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THE HUNGER GAMES AND THE GAME OF SILENCES: THE APOCALYPSE WITHIN THE APOCALYPSE

ABSTRACT: An apocalyptic view present in the dystopian novel *The Hunger Games* (2008) can be broadly analysed through Baudrillard's concept of "simulation" and "simulacra." This article analyses how the mass media is represented in this young-adult dystopian fiction as the new almighty God that can create, but also destroy, real and hyperreal scenarios. The article particularly focuses on the concept of "arena" (present in the trilogy) as a hyperreal territory that acts as a panopticon that ends up reversing its original purpose.

The apocalypse is finished, today it is the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference ... all that remains, is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us. Now, fascination (in contrast to seduction, which was attached to appearances, and to dialectical reason, which was attached to meaning) is a nihilistic passion par excellence, it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance. We are fascinated by all forms of disappearance, of our disappearance. Melancholic and fascinated, such is our general situation in an era of involuntary transparency.

(Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*)

The postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard¹ has explored concepts such as the imposed artificial values present in our consumerist (and virtual) world, and the absence of real and meaningful values. He has also discussed a postmodern nihilism that he describes as simulacra. The values (or should I say "non-values") that he explores in many of his works have been represented in many fictional literary texts, which depict reality or virtuality through metaphors such as disappearance, illusion, game and silence; these abound in literature of the apocalypse.

Fiction detailing apocalyptic and/or post-apocalyptic scenarios has proliferated in the last decade, and many of these stories feature the mass media, cameras transmitting and re-transmitting people's lives, virtual worlds that duplicate the real one, virtual maps that modify a territory, and artificial or climate catastrophes. These features seem to be presented as science fiction, but they can be read as metaphors of our reality, of our present world. Themes such as these have been fictionalised in the latest dystopian² novels (most of them

written for young-adult readers) such as *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Divergent* (2011), among others. In this article I will analyse Suzanne Collins's trilogy—*The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010)—to illustrate how the reader can see, through a (post-)apocalyptic society, an analogy with our world, where reality and virtuality seem to coexist.

AN IMMINENT PROGRAMMED END

Many postmodern thinkers have talked about the end of history,³ the end of illusions, the end of ideologies, the end of utopias; all these “endings” are associated with the advent of technological progress and with the advance of a globalised world. According to Selden and Widdowson, “The grand narratives of historical progress initiated by the Enlightenment are discredited and any political base of this idea in ‘history’ and ‘reality’ is no longer possible” (174). “History” and “reality” have become “textualised” in the present world, where images and simulations constitute our current reality (184). This idea of an “end” can be understood as the disintegration of the idea of historical progress. In this sense, Baudrillard says that “the end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins for the disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values” (“The Illusion” 263). Clearly, there is a sense of absence of hope, due to the idea (or illusion) of progress, which is making our world go so fast that history itself has lost its stability. This idea of “the end” makes one think of a halt in a historical narrative of our world and our lives. Yet if history has come to its end, and there is nothing to tell, then there is a sort of silence that also has to be ended, because there is no place for silence in the era of communication, mass media and technology. It is within that silence that apocalyptic fictions emerge, creating and projecting a history, narrating the future of our world, but mostly, narrating the ending, an end that has to be created. If history has ended, then there is no need to wait for the end of this era; thus, the only possibility is to provoke “the end,” an apocalyptic one.

When we refer to the apocalypse, the first image that comes to our minds is the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, which presents a prophecy of the end of this age and the triumph of God and good over evil. The prophecy foretells a series of events that will imminently lead humankind to an end through different catastrophes and plagues sent by God. These, the Bible suggests, will end with the establishment of a new era. What is clear in the Biblical book of end times is that such an end has already been programmed, and humanity merely has to wait for it to come. Not only does the Bible narrate how the end of this era will be, but it also states how everything began (Genesis); there is thus a linear narration, given that the collection of books that makes the Bible starts from “the beginning” and finishes with “the end.” In this narration God is presented as powerful and almighty—the designer, the architect and the originator—whereas humans must simply obey and accept what is to come.

