

## A Foucauldian Analysis of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*

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### Abstract

In his work *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Michel Foucault applies the concept introduced by Bentham's Panopticon. He argues that the panoptic structure illustrates the connection between an abstract notion like punishment and a tangible reality like the Panopticon. The purpose of punishment becomes more about providing a spectacle for the audience rather than rehabilitating the prisoner, as it primarily aims to deter others. *The Hunger Games* clearly exemplifies this concept, as the people living in the districts are constantly under careful observation of Panem's political power. Foucault's power and surveillance create a world that is closely related to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* and post-truth discourse. *The Hunger Games* also intersects with the idea of post-truth discourse, which refers to a political climate where the objective truth becomes irrelevant or manipulated for political gain. It shows that we live in a world that is akin to Bentham's Panopticon, where the truth is completely vanished and replaced by fake information to serve authority's emotions.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, Bentham, Panopticon, Discipline, Punishment, Post-truth, Truth



## تحليل فوكوياني لرواية سوزان كولينز "ألعاب الجوع"

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### المستخلص

في عمله "الانضباط والمعاقبة"، يطبق ميشيل فوكو المفهوم الذي قدمه بانوبتيكون للكاتب بينثام. يجادل بأن البنية لنظام "الرؤية الكاملة" ما هو الا العلاقة بين فكرة مجردة مثل العقوبة والواقع الملموس مثل "بانوبتيكون" او الرؤية الكاملة. يصبح الغرض من العقوبة هو توفير مشهد للجمهور بدلاً من إعادة تأهيل السجين، حيث أنها تهدف في المقام الأول إلى ردع الآخرين. تمثل ألعاب الجوع مثالاً واضحاً لهذا المفهوم، حيث إن الأشخاص الذين يعيشون في المناطق يخضعون باستمرار للعين الساهرة للسلطة السياسية لبنايم. إن قوة فوكو ومراقبته تخلق عالماً يرتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بكتاب سوزان كولينز "ألعاب الجوع" وخطاب ما بعد الحقيقة. تتقاطع "ألعاب الجوع" أيضاً مع فكرة خطاب ما بعد الحقيقة، والذي يشير إلى مناخ سياسي تصبح فيه الحقيقة الموضوعية غير ذات صلة أو يتم التلاعب بها لتحقيق مكاسب سياسية. إنه يظهر أننا نعيش في عالم يشبه البانوبتيكون لبنايم، حيث تختفي الحقيقة تماماً وتحل محلها معلومات مزيفة لخدمة عواطف السلطة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ميشيل فوكو، بنثام، الرؤية الكاملة، الإنضباط، العقاب، ما وراء الحقيقة، الحقيقة

## 1. Introduction

The first book in the trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (2008), was written by Suzanne Collins (1962), the American television writer who focuses mostly on the most critical issues of our present day (the post-truth period) and undoubtedly offers sarcastic critique of it. The ruling force, symbolized by Panem and its leader, President Snow, spreads misinformation, lies, and cynicism. She cleverly illustrates the two opposing features of these advancements, which are both extremely amazing and terrifying.

Approaching *the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis* (2012), despite Collins' assertion that the trilogy is mainly related to war stories. Tom Henthorne asserts that the trilogy is tough philosophically. War is not a topic covered in *The Hunger Games*, but gender, rules, friendship, love, trauma, and surveillance in the post-truth era are given considerable attention.

Collins develops a totalitarian government that is capable of warning society that things would go out of hand if such power is maintained. She paints a vivid picture of what is required to treat a malice that is toxic. Dystopian fiction has the advantage of showing what may happen if people do not make meaningful changes to the problems they are now facing.

James Blasingame (2009) claims that people rarely stop to consider the totalitarian regime that oppresses them because they are so concerned about where their next meal will come from (724) in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Most people no longer consider what is going on around them in the post-truth period; instead, they passively accept events, keeping their opinions to themselves and posing no resistance.

