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REVISITING DYSTOPIA: THE REALITY SHOW BIOPOLITICS OF *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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Abstract: **This paper explores the dystopian imaginaries of the recent popular novel trilogy *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and its film adaptations. Having put the narrative into a genealogy of dystopian fiction concerned with the historical nation-state totalitarianisms, I ask what is specifically contemporary about *The Hunger Games*. I explore this by focusing on the functioning of the reality show format in the narrative, which I link to G. Agamben's understanding of the spectacle, as part of his wider biopolitical theories. I apply an Agambenian biopolitical reading to the narrative, seeing it as a production of bare life through the camp of the reality show arena. I suggest that *The Hunger Games* offer a critique of contemporary liberal democracies by calling attention to their production of underclassed and expendable life, which is imagined as an eruption of the nation-state right to kill, similarly as in Agamben's theories.**

Keywords: **The Hunger Games, dystopia, biopolitics, spectacle, bare life.**

I. CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIA

The screen adaptations of the novel trilogy by Suzanne Collins *The Hunger Games* have certainly reached far wider audiences than the originally targeted young adults. The planned four film sequels have been scheduled for release in the following order: *The Hunger Games* (2012), *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay – Part 1* (2014), *Mockingjay – Part 2* (2015). One of the reasons behind the popular appeal of *The Hunger Games* fictional world might be its consistent reliance on quite a number of tropes from the histories of dystopian, postapocalyptic and science fiction.

The narrative takes place in a future totalitarian state called Panem, which covers the North American continent after a number of natural catastrophes and the ensuing social disorder destroyed the society as we know it. The dystopian Panem is governed by a dictatorial President from the luxurious and high-tech city Capitol, which exploits the industrial labour of 12 economically poorer districts. Class divisions between the Capitol elites and the district producers run deep, as well as between the richer districts closer to the Capitol and those further away such as District 12, in which people starve. A rebellion against the Capitol that took place 74 years ago was crushed and ever since, as a punishment, each district has had to

sacrifice annually one girl and one boy, aged 12-18, in a televised game arena called *Hunger Games*, to fight to death until only one victor remains. The ritualized reality game show has been framed as an honour and sacrifice for the nation.

As it becomes clear from this brief summary, the narrative rehearses quite a number of familiar motifs from the genealogies of modern dystopian fiction and its crossings with science and postapocalyptic fiction – modes which have often combined together to depict a future society in which a population is controlled in oppressive ways through technological developments. According to Gregory Claeys (2010), dystopian genre is significantly a 20th century phenomenon, inextricably linked to the failures of the first half of the 20th century totalitarian state ideals. Claeys traces the origins of modern dystopia in British fiction through the well-known names of H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, and lists a number of the most common features which dystopias are preoccupied with: a one party state with total control over the police and technology, especially media and surveillance techniques; a willingness to destroy domestic enemies in the name of the regime; an ideology which demands absolute loyalty and sacrifice; a cult of leadership, etc. (Claeys, 2010 : 119).

Based on the listed generic traits, *The Hunger Games* read as straightforwardly Orwellian, especially considering the crucial functioning of TV as the means of state control. On the other hand, the Orwellian resonances are also a bridge towards what is specifically contemporary about the narrative and the ways in which it speaks of the contemporary liberal democracies, by rehearsing the scripts about the historical nation-states totalitarianisms. We can unpack this contemporary dimension of dystopian society if we look at the functioning of the particular TV format around which everything in Panem revolves – the *Hunger Games* reality show. The show in no small part mimics the Orwell-inspired *Big Brother* show, which at the end of the 1990s triggered, first in Europe and the USA and then globally, an explosion of reality TV popularity[1].

II. Reality Show as a Biopolitical Spectacle

I suggest that the *Hunger Games* reality show is framed within the dystopian imaginaries of the totalitarian nation-state in order to critique the logic of the global liberal capitalist market in which such shows operate today. This strongly resonates with Giorgio Agamben's theoretical views of the spectacle, the notion he takes from Guy Debord, and which for him is a power apparatus that bridges the nation-state and a sort of post-state contemporary capitalist sovereignty (Agamben, 2000). In order to unpack precisely the many correspondences between *The Hunger Games* and Agamben, let me first describe the reality show within the state of Panem, and then read its functioning through the lense of Agamben's biopolitical theories.

