative manifestation because it operates "as an allegory for the horrors of impending adulthood in a largely harsh political and economic environment" (Kvaran 954).

This is why the way in which the Final Girl overcomes these horrors is so crucial. Clover asserts that "when she downs the killer, we are triumphant" (207). This sense of vicarious triumph dominates most readings of Katniss as a valuable hero and positive role model. In my view, however, she has very limited personal appeal and heroic agency. Her acts of personal rebellion take on much political significance but this is quite accidental. We need, besides, to re-consider why we praise Katniss for demanding to assassinate Snow, as part of her deal to embody the Mockingjay, and why we feel elated when she murders Coin. At the end of *Mockingjay* Collins reaches what Clover calls "the final scene", when the Final Girl "stops screaming, looks at the killer, and reaches for the knife (sledge hammer, scalpel, gun, machete, hanger, knitting needle, chainsaw)" (210), or, in Katniss' case, bow and arrow. As Staiger warns, however, in becoming the attacker the Final Girl "also becomes non-normal, a monster and, while adult, contradictorily also associated with the abject, the other side of 'now', a terrible place of loss and death" (224). Coin's public assassination, a disturbing rather than a liberating event, is an aberration that, given Katniss' impact on Panem's political system and among young readers, should be examined more closely.

This issue has been neglected partly because of the limited post-Freudian approach to gender, shaped by static binary notions of masculinity and femininity, inherited from Clover. The coarse, crude slasher, she wrote, "gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience, than do the legitimate products of the better studios" (188). Her feminist theorizing offered a productive model to explain men's cross-gender identification with the Final Girl. Clover may have been, nevertheless, partially wrong to assume that the slasher audience was mostly male. Presenting a detailed analysis of the marketing techniques applied to 1970s slashers, Nowell criticizes Clover for ignoring the historical context at the time of the films' original release. Actually, according to Nowell's somewhat controversial arguments, producers introduced progressively stronger female characters in slashers because they observed, checking the marketing data, that female spectators chose which films to see with their dates or husbands (51). "Industry insiders also felt," Nowell explains, "that, if marketed correctly, horror appealed over other types of film to courting youngsters because it provided a socially sanctioned facilitator of heterosexual intimacy" (121). Slashers were, it appears, a very convenient excuse for the bodily contact which both boys and girls craved for, especially in first dates.

Besides, by characterizing the Final Girl as "simply an agreed-upon fiction, and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty" (214), Clover complicated the feminist analysis of her appeal among young female spectators. She did acknowledge that the presentation in the last segment of most slashers of the Final Girl as self-rescuing hero served a double function: it offered boys a cathartic cross-gender pleasure but also altered positively how girls perceived female characters. Nonetheless, her critique and her legacy are burdened by a heavy-handed gender binarism very difficult to shake off. "The deeper problem," Totaro notes, "resides in the built-in patriarchy of depending on a Freudian psychoanalytical model, where an active or powerful woman is nothing but a 'masculinized' woman (or a closet lesbian)" (online).

The analysis of Katniss' personality has been negatively impacted by this onerous legacy. Because of the persistence of the old-fashioned gender binary, at odds with Judith Butler's perceptive presentation of gender as fluid performance, passages like the following still seem to apply to Katniss—a sixteen-year-old virginal hunter severely punished for daring to understand her historical-political context:

The gender of the Final Girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of the cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the 'active investigating gaze' normally reserved for males and hideously punished in females when they assume it themselves. (Clover 210)

Much academic energy, then, has been poured into discussing how Collins reverses the gender binary with 'masculine' Katniss and 'feminine' Peeta; also, to criticize Katniss' manipulative transformation by designer Cinna and his prep team into the normative femininity that the Capitol requires from her.<sup>3</sup> Typically, Carrasco writes that "*The Hunger Games* adds another meaning to Darwin's 'survival of the fittest', linked to the performance of beauty, fashion and gender in mediated contexts, which responds in part to the televised gaze of the twenty-first century" (69); 'performance', nevertheless, is not used here in a Butlerian sense but in connection with the narrowest gender essentialism. Conversely, attempts to read Katniss against the grain of enforced normativity as 'queer' lead to unconvincing conclusions. Manter and Francis argue that Katniss' true emotional center is not the romantic dilemma of how to choose between her two suitors, Peeta and Gale, but her queer sororal relationships with her sister Prim and with Rue, the pseudo-sister she bonds with in the 74<sup>th</sup> Games:

