

# Moves and Countermoves: Visual Technologies of Fear and Counter-Technologies of Hope in *The Hunger Games* Quadrilogy

“Fear,” writes Robert Solomon, “is perhaps the most important emotion” (29). As unpleasant and intense as fear can be, it is a vital emotion that directs our attention to relevant details of a dangerous situation, alerts us to be on the lookout for more details that are imperative to our assessment of that situation, and encourages us to form expectations about how we should respond to its possible evolvment. However, fear is not always simply a question of being afraid of something that is potentially endangering. It can also become a form of cultural politics that, in the words of Sara Ahmed, “works to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies . . . through othering” (1). Ahmed speaks of the spatial politics of fear that work to restrict some bodies through privileging others and to align bodily and social space by enabling “some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained” (70). Fear in this sense is anything but an immediate, affective response to an objective danger; here it functions to conserve power, making the subordinates consent to power as the possibility of dissent is linked to pain, torture, and death. In this technology of fear, publicizing visible suffering through media plays a central role.

This article studies the hugely popular and critically acclaimed *The Hunger Games* film quadrilogy, starring Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen, who survives in a world in which fear is structural and mediated through visual technologies. The series establishes Katniss as its most important ethical and narrative agent, the locus of the spectators’ emotional engagement. However, the films also embody fear independently of the protagonist insofar as their thematic and aesthetic organization can be considered fear-ridden throughout the series. The quadrilogy consists of four science fiction/action films (*The Hunger Games*

(2012), *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay Part I* (2014) and *II* (2015)) based on a dystopian trilogy of books by Suzanne Collins that depict the post-apocalyptic world of Panem. Panem is separated into twelve Districts, which are each subject to the authoritarian Capitol. The quadrilogy’s title refers to a compulsory, televised death match, for which twenty-four children from the Districts are selected each year as “tributes” to fight each other in a dangerous public arena for the entertainment of the Capitol. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the organization of the media follows a panoptic logic that is designed both to observe and to discipline, which can be seen as an allegory for governance that uses fear as the technology of its power. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault used this idea to illustrate the way in which disciplinary societies exercise control by subjugating their citizens to asymmetrical surveillance and by consequently provoking citizens to monitor and police themselves for fear of punishment.

*The Hunger Games* series suggests that counter-technologies can resist these disciplinary technologies of power but that these counter-technologies are equally subject to governing disciplines. This means that while one might resist technologies of power with counter-technologies, the resistance will never be outside of power relations. Even new media technologies, while providing individuals with the means of counter-hegemonic politics of communication, remain embedded “in the political economy, social relations, and political environment within which they are produced, circulated, and received” (Kellner 2). This is why Wendy Chun talks about digital technologies not only as “freedom frontiers” but also as “dark machines of [state] control” (2). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, actual resistance becomes a matter of individual action only. The series’ emphasis on individual action at the expense of emergent

technologies comes with a remarkably pessimistic view on media and media activism, suggesting in the spirit of Jean Baudrillard that all media is conformistic, and that the only places removed from power are areas beyond the media's reach. In the age of digital surveillance, where algorithms have replaced the central observation tower, this view is increasingly relevant since digital surveillance is invisible, and individuals are no longer aware of being watched continually (Zuboff 323).

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In his book *Screened Out*, Baudrillard writes that omnipresent screens threaten us from all directions, resulting in the abolition of distance between the receiver and the source of a transmission, between an event and the broadcasting of that event (176). One of the most critical aspects of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy is indeed the pervasiveness and ubiquity of public screens that are seamlessly positioned within private and communal spaces, shaped by panoptic principles that delineate people's bodies as well as the way in which those bodies inhabit space. These public screens are large-scale displays enabled by digital technologies, offering a virtual expansion of actual space in real time, thereby forging simultaneous connections between different physical spaces.

