

Published in *The Hunger Games and Philosophy*, eds. G Dunn and N. Michaud (Wiley, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, 2012) 250-264.

Discipline and the Docile Body: Regulating Hungers in the Capitol

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*“We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms...In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”*¹

When Katniss first arrives in the Capitol, she is both amazed and repulsed by the dramatic body-modifications and frivolous lives of its citizens. Compared to the harsh conditions of her own District 12, the luxuries of the Capitol and the party-style excitement of the population at the prospect of the Hunger Games seems unforgivable. “What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol,” she wonders, “besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment?”²

Katniss’s three-person prep team embodies everything that she finds repugnant about the Capitol, from their high-pitched voices (with the accent she finds so affected) to their overwhelming preoccupation with fashion, social status, and parties. At the same time, the Mockingjay grows fond of them—and so do we, as they fuss and flutter around Katniss like exotic birds, doing their best to transform her to Cinna’s specifications. As events unfold, we see the trio become genuinely attached to Katniss as well: while preparing Katniss for her pre-Quarter Quell interview with Caesar Flickerman, each of the stylists in turn eventually leaves in tears at the thought of her re-entering the arena.

The prep team is actively promoting the horror of the Hunger Games, but they are sympathetic—not evil—characters, and in this way they resemble the vast majority of the Capitol citizens. But how is the prep team’s affection for Katniss and Peeta compatible with their bloodthirsty delight at the violent spectacle itself? What keeps them from recognizing that *all* the children in the arena are the objects of affection? And why do the Capitol citizens generally remain so indifferent to the systemic injustices on which their comfort rests? As we’ll see, the

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 194.

² Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 65.

more time and energy the Capitol citizens focus on body-modification and their social lives, the more self-focused they become...and the less likely they are to notice or care about political injustices that don't directly affect them. A further examination of how the frivolity of the citizens is actually used by the Capitol to strengthen its power also provides insight into what seems most troubling about the lives of the citizens not just of the Capitol but of District 13 as well—namely, their lack of self-directed significance.

Fantastic Fashion and Shifting Focus

“How can one capitalize the time of individuals, accumulate it in each of them, in their bodies... in a way that is susceptible of use and control?”³

It might seem strange to talk about regulating the *hungers* of the citizens, given that one of the most striking differences between the Capitol and the Districts is that hunger doesn't appear to exist in the Capitol. The citizens never experience the gnawing sensation of an empty belly; their every appetite is satisfied as soon as it arises. In stark contrast to the poorer districts (especially areas like the Seam in District 12), rich food appears ready-made at the touch of a button, and the hardest choice families face at meal times is which dishes to eat. Furthermore, in the Capitol, this abundance is taken for granted. To count as a feast, all the stops must be pulled out, as at the party at President Snow's mansion, where one table contains nothing but a purgative that allows people to fill their stomachs again and again, just for the pleasure of taste. This is not a world in which the sort of hunger that Katniss has grown up with even exists.

'Hunger' is a word with myriad levels of meaning, however, and in its broadest sense 'hunger' can refer to any sort of appetite. Human beings hunger for food, for touch, for love, for power...and how we respond to those hungers—and how those hungers are shaped—becomes integral to who we are and how we experience life.

Let's look more closely at Katniss's prep team. When Katniss first meets the three stylists, they appear so odd to her that she has a difficult time seeing them as fellow human beings; as they strip her naked and examine her body prior to beginning their treatments, she compares the experience to being observed by a trio of outlandish birds. The main reason for

³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 157.

this, of course, is how physically different from her they are—differences that the team has carefully cultivated. Each member of the prep team has adopted a different “look” through the widespread Capitol practice of dramatic body-modification: Octavia has dyed her whole body green, Flavius wears bright orange corkscrew curls and purple lipstick, and Venia complements her spiky, aqua-colored coiffure with elaborate golden tattoos around her eyes. Katniss is also struck by their high-pitched, accented voices and their quick, darting patterns of movement.