Her gender-bending attributes and rejection of traditional heteronormativity are not based on a typical heterosexual/homosexual split; both her tomboy ways and her rejection of Gale's dream of marriage and children come out of survival pragmatism and her devotion to Prim. In other words, the question is not 'Does she like boys or girls?' but rather how her survival mentality has shaped, and continues to shape, her desires. (291)

The authors, though, overlook the fact that Katniss' interaction with Prim is minimal, just limited to a couple of conversations. Gender and sexuality, besides, are not represented in texts only by the protagonist; by obsessively discussing Katniss' femininity or masculinity, we miss interesting alternatives. Johanna Mason, a Game winner nobody likes, is, as Katniss herself acknowledges, better hero material—also far more queer in her uninhibited self-presentation.

In Clover's binary scheme the psychopath is male, but somehow feminized, and the victim that opposes him female, but somehow masculinized. This highlights another problematic feature of her analysis for, as Totaro notes, "her central argument does not work as consistently well in the European horror film, simply because the killers/murderers in Euro horror are often female!" (online), as is also the case with Coin in *The Hunger Games*. In his view, we need to look beyond supposedly universal Freudian psychoanalysis and into specific cultural circumstances. "American horror, like its popular culture in general," Totaro remarks, "is generally prudish and too deeply entrenched in a Puritan past to really engage in sexuality, which is so important to the

---

<sup>3</sup> This is somehow ironic since Cinna secretly supports the rebellion: he uses his designs to feminize Katniss but also to dress her as the subversive Mockingjay.

horror film” (online). If in slashers young people are often killed in post-coital scenes, this is because of a specifically American taboo against pre-marital sex generalized to all sex among young people. In *The Hunger Games* the Puritan legacy is expressed more radically for this is a quintessentially American tale of survival, in which violence erases sexuality. Katniss, who roams the meadows unchaperoned with handsome hunting companion Gale and sleeps every night after the first Games with Peeta seeking relief for her nightmares, is never tempted by sex. Unrealistically, erotic contact is limited to kissing because, it is argued, fear blots out desire. As Katniss tells Gale, she cannot love because “all I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim’s name at the reaping, is how afraid I am” (CF 111).

There is something unsettling, nevertheless, in how Katniss allows Peeta to concoct in public the narrative of their popular fake romance, including a secret marriage and even pregnancy, without responding to his warmth;<sup>4</sup> much more so when everyone already assumes they are lovers. The same applies to her relationship with Gale. We must, then, accept that Katniss’ sexual unresponsiveness is due to the fact that she invests all her libidinal energy into surviving, in which she mirrors cold Alma Coin. Actually, the insistence to place Katniss’ in the correct or incorrect gender/sexuality box diverts our attention from what Collins ultimately foregrounds: the deadly confrontation between Katniss and her female nemesis. At the end of her ordeal, Clover writes, the Final Girl “has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with” (210). At the end of *The Hunger Games* something different happens: Katniss learns to combine hunting with loving a man, thus breaking binary gender barriers. Moreover, she does not ‘unman’ a male but eliminates a woman whose self-empowerment threatens to destroy Panem. Yet, and this is an important novelty, villainess Alma Coin is not just Snow’s patriarchal female counterpart, but the product of the post-feminist social system of District 13, which allows women to be iconic rebels or powerful leaders, as they wish.

The problem is that to eliminate this monster, Katniss needs to become one herself: a murderer. The silencing of the Final Girl, pardoned but removed from public life after her crime, has nothing to do, then, with “a descent into compulsory normativity” (McGuire 74) but with the ambiguous place which monstrous Katniss finally occupies. Collins’s trilogy strikes a new type of fear because whereas slashers can be unmasked as products of patriarchal terrorism, as Clover showed, *The Hunger Games* is habitually praised as a feminist text designed to empower young women like Katniss. Far from being empowered, though, Katniss is deeply traumatized not only by Snow’s male-centered patriarchy but by the murder she must commit to stop Coin, the power-hungry villainess who, as the embodiment of the post-feminist, rebellious District 13, should have been her main anti-patriarchal ally.