Thomas Elsaesser describes connections between multiple screens—not only the screens around the city streets but also the cinematic, television, computer, and mobile screens—as “horizontal.” Elsaesser's reason for this description is that we experience these screens along a parallel axis: our embodied interaction with the screens creates ever-present connections in time and space even when we are not consciously aware of these connections as a (new) media culture (17). Through screens, other people and other situations that may have nothing in common except for being elsewhere are constantly made manifest in the physical space that we occupy as embodied beings. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, these screens enable social interaction between the Capitol and the Districts, creating formational power structures that are integrated into the citizens' everyday routines. Furthermore, they expand individuals' embodied experiences by mediating between the boundaries of the material body in the proximate, contingent world

“in here” and the distant, virtual world “out there.” This mediation is very emotional as it is amplified, shaped, diffused, and exposed through flows of communication that initially run just one way, altering the embodied perception of individuals exposed to the media-driven discourse of fear. It is through public screens that President Snow addresses the people of Panem in *Mockingjay Part I*, referring to the Districts as bodily organs that supply the Capitol, “like blood to a heart,” before ordering the Peacekeepers to shoot the Districts' rebels to death in a public execution. Snow's fearmongering practices are inseparable from the way they are displayed to Panem's citizens. The quadrilogy constantly foregrounds the mediation of Snow's acts of state terrorism through their dissemination via public screens in the *mise-en-scène*.

Such a visual technology of fear extending from private to public spaces was already imagined by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), as the operational technology for a totalitarian government called “Big Brother.” Foucault called this technology “panopticism.” Panopticism creates an illusion of constant external surveillance, thereby enabling effective fearmongering, disciplining, and punishing of human bodies in a normalizing discourse. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the Games are designed according to this panoptic logic, not only providing entertainment for the Capitol but also functioning as a visual technology of fear. In this sense, *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy offers a “reboot” of Foucault's panopticism, regardless of the apparent incompatibility of this notion with current technologies of digital surveillance, insofar as the series presents it as a structural, omnipresent, and harmful modality of power.

The Games were invented in the first place to remind the districts of the Capitol's power and its lack of compassion for the failed rebellion orchestrated by District 13. In this system, fear works as an imperative for the Capitol's power: fear is the punishment for rebellion, the promise of a secure society, and the elimination of disorder. The Games fulfill this function as the original rebellion's public aftermath, submitting the tributes to panoptic exposure as bodies that inflict lethal danger upon each other while broadcast live to eager spectators, until one victor remains



and order is restored. The similarities between such enactment of public exposure and “game-docs” like *Big Brother* (1999-) are obvious, and the ways in which they undermine human agency and dignity have regularly been at the centre of debates on the ethics of reality television (Jermyn 80).

The world of Panem is a world in which the Capitol’s power is visibly omnipresent, and there is no way that its inhabitants can act freely of its constraints. Throughout Panem, order is maintained by a military police force called the Peacekeepers, whose apparel—shining white armour, black leather accessories—not only symbolizes authority but also functions as a highly noticeable reminder of the Capitol’s authority and power. The pervasive and constant, but anonymous visibility of the Peacekeepers suggests that Panem’s inhabitants are being scrutinized at all times. While the omnipresent, enormous public screens suggest a situation designed to ensure surveillance that is both wide-ranging and selective, they also function as a visible reminder of an all-pervading, panoptic gaze. This panoptic gaze is also present as a voice that is reminiscent of what Michel Chion calls *acousmètre*. An *acousmètre* is neither inside nor outside the film’s diegesis and therefore has no perceivable limits to its power (129-31). In the first instalment of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the *acousmètre* is present as a disembodied voice-over for a propaganda film *à la* Leni Riefenstahl. In the film’s Reaping scene, this voice manifests as a masculine, smooth, and reassuring authority associated with an all-perceiving eye that looks both back in time and forward to the future. At the same time, it assumes the function of the omniscient author-god in narrative fiction. In other words, the voice appropriates the function of the central watchtower in the panopticon. It becomes an acoustic “gaze” that is not experienced visually but acoustically, prompting awareness of an authority one cannot escape or close off one’s ears from. Sound in general and the voice in particular can effectively assume this function since it is not experienced somewhere “out there,” separate from one’s subject position, but it creates a “‘here’, or rather a ‘there’ + ‘here’” (Stilwell 173).

