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Troubled Contemporary Masculinities in *The Hunger Games*

Abstract: This paper explores representations of masculinities and the American makeover culture in the *The Hunger Games* series. Many analyses of *The Hunger Games* so far have mostly focused on and explored the female characters such as Katniss Everdeen. However, based on the assumption that *The Hunger Games* negotiates what it means being a man in the United States in the 21st century, this paper provides an against the grain reading of the popular novels and movies of this series. This paper argues that *The Hunger Games* – while seemingly celebrating progressive gender roles – on another, deeper level expresses nostalgia and a desire for 'conventional' masculinities such as the working class hero.

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1. Introduction

A lot has been written about Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series so far – be it with regard to the three novels, which were published in the United States of America between 2008 and 2010, as well as with regard to their film adaptations, i.e., the four movies which came to American theaters between 2012 and 2015. Many publications so far have analyzed issues of gender in *The Hunger Games*-series – most of them with regard to Katniss¹. Some critics argue that in *The Hunger Games* gender roles are transgressed or reversed, for example, because they believe that Katniss exhibits male gender traits due to being a fighter, not being emotional, or that Peeta has female gender traits due to being caring or sensitive.² Others believe that *The Hunger Games* is conservative with regard to gender roles, because Katniss allegedly succumbs to male expectations towards women, i.e., she becomes what mostly male characters like Peeta, Snow or Cinna, want her to be³ (mother, the girl on fire, desirable). A lot of attention has been paid in this context to Katniss' appearance: her looks, body, beautification, dresses and femininity. To some critics, it seems that Katniss represents what it means being a woman in the United States in the 21st century, where girls and women seemingly have to create particular images of themselves, and to improve themselves, their appearances and bodies in order to “survive” in the contemporary American society, which seems to be strongly influenced by fashion, the beauty industry, celebrity culture, reality and makeover TV, i.e., makeover culture.⁴ Although some critics have analyzed male characters and masculinities⁵ with regard to *The Hunger Games*,⁶ this paper aims to add another perspective by exploring masculinities and male appearances that other analyses rarely explore, other than to explicitly or implicitly claiming that they play a minor role for male characters. In my paper I claim that *The Hunger Games* negotiates what it means being a man in the United States in the 21st century. I argue that *The Hunger Games* series reflects the attempt to re-establish faith in the American nation via establishing faith in 'conventional' masculinities such as the working class hero, which both seemed to be threatened by 9/11, the economic crisis, and the American makeover culture. Since my paper focuses on male appearances, it seems to be useful to analyze both the novels and the movies in order to identify similarities and differences between the written text and its visual realization on screen, and to provide explanations if necessary. Since according to Michael Kimmel “American men define their masculinity [...] in relation to each oth-

¹ See, e.g., Henthorne 2012, or Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014: 395-409.

² See, e.g., Kirby 2015: 460-478 and Oliver 2014: 675-686.

³ See, e.g., Denison 2014: 5.

⁴ See, e.g., Denison 2014 and Evans Garriott 2014: 165-166, 172. See also Rice and Wrabel 2014: 184-195.

⁵ I chose Michael Kimmel's term masculinities since it indicates that there is not merely one, homogenous masculinity to be explored, but rather various – at times conflicting – masculinities. See Kimmel 2012.

⁶ See, e.g., Woloshyn, Taber and Lane 2013: 150-160. See also Swenson 2014 and Henthorne 2012: 57-62.

er,”⁷ it seems to be useful to analyze and compare some of the most revealing male characters to each other.

2. American Masculinities in the 21st Century

For various reasons, some critics have seen and still see contemporary American masculinities in crisis or in need of redefinition or reaffirmation.⁸ Among many other issues and events, contemporary American masculinities seem to be challenged by 9/11, the economic crisis in 2008⁹ and the American makeover culture¹⁰ which – as *The Hunger Games* series shows – not only affects women, but also men.

According to Di Mattia, the terrorist attacks in 2001 created a climate of collective loss, grief and fear, and a desire to protect the United States from external and internal threats¹¹ – “from what is different, not ‘normal’, and, in turn, un-American.”¹² However, the attacks did not only pose danger to the United States, but simultaneously to American masculinities, since it seems that both were inter-related, challenging “what it means to be an American male (and in turn an American)”¹³ and creating the need “of rearticulating and renegotiating ideologies of not only masculinity but also citizenship and nationhood.”¹⁴ Thus – according to Di Mattia, who is referring to Dana Heller – “the refashioning of American cultural and national identity”¹⁵ in that era “focused specifically on the resuscitation of ‘masculine confidence’ evident in the proliferation of images of ‘heterosexual masculinity’ as America’s ‘best line of defense.’”¹⁶ According to Di Mattia this was evident in George W. Bush’s efforts to “strengthen conventional, heroic, ‘man on top’ gender roles”.¹⁷ This not only includes his fight against all aspects of gender identity, sexuality and sexual practice he thought deviant,¹⁸ but also his attempts of “defining ‘normal’ masculinity as heterosexual, monogamous, and married”¹⁹ after his re-election in 2004. Di Mattia and Heller argue that at that time, “popular-culture texts”²⁰ played an important role for commercial “commemoration and reimagining of national identity”²¹ and likewise heroic masculinities “by which myths of the

⁷ Kimmel 2012: 5.