### **Political Roles of the Final Girl: Tribute, Rebel Icon, Assassin**

Katniss’ transformation into a heteronormative, feminized TV celebrity has drawn much attention, as mentioned; however, her parallel transformation from hunter into assassin has been mostly overlooked. Collins uses 225 pages (HG 172-403) to narrate the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, many more than to describe Katniss (and Peeta’s) grooming and training, yet she uses scant authorial energy to explain how Katniss feels once she starts killing. Nine days into the Games, when tribute Marvel mortally spears twelve-year-old Rue, Katniss shoots an arrow into his neck. Rue’s dreadful death compels Katniss to “confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us” (276), but

---

<sup>4</sup> Collins focalizes the story through Katniss but still manages to give readers an accurate impression of the Final Boy’s silent romantic suffering, for Peeta does love Katniss.

Marvel's murder offers no catharsis: she just notes that it feels like hunting but "entirely different in the aftermath" (284).

This glossing over of the transition from hunter to murderer is facilitated by Collins' superficial characterization of the tributes; many remain unnamed, whereas the few given names are mainly presented as vicious enemies. The Games begin in both editions, 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup>, with a terrifying bloodbath. The fact that the passage "about a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one another [...]. Several lie dead already on the ground" (175-6) appears in a novel for young readers should give us pause. In the eighteen days of slaughter, a much longer persecution than any endured by a Final Girl, children are poisoned by plants and insects, killed by fellow tributes who snap necks, smash heads with stones, stab and spear bodies, etc. In an awful episode, Katniss gives her rival Cato a mercy killing after he is mauled for hours by mutts—beasts apparently bioengineered from dead tributes bodies. Peeta loses a leg during another mutt attack,<sup>5</sup> whereas a blast leaves Katniss partially deaf. Her victory, won when she threatens to kill Peeta and herself by eating poisonous berries if only one is allowed to survive, is no triumph but the beginning of a life-long depression. The fact that Snow and most Panem citizens read her pitiful suicidal threat as political defiance is almost laughable.

Katniss' scars are erased with plastic surgery, her hearing restored, but no psychological treatment is offered. Formally transformed into a winning Final Girl (and Peeta into her Final Boy), Katniss faces Snow's second assault in *Catching Fire*, once their Victory tour sparks widespread political unrest. Smelling disgustingly of "roses and blood" (CF 19), Snow visits Katniss to warn her that rebellion will cost many lives. Paradoxically, his warning awakens Katniss' dormant political consciousness and she challenges him: the system "must be very fragile if a handful of berries can bring it down" (24). Snow threatens next to kill Gale and both their families unless Katniss keeps up the fake love story with Peeta, which fascinated Capitol audiences. The romance is insufficient, though, and the political unrest mounts, leading to riots and, soon, a general uprising. Katniss' commitment to the rebellion, nonetheless, grows very slowly because it is strictly motivated by negative personal experiences, such as Gale's public whipping. Thinking of Rue and Prim, Katniss finally decides to focus her efforts on saving children from Capitol violence, without considering the larger political panorama. She always sees herself, at all times, as a catalyst rather than a leader, a fact that Snow and Coin fail to grasp, obsessed as they are by their own fragile leadership.

Determined to quench the uprisings, Snow announces a Quarter Quell, a new Hunger Games with twenty-four of the remaining fifty-nine survivors of the past twenty-five years, including Peeta, Katniss and their mentor Haymitch. This comes only nine months after the previous edition and, far from feeling heroic, Katniss totally loses control over her emotional reactions; in contrast, Peeta closes a deal to volunteer instead of Haymitch and thus protect Katniss. The 75<sup>th</sup> Games occupy fewer pages but, still, their terror runs for 125 (299-425). Katniss becomes the center of a three-sided dispute, about which she knows little. She is fully aware, though, of how Snow is using her again, and starts fantasizing about murdering him. Yet, despite Cinna's spectacular transformation of her wedding gown into the Mockingjay's outfit live on TV—which costs him his life—Katniss still ignores that she's also being used by the rebels. They find her so unreliable that the conspiracy to keep her alive, involving many loyal tributes, is concealed from her. Peeta complicates the confrontation between Snow and the rebels over the political uses of Katniss' celebrity by announcing that she's pregnant, a lie intended to undermine the Games. As Katniss stresses, "even the most

---

<sup>5</sup> An atrocity that, interestingly, the films ignore, perhaps finding it too gruesome.

Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can't ignore, at least for a moment, how horrific the whole thing is" (289).