According to Chion, when the embodied source of the *acousmètre* is revealed—when the voice is “de-




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acousmatized”—it loses its authority (129). However, in the first *Hunger Games* film, when we learn during the tribute parade that the voice-over belongs to President Snow, this does not come with an accompanying loss of power. When the source of Snow’s voice is incorporated into the visual field, the composition of the image confirms rather than denies its authority, placing him in the foreground of a wide-angle shot of the Capitol like a conductor of an orchestra, or the “master of ceremonies,” as Chion puts it (129). The diagonal line of his gesturing arms continues along the diagonal of an enormous boulevard cleaving the Capitol, which is lined up with stands filled with cheering spectators. Even though Snow’s voice becomes embodied at this point, it remains omnipotent. It is only once we learn about his weakness in *Catching Fire* that the voice starts to lose its authority, a moment conveyed very powerfully by the image of Snow spitting blood into his champagne glass.

In many ways, the figure of Snow is an epitome of panoptic power, his towering televisual presence powerfully captured in a teaser for *Mockingjay Part I*. This teaser takes the form of a propaganda video in which Snow smoothly addresses Panem while seated on a gleaming white throne as words like “unity” and “prosperity” appear on an all-white background.<sup>1</sup> John Thornton Caldwell calls “televsuality” of this kind “epic” and links it to authority and power. By exploiting its ability to distort truth through an excessive visual style and imposing, persuasive utterances, epic televisuality is an instrument that programs real-world authority and cultural hegemony (Caldwell 191). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, televisuality functions as a visual technology of fear that extends into people’s homes, blurring the line between the private and public sphere. This is one way in which the quadrilogy “reboots” Foucauldian panopticism in today’s age of digital surveillance: it networks private spheres into the public arena through its

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1. *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy closely associates the colour white with Snow, particularly through the white roses that function as important props throughout the series. These metonymic elements gain an ever-increasing symbolic power as the story progresses. While white roses are customarily associated with love and innocence, they become not only a metonym for Snow in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, but also a metaphor for death and the panoptic presence of the state authority to be felt and internalized much more generally.

ubiquitous televisuality which records and transmits mandatory newscashes of actual events in real time.

This televisual presence that occupies a central place in the panoptic system of Panem, constantly degrades its citizens to “objects of information,” never enabling them as “subjects in communication” (Foucault 200). Furthermore, the format of reality television itself is of an obvious panoptic nature, (involuntarily) recording, monitoring, and exposing its “prisoners” twenty-four hours a day. During the Games, the powers of surveillance and exposure are constantly there. For instance, they take the form of “in-depth” interviews in front of a live audience. In the game arena itself, the cameras are omnipresent, both airborne and on the ground, encapsulated in trees or hidden in other objects, allowing the Gamemakers and the spectators to follow the action regardless of the tributes’ movements or location, since trackers have even been inserted into their arms. At one point, Katniss finds a camera in a tree that she is sleeping in. This functions as a reminder both for herself and for the spectator of how she is constantly being observed by the people of Panem as they watch the Games. The next shot of the interior of a control room reveals that her surveillance coincides from various angles. This shot also demonstrates that the act of surveillance and control is not a matter of vision only. It appears that the control room contains a sizeable virtual replica of the arena that can be used to manipulate the weather conditions in the arena or its time of day by touching an equivalent virtual point. Janez Strehovec calls this a form of “digital tangible,” referring to the way in which in our changed relationship with media, the digital, and the sense of touch are linked by new media technologies, blurring the line between proximity and distance (57).