The prep team has literally embodied Capitol society’s preoccupation with fashion, entertainment, and social status. What Katniss can’t get past, however, is not just how unusual but also how *unnatural* the results appear. To a girl who grew up in the Seam, where clothing is primarily protection from the elements and simple cleanliness a luxury, the elaborate Capitol fashions are nothing short of bizarre. When Octavia bemoans Cinna’s refusal to let the team make Katniss “something special” Katniss wonders what they want to do: “Blow up my lips like President Snow’s? Tattoo my breasts? Dye my skin magenta and implant gems in it? Cut decorative patterns in my face? Give me curved talons? Or cat’s whiskers?....Do they really have no idea how freakish they look to the rest of us?”⁴ The short answer to Katniss’s last question is, of course, “No!” In the social world of the Capitol, fashion statements like Venia’s tattoos and Olivia’s skin color are the norm; natural, unmodified bodies like Katniss’s and Peeta’s are the ones that look freakish.

This distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ is actually key to understanding how the citizens’ self-centered lifestyles play into the Capitol’s exercise of power. According to French social theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a society functions in large part through the creation and negotiation of widespread standards of appearance and behavior that unify the members of that society. What’s “normal” becomes whatever the prevailing social standard is, regardless of whether it’s “natural” in a physiological sense. Wearing clothes, for instance, is a powerful social norm throughout Panem (although one Johanna Mason is certainly comfortable violating); using implements to eat one’s food is another. Although a few social norms are common to most cultures, though, variation between sets of social norms is a large part of what differentiates one culture from another. Norms about what animals are acceptable to eat, for instance, (chickens? grubs? dogs? pigs?) vary widely between societies, and are part of how we distinguish one culture from another.

⁴ Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 49.

Social norms allow us to participate in and identify ourselves as belonging to a particular culture. They are also an important part of how power functions in that culture—something we can see most clearly if we think about common reactions to someone’s violating a social norm. If you were at an Applebees in Indianapolis, for example, and your group was offered dog as a substitute for beef in their hamburgers, the reactions around the table would probably range from shock and disgust to outrage. Those reactions, moreover, are not just typical of how we react to the violation of social norms within our own society—they are part of how that society is regulated. Think of how Effie Trinket reacts to the District 12 tributes ate food with their hands, for instance, or how most people in North America would react to the sight of a woman with extremely hairy legs and armpits. Now think of the person violating that social norm—the object of those reactions. Social disapproval is a powerful force, and most people feel the pressure to conform to social norms strongly. At the same time, the more people conform to a particular norm, the more powerful that norm becomes, the stronger the reaction to someone’s violating it, and the stronger the pressure on individuals to self-correct to that norm. (The more people whiten their teeth, for instance, the more yellow someone’s teeth will look if they’re *not* whitened—and the more abnormal that person’s “natural” teeth appear in that society.)

The nature of the social norms prevalent in a particular society can also reveal a great deal about power structures within that society. In District 12, for instance, social norms include keeping one’s head down and avoiding attention (as opposed to dressing flamboyantly and living ostentatiously), as well as keeping any dissatisfaction with the government quiet (as opposed to publishing free-speech newspapers, etc.) and avoiding large social gatherings. This indicates, among other things, a repressive system of government likely to crack down on anyone who draws attention or resists openly. In the Capitol, however, social norms include adhering to outrageous fashion trends and placing a great deal of importance on lavish parties and other elaborate forms of entertainment. This speaks of widespread privilege and abundant resources...and also a lack of economic and political consciousness.

Part of what social norms do is to create a corresponding hunger within us. We want to belong, to be part of a group—and social norms function as guidelines for how to do that. Furthermore, when basic physical hungers are easily satisfied, we have time, energy, and resources to devote to less vital needs, and arbitrary social norms tend to assume greater importance. In the Capitol, for instance, the incredible abundance of resources leaves the citizens

with ample time to focus on social norms of fashion and entertainment. In fact, the amount of free time the citizens have on their hands is undoubtedly part of *why* social norms within the Capitol are so complex, widespread, and elaborate: they have little else occupying their attention. Once in place, though, those norms give rise to correspondingly complex and demanding hungers in the citizens...and the citizens' sense of identity is increasingly centered around the particular ways in which they choose to fill those hungers.