Collins offers more detailed characterization of some tributes in the 75<sup>th</sup> Games, also used as secondary characters in *Mockingjay*: Enobaria, Beetee, Finnick and Johanna. The novelty in these Games is that not all participants are young, which is why the sacrifice of eighty-two-year-old Mags to save Peeta is particularly poignant.<sup>6</sup> The Games only last for three days, but their violence is intensified because the tributes must fight each other and also the arena, designed to start a new torment at each hour. They are gassed, soaked in bloody rain, drowned in a tidal wave, burnt by the electrified fence, attacked by cyborg monkeys and by more mutts. The succession of brutal deaths only stops when, desperate, Katniss shatters the dome. This forces Snow and the rebels to get into a mad scramble to rescue the survivors: the Final Girl is saved by the right side, but her Final Boy is kidnapped by the Capitol. Katniss needs to cope, thus, with Peeta's absence, her many wounds, the realization that she has been deprived of all agency by the rebels, and, to cap it all, the bombing of District 12, which loses 90% of the population. No Final Girl has ever faced such a low point.

*Mockingjay* confirms that, though not labeled horror fiction, Collins' trilogy is one of the most terrifying stories of recent years. The third novel opens with Katniss' visit to her hometown, her first condition to cooperate with the rebellion. Shocked by the ruined streets and the gruesome dead bodies, she blames herself: "*I killed you. I think as I pass a pile. And you. And you*" (M 6, original italics). Her dismay and sorrow grow when she becomes a refugee under the jurisdiction of Alma Coin, the rigid leader of District 13. Coin is "a cold, power hungry 'Big Sister', her Capital adversary's opposite in many ways, except that she and President Snow both lust for power and are willing to sacrifice others for their ambition" (Martin 234). They may be two sides of the same political 'coin', but whereas Snow's presentation as a repulsive vampiric figure attacks the ugliness of patriarchal tyranny, Coin's ageist, misogynistic presentation is not so easy to read. As Katniss reports,

She's fifty or so, with grey hair that falls in an unbroken sheet to her shoulders. I'm somewhat fascinated by her hair, since it's so uniform, so without a flaw, a wisp, even a split end. Her eyes are grey [...]. They're very pale, as if almost all the color has been sucked out of them. The color of slush that you wish would melt away.  
(11)

Throughout *Mockingjay*, Coin's hostility towards Katniss accumulates (she wanted Peeta to become the rebellion's icon), becoming murderous hatred. Politically naïve, Katniss forces Coin to accept a bargain for her cooperation, which includes pardoning Capitol prisoners like Peeta. As Gale explains, Katniss' demands threaten to undermine Coin's leadership and, so, she publicly announces that "any deviance from [Katniss'] mission, in either motive or deed, will be viewed as a break in this agreement" (65). This implicit threat against all District 12 refugees angers Katniss, who instantly sees Coin as just "another power player who has decided to use me as a piece in her games" (66).

Their mutual antagonism escalates with episodes such as the appalling imprisonment of Katniss' Capitol prep team, found "half-naked, bruised, and shackled to the wall" (52). Katniss struggles to develop the charismatic screen presence that her *Mockingjay* role demands, as she also copes with evidence of Peeta's torture by Snow.

---

<sup>6</sup> Like Katniss, she has volunteered instead of another person: Annie, who lost her sanity in the Games she won.

Her undiagnosed PTSD worsens (she's just judged "mentally disoriented", 395), and Katniss concludes that "the Games are still on" (34). Prim attempts to cheer her up—"I don't think you understand how important you are to the cause" (38)—but Katniss uses this authority to have Coin accept a request to kill Snow, not realizing how this must scare her enemy. Only when she visits Commandant Paylor's field hospital, where she is warmly received, does Katniss understand her situation: "I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. Snow knew it, as soon as I held out those berries" and "Coin knows now. So much so that she must publicly remind her people that I am not in control" (101). Aware that Katniss may spoil her political plans, Coin decides then to eliminate her.