The contemporary apocalyptic scenarios present in the new millennium's popular dystopian literature, films and video games present a stark contrast. This new generation of dystopian narratives makes sense of our world and our future by depicting a dark reality where there is nothing to wait for, where there is no hope, where humans are empty, where God has no place, where technology and the mass media are the new gods, where natural catastrophes give place to what Baudrillard calls "created catastrophe" and "programmed catastrophe," and where the apocalypse is programmed and managed by humans. In a world marked by speed there is no time to wait for the final judgment ("Fatal Strategies"¹⁸²), so it has to be created. This form of created crisis suggests the kinds of "false problems" Baudrillard outlines in "Fatal Strategies":

The scandal is that experts have calculated that a state of emergency declared on the basis of a prediction ... would trigger off a panic whose consequences would be more disastrous than the catastrophe itself ... [I]n the absence of a real catastrophe it is quite possible to trigger one off by simulation, equivalent to the former, and which can be substituted for it. (196)

"Simulation" seems to be a key word when trying to analyse and understand not only fiction, but also reality, which every day is becoming less real, with new problems being created in order to divert people's attention from what is real and important. This "simulation" does not allow a person to see and differentiate what is real from what is artificial. Or maybe the difference is clear, but people prefer to experiment with the artificial model over the real one. People seem to be trying to escape from their natural catastrophes; they create new artificial catastrophes in order to escape from their own destiny and to decide what destiny they want to perform. Perhaps humans prefer to imagine, create and perform their own death than to wait for it.

FULL OF EMPTINESS

We cannot but associate the concept of "emptiness" with that of an existentialist philosophy closely connected with a feeling of alienation, affliction and desolation derived from alienation from nature, God, peers, but mostly from the inner self. According to Gordon E. Bigelow, people live "crowded into cities, working in mindless jobs, and entertained by light mass media," a superficial life that makes people who have everything "feel empty, uneasy, discontented" (86). The very same emptiness is present in existentialism, which is closely connected with the nihilism mentioned at the beginning of this article. This nihilist outlook is usually associated with extreme pessimism, a strong impulse to destroy, and a sense that there is no purpose in life because we live in an absurd world. All these feelings are present in contemporary young-adult dystopian novels, which have reached millions of readers eager to devour stories where the characters live under the rule of a tyrant in an absurd world, with an important technological presence, where they have to fight to survive. In these scenarios the reader finds that irrational violence occurs and humans are more and more dehumanised.

All the above-mentioned elements are part of the apocalyptic world of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which presents a country called Panem, divided basically in two between the Capitol and 12 districts (in the third book a thirteenth district appears). The Capitol represents a utopian city where the wealthiest and most powerful people live, and where technology and the mass media play a central role in the citizens' lives. In Suzanne Collins's imagined society the Capitol seems to be an ideal place (but only for those with superfluous privileges, living happily anaesthetised, without being conscious that they are being manipulated). The Capitol's citizens live an empty and superficial life, full of excesses such as fashion and body transformations, make-up and sumptuous banquets. These superficial elements illustrate what Lipovetsky discusses in *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (1994) as the role of fashion in the hyper-consumerist society: to mirror individualism and a desire to remain young, or to appear to be what one is not. Life is so superficial in the Capitol that they have to create a "game" to entertain them: *The Hunger Games*, which are nothing but the artificial construction of a reality that takes place each year in a hyperreal arena that reminds us of the Roman games from the ancient world. On the other hand, the rest of the country is composed of 12 independent and isolated districts, united by hunger and having to learn to survive with it, and also by the Capitol's tyranny and its perverse, hyperreal game.

According to Tiffin and Terashima, "hyper-reality is seen as a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins" (156); in this sense, the arena⁵ where *The Hunger Games* take place can be seen as a virtual territory where a hyperreal battle, created artificially, feeds the empty citizens living in the Capitol. The permanent presence of the mass media in *The Hunger Games* also helps to silence the silence by broadcasting in simulcast the battle fought by the 24 participants (two from each district), a battle that does not really exist. The media helps to create the illusion of a battle, which is real only for those who die in the arena, but hyperreal for those who (hyper-)live it through their last-generation flat screens: the "mass of citizens" living in the Capitol. Governments cannot let the mass face silence and emptiness; thus, their strategy is to create the illusion that an important event is taking place, something (very noisy) to fill that emptiness, and a war or a battle is perfect for this purpose.