Think of the bewildering range of options the Capitol showers offer for beautification: it's easy to imagine Octavia or Flavius taking an entire shower to ponder which foam to choose, and which scent. It's just as easy to imagine them placing a great deal of importance on their decisions, and judging their friends and co-workers based on the decisions that they make. ("Grapefruit scent? He's trying too hard." "Banana foam rinse? So bold!") Very few people in the Capitol appear to have meaningful occupations, and even those occupations are disproportionately based in the entertainment industry; the Districts provide all the "real" work necessary for meeting basic needs. It's in fretting about how to keep abreast of constantly fluctuating fashions (whether for themselves or for their clients)—fretting about whether feathers or beads are the best way for them to put their own spin on a new trend—that the people of the Capitol's hungers for belonging, for meaning, for self-expression are expressed. In a surprising way, then, hunger plays a crucial role in the lives of the Capitol citizens: they organize their lives around satisfying their complex desires just as surely as Katniss and Gale have organized their lives around satisfying their more-basic hungers and keeping their families from starvation.

I believe that how the citizens fill their hungers also plays an important role in their turning a blind eye to the injustices of the Hunger Games. In a society that places a strong emphasis on fashion and entertainment, the constant practice of self-surveillance ("Ooo—the stubble on my legs is getting noticeable") and self-correction ("I'd better shave my legs again") has the effect of keeping attention away from other concerns. The effort exerted by the Capitol citizens towards keeping up with constantly changing styles (stenciled cheekbones! gem-studded collarbones!) has the effect of transforming them into 'docile' bodies—bodies, in the words of feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, "whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'."⁵

⁵ Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 166.

The Capitol citizens are motivated primarily by an externally-generated sense of self-worth and importance; their energies are directed towards subjecting and transforming themselves to the dictates of fashionable society. Tellingly, their primary assessment of whether their lives are going well or badly is based on the extent to which they've succeeded in 'improving' themselves to fit the latest style. In sharp contrast with Katniss, who is constantly thinking about how her actions will impact her family and community (and who is determined to protect her sister and mother), the prep team's docile self-focus leads them to experience even the televised horrors of the Hunger Games in personal terms: "I was still in bed!" "I had just had my eyebrows dyed!" "I swear I nearly fainted!" Everything is about them, not the dying body and girls in the arena."⁶

As we'll see in the next section, this sort of self-centered focus connects directly to the political and economic control the Capitol exercises over the people: the citizens' preoccupation with their own bodies actually helps reinforce the Capitol's power over them—and the rest of Panem. It also helps explain how sincere and earnest people like Octavia and Venia can willingly (and obviously) participate in the injustices of the Hunger Games.

Discovering Discipline in Surprising Places

*"[P]ower is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms."*⁷

In *Mockingjay*, Plutarch explains the imperial Roman idea of *Panem et Circenses* (Bread and Circuses) to Katniss, to help her better understand how the Capitol functions: "The writer was saying that in return for full bellies and entertainment, his people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power."⁸ That description certainly captures the relation between President Snow and his citizens in outline, but there's much more to be said about the process by which an entire people abdicates its power in exchange for abundant resources and ready entertainment. In particular, it turns out that the same process by which the citizens

⁶ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 354.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 86.

⁸ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 223.

become “docile bodies”—a process of subtle but powerful social discipline—is also integral to their willingness to go along with the political status quo.

Life in the Capitol is highly *undisciplined* in the traditional sense of the term. The incredible apparent freedom of the citizens of the Capitol, though, merely masks the ways in which the Capitol builds, exerts, and maintains control over its citizens. Foucault, who offers a complex analysis of the often-hidden ways in which discipline functions, points out that the time, energy, and resources that individuals devote to transforming themselves to fit social norms discipline their bodies in obedience to that culture. When Flavius feels like he can’t leave the house without his “face” on, or when Octavia spends all her free time shopping for the perfect hair accessory because she can’t face her friends without it, it’s a sign that they have become disciplined, docile bodies. Their constant conformity to social norms has made them (unthinkingly) obedient to the rules of that society.

The demanding social norms of extreme body-modification and utter absorption with fashion and entertainment in the Capitol also discipline the citizens by training their attention away from economic and political concerns. As Bordo describes the process (paraphrased slightly to fit the context):

Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many [Capitol citizens]—they are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification.”⁹

Even the arrangement of the citizens’ physical living spaces—with their spacious closets, enormous television sets (under Capitol control), and constant scrutiny via security systems—plays an important role in disciplining the citizens into unreflective obedience. The citizens’ natural desire for originality and self-expression is channeled into “safe” outlets that draw attention away from the harsh realities of the injustices that make their lives possible.