Collins, however, diverts the readers' attention from this conflict, focusing instead on exposing the Capitol's evil ways. Paylor's hospital is maliciously destroyed, and Katniss' film crew shows her sending calls to resist in cities ravaged by Snow's armies. Handsome survivor Finnick Odair, also overwhelmed by PTSD, reveals how the Capitol prostituted him and other winners by threatening to murder their families. He also discloses that Coriolanus Snow rose to power by poisoning his immediate rivals: the roses on his lapel mask the stink of the mouth sores caused by drinking small doses of poison to fool suspecting victims. The rescue of Peeta and Johanna Mason from the Capitol offers fresh proof of Snow's destructive torture methods. Katniss realizes that if brainwashed Peeta hates her to the point of trying to murder her, there is little the Capitol cannot do against her. Later, Katniss is finally allowed to engage in combat as a soldier, but the six members of her squad and three of her film crew are exterminated while trying to approach Snow. The Games are not on, but Collins traps Katniss and her companions in a flurry of merciless attacks, including bombs, mutant lizards, a substance that melts skins, spinning blades, and, again, mutts. In a horrifying scene similar to Cato's death, Katniss ends Finnick's suffering by triggering a bomb.

While this malevolent picture of Snow and the Capitol emerges, Katniss realizes that District 13 might not offer a truly reliable alternative. Her mentor, Haymitch, remains skeptical when Plutarch announces that "we're going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government" (93). Katniss is specially disgusted by Beetee and Gale's development of bombs with a double trigger system and by the callous tactics deployed in the occupation of District 2. Before he dies, her squad chief Boggs reveals that Coin wants Katniss dead because she is afraid that, once the war is won, the Mockingjay might support another presidential candidate. Coin prefers Katniss to become a martyr that she can freely use.

Ironically, Katniss only fully understands the method of execution that Coin chooses for her when she hears it described from the bloody lips of President Snow, by then a prisoner. District 13 attacks the Capitol children seeking shelter in Snow's mansion. The rebels drop Gale and Beetee's bombs in the little silver parachutes used to send gifts to the tributes during the Games. Katniss witnesses the resulting massacre: "The snow's red and littered with undersized body parts. Many of the children die immediately, but others lie in agony on the ground" (390). A group of rebel medics, including Prim, approaches the casualties and then a second set of shells goes off. Katniss sees her sister evaporate and is herself caught by a ball of flame, which "transformed me into something new" (392). She is now a "fire mutt" that "knows only a single sensation: agony" (392), a grotesque version of "Cinna's bird, ignited, flying frantically to escape something indescribable" (392). Against Coin's calculations, though, this phoenix rises again, remade into "a bizarre patchwork quilt of skins" (397), her face and scalp partly burnt. The Final Girl hears then from the defeated villain what



has actually happened. As Snow explains, this “masterful move” (402) was Coin’s design: “The idea that I was bombing our own helpless children instantly snapped whatever frail allegiance my people still felt to me” (402). Snow grants that his failure consisted of

being so slow to grasp Coin’s plan. To let the Capitol and the Districts destroy one another, and then step in to take power with Thirteen barely scratched. Make no mistake, she was intending to take my place right from the beginning. [...] 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. (402-3)

Katniss initially doubts his version, but Snow reminds her that “we had agreed not to lie to each other” (403).

On execution day, Coin signs her own death warrant by inviting the remaining victors to “settle a debate” (414). Coin has proposed to her colleagues in Government that “in lieu of eliminating the entire Capitol population, we have a final, symbolic Hunger Games, using the children directly related to those who held the most power” (415); for this, she requires the victors’ support. Peeta, indignant, rejects Coin’s proposal together with Annie and Beetee; Johanna, Enobaria and Katniss vote in favor. Haymitch unties the vote, endorsing Coin’s proposal. The scene is phrased ambiguously and it is difficult to determine why Katniss votes yes. Disgusted, she realizes that “nothing will ever change now” (417). However, when she declares “I vote yes... for Prim” (417, original ellipsis) and waits for Haymitch to cast his decisive vote, we read: “This is the moment, then. When we find out exactly just how alike we are, and how much he truly understands me” (417). Haymitch’s reply, “I’m with Mockingjay” (417), suggests that Katniss has already taken the decision to rise against Coin (not necessarily to kill her), which Haymitch backs.