Collins in the dystopian future depicted in *The Hunger Games*, authoritarianism and state authority struggle mightily to create a panoptic society. Panem is divided into districts that all serve the main authority, which is represented by President Snow, as a result of earlier uprisings and revolutions.

The Capitol chooses a male and female tribute at random to engage in a death match as part of the games. Since they are aired, any district may watch the Games. The Capitol practices Michel Foucault's Panopticism, which places all people under rigorous control and regulation along with governance.

The study raises different questions: whether Collins' *The Hunger Games* is found in Foucault's Panopticon. Does the constant surveillance in *The Hunger Games* represent Foucault's Panopticon? Can one observe *The Hunger Games* and Foucault's Panopticon?

Contextually, this study highlights the most significant similarities between the trilogy and Foucault's Panopticon as well as the post-truth world (our world).

## 2- Theoretical Framework

### 2-1 Key words

#### 2-1-1 Panopticon

Panopticism, as discussed by Michael Foucault(1926–1984), is considered

a model of self-regulation and self-restraint. Additionally, it is a paradigm to comprehend how the dominant powers operate in our world and also the capitol in *The Hunger Games*. According to Connors (2010, 6).The capitol induces hierarchal division among the citizens of districts. At the apex, the capitol enjoys luxury and richness. Whereas at the nadir, the districts gravely suffer from subjugation, oppression and poverty.

The total control through cameras, peacekeepers and the advanced technology gives them non-real feelings making them vulnerable to invisible guards, as discussed in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

“They are like so many cages, so many small theatres in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1983, p200). Its main mission not only watching the inmates, but also surrounding them, depriving them of their basic needs and most importantly, making them fully ignorant of the updated news and their potentials.

#### 2-1-2 Capitol

Represents the dominant power in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. They have the ability to control the others and access to any information regarding them. Thus, it represents the guards in Panopticonism concept.

#### 2-1-3 Tributes

The residents who are chosen or volunteered to participate in annual the Hunger Games.

#### 2-2 Related Works

Many writers conduct their studies on this subject. However, there have been no studies relating Collins' *The Hunger Games* to Foucault's Panopticon and the post-truth world. This study gives much attention to the discipline and punishment themes. It then moves on to discuss the work done on *The Hunger Games* to discover the possible gaps in which to focus. For instance, Henthorne's (2012) *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis* offers a comprehensive study of *the Hunger Games Trilogy* and Foucault's Panopticon. Furthermore, Wenzel's “*Perhaps I Am Watching You Now*” illustrates how the disciplinary network works, as well as Katniss's understanding of the network's use of spectacle and surveillance to maintain control.

### 3- Methodology of the Study

#### 3-1 Theory and Model adopted in Data Analysis

This study follows Foucault's Panopticism from *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, where people are monitored at all times. Their age, names, and sex are recorded in documents. The concept of Foucault provides a clear image of how power is disseminated and controlled in contemporary society. A theoretical analysis is used to show the application of Foucault's Panopticon to *The Hunger Games*. Also, a close reading of *The Hunger Games* is shown in this study.

### 4- The Analytical Part

The post-truth period produces a system akin to Jeremy Bentham's

Panopticon (1791), a centrally planned jail where invisible guards simultaneously watch all inmates while the inmates are unaware they are being observed. The convicts alter their conduct as a result of the unequal gaze since they are always being seen, and this gaze produces a "sentiment of invisible omniscience" and internalizes that observation (Bentham 2). The center tower is theoretically made up of a series of spherical jail cells, each of which is lit from both the inside and the outside, making every prisoner exposed and vulnerable. One may say that Panopticon's major goal is to eliminate the requirement for tower guards. Consequently, the Panopticon's main impact is to encourage the prisoner to behave in a certain way (Foucault, 1995, 201).