In addition to encouraging the narcissism that keeps the citizens happily occupied decorating their hair with strings of twinkling mice-shaped lights instead of wondering how it would feel to watch their child be chosen in the Reaping, President Snow also maintains his absolute control over the Capitol by carefully controlling what information the citizens have available and by issuing sanctions for violating the established social norms. The consequences

⁹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 166. (Original quote has “women” in place of “Capitol citizens”.)

for violating norms (loss of job and social ostracization, for example, as when Tigris, the former Hunger Games stylist, takes her cat-loving body-modification too far and becomes grotesque even by Capitol standards) are just harsh enough to motivate the majority of the citizens to keep their attention focused where it's been trained, instead of challenging the status quo—or even looking more deeply into it. The Capitol citizens who join the fight against President Snow's regime (Plutarch and Fluvia, Cressida and Messalla, Castor and Pollux) are either people who had been within Snow's inner circle, people of the journalistic mindset that naturally drives them to push deeper for knowledge, or people who have suffered deeply at the hands of Snow's regime. The vast majority of the citizens remain docile bodies, content to avoid trouble and live their superficial, self-centered lives of comfort.

Power in the Capitol also functions in a way that is, to use Foucault's terms, positive and constitutive. We see this first in the generation of complex social norms that both give the citizens a sense of identity and belonging and require vast amounts of time and energy to satisfy. (It's worth noting that although President Snow was not responsible for the creation of these social norms, he certainly exploits and encourages them for his own ends!) It's also evident in the way that the Capitol rewards good behavior. In the world where the Capitol citizens see their lives as perfectly "normal", commonplace luxuries and entertainments like the Hunger Games contribute to a sense of superiority that leads the citizens to view people from poorer districts as "abnormal", sub-human, in need of fixing...and that works against the citizens seeing the interests of those people as equal to their own.

In philosophical discussions of race, class, and gender, it's often said that privilege is invisible to those who have it. This is certainly true in the Capitol: Katniss's prep team, for example, has no idea that it's actually an insult when they try to compliment her after they scrub, polish, and buff her body by saying that she looks "almost human!" The world of excess in which they live is normal to them, and they see deviation from those norms as unpleasant and undesirable. Who, after all, would *want* to hunt for her food or have visible scars? Furthermore, their perception of their lifestyle as the norm blinds them to the actual workings of the power systems that make it possible. In *Catching Fire*, for instance, Katniss is able to guess exactly which Districts are rebelling based on her prep team's complaints about the unavailability of their favorite products, while the team itself is oblivious to the true significance of the shortages

(through privileged ignorance either of where the various goods consumed in the Capitol are produced or of the effects of rebellion).

In the end, the people of the Capitol are highly disciplined—and by mechanisms that remain completely invisible to the vast majority. The sheer universality of this phenomenon is, in fact, a large part of what makes us tolerant of the citizens' participation in Snow's regime. "Who knows who I would be or what I would talk about if I'd been raised in the Capitol?" Katniss wonders as she watches her prep team listen earnestly to her mother's instructions on how to construct her signature hairstyle. "Maybe my biggest regret would be having feathered costumes at my birthday party, too."¹⁰ Although understandable, however, the frivolous, self-centered lives of the Capitol citizens seem neither admirable nor desirable to Katniss (and are clearly not meant to seem so to us, either, as we read the books); it's striking, then, that the lives of the citizens of the district that attempts to replace Snow's regime with its own institutions of power (namely, District 13) seem no more appealing. As we'll see in the next section, the main reason for this is that, despite enormous apparent differences between the two societies, there are marked similarities between the exercise of power in the two societies.

Power and Participation

*"A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved"*¹¹

Life in the underground compound of District 13 contrasts sharply with the carefree, indulgent life of people in the Capitol. District 13's rigid control of the citizens' personal and political lives keeps it running in the face of almost insurmountable odds...but it also has indelible effects on the population, perhaps the most noticeable of which is the stoic compliance of the people with a system that allows essentially no room for individual expression. On the surface, at least, it would be difficult to imagine anything less like the Capitol citizens' frivolity. Yet, as becomes painfully clear as events unfold, neither system of control can satisfy Katniss's hunger for a meaningful life—and for similar reasons.