Most likely, Katniss decides to kill Coin when, pointing her arrow at Snow, she sees in his eyes no “fear, remorse, anger” but “the same look of amusement that ended [their] conversation” (418). Snow is as good as dead but Coin still poses a clear, imminent danger and, so, Katniss shoots her dead. “In the stunned reaction that follows,” she reports, “I’m aware of one sound. Snow’s laughter” (419). This disturbing noise might mean that Katniss has been duped into killing Coin as Snow’s final act of revenge before his own gruesome demise (he dies immediately, drowning in his own blood vomit, or perhaps torn to pieces). What comes next is, in any case, quite perplexing. Assuming that she will be executed, Katniss tries to swallow a poison pill, but Peeta prevents this; Gale refuses to kill her as she begs him. Katniss is badly hurt, physically and mentally, but, oddly, offered no medical help. Isolated for weeks, Katniss sinks into deep depression: “I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despite being one myself” (424). When Haymitch finally fetches her, the trial is already over and another woman, Paylor, has been voted President. Dr Aurelius has secured, Katniss sees, her release by presenting her “as a hopeless, shell-shocked lunatic” (425). She is sent home under Haymitch’s reluctant vigilance and Aurelius’ unconcerned care, until Peeta—also a disfigured ‘fire mutt’—makes their fake romance finally real.

The composed acceptance of Coin’s assassination suggests that Katniss actually does Panem’s new democracy a favor by terminating its worst menace. Since the Capitol no longer needs her and she is embarrassingly tainted by her act, Katniss is deprived of her public political role and marginalized. “Slowly, with many lost days, I come back to life” (435), Katniss reports, as she and Peeta start a life together, plagued by his flashbacks and her nightmares. The Epilogue presents her 15 years later as a

moderately happy wife and mother, still unable to fully overcome the horrors of her youth. Nothing is said about Panem's political situation, though District 12's prosperity hints that it is a stable democracy.

There is no comment, either, on Coin. When Gale asks Katniss after the 75<sup>th</sup> Games how it feels to have killed, she hesitates: "But I don't know what to tell him about the aftermath of killing a person. About how they never leave you" (*M* 77). Presumably, the memory of Coin's assassination persists for long years. This is at odds, though, with most critics' easy acceptance of Katniss' action, which somehow mirrors Panem's. For Martin, Katniss prevents the return of the Hunger Games "by assassinating, or rather *sacrificing*, Coin" (234, my italics). Crediting her with a deeper motivation, Henthorne notes that "no longer a piece of anyone else's games, Katniss takes definitive action because to do any less would be unethical" (91). Likewise, McDonald maintains that "her courageous and morally-directed assassination of Coin [...] is the culmination of a developing process of philosophical and moral examination that at long last have led her to a life truly worth living" (83). Tan defends that "with Coin's death, the public spectacle of the Hunger Games is truly destroyed, the child's body no longer a target or means of inscribing law and punishment. And, as the body is freed, Katniss is freed" (64).

No critic disputes whether Katniss has the *right* to murder Coin because "in the final analysis, the similarities between Snow and Coin allow no easy distinctions between just and unjust systems" (Clemente 27). And, even though Katniss emphatically seeks revenge for Prim's death, Hansen believes that "by killing Coin rather than Snow, Katniss not only rejects Coin's avowed emphasis on vengeance, but also rejects and repairs her own embrace of it" (174). Quite the contrary: Katniss is totally disempowered and undone as a hero by what should be regarded as an immoral, criminal choice—as a Final Girl she becomes, as Staiger worries, an abject monster. She could have fired her arrow at Coin, miss on purpose, and use the "stunned reaction" (*M* 419) to expose the new President's machinations, hopefully earning Commander Paylor's support. Killing Snow while he was still the ruling dictator may have been justified, but Collins places her Final Girl in an indefensible ethical position; besides, she teaches her young readers the dangerous political lesson that assassination, whether Snow's intended execution or Coin's improvised murder, is a valid personal choice for Katniss which even has a justified place in democracy. This is how Collins misuses Katniss, the Final Girl, politically and as a hero.

### A Final Word about the Final Girl

After analyzing many recent remakes of the original slasher films<sup>7</sup> Lizardi concludes that "ironically" these "emphasized versions of the originals' misogynistic and hegemonic historical allegories, [...] also adopt a hopeful outlook on the future" (121). The 21<sup>st</sup> century Final Girl survives worse ordeals than others in the past but she is also more resilient, a better-equipped survivor. As Lizardi argues, though, this is ironic patriarchal backlash: the toughened-up Final Girls are meant to be unrealistic and are intended to scare female spectators with the realization that they could never survive the same kind of extreme patriarchal violence. There is no irony in Collins' trilogy, yet her message is not so different: female (and male) readers are warned that challenging patriarchy is necessary but has serious consequences. Katniss is physically and mentally crushed, and whatever comfort the also victimized Peeta provides is small

---

<sup>7</sup> The trend continues, but Lizardi refers to the period between 2003 (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) and 2010 (*Nightmare on Elm Street*).

compensation. The apparent happy ending only confirms that trauma may never be overcome.