In his premise, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses Bentham's idea. He argues that the panoptic structure shows how a made-up idea—the pervasive idea of punishment—depends on something real, like the panopticon. It creates a fabricated feelings; an omnipresent punishment. The Panopticon representation symbolizes the social control which is prevailing every single part of political and social institutions. Punishment finally becomes a spectacle that is given more for the audience than for the condemned since its main purpose is to deter others rather than to rehabilitate the prisoner (Foucault, 1995, p201).

The Panopticon's physical layout is similar to Collins' trilogy's setting. Mountains encircle every district from the east, covering the Rockies, where the capital is located. The Capitol is located over all of the districts, and from the watchtower we can view every prisoner.

Residents of the districts are not permitted to cross the barrier since it is risky and poses a serious threat to their safety. They learn the least about the outside world due to their solitude. They receive knowledge and truth from the Capitol that is relevant to their interests which is similar to post-truth discourse. The Capitol continues to keep an eye on them with informers and peacekeepers and broadcast their movements to serve as a constant reminder to the people of their helplessness and the potential punishment they face should they ever try to rebel against the authority. The finest instance of reminding people that they are under the Capitol's rule is Treaty of Treason, which establishes laws and conventions to quell any prospective acts of revolt. People in districts are not only continuously being monitored, In addition to being continually observed, residents of districts have their children taken away and sacrificed in such games to demonstrate to them just how vulnerable they are.

The Capitol forces them to participate in the aforementioned Games in order to humiliate and punish them; the victor will be granted a quiet life, and the arenas has a panoptic design that keeps them under the watchful eyes of the game creators, who impose harsh punishments, and the citizens of Panem, who are obligated to adhere to viewing broadcasts. The game designers send the cannons and the hovercrafts to collect the dead victims as well as implant devices whose main role is to record and check their health and movement.

The Quarter Quell arena is made to resemble Bantham's Panopticon in every way possible in order to be both spectacular and dangerous at the same time (Wezner, 2012, p149).

The Panopticon authority and its control over the twelve districts are symbolized by the arena. The maintenance of district segregation and the requirement of the dominating power's surveillance function, which monitors the developed capacities of each district within a highly regulated environment, are advantages of the lethal rivalry among tributes. For instance, district three is widely known for having land mines that have been deactivated. The Capitol can suppress any possible revolt with the use of such information, which also serves to increase monitoring and punishment scenarios. Because of the psychological issues that result from the Panopticon, the inhabitants frequently experience such mistrust, suspicion, and paranoia (Wezner, 2012, p150).

The people of Panem have the power to shape the audience's reaction, just as they have the power to award or withhold sponsors. This power only hinges on their preference for tributes, even if the tributes are questioned prior to the day of The Hunger Games. The power uses "spin control" to distort and conceal the facts as well as to exert control and uphold order. Propaganda videos are played, and the public spontaneously congregates as an audience. This action demonstrates that in the post-truth age, individuals in authority present a narrative of history that is viewed as moral and right. It is obvious when someone hides their feelings in order to gain public favor. When the tribute for the 12th Hunger Games is to be Katniss's sister, Prim, Katniss manages to conceal their feelings in order to pacify the crowd. Since they would be broadcasting the replay of the reaping, Katniss tries to keep her sentiments of apathy hidden so that she won't appear to be an easy target. Katniss, the heroin of *The Hunger Games*, shows the importance of turning of her facial expression into indifferent. Being apathetic is one of the most significant characteristics of post-truth era.

According to Brianna Burke's 2013 article "Teaching Environmental Justice through the Hunger Games", Panem is a metaphor of our world if the current policies and the ideologies continue. To make the citizens feel powerless, the Capitol, internalizes fear in every aspect of their life (53-63). The fact that the districts are guarded by electronic fences topped with barbed wire and monitored, a precaution they are informed is done for their own protection which serves as more evidence of this. By making the public believe that the Capitol is defending them while in actuality it is to the Capitol's benefit to prevail the division among the citizens (Fetouni, 2015, p9).