Hunger Games, in which 24 youngsters fight to death, is a competition reality show spectacularly produced by the impressive technology that the Capitol has at its disposal, such as high tech trains and aircraft or bioengineering. The game arena as a bounded piece of geography (water surfaces, woods), which recalls the reality show *Survivor*, is totally technologically managed: the producers can create poisoned fogs, fireballs or genetically altered beasts to

kill the contestants in the ways they see as entertaining. The procedures before the contestants enter the arena, such as the interviews in front of a live audience or the work of stylists who dress the contestants, mimic *Big Brother*.

The crucial difference from these known shows is that *Hunger Games* is deployed by the nation-state to isolate or "reap" young, lower class, killable lives, the so-called "tributes" from the Districts, as a sacrifice and honour for "the people", with each death in the arena being ritualized by the sound of the canon and national anthem. Not all the districts, however, disciplined through labour and the technological threat, stand the same in relation to the Capitol politics of "bread and circuses", into which the Capitol rich elites seem to buy in their obsession with fashions and TV entertainment. In the richer Districts 1, 2 and 4, referred to as "career districts", participation in the Games is actually considered a chance for wealth and success, and therefore kids there physically train for and volunteer for the show. In this way they readily participate in being framed as celebrities and success stories in a deadly competitive script, which is also the way that most reality shows out there frequently frame the young individuals who take part in them. In this way, the fictional totalitarian nation-state decision to isolate and kill bodies in the reality show can be read as an imagined radicalization of the current procedures and narratives in which young bodies are framed by the liberal competitive market.

This imaginary of the *Hunger Games* reality show resembles much Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the spectacle as part of his broader theory of biopolitics, on which let me elaborate in more detail in order to then read *The Hunger Games* through a biopolitical lense. For the notion of biopolitics Agamben draws on Michel Foucault (1976), who used the term to theorize the modern western logic of management of a population, which develops towards the end of the 18th century and is tied to the idea of the nation-state. In the management of life of a population, the classical sovereign right to kill is for Foucault unleashed through the apparatus of modern biological racism, radicalized in the Nazi regime. Agamben takes his cue from this and coins a term for the relation between life and its capacity to be killed by the sovereign – "bare life" (Agamben, 1998). He develops this concept from the figure of *homo sacer* in Roman law – a body which was banned and expelled from the Roman city and could be killed by anyone without committing a murder, but could not be sacrificed to the gods. At the same time then, *homo sacer* is both included in and excluded from the law, or more precisely – included through an exclusion (banishment from the city), which Agamben theorizes as the primary relation of body to the law (as a possibility to be killed).

Historically, in modernity bare life comes to dwell in the body of each citizen through the notion of "man" instituted in the modern nation-states. The management of "people", however, Agamben continues, installs a fracture between the unifying concept of "people" and those bodies that can be marked in various ways as inferior and made killable for the sake of unity, such as historically racialized life by the Nazi regime[2]. Furthermore, when bare life could not be tolerated within the Nazi city, it was put into a material location – the camp. Similarly to the relation of bare life to the law as an included exclusion, Agamben theorizes the political structure of the Nazi camp as that of a state of exception which becomes the

norm. The camps were first formed under the proclamation of the state of siege, and not the prison or penal law, and then were simply left to exist as a state of normal situation. To the paradoxical pairs of the inclusion/exclusion of bare life and exception/norm of the camp, Agamben in his later work adds yet another one – that of the Greek bios/zoē of life (Agamben, 2004). The decision on which human life is made expendable for him depends on deciding which humans in the polis are marked as less valued than human and thus closer to the supposed animal or natural life or zoē. In this way, bare life is the flip side of the very notion of human as instituted legally in the idea of human rights as the basic inscription of bodies into law. The post-WWII international legal norms are for Agamben thus an extension rather than a break away from the nation-state isolation of something called "life" to be captured by the law. In his theories, the modern sovereign decision on bare life constantly passes through the three pairs of relations (inclusion/exclusion, exception/norm, bios/zoē) and ties inextricably together the notions of body, space and species.