⁸ See, e.g., Kimmel 2012 and Di Mattia 2007: 133-149.

⁹ For 9/11, the economic crisis of 2008 and masculinities see, e.g., Swenson 2014.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Di Mattia 2007.

¹¹ See Di Mattia 2007: 136.

¹² Ibid.: 136.

¹³ Ibid.: 135.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 135.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 136, referring to Heller 2005.

¹⁶ Di Mattia 2007: 136

¹⁷ Ibid.: 135

¹⁸ See Di Mattia 2007: 135.

¹⁹ Di Mattia: 135.

²⁰ Ibid.: 136, referring to Heller.

²¹ Ibid.: referring to Heller 2005.

past are being rewritten to accommodate new possibilities.”²² In this climate the “working-class hero”²³ was of particular importance, because he “represented a nostalgic cultural longing for normalcy and simplicity in the face of new extraordinary complexities and uncertainties.”²⁴ The “recurring, iconic image” of the masculine and heterosexual firefighter²⁵ represents this type of working-class hero, through which “a discourse of heroic masculinity is reinvigorated,”²⁶ which not only reaffirms “faith in masculinity”, but also “by extension in the nation itself.”²⁷

The American makeover culture does not seem to be a new phenomenon, because according to Dana Heller “the complex cultural origins of makeover narrative can be broadly traced to myths of American expansionism, evangelicalism, and immigration.”²⁸ Nevertheless, the current American makeover culture, which is discussed in this paper, seems to be a particular social and cultural phenomenon that challenges American masculinities²⁹. According to Meredith Jones, it is “utterly tied up with post-modern values of consumption, revision and the importance of surface”³⁰ evident in forms of media such as reality-, or more specifically, makeover-TV, and also Facebook. Working on one’s body and appearance via beautification is an essential aspect of makeover culture, whereas, according to Jones “cosmetic surgery is makeover culture’s quintessential expression.”³¹ Although makeover might also be used for constructing or reaffirming masculinity,³² the made-over man seems to “occupy a feminized position.”³³ One of the reasons might be that male indifference to his appearance has been an American ideal, which might have been challenged or changed by various factors such as the “gay male aesthetics of the 1980s,”³⁴ but still seems to be identifiable in the male heterosexual ideal of effortlessness with regard to his appearance.³⁵ This means that

[t]hough the common truism contents that the metrosexual was born out of shows like *Queer Eye*, which made shopping, grooming, smelling good, and looking fabulous “safe” for the straight guy, [...] the made-over man must learn [...] how to improve the way he

²² Ibid.: referring to Heller 2005.

²³ Ibid.: referring to Heller 2005.

²⁴ Di Mattia 2007: 136.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Heller 2006: 2.

²⁹ Brenda Weber also writes about American masculinities in crisis in the context of the American makeover culture. See for example: Weber 2009: 171-213, or Weber 2006: 287-306.

³⁰ Jones 2008: 6. See also Steinhoff 2015.

³¹ Jones 2008: 1.

³² For makeover narratives and masculinities see, e.g., Heller 2006.

³³ Weber 2006: 287.

³⁴ Weber 2006: 303.

³⁵ Ibid.: 303-304.

looks without seeming to have done so. Anything more will too flagrantly point to the aid and intervention offered by the feminized mechanism of the make-over.³⁶

Thus, men, who visibly adhere to the American makeover culture, who care about their appearances, fashion, or who otherwise beautify themselves, run the risk of being seen as 'effeminated.' Another reason for this view might lie in the interrelation between makeover culture and wealth, decadence and luxury,³⁷ which might evoke the old American fear that luxury and decadence "effeminates" men and threatens the health of the nation.³⁸ For example, the American historian Rader describes that Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) "feared above all else that boys born into luxury would become effeminate men."³⁹ From early on, Americans compared the (fate of the) United States to Ancient Rome. In the same vein, some feared that the United States might also fall (like they believed Rome did) because of its luxury or decadence (although the latter is now doubted by experts) and 'effeminacy.' Similarly, Rader writes that Roosevelt's contemporary Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1919) also feared that "Ancient Rome had fallen [...] when the strong masculine impulse which first created it had degenerated into ... worship of comfort, wealth, and general softness."⁴⁰ In order to fight this 'effeminacy', American men resorted to 'conventional' images of masculinities as embodied by the pioneer, fighter or cowboy, and went "out there" to the West⁴¹ to re-establish 'conventional' masculinities such as Theodore Roosevelt famously did.⁴²

3. Masculinities, Fear and Makeover Culture in *The Hunger Games*

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Some critics believe that the popularity of dystopian young adult fiction such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* is related to the events of 9/11,⁴³ because it seems "to evoke and relive the mind-set of fear and isolation felt by many real-world people after the attacks."⁴⁴ This also includes the American War on Terror, which made some people fear that civil rights would be curtailed to protect the country.⁴⁵

³⁶ Weber 2006: 304, see also Weber 2009: 212.