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Thus, in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, it is significant that the acts of violence by the Peacekeepers and the suffering of the Districts’ inhabitants are covered live as a fear-mongering strategy in which visual technologies play a central role. First, the game arena is manipulated to Katniss’s disadvantage as a result of the Gamemakers’ panoptic access to her game strategy. Later, in *Catching Fire*, fear is sown in District 12 under the command of a new, sadistic Head Peacekeeper, who eliminates his predecessor, shuts down the black market, and burns all contraband. Aired live to



all of Panem’s citizens, the violent scene climaxes with Katniss’s friend Gale tied to a post in the centre of the town square and ruthlessly whipped. In *Mockingjay Part I*, Snow gives an order to attack a hospital full of injured rebels and to televise its destruction. Finally, in *Mockingjay Part II*, the Capitol itself—now an urban war zone—is turned into a game arena with a minefield of the Gamemakers’ sadistic inventions, designed to make a public spectacle of the rebels’ deaths.

Through visual technologies of fear, the Capitol’s power is thus omnipresent throughout the world of Panem. Nevertheless, this power is not omnipotent, for, in the words of Foucault, “there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power” (*Power/Knowledge* 138). In other words, there always remains a residue in the relations between individuals that manages to avoid social power: “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight” (“Subject” 225). According to Foucault, even though one can never be free from power relations completely, one can provocatively engage with them through “practices of freedom” (“Ethic”). In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss “practices freedom” by self-consciously performing in the direction of the cameras. After Rue dies, Katniss adorns the young girl’s body with flowers, then looks directly into the camera and greets it with the three finger salute. The film then cuts to the same image of Katniss projected onto the screens in a public square. In response, District 11’s inhabitants return the salutation and then start to riot against the Peacekeepers in a violent scene that quickly skids out of control and culminates in destruction by fire, until order is violently restored.<sup>2</sup> Later Katniss “performs love” towards Peeta, her fellow tribute from District 12, in front of the cameras in order to manipulate the Games to her advantage. Her performance of love is part of a strategic game, a tactical choice that can potentially reverse the power dynamics, as she is both the author and the object to-be-looked-at of her personal “love” story.

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2. The raised arm salute became an unofficial symbol of opposition during Thailand’s coup in May 2014, and a creative response to several bans the junta had placed on freedom of expression.

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Apart from Katniss's emotional performance, visual technologies can themselves be harnessed as practices of freedom, which opens up possibilities of two-way creation and the sharing of meaning. John Downing calls this form of technology "rebellious communication" that not only confronts established political institutions but also challenges the way in which information is produced (99). Rebellious communication operates collectively, not hierarchically, forming networks of groups that become a social movement, such as the Districts in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy. In *Mockingjay Part I* and *II*, the rebels of communication produce "propos" (propaganda messages) as part of the Airtime Assault on the Capitol, which are transmitted after hacking the signal defence that protects the Capitol's broadcasting system. On their computer screen, the Capitol's defence system has a panoptic form, with a circle in the middle that is surrounded by wedges, closely resembling the symbol of an all-seeing eye surrounded by rays of light, watching over everything. In the hacking scene, Beetee, an electronic wizard from District 3, has to find his way digitally through the electronic defence system that he himself designed. At the same time, the District's rebels physically attack the Capitol's power plants, thereby limiting the range of frequencies available in its broadcasting system. This disruption enables Beetee to interrupt the Capitol's broadcasting with propos that feature Katniss visiting District 12, which had been destroyed, or District 8 while heavily under attack.

When visiting these, and other places, a highly emotional Katniss is constantly filmed by a crew, also known as Squad 451,<sup>3</sup> that have cameras built into their body armour as prosthetic, physical media extensions of the self. This idea of a prosthesis was present already in Marshall McLuhan's seminal text *Understanding Media*, in which he used the concept to explain media's function as an extension of oneself (7). That Squad 451's cameras can be seen as extensions of the self is significant, as it demonstrates how the body and its emotions facilitate both media production and political activism. Thus, the body itself becomes the site for political struggle both within (cameras as body armour) and without (the visible, affective body of Kat-

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3. Perhaps a reference to Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

niss). The footage that is gained in this way by Squad 451 is then intertwined with and superimposed on the Capitol's newflashes, bridged by random dot pixel patterns that one might see in an analogue television transmission. This pirate broadcasting's noise not only literally but also figuratively jams the Capitol's defence systems. It allows the rebels first to commandeer the system, then to unshackle all of Panem, and finally to end the war with a two-tiered explosion targeted at the Capitol's children, with the whole collapse aired live.