Furthermore, to talk about the role of modern media, such as television, in the production of bare life, Agamben employs Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle (Debord, 1967). For both these theorists, "the spectacle" as a media apparatus seems to capture well two things: a sort of collapse between what is considered its liberal and its totalitarian state deployments; and a historical transition from the sovereignties of the modern nation-states towards a global sovereignty of the capitalist market (where the state sovereignty is nevertheless still relevant and can be re-activated). Debord in 1967 differentiated between two types of the spectacle, under which he understood news, advertising and entertainment: "concentrated", which he associated with the Stalinist-type media promotion of totalitarian cohesion, and extensive bureaucracy; and "diffuse", associated with the American-type promotion of commodities and consumerism. In 1988 Debord wrote of the eventual historical collapse of the two types into an "integrated spectacle", which he was later to describe in terms of "the current ideology of democracy" and "the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator" (Debord, 1995 : 9).

Agamben takes up the notion of the integrated spectacle in the 1990s, in the context of the post-1989 merging of the western capitalist and eastern socialist states into a global capitalist market. One specific technology plays a crucial role in this unification into the "spectacular-democratic world organization" – television (Agamben, 2000 : 85). For Agamben then, the integrated spectacle is primarily televised as "the final stage in the evolution of state-form – the ruinous stage toward which monarchies and republics, tyrannies and democracies, racist and progressive regimes are all rushing" (Agamben, 2000 : 85). Not only does the global capitalist spectacle manage class differences, as both Agamben and Debord emphasize, but for Agamben also – bare lives[3].

III. The Bare Life of *Hunger Games* Traverses Bodies, Spaces and Species

At this point I would like to attempt an Agambenian reading of *The Hunger Games* biopolitics. I propose we consider the *Hunger Games* reality show

as one of the most recent developments in a 20th century genealogy of the televised spectacle. The reality show format deploys such strategies as success and competition to frame its contestants and manage the audiences. At the same time, in an Agambenian fashion, it produces that elusive and unstable element at the heart of each body – expendable life. Moreover, it gives it a specific material location and in this way plays the exact Agambenian script of entangling specifically marked bodies, certain spaces and the human-animal demarcations of species – all through an imagined eruption of the modern national sovereign right to kill. Let me turn more specifically to the narrative.

We are drawn into the narrative by following two main protagonists, young tributes from District 12, Katniss and Peeta. Their district is specific for old-fashioned coal-mining labour, predominantly but not entirely gendered male, and poor even to the point of starvation. In order to feed her sister and mother, after her father died in a coalmine accident, Katniss frequently roams outside the District fences and hunts game with a bow and arrows, which will prove a much useful activity in the game arena. District 12, among other poorer districts, is for obvious reasons opposed to the Capitol politics of the annual killing game, unlike the richer Districts 1, 2 and 4, which view it as a competition for success and celebrity status, highly valued by the Capitol elites, who are obsessed with fashions and entertainment. These strict geographical-social boundaries of space and class carved out by the imaginary state can be said to speak in fact of the not so easily mapped but rather fluid and dispersed global class geographies, in which sweatshops exist next to the middle class housing, and the homeless sleep in the city centres (unlike in the Capitol). While the imaginary Capitol installs colonial-like relations to its farthest districts, in which people rely on the traditional hunting in the wilderness beyond the state fence to feed themselves, the city and the colony, center and periphery are in today's post-colonial global economies nowhere near so stable and clearly demarcated.

In an economy traversed by the striking class hierarchies, Panem's sovereign right to kill erupts and captures that Agamben's elusive spectre of expendability which is the flip side of each citizen and indeed human of the liberal democracies – bare life. As a punishment for the social rebellion in the districts, the Capitol through a legal decree decided on giving an exceptional space a permanent location in the territory on an annual basis – the camp of the *Hunger Games* arena equipped with the technology to kill and to broadcast. Bare lives of the contestants from the districts are in this way included in the city, to which they are taken in high-speed trains, only to be excluded in the space of the arena. One of the tributes, Johanna, voices this when she remarks in the arena that "you cannot put everyone in here". The exceptional killing of specific 23 youngsters and the victory of one are normalized and localized in the arena in order to preserve through fear the overall oppressive status quo, an order in which indeed everyone is potentially killable. This is exemplified when the President at the end of the first film decides to kill the game producer who failed to control Katniss's acts of defiance in the arena, and also in the second film when the President makes an exceptional precedent decision to reap the tributes for the 75th show from the existing pool of victors (who were

supposed to be left alone). Every President's decision on life thus immediately becomes the rule, and each body in Panem is in fact a walking dead, as Agamben would have it.