³⁷ See, e.g., Frankel 2012: 50-55.

³⁸ See Rader 2009: 129, 181.

³⁹ Rader 2009: 181.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 129.

⁴¹ On the West and masculinity, see Kimmel 2012: 32, 44-45, 90, 109-111.

⁴² On Roosevelt and the West, see *ibid.*: 100-101.

⁴³ See, e.g., Pharr and Clark 2012: 8, Wright 2012: 98-99. Garriott 2014: 182, Henthorne 2012: 77, 118, 121.

⁴⁴ Pharr and Clark 2012: 8.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Henthorne 2012: 77.

3.1. Fear and Masculinities in the Districts

Indeed, the people living in the Districts and the setting seem to reflect this sense of individual and national fear. *The Hunger Games* is set roughly on the North American territory sometime in the future. Here, North America as we know it today has been destroyed due to natural disasters and war. However, the “peace and prosperity” (THG, 21)⁴⁶ brought to the citizens (THG, 21) of Panem, – “the country that rose up out of the ashes of [...] North America” (THG, 21) – was disrupted by the “Dark Days”, i.e. “the uprising of the districts against the Capitol” (THG, 21). However, even after that, the people from the Districts live in fear. Because of President Snow, they live in an oppressive society, where their lives and limbs are constantly in danger due to harsh punishments for breaches of law, their living conditions or the annual Hunger Games, which require that random families have to give away their children – normally, twelve girls and twelve boys – to participate in the games. Usually, only one of them survives.

Another source of insecurity for the people who live in Panem’s (poorer) Districts is their economic situation.⁴⁷ They live in poverty and have to work hard (manual labor) to barely make a living. Some of them starve to death, suffer from malnutrition or die from work accidents. This can be seen as being especially problematic for the male characters since they seem to have no way of reestablishing any sense of security via ‘conventional’ masculinities. They cannot go into the wilderness, explore the frontier, or become cowboys or pioneers since they’re caged in in their districts (literally by fences) and going ‘out there’ is forbidden. They are also not able to become successful businessmen or self-made men since the Districts they are born in determine the professions available to them. The absence of Katniss’ and Gale’s fathers (who both died in a mining accident), too, reflects the lack of male providers and ‘conventional’ masculinities in a world determined by grief and fear.

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3.2. Fear in the Capitol

In contrast, at first glance the people who live in Panem’s capital – the Capitol – seem to live in a decadent, futuristic Cockaigne or utopia, which is affected by luxury and “effemination.” Makeover culture, consumption and entertainment merely seem to be symptoms of this decadent nation, which clearly refers to Rome – not only because of its name: Panem. The people from the Capitol seem to represent the rich and the famous: the well off who were not affected by the economic crisis, or at least not that hard. They live in an affluent city, they don’t seem to have to work hard and are able to get up late. In the Capitol “food can appear at the touch

⁴⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games* 2008. Abbr.: THG.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Henthorne 2012: 2. On the economic crisis and masculinities see, e.g., Swenson 2014: 2, 38. On the connection between the crisis and *The Hunger Games* see, e.g., Ringlestein 2013: 373.

of a button”⁴⁸ and they have so much of it that they can afford gluttony and bulimia.⁴⁹ The Capitol’s medicine helps effortlessly and effectively as Katniss and Peeta experience during the Hunger Games. However, the Capitol too is affected by fear and terror. First of all, its citizens also live in a country, which has been destroyed, rebuilt and is still facing various threats, e.g., by the underground-rebels from District 13, or by President Snow, who resides in the Capitol (clearly an allusion to the seat of the United States Congress) – Panem’s seat of government. Under Snow, who is a cruel, unjust and dangerous dictator, Panem’s citizens have to fear being surveilled, threatened, persecuted, tortured, or killed if they seem to be ‘dangerous’ to the system. The murder of Katniss’ stylist Cinna, because he designed Katniss’ mockingjay-dress, and of the Gamemaker Seneca Crane, because he allowed the Hunger Games to have an alternative ending, are just two cases in point.