On Foucault's account of power, discipline is a process that channels individual bodies' forces for social ends. One of the most striking features of the disciplined or 'docile' body is that

¹⁰ Collins, *Catching Fire*, 38.

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

its energies are directed simultaneously towards increasing economic efficiency (as both producer and consumer) and away from questioning political institutions and structures.¹²

We've already seen how the Capitol exploits this; a quick look at living conditions in District 13 shows that President Coin also has this dual process down to a science.

Again, the use of physical space is crucial. In District 13, every citizen is monitored and given an inviolable schedule that accounts for their location every minute of the day; living quarters are impersonal and spartan; food intake is strictly regulated according to height, weight, and physical activity. Deviation from these rules is not tolerated: the prep team's incarceration is the result of Octavia—whose gentle plumpness is unthinkable under this regime—taking an extra piece of bread at dinner. The guard's reaction to Katniss's horror at discovering her prep team chained and beaten underscores the effects of constant compliance to a highly structured system: "They were warned. Still they took more bread.' The guard pauses for a moment, as if puzzled by our density. "You can't take bread."¹³ Knowing your place in the system and unquestioning obedience to rules and regulations are the hallmarks of life underground.

In the Capitol, the citizens unthinkingly participate in the political system in large part because they are distracted, their attention focused on their self-centered desires. In District 13, the citizens unthinkingly participate in the political system largely as a result of deeply engrained habits formed through their repeated obedience to the myriad rules and regulations imposed by President Coin. The effects of this constant compliance are gradual, cumulative...and dramatic. In Foucault's words, "[T]he soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit."¹⁴ The end result of this process on a larger social scale is a populace that literally embodies obedience.

From the perspective of the Capitol, Katniss threatens its power structure by exposing the hidden mechanisms of power and drawing attention to the ways in which the system exerts its control. From the perspective of District 13, Katniss's unforgivable sin is her inability to take

¹² As Foucault himself puts it, "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (*Discipline and Punish*, 138).

¹³ Collins, *Mockingjay*, 48.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

orders. In both systems, there is no place for the life that Katniss longs to lead—a life where she can decide for herself what to do and under what conditions. On the surface of things, the ‘hidden’ discipline and excessive luxury of the Capitol look nothing like the incredibly regimented life of District 13, but both have the same outcome: a lack of genuine autonomy that leaves the citizens without a source of meaningful self-expression.

When All Is Said and Done

“Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”¹⁵

When Katniss’s prep team is transported to District 13, they appear ridiculous—even pathetic. Their attempts to carve out unique forms of self-expression in the Capitol’s context of excess leave them far outside the boundaries of acceptability in President Coin’s strictly-regulated underground regime. That does not imply, however, that even extreme forms of body modification cannot function as a form of genuine self-expression, however. Furthermore, as Cinna’s brilliant efforts make clear, it can also serve as an effective means of resistance to dominant power structures.

Cinna, for instance, is a master of subtle (and not-so-subtle) forms of resistance through appearance. Again and again, Katniss’s understanding of her situation and her role is enhanced and sometimes even learned through how Cinna presents her. He is the first person who gives her courage and hope, and it is his talent for highlighting aspects of Katniss’s true self that allows her to see the possibilities available to her. Her transformation from someone playing a role to accepting and even embracing her importance as the Mockingjay has everything to do with Cinna’s belief in her, and her belief in his designs.

The difference between this sort of transformation and both the excesses of the Capitol and the asceticism of District 13 is the difference between body modification based on an internally-generated sense of self, aimed at a substantive goal, and an unthinking conformity to externally-generated norms. Ultimately, for Katniss to find a meaningful place in a society at

¹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 93.

which she can feel at home, she needs to find a space where social norms are not aimed at control, where bodies are not consistently disciplined for political ends. As Foucault observes, none of us can escape being shaped by the norms of the society in which we live—but we can, like Katniss, resist becoming docile bodies; we can struggle to change the norms that would subdue us.¹⁶

¹⁶ Many thanks to Barrett Emerick for helpful comments on an earlier draft—and to Anna Pasnau for being so excited that I got to write this!