Nevertheless, it is bodies marked in specific ways that enter the spectacular arena. As already noted, they are lower class docile bodies in relation to the Capitol, but also hierarchically class differentiated among themselves. Furthermore, they are boys and girls aged 12-18, which points towards reality TV but also more general strategies that target young people who are just about to be initiated into the capitalist market, and sell them the competition and kill-to-success stories. In addition to these, the *Hunger Games* reality show also thrives on the script of romantic, heterosexual and reproductive love between the main characters Katniss and Peeta, which it attempts to frame as of importance to the whole nation. The axes of class, age and heterosexual love on Panem's screens are thus managed in a way to rehearse the well-known middle-class script of individualist economic success and heterosexual reproductive family. The productive and reproductive bare life captured by the reality show in this way points towards how bodies are more generally framed within liberal capitalism, with its potential flip side of class, gender and sexuality based expendables.

The entanglement of the bare life of the tributes and the space of the *Hunger Games* arena camp incorporates the third Agambenian element – species. Katniss, who became an expert in hunting animals because of the necessity to feed her family, is at a great advantage in the arena where she can use the bow and arrows on humans. Her anxiety about the fact that she will need to kill people in order to stay alive is expressed when she remarks in the first film that the tributes are not animals. In this way she voices the manner in which the Capitol positions humans in the arena and manipulates them completely through the technological means, often releasing genetically modified animals on them - as less than human. In Agamben's vocabulary, they come to inhabit a zone of indistinction between the politically valued bios and the animal or natural existence of zoē, through which a decision is constantly being passed on which life is killable. In this way, *The Hunger Games* play literally the Agambenian script of isolating (heterogeneously) underclassed life as expendable in a reality show camp within the city law by rendering it subhuman.

Let me conclude by remarking that the narrative of *The Hunger Games* is a fairly accurate dystopian scenario of what Agamben had in mind when he spoke of the "spectacular-democratic world organization" (Agamben, 2000 : 85) as a management of bare life. In other words, in both Agamben and *The Hunger Games*, the ways in which today's capitalist liberal democracies manage life through a TV spectacle, slip into the production of expendable, and potentially killable life. This slippage is imagined as an eruption of the nation-state right to kill. Relatedly, on the level of film medium, *The Hunger Games* function in two ways. On the one hand, they are quite an explicit critique of the reality TV and its functioning within the global biopolitical economy, but on the other, they are surely themselves a capitalist high-produced spectacular action format, aimed for easy consumption.

Endnotes

[1] It is interesting to note that *The Hunger Games,* published between 2008 and 2010, decide to focus completely on the TV reality show culture – the biggest popularity of which can be said to have happened in the early 2000s, rather than on the

Internet media, for example. Reality TV is, of course, still popular globally, but I would tend to see (speaking in very general terms now) the medium of the Internet, and especially the social network formats, as becoming much more pervasive media than reality TV in the late 2000s. On the other hand, Agamben's focus on televised spectacle, which I explain later in the text, makes sense in the context in which he was writing – early 1990s.

[2] In Foucault's and Agamben's understandings, the notion of "racism" can be said to denote the modern nation-state discursive and material apparatuses that render some lives expendable and killable in biological terms. "Race" is not tied exclusively to the notion of ethnic purity, but involves various ways in which bodies are pathologized, sexed, etc.

[3] Timothy Campbell in *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* has criticized Agamben for too easily collapsing the historical specificity of the Nazi technological manipulations of life for the purpose of eugenics into an universalizing view of how contemporary capitalist democracies produce docile and inert bodies through technologies such as "proliferation of spectacles" (Campbell, 2011 : 61).

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