3.3. Masculinities in the Capitol

The men from the Capitol do not seem to embody the “heterosexual masculinity,” which can be seen as “America’s best line of defense”⁵⁰. They do not embody normalcy, simplicity or the working class hero. On the contrary: Their decadence and luxurious lifestyles seem to represent a masculinity, which has a long history of being despised and rejected as ‘effeminate’ in the United States. Accordingly, figure 1, which is a screenshot from the first *The Hunger Games* movie (2012),⁵¹ exemplifies the visualization of the male citizens from the Capitol in the movies. This scene, which shows a cheering crowd welcoming Katniss’ and Peeta’s arrival, is exemplary for the movies, which depict the male citizens as being similarly affected as the female characters by beautification, appearances and makeover. Male as well as female citizens wear make-up, have peculiar hairstyles and wear extravagant clothes (in screaming colors) or feathers.

Similarly, in the first *The Hunger Games* novel Katniss describes her first moments seeing the Capitol and its citizens:

the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes (THG, 72).

Katniss also does not distinguish between male and female characters, because it seems that both are equally affected by luxury, decadence and makeover culture, which marks the male characters as ‘effeminate.’ According to Deirde Byrne

Contemporary Western society perceives colouring the skin with make-up and tattoos as the prerogative of women and a marker of femininity (Craig 1994: 157). Accordingly,

⁴⁸ Frankel 2012: 51.

⁴⁹ See Frankel 2012: 50.

⁵⁰ On heterosexual masculinity as America’s best line of defense see Di Mattia 2007: 136.

⁵¹ *The Hunger Games* movie 2012. Abbr.: THG movie.

Katniss's prep team are all coded as 'feminine', even though Flavius and Cinna are male.⁵²



Fig. 1: Makeover men and women welcoming Katniss and Peeta in the Capitol (Still: *The Hunger Games* movie 2012, © Lionsgate Films/Color Force 2012)

Since they are visibly part of makeover culture, they seem to occupy an 'effeminate' position. This holds true for example, for Flavius, Katniss' male prep-team-member, who is depicted in the novels as repeatedly applying "purple lipstick to his mouth" (*THG*, 75) and having "orange corkscrew locks." (*THG*, 75). Furthermore, his profession, his high-pitched Capitol accent and manners mark him as being a fictionalized version of what some Americans might believe to be the prototypical queer expert/stylist (like those who appear in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and other makeover shows) representing "gay male aesthetics."⁵³ Furthermore, the reference of his name to his namesake Flavius Aeticus is again a reference to the final stages of the Roman Empire and its decadence. Some of the male characters even seem to have been made over via cosmetic surgery. Two cases in point are Caesar Flickerman, who has been The Hunger Games' host for more than forty years and whose "appearance has been virtually unchanged," (*THG*, 150) and President Snow, whose lips "are overly full, the skin stretched too tight" (*CF*, 23)⁵⁴.

Consequently, the male and female tributes are similarly affected by makeover culture and have to be both good looking and made over. Katniss knows: "The Hun-

⁵² Byrne 2015: 51.

⁵³ For "gay male aesthetics" see, e.g., Weber 2006: 303.

⁵⁴ Collins *The Hunger Games. Catching Fire* 2009. Abbr. *CF*.

ger Games aren't a beauty contest, but the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors" (*THG*, 70), which also held true for Finnick and Haymitch – two former victors, who were allegedly good-looking. This is why Haymitch, Katniss' and Peeta's mentor, says to both in the first novel of the trilogy "Well, you're not entirely hopeless. [...] And once the stylists get hold of you, you'll be attractive enough." (*THG*, 70) This comment does not appear in the *The Hunger Games* movie, probably because it has other means of 'showing' the importance of appearance and makeover culture in the Capitol due to its visual elements. Consequently, Katniss and Peeta and the other tribute 'couples' mostly seem to be styled in a similar, or complementary way. Figure 3, which is a screenshot from the *Catching Fire* movie (2013),⁵⁵ shows Katniss and Peeta during the opening ceremonies for the Quarter Quell. It shows them coming in on chariots, which is as the setting, the Games themselves, and their styling again an allusion to the Roman gladiatorial combats and Empire. This screenshot shows that when Katniss is glowing, Peeta is glowing, just as when Katniss was the girl on fire in the opening ceremony for the Hunger Games (in the first *The Hunger Games* movie), Peeta is on fire, too.