As a sonic phenomenon, noise is typically conceived as a communication system's residue, a disorderly, chaotic sound in comparison to more orderly and meaningful modes of expression, such as language or music (Godard et al. 2). However, it is precisely that residual aspect of noise that renders it a productive, subversive means of creating and sharing alternative experiences. For instance, even though Foucault is suspicious of individuals as agents of resistance against the constellations of power, he nevertheless acknowledges within them a "residual power" that allows them the possibility to resist the consolidation of power in systems of governance (Conway 68). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, due to their residual power to interrupt and interfere with governing political forms, hackers are the agents of resistance. Within this context, Gabriella Coleman writes of hackers as significant technological users operating as political actors, who use hacking as legitimate dissent tactics against state power. Instead of conceiving of hacking as the transgressive practice of malicious computer geeks and trolls, she approaches the phenomenon as expressing dissent towards the establishment by "reordering the technologies and infrastructures that have become part of the fabric of everyday life" in order to politicize "actors to engage in actions outside of the technological realm" (515).

In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the practice of hacking functions as a defiant interference against the pathologies of authoritarianism and gives the citizens of Panem

hope. In this process, the dividing line between “objects of information” and “subjects in communication” in the panoptic system becomes increasingly blurred, giving rise to hope for potential change against Snow’s fearmongering discursive practices. Thus, the central opposition of fear and hope that is initially established in the quadrilogy’s first instalment does not only occur on the thematic level. It is also represented in the technological “moves and countermoves” that manifest themselves as the game unfolds, both on the micro level of the game arena, and the macro level of battle between the Capitol and the Districts. In *Mockingjay Part I* there is a scene, in which a physically and emotionally tortured Peeta addresses Katniss directly via a mandatory newflash: “How will this end? What will be left? No one can survive this. No one is safe now. Not here in the Capitol. Not in any of the Districts.” This discourse of fear is hijacked and mixed with subversive footage of Katniss in the ruins of District 12, singing the “Hanging Tree” song as an emotional rallying cry for rebellion. Aesthetically, this hijacking is represented by pixelated dissolves between the Capitol’s footage and the rebels’ footage, elucidating visually the way in which the rebellion literally takes place on the airwaves by means of counter-technologies that enable unruly interaction with hegemonic technologies. The scene shows that in all systems of transmission, the flow of communication can run both ways and political resistance can be enacted. Political resistance of this kind has been attributed to the rise of new communication technologies, but as John Michael Robert points out, these technologies also run the risk of re-transforming the subjects into objects of communication as soon as they become established (7). Indeed, the ending of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy suggests that as soon as the resistance becomes the new establishment, the media conforms, and the only means of defiance that can be realized is through individual action, such as by Katniss from outside of the establishment. Hers is a strategy of angrily reasserting her idiosyncrasy, doing what is least expected from her in the panoptic system, despite still residing within that system.

The ending of the quadrilogy corresponds with the Foucauldian insight that subjective agency’s individualist paradigm remains subservient to collective, normalizing



disciplines, as in the end Katniss is exiled to District 12, separated from the panoptic gaze, but also separated from the means to resist its power. Of course, her anonymity from that gaze is possible within a very limited space, and as soon as she leaves that space, she re-appears in the panoptic matrix. In this context, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson speak of the “disappearance of disappearance,” the current impossibility of anonymous existence outside technologies of surveillance (620). The final, happy scenes of *Mockingjay Part II* that show Katniss serenely enjoying her family in the middle of nature are then strangely disappointing, pessimistic even, since they imply that individual resistance to mechanisms of panoptic power is but an illusory ideal. However, it is still one nevertheless worth striving toward. In conclusion, what this Foucauldian informed reading of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy has hoped to show, is that *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy is more than an illustration of the philosopher’s complex ideas about media, power, and resistance. Rather, this emotionally driven series first and foremost prompts us to reflect upon these ideas by experiencing them from the inside, through a strong affective engagement with its female protagonist as she bravely orchestrates her moves and countermoves.

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