There is another type of silence present in the trilogy, the one imposed on the districts, whose citizens have no voice, since they have been silenced by the Capitol through different forms of violence, such as physical and psychological. The only voice that could not be silenced is the one from their spirits, their minds: their inner voices. This silence can be read as the silence imposed by those empires that have ruled and enforced their power over many people throughout history. Despite the fact that the districts are part of the same country, Panem, the relationship of power between them and the Capitol is analogous to the relationship between the colonised and the colonisers.

The trilogy represents two types of “masses of people.” On the one side, there is the mass of people living in the Capitol, the “mass” that is being manipulated by power to serve the government’s aims. A “mass,” as described by Baudrillard in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983), can only be such, “because its social energy has already frozen. It is a cold reservoir, capable of absorbing and neutralising any hot energy. It resembles those half-dead systems into which more energy is injected than is withdrawn, those paid-out deposits exorbitantly maintained in a state of artificial exploitation” (26). On the other side there is the mass living in the districts, oppressed by power, but conscious of that oppression. Both groups are deprived of their voices, but in two different ways. The second type of oppression is the one that leads the masses to revolution.

In *The Wretches of the Earth* (1963), Frantz Fanon analyses the dehumanising effects of colonisation, not only on the nation, but also on the individual, and how this leads to social movements for decolonisation. We can see the districts as The Capitol’s colonies, given that their relationship clearly resembles the one between a master and slaves. The districts embody the working-class masses, and when they rise, they quickly emerge as the revolutionary class. Fanon states that:

it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength. (61)

The third book of the trilogy, *Mockingjay* (2010), silences the voice of the Capitol, the powerful ones, and gives voice to the districts, to the oppressed ones who rise up. The strategy that Collins uses is the insurrection of the masses, a revolution that ends in a final battle, but (as mentioned before), this final battle is not the one planned by God in the biblical apocalypse, but the one planned and performed by men. It is not God who revolts against men, but men who revolt against oppression (political, social and ideological). After the final revolution, victims from the districts die, as well as the evil ones, giving birth to a new era, and establishing a new order.

The final battle that leads to the end of the Capitol’s era is presented (like in the Bible) in a very spectacular way, taking the format of a reality show broadcast live, as spectacular as the apocalypse narrated by John. Technology and the mass media replace the almighty biblical God, and the cameras are the new gods (maybe not the Father, but the Big Brother) that can know and see everything.

TECHNOLOGY, THE MASS MEDIA AND "SIMULATION"

Our reality seems to extinguish, to disappear under a new virtual reality or hyperreality, which leads to multiple simulations⁶ of almost any type. The supreme presence of technology and its new forms of digital communication and information has become like a new god, permanently present, seeing, knowing and controlling everything.

The dominant ideologies that can be identified in or based on Michel Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon⁷, interact (I believe) through contemporary dystopian fictions, and the cyber (hyper-)realities presented in most of them. The "panopticon" can be read as a metaphor for modern societies and the way that governments observe (*surveiller*), control and eventually punish or discipline their citizens. This *surveillance* method has been present through different forms in novels like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* (2008) by E. Lockhart, or *The Panopticon* (2012) by Jenni Fagan (among others). The purpose of technology and cameras is to register and record (in an anonymous way) what people do, to create a feeling of fear or paranoia in order to dominate, not only people's actions, but also their minds. This type of control dominates *The Hunger Games* trilogy, not anonymously, but with a clear "controller," the Capitol, and with a clear intention: to remind the districts and their citizens of its total power. This practice is extended with the addition of a hyperreal element: the "arena" where the games are held each year.

The view that people living in the Capitol and in the different districts have of the "arena" is the one they receive through the multiple screens where The Games are broadcast (sometimes live, in other cases edited), which work like the "panopticon" because those who are playing the game are consciously observed. They acknowledge the *surveillance* system under which they live; those who are dominated can see the perverse mechanism that dominates their behaviour, and how it has an impact in the "arena", which in fact is a reduced model of Panem, where everybody is under *surveillance*. The participants (tributes) act according to what they think can help them; they perform a role for the cameras and the audience, because they are aware of the power that the cameras and the media in general have.