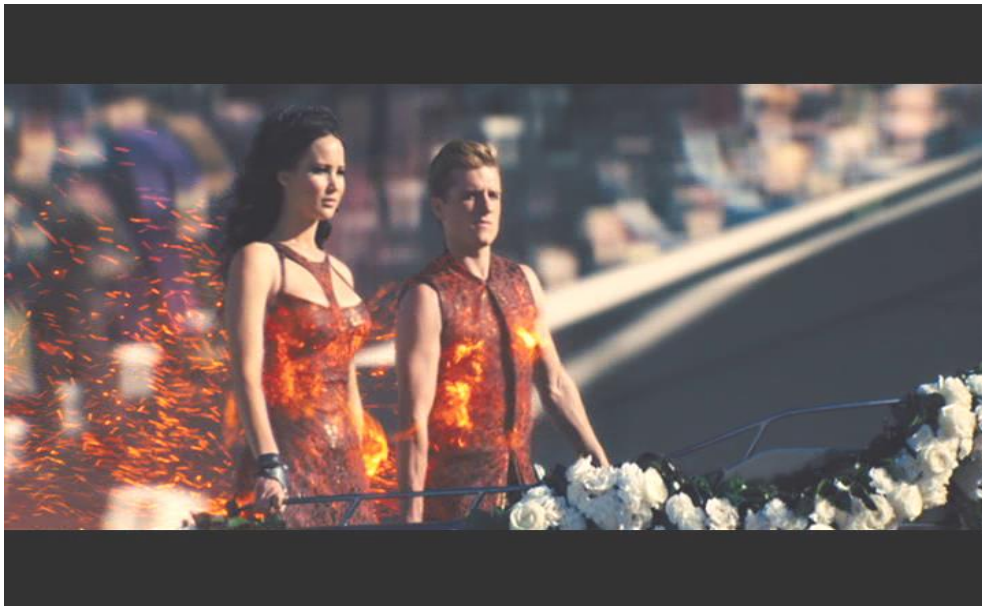


Fig. 2: Katniss' and Peeta's complementary styling (Still: *Catching Fire* movie 2013, © Lionsgate Films/Color Force 2013)

The first scene from the remake center as exemplified in figure 3, a screenshot from the first *The Hunger Games* movie, further seems to prove the point that male and female characters are equally subject to the Capitol's makeover culture. It not only shows Katniss as female tribute at the center of the image being made over, but also a male tribute (on the right) being subject to makeover treatments. Furthermore,

⁵⁵ *Catching Fire* movie 2013.

it not only shows female prep-team members, but also a male prep-team member (Flavius). However, it seems noteworthy at this point that the novels seem to indicate that the female tributes need more prepping than the male tributes (see e.g. *CF*, 58-59)⁵⁶, whereas the movies do not. One of the reasons for this difference might be that Katniss is the first-person narrator in the novels and thus provides the reader with her subjective perspective, whereas in the movies this is not the case. In the Capitol, beautification and makeover seem to be part of its 'Panem et circenses' – alongside the Roman expression – entertaining and feeding the 'masses' in order to distract the people (from the Capitol) from their own oppression and generate approval for the current political system. For the tributes beautification is merely another form of oppression since they are forced to be made over and have little control on the way they are made over. This might explain the visual resemblance of the aforementioned remake-center scene with morgues as they are imagined in movies or TV series like *CSI: Miami*.

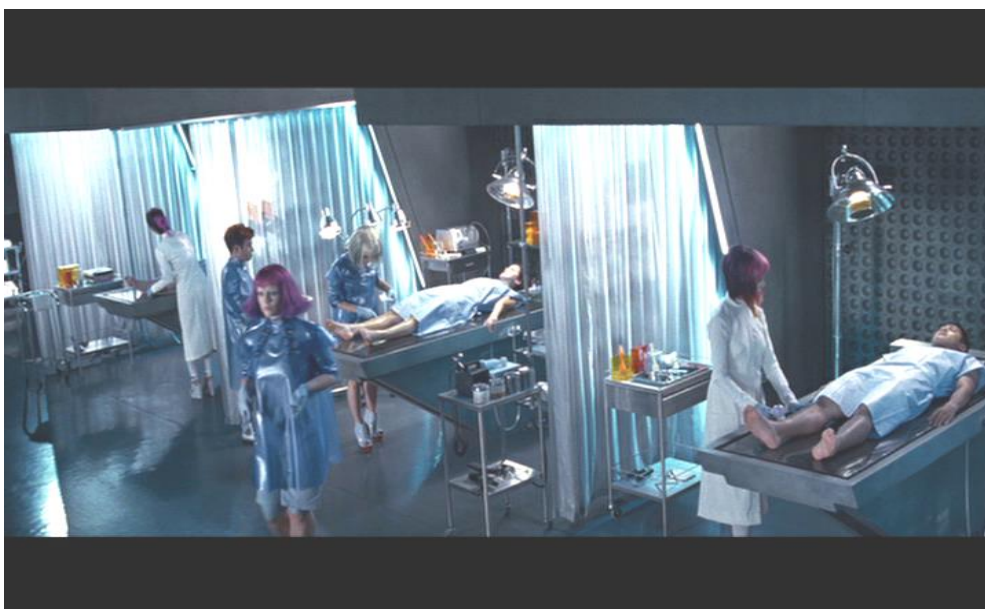


Fig. 3: Katniss and a male tribute being made over in the Remake Center (Still: *The Hunger Games* movie 2012, © Lionsgate Films/Color Force 2012)

It seems almost ironic that some view the Capitol as being situated more or less in the American West, as figure 4 shows, since the West used to be the place where American men went to reaffirm their masculinity.⁵⁷ However, the frontiers have been closed for a long time and the buffalo has died.⁵⁸ What is worse, in Panem, the West – the site of masculinity – became the hub of men living in luxury, decadence,

⁵⁶ See also: Henthorne 2012: 52.