Goffman argues that individuals are compelled to act in a way that fits with our daily life. one follows the norms that have been allocated to him when mingling with others, acting out his roles exactly as they are when he is alone. This idea casts doubt on Panopticon's thesis and poses a number of issues, such



as if this theory teaches prisoners to appeal the ruling class in order to win their support and contentment. Do those laws only allow kids to follow the herd or do they also teach them morals? Similar to *The Truman Show* the arena is like the Panopticon in that it is utilized for entertainment and is subject to inevitable public inspection. The protagonists, Katniss and Peeta, must take advantage of the totalitarian system by acting in a way that appeals to people in positions of power.

The interviews that are televised in front of a live audience, for instance, are a perfect example of how the government tries to influence the populace. Since cameras are pervasive and are implanted in trees, the ground, and other objects in addition to being in the air and the sky, it is legal to continually monitor players since they wear trackers in their arms. A camera is discovered in the trees when she is camped there, and its purpose is to serve as a reminder to her and the other tributes that they are being watched by Panem's people while they take in the games. The inner control room demonstrates the several ways Katniss maintains surveillance. Furthermore, this picture demonstrates that monitoring and control are not just visual processes. By hitting a similar virtual point, it looks that there is a sizable virtual replica of the arena in the control room that may be utilized to alter the weather or time of day in the arena (Laine, 2018, p19). "So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Game makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done"(Collins, 2008, p274).

The power of the capitol is everywhere because it uses visual technology for punishment and surveillance, but, as Foucault asserts, "there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups, and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power" (Foucault, M. 2020, pp. 73-74). In other words, individual ties always leave behind some residue that avoids social power.

There can be no power dynamics if one cannot run away or escape. Foucault contends that one can be provocative in "practices of freedom" even if one may never be completely free from power relations (Batters, 2011, p7).

Practices of Freedom are demonstrated as Katniss stands intentionally and proudly in front of the camera. When Rue dies, Katniss drapes her body in flowers, performs the three-finger salute, and looks directly into the camera. The image of Katniss shown on monitors in a public space then enters the scene. District 11 residents return the salute and then start rioting against the Peacekeepers in a violent scene that quickly escalates out of control and finishes with fire damage until the law is forcibly imposed. The second instance is when Katniss "performs love" with the other tribute from District 12 to influence the audience's reaction. Since she is both the author and the focus of her own unique "love" story, her display of affection is a strategic move with the potential to alter the balance of power.

Katniss is able to exploit technology to her advantage. On the one hand, the Capitol employs technology to manage the tributes and keep its citizens amused. Then, she is using it to remain in touch with her team, keep an eye on her competitors, and plan her strategy. She is able to obtain information on her team's development and make plans as necessary by maintaining contact with them. For instance, she is able to come up with a plot to remove the Career Tributes in revenge after learning that Rue has been slain.

The protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, despises the Capital and shows her rebellious spirit from the beginning when she attempts to pass the fence which is electrified to prevent anyone from hunting. Collins wants to emphasize that telling truth has a price and nothing is immune even the basic necessities for survival. The woods, which should be a refuge for Katniss, however, are a house for "venomous snakes, and rabid animals". But there is food. When Peeta, her potential lover, says that "every time I look at fence, all I think of are hidden things, snakes, rabid animals, and quicksand", "there could be anything in there"(Collins, 2008, p. 291). Those words remind Katniss of Gale's words and she compares between them. She concludes that their lifestyles affect their looking at the same object. For example, Gale sees the fence as a potential source of food as well as a threat, while Peeta sees it as the only source of danger since he has the luxury of being a baker. The fence represents the district's imprisonment and lack of freedom. In Panem, there is no democracy, and people are treated as animals.