The real, unreal and hyperreal coexist in a juxtaposition of different layers. In this way, we can say that reality is (or can be) replaced by what is seen in the TV screens, by what the Capitol decides to broadcast and to show. Reality is transformed and adapted according to the Capitol's interest, which is a clear metaphor for the tactics that the mass media uses to manipulate information, either by suppressing it, or by diverting people's attention with propaganda or non-important information. The juxtaposition mentioned before is evidence of a process through which reality is substituted or replaced by another (hyper-)reality. Therefore, we construct and simulate reality. According to Baudrillard, "Simulation is no longer a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without

origin or reality: hyperreality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). *The Hunger Games*, futuristic and dystopian, exposes in a hyperbolic way a society that resembles our present one and that consumes empty signs without being able to distinguish what is real from what is simulation, what is natural from what is artificial.

Another concept that should be included and that Baudrillard presents together with that of "simulation" is "simulacra," which is present in the trilogy, specifically in the "arena," which constitutes a representational image that deceives, and that does not exist in the real world (*Simulacra and Simulation*). In fact, the geographic territory, the "arena," comes to exist after the map, a hyperreal map; the idea, the concept of the "arena" exists first, and then is created to simulate an artificial situation: the games. Baudrillard's words illustrate this: "it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map" (166).

The "arena" itself represents a closed hyperreal territory dominated by technology, but open to the "real" world through the images that are projected on the TV screens in the rest of Panem's territory. It is the media that creates this hyperreality. The cameras and the TV screens are the "panopticon" that controls and sees everything, but it is this very same "panopticon" that reverses its role, its mechanism, and it is then when revolution and the last battle take place.

Revolution, chaos and apocalypse happen when (in *Mockingjay*) the Capitol's channel is intercepted and taken by the rebels. The "revolution" starts when the insurgents take control of the mass media and manipulate the broadcasted images, which leads to the end of the Capitol's era, giving birth to a new one. Those who control technology, those who control the media, control the masses. The mass media in the trilogy represents the almighty hyperreal God that creates, but that can also be powerful enough to end an era.

NOTES:

¹ Jean Baudrillard was born on 27 July 1929 in the town of Reims, France. He was a sociologist, cultural critic and theorist of postmodernity. Baudrillard's philosophy centres on the concepts of "hyperreality" and "simulation." These terms refer to the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. According to Baudrillard, we live in a world dominated by simulated experiences and feelings. He believes that we experience only prepared realities: edited war footage, meaningless acts of terrorism, the destruction of cultural values and the substitution of "referendum" (see: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/biography/>).

² Dystopian fictions usually extrapolate elements of contemporary society and depict it characterised by a focus on mass poverty, squalor, suffering or oppression.

³ The postmodern philosophy has brought to light topics such as nihilism (Friedrich Nietzsche), the subject's annihilation (Michel Foucault), the end of history (Francis Fukuyama) and the end of metanarratives (Jean-Francois Lyotard).

⁴ This term was adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre and it became identified with a literary and philosophical movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus can be associated with this movement, as well as with philosophers like Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber in Germany, Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel in France, the Spaniards José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, and the Russians Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov. The nineteenth century philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, came to be seen as precursors of the movement. (See: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>)

⁵ Here I refer to the arena present in the first and second books, where the annual "Games" take place. In the third book, *Mockingjay*, the Capitol itself is transformed into a battlefield where the final battle occurs.

⁶ Simulation: word used by Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation*).

⁷ Panopticon—observe (-opticon) all (pan-)—refers to a place where someone can see everything. It is a type of building (usually circular), designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, that allows a single watchman to observe those confined to an institution. Because of the design, those being watched cannot know if they are being watched or not. Thus, they act as if they are being watched at all times. It works as a disciplinary mechanism, which ends up controlling people's behavior. This idea was later taken up by the philosopher Michel Foucault, who sees the panopticon as a way in which discipline and punishment work in modern society, allowing power to operate efficiently.

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