⁵⁷ On the West and masculinities, see Kimmel 2012: 32, 44-45, 90, 109 - 111.

⁵⁸ Ibid.: 66.

of male makeover culture, and thus 'effeminacy.' This is the place where President Snow was overthrown by two women, Katniss Everdeen and rebel-leader Coin.

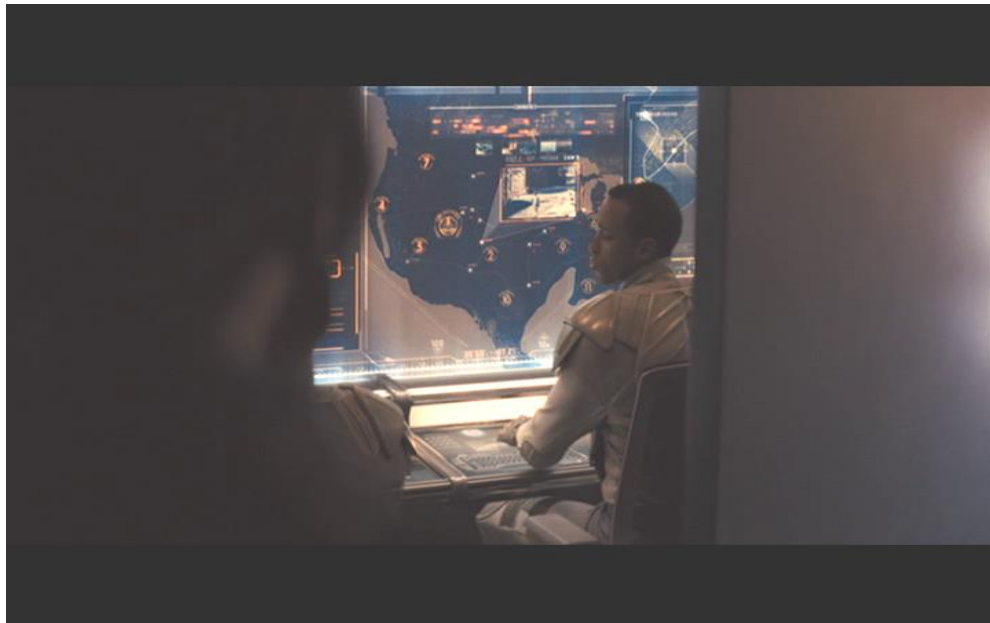


Fig. 4: Katniss gets a glimpse of the map of Panem (Still: *Catching Fire* movie 2013, © Lionsgate Films/Color Force 2013)

This might reflect the feeling shared by some American men that they have no place left to go to reaffirm their masculinity, and that their manliness and nation are under attack.

4. Reestablishing Traditional Masculinities, Citizenship and National Security in *The Hunger Games*

Despite all the topics and issues discussed previously in this paper, there is hope for Panem and its masculinities. This hope lies in District 12 – and in particular in two of its male inhabitants: Peeta Mellarck and Gale Hawthorne. Being from District 12, and thus neither living in luxury or decadence, nor being particularly interested in appearances, fashion or makeover culture, they seem to represent different masculinities than their 'effeminate' counterparts from the Capitol. They can both be seen as two characters representing two types of heterosexual masculinity, which could be "America's best line of defense."⁵⁹ Gale is a miner and Peeta is a baker. Thus, they can be both considered being the working class heroes Di Mattia and Heller envision as desired in the aftermath of 9/11 to reaffirm faith in masculinity and the nation itself. However, as critics noted, Peeta and Gale differ in vari-

⁵⁹ On heterosexual masculinity as America's best line of defense, see Di Mattia 2007: 136

ous aspects. This is probably one of the reasons why Katniss has difficulties deciding in favor of one of them. Katniss' indecisiveness could also be seen as being symbolical and having not only the function of reflecting on which one of these two masculinities is best for her and probably for Panem, but also for America.