The truth for the citizens of Panem is a representation of the political system there. For instance, the people of Panem are told that a fence is a defense for wild animals. Katniss realizes the true reason for the function of the fence as well as other issues such as hunger, oppression, and the totalitarianism of the political authority. Katniss and her crossing the fence show that she is not satisfied with this situation, and this act shows the first step of her rebellion. Where people get shot if they pass the wall, people in Panem can be killed by wild animals or electrified. Katniss does not take the risk for the purpose of fulfilling her interests as a hunter, but rather to feed her family. Many "weak spots" are found by Katniss who knows that sometimes the fence is not electrified; thus, she takes advantage of this to pass through it and hunt. (Connors, 2014, p104).

Though hunting is considered an illegal act and the punishment is death, however, the Capitol and its president "turn a blind eye to the few of us who hunt because they are hungry for fresh meat as anybody is. In fact, they're among our best customers" (Collins, 2008, p.5).

The other way that Capitol uses to control others is by sending most torturous creatures to the tributes. Tracker jackers are widely used by the Capitol as a strategy in *The Hunger Games* and as a technique for torturing captive rebels. It is particularly dangerous since the tracker jacker sting may



result in bizarre hallucinations that may drive people insane. These mutts are among the most effective biological weapons the Capitol has since tracker jacker poison can occasionally be deadly. Katniss uses the Capitol as a result to murder the other tributes. Where tracker jacker nests are located, she cuts the trunk.

Foucault argues that there is a clear dichotomy between “the power” and the “powerless”. Katniss and Peeta can win if they are able to resist Panem and exploit its potential power (Connors, 2014, pp103-104). To have power means that you have the capacity to determine what is true and what is not. For example, the Capitol has the power to influence others` perception. When district 13 attempts to overthrow the government in the beginning of the trilogy, and as a result of this action, the Capitol devastates the whole District. It is clear that the primary business of District 13 is not graphite mining but rather the creation of weapons of mass devastation. To conceal the truth, the Capitol spreads false information (Henthorne,2012, p.74).

The Capitol or the dominating power here tries to construct a fictitious atmosphere to deceive the people. By keeping the other districts ignorant of the reasons behind their persecution and poverty, the Capitol is able to further its own objectives. Despite the fact that it is essential for diverging from others' beliefs, asserts that technology is the only way to tell truth from fiction. The Capitol, for instance, utilizes technology against the districts by watching every move and broadcasting reality shows as tributes (McIntyre,2018, p121).

It is certainly plausible to claim that President Snow may observe and witness the murders of children and the demolition of buildings for personal benefit as he watches young adults die in video games. It is also akin to what happened to Iraq in 2003 when the US invaded Iraq and used its natural resources for their advantage. Residents of Capitol witness young adults slaughtered and entire neighborhoods devastated while the rest of the world watches reality shows, the war of Iraq, and the execution of individuals; they are uninterested in these types of spectacles, which are typical of post-truth culture.

Collins' trilogy aims to enlighten people living in the post-truth era, she has sympathy to the young people and children who lose their lives for the sake of the politicians who have given the manipulative narratives. Political beliefs are truly represented in this novel. Using these political ideas, the Capitol consciously tries to rob the districts. The Capitol wants to influence the decisions that its citizens make. It has an impact on how individuals in Panem feel about their personal issues as well as how they perceive and deal with their government (Henthorne, 2012, p.99).

## 5- Conclusions

- 1- The themes of *The Hunger Games* are closely related to Foucault's writings on authority, discipline, and surveillance.
- 2- The writings of Foucault assist us comprehend how such a

government would continue to exercise control and how its citizens may be impacted. Both Foucault and *The Hunger Games* may be viewed as social commentary and show the perils of an overly regimented society. When analyzing the organizational principles of post-truth, it is crucial to take these concepts into account.

- 3- The concept of Panopticon can be seen in the norms and values of the current discourse. It also manifested through the dissemination of misinformation in *The Hunger Games* as well as in our world. Thus, *The Hunger Games* reflects the Panopticon world already described by Michel Foucault.

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