Most readings neglect how Alma Coin causes a great deal of this traumatic damage. President Snow embodies in a straightforward way the idea that evil is caused by corrupt patriarchal hegemony, coded male. Coin's own corruption, nevertheless, proves that women leading, like her, anti-patriarchal rebellion may be also consumed by a lust for power. Women's empowerment, as *The Hunger Games* shows, can ultimately become patriarchal for the very idea of power *is* patriarchal; at the same time, reading Coin's position as implicitly male only results in the repetition of jaded binary clichés. Katniss' own reluctant empowerment also questions the very notion of power: it brings her much suffering, the loss of her beloved sister, her transformation into an immoral assassin, and an uneasy future. Final Girls, we must conclude, are heroic survivors but they are, above all, the victims of sinister power games.

## Works Cited

- Allsop, Samara L. "Battle Royale: Challenging Global Stereotypes within the Constructs of a Contemporary Japanese Slasher Film". *Film Journal* 1.7 (November 2003): no pagination. <http://archive.is/Qnkk1>
- Arai, Andrea G. "Killing Kids: Recession and Survival in Twenty-First-Century Japan". *Postcolonial Studies* 6.3 (November 2003): 367-379.
- Blasingame, James. "An Interview with Suzanne Collins". *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.8 (May 2009): 726-727.
- Carrasco, Rocío. "The Mediated Body in Contemporary U.S. Science Fiction Cinema: *Legacy* (2010) and *The Hunger Games* (2012)". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 73 (2016): 57-72.
- Clemente, Bill. "Panem in America: Crisis Economics and a Call for Political Engagement". *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr & Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 20-29.
- Clover, Carol J. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film". *Representations* 20 (Fall 1987): 187-228.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2008.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2009.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010.
- Hansen, Kathryn Strong. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen: *The Hunger Games*, Myth, and Femininity". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40.2 (Summer 2015): 161-178.
- Heit, Jamey. *The Politics of The Hunger Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015.
- Henthorne, Tom. *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.
- Kvaran, K.M. "'You're All Doomed!': A Socioeconomic Analysis of Slasher Films". *Journal of American Studies* 50.4 (8 January 2016): 1-18.
- Lizardi, Ryan. "'Re-Imagining' Hegemony and Misogyny in the Contemporary Slasher Remake". *Journal of Popular Film* 38.3 (Fall 2010): 113-121.
- Manter, Lisa & Lauren Francis. "Katniss' Oppositional Romance: Survival Queer and Sororal Desire in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 42.3 (2017 Fall): 285-307.

- Martin, Bruce. "Political Muttations in *The Hunger Games*: 'Real or not Real?'" In *Space and Place in The Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels*. Ed. Deirdre Anne Evans Garriott et al. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 220-242.
- McDonald, Brian. "The Three Phases of Evil: A Philosophical Reading of *The Hunger Games*". *The Politics of Panem: Challenging Genres*. Ed. Sean P. Connors. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014. 63-84.
- McGuire, Riley. "Queer Children, Queer Futures: Navigating Lifedeath in *The Hunger Games*". *Mosaic* 48.2 (June 2015): 63-76.
- Nowell, Richard. "'There's More Than One Way to Lose Your Heart': The American Film Industry, Early Teen Slasher Films, and Female Youth". *Cinema Journal* 51.1 (Fall 2011): 115-140.
- Rothman, Joshua. "The Real *Hunger Games: Battle Royale*". *The New Yorker* 3 April 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-real-hunger-games-battle-royale>
- Staiger, Janet. "The Slasher, the Final Girl and the Anti-Denouement". *Style & Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*. Ed. Wickham Clayton. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 213-228.
- Tan, Susan Shau Ming. "Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in *The Hunger Games*". *Lion and the Unicorn* 37.1 (January 2013): 54-73.
- Totaro, Donato. "The Final Girl: A Few Thoughts on Feminism and Horror". *Offscreen* 6.1 (January 2002): n.p. [http://offscreen.com/view/feminism\\_and\\_horror](http://offscreen.com/view/feminism_and_horror)