4.1 Gale's 'Conventional' Masculinity

Gale unifies various markers of heterosexual, conventional, working class masculinity. First of all, since the beginning of the novels and movies Gale is portrayed as being the one who gives Katniss a sense of security she lacked since her father's death (*THG*, 135). With him, she can be herself and relax (*THG*, 7). He is a friend, her hunting partner and her confidant, someone with whom she can share thoughts she could never voice (*THG*, 136). Furthermore, Gale seems to represent another marker of 'conventional' masculinity: Not only does Gale take care of her family after she leaves for the Hunger Games – "Take care of them Gale...Whatever you do, don't let them starve" (20:20-20:27, *THG* movie) – as he promises to do, he also seems to be devoted to his family (*THG*, 11) too. Katniss notes: "Gale, who is eighteen [...] has been either helping or single handedly feeding a family of five for seven years" (*THG*, 16). For it, Gale risks his life because he goes into the woods hunting, which is forbidden, and because he opted for tesser-ae, which means that he provided food for his family by adding his name to the reaping-lottery forty-one extra times (*THG*, 16; *THG* movie 7:40-7:50). Moreover, Gale seems to embody various elements, which seem to classify him as more 'manly' than Peeta. Katniss remarks, for example, that Gale at fourteen already "looked like a man" (*THG*, 11). He is "good-looking, he's strong enough to handle the work in the mines, and he can hunt" (*THG*, 12). Hunting has a long history in the United States of being seen as a manly activity.⁶⁰ Furthermore, being a miner seems to be more manly than being a baker, which is Peeta's profession. Moreover, Gale's sexuality too seems to classify him as more masculine than Peeta. Firstly, Katniss seems to notice and talk more explicitly about Gale's (sexual) attractiveness than she does with regard to Peeta. For example, she says, "You can tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him." (*THG*, 12). Secondly, Gale seems to be more sexually aggressive than Peeta, "imposing himself physically upon Katniss at one point and explaining afterwards that he had to do that."⁶¹ Additionally, Gale seems to be more manly than Peeta, because he embodies the conservative male ideal of the fighter or warrior.⁶² Gale seems to be willing to fight for what he believes is right. He joined the rebels and does everything in his power to help Coin free Panem from President Snow. He is brave and willing to risk his life to free Peeta from his imprisonment in the Capitol. However, this type of conservative masculinity also has negative aspects. Gale is

⁶⁰ On hunting in the US see, e.g., Kimmel 2012: 50, 92, 101.

⁶¹ Henthorne 2012: 31.

⁶² On masculinities and being a fighter see, e.g., Kimmel 2012.

brutal and ruthless. For him, killing people is just like hunting (*THG* movie, 20:10-20:20), as he tells Katniss before she leaves to participate in the Hunger Games. He is driven by revenge for the destruction of his home and would hit a button and kill every living soul working for the Capitol if he could (*MJ*, 37).⁶³ For him the end justifies the means – even if this means killing innocent children like Katniss’ sister, Prim.⁶⁴ He is the one who keeps the vicious cycle of violence alive. When Katniss realizes this, she leaves him.⁶⁵

4.2 Peeta’s ‘Conventional’ Masculinity

In contrast, Peeta seems to represent another, less aggressive form of heterosexual, conventional, working class masculinity. Peeta is “also strong and handsome, but [...] much more empathic, sensitive and socially-oriented than Gale.”⁶⁶ Although it takes Katniss some time to trust Peeta, *The Hunger Games* series shows that he is the one who helped her survive, who gave her hope and who always stands with her. Katniss has been praised by critics for being a strong and progressive female character. However, it is highly unlikely that Katniss would have won the Hunger Games, survived, and become the mockingjay, i.e., the symbol of rebellion, without Peeta’s help. His declaration of love made her look desirable and thus improved her chances of winning sponsors, he helped her escape after she got poisoned by tracker jackers, he risked his life warning District 13 and Katniss with regard to the planned attack from the Capitol, and he gives her comfort and holds her in his arms when she is scared or cannot sleep. Their first encounter is very telling in this context. Katniss and Peeta first met when Katniss and her family were starving. Katniss was desperate. Although he did not know her at that point, it seems that he burned two loaves of bread on purpose and took a beating from his mother in order to give them to her (*THG*, 31-38). This not only prevented her and her family from starvation, but also gave her hope. As Katniss remarks: “To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me that I was not doomed” (*THG*, 39).

As various critics have pointed out, *The Hunger Games* series has an overall anti-war-tone. It shows that both Coin’s and Snow’s systems are oppressive and cruel. There is no just cause for murdering people since killing just “goes around and around” (*MJ*, 251) and nobody wins in the end.⁶⁷ Instead, as Peeta notices right from the beginning, it “costs everything you are” (*MJ*, 27). “Fighting may seem exciting [...] even glamorous, but in the end it is just murder.”⁶⁸ This is why Katniss

⁶³ See Collins *The Hunger Games. Mockingjay* 2010. Abbr.: *MJ*.

⁶⁴ See Pavlik 2012: 34.

⁶⁵ See Henthorne 2012: 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 31.

⁶⁷ See Henthorne 2012: 72

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 74.

chooses Peeta over Gale eventually. Gale's "rage seems pointless" (*THG*, 17). What good is it if "[i]t doesn't change anything." (*THG*, 17) If "[i]t doesn't make things fair" (*THG*, 17) or "fill [...] stomachs" (*THG*, 17). What changes everything, ends the cycle of violence and heals the souls after traumatic and difficult experiences is love, kindness and hope. As Katniss says:

[w]hat I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means re-birth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that. (*MJ*, 453)

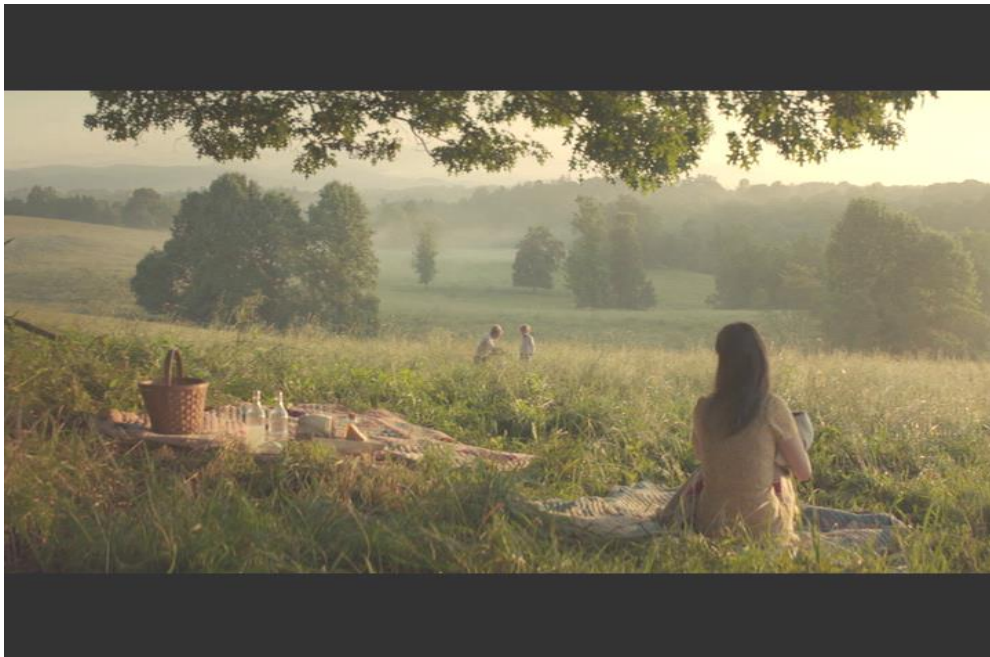


Fig. 5: Pastoral ending of The Hunger Games-series (Still: *Mockingjay-Part 2* movie 2015, © Lionsgate Films/Color Force et al. 2015)⁶⁹

The last scenes of the second *Mockingjay* movie that ends the series seem to echo the first scenes of the first movie from the series, *The Hunger Games*. However, as figure 5, a screenshot from the last scene of the second *Mockingjay* movie illustrates, here, the imagery evokes the tone of pastoral paintings such as those by the Hudson River School. In contrast, the first scenes of the first *The Hunger Games* movie showed the strenuousness of life for District 12's inhabitants: the hard manual work, the miners, the poverty, the feeling of being caged in. The last scenes from the last *Mockingjay* movie seem to refer back to a 'natural' past, unspoiled by any signs of modernity or civilization like mining, war, or makeover culture, and evokes associations of authenticity and innocence. The latter is highlighted by the

⁶⁹ *Mockingjay-Part 2* 2015.

two small children, who also point to Panem's and America's future. The last scene seems to reflect all Peeta stands for: normalcy, simplicity, authenticity and hope. He stands in sharp contrast to both – the decadent, makeover men from the Capitol and Gale.

Unlike Gale and the men from the Capitol, Peeta refuses to be corrupted by any system – neither makeover culture and decadence nor politics. As he says it himself: "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not" (*THG*, 171).⁷⁰ Furthermore, the masculinity Peeta embodies is conservative and 'conventional.' Peeta represents the breadwinner, who is "one of the central characteristics of American manhood."⁷¹ Like the firefighter, his aim is to "fill his station with dignity, and to be useful to his fellow beings."⁷² Peeta, who is "ethically-aware, and a gifted communicator,"⁷³ evokes a version of muscular Christianity, according to which Jesus can be seen as a working class hero, as a "skilled artisan," and "master intellect coupled with a master heart and will," and not merely as "some testosterone-juiced, muscle-bound lout."⁷⁴

The last scene presents a nuclear family consisting of father, mother, a daughter and a son, thus a 'traditional' family. In this image, the father is no longer missing. The family is 'complete.' This, in conjunction with the overall tone of *The Hunger Games* series shows that the series is, despite its progressive elements, conservative with regard to gender and, in particular, masculinities. The outlook provided by the last scene reflects the ideal of conventional, heterosexual masculinity, of working class heroism. The ending of the last movie seems to take the last scene as a starting point for a new beginning on an individual and national level. The ending of the *The Hunger Games* novels and movies seems to echo the American need for hope, safety and stability, i.e., the need to re-establish faith in American conventional masculinities and likewise in the American nation.

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⁷⁰ See, e.g., Sweeney 2010.

⁷¹ Kimmel 2012: 16.

⁷² Kimmel 2012: 16.

⁷³ Henthorne 2012: 170.

⁷⁴ Kimmel 2012: 16, 129.

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