

Stefanie Lethbridge

## Girl on Fire

### Antihero, Hero, *Hunger Games*

While heroes have never been particularly absent in popular culture, the possibilities and ambiguities of heroic action seem recently to have returned to the very centre of attention in many popular culture products. If, as critics keep telling us,<sup>1</sup> popular culture is a site of negotiation for current cultural concerns, then it is worth paying attention to developments of the heroic in popular culture. As Barbara Korte has remarked, popular culture “is marked by a special sensitivity not only to cultural markets but, even more importantly, the desires and anxieties of its audiences” (Korte 68). This article enquires into the development of the female heroic in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, a popular culture product that has exploded into a multimedia franchise of considerable public profile since the trilogy started appearing in 2008.<sup>2</sup> What follows will concentrate on the novels of *The Hunger Games*, though I will use the films by way of illustration and as an occasional shortcut. A science-fiction dystopia, *The Hunger Games* engages with quite a number of issues of current cultural discussion, such as the role of the media in the construction of reality, the blurring of boundaries between the real and the hyperreal esp. in reality TV, celebrity culture, surveillance, the performative nature of gender roles, identity construction, and questions of global economic exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Within the context of these issues, the *Hunger Games* trilogy presents an adolescent female protagonist as autodiegetic narrator who veers between conflicting interpretations of her position and behaviour as victim, as anti-heroine, as heroine, and even as perpetrator. When in *The Hunger Games* the young Katniss Everdeen is forced to take part in the annual competition that pits teenagers against each other in a televised fight to the death, she develops media-effective strategies to ensure her own survival, and that of her fellow-competitor Peeta Mellark. Her evasion of the rules imposed by the tyrannical Capitol incites several districts of Panem, a future version of the United States, to rebellion. In *Catching*

*Fire* the Capitol unsuccessfully attempts to enlist Katniss and Peeta on their side to crush the rebellion and then forces her to take part in another Games to eliminate the threat she represents. In *Mockingjay*, Katniss joins the rebellion which is now organised from the supposedly destroyed District 13. Though struggling for psychological balance and harrowed by doubts about the methods of revolution, Katniss nonetheless becomes the media face of the rebellion. The ‘most today’ of contemporary heroines [“die heutigste aller Heldinnen”], as Andreas Kilb has called her, and also one of the darkest, Katniss is struggling to define her own identity and ensure survival in an increasingly hostile environment. In this struggle she is difficult to predict; she is impulsive, playing by the rules only when it suits her, and with that fascinating for both friend and foe. While the connection is not new, *The Hunger Games* places unusual emphasis on the dialectic between victimisation and heroisation. As dystopian Young Adult fiction, *The Hunger Games* also has fairly pronounced didactic leanings. The inextricably intertwined relation between victim, anti-hero, and hero presented in the novels offers a role model that counters post-modern trends to accept, even cultivate, a status as victim. But most of all, symbolically aligned to the moon and its hunter-goddess Diana, Katniss combines masculine and feminine traits to remodel traditional concepts of the heroic.

### 1. Hero – Anti-hero – Victim

In many ways, the anti-hero has more scope for in-depth character development than the hero and thus more scope to fascinate as he or she draws the gaze of the observer, who is unable to predict the anti-hero’s next move. While the heroic tends to be stereotypically monodimensional and to a certain extent still complicit to concepts like “chivalry, aristocracy, loyalty, masculinity and

militarism" (Cartlidge 1),<sup>4</sup> the anti-hero's hesitation, uncertainty, self-doubt, wavering, or downright cowardice and selfishness offers spaces to explore complex interiority and conflicting character traits. The anti-hero in this sense not only caters to contemporary preferences for wallowing in conflicting emotions but also offers more narrative potential to explore the unexpected, while the heroic remains largely predictable within a narrative structure of departure, initiation, and [triumphant] return.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the anti-hero is not separable from the hero; not free to roam completely unexplored territory, the anti-hero is used to "criticize the value system of society through the subversion of traditional heroic exemplars" (Simmons ix). In this sense, the anti-hero always questions, negotiates, and redefines the heroic as well.

If the anti-hero is still intrinsically connected to the conceptualisation of the hero, the victim is most commonly opposed to it. According to the sociologist Bernhard Giesen, the hero as symbolic archetype is transparent, he – or she – has a name, a face, a myth, and a place in the community (Giesen 17). The victim, on the other hand, has none of these things: "The subjectivity of victims [...] is restricted, damaged and anonymous: Victims have no faces, no voices, no places of their own – at least in the moments when they are victimized" (51). Both hero and victim however operate in the liminal space beyond everyday reality: They are *extraordinary*, confronted with existential boundary experiences, like birth, or more frequently death. According to Giesen, the hero status relies on distance; too much intimacy endangers the charismatic status of the hero – heroes do not struggle with the mundane, and if they do, they lose their status as hero: "Heroism dissolves if looked at from a close range" (17).

Giesen offers useful categories for analysis. When they are applied to the *The Hunger Games*, however, it becomes clear quite quickly that the definite separation between hero and victim that Giesen maintains is not viable. While in Giesen's system persons can switch from being a hero to being a victim or a perpetrator depending on the perspective of the viewer, he sees no causal connection between the two liminal states of hero and victim, no scenario that creates heroes out of victims.<sup>6</sup> As sociologist Giesen is of course interested in general and generalized observations about society and history rather than specific examples in fiction. If, however, we take the position seriously that popular heroes function as "established point of cultural reference [and ...] as short-hand expressions for [...] cultural and ideological concerns" (Bennett and Woollacott 14), then it is

worth asking how the general categories set up by Giesen fare in a specific example of popular fiction like *The Hunger Games*. Supplementing Giesen's four categories of triumphant hero, tragic hero, victim, and perpetrator with Ulrich Bröckling's useful typology of negations of the heroic (**Bröckling**) enables not only a more differentiated approach to a description of the heroic but also highlights the oscillation between and interdependence of the individual categories.

## 2. From Victim to Heroine

The dystopian society of *The Hunger Games* in former North America is a tyranny. As a reminder of and punishment for their rebellion, the 12 districts of Panem are required each year to offer two teenagers, one male, one female, to be sent to the Capitol to fight each other to the death in a televised competition. The Capitol inserts this procedure into a narrative of heroic contest and sacrifice and presents the "reaping" of the children as ritual that "knits the community together" [as Head Gamemaker Seneca Crane expresses it in the film version]. This is immediately exposed as a fake construction in the blatantly forced participation of the terrorised community and made explicit by the comment of the narrator, Katniss Everdeen: "Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them ...'. To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event [...]" (HG 21).

Despite the Capitol's rhetoric, it is clear that the chosen youngsters are both victim and sacrifice. As 'tributes', originally the payment given by a conquered nation to its conqueror as expression of allegiance and political submission, the children become the paradoxical symbol of both respect and suppression (Olthouse 46). They also become mere objects in a cultural ritual, a payment in kind to commemorate the defeat of the districts in the war against the Capitol. When the name of the twelve-year-old Primrose Everdeen is drawn in the lottery for the 74<sup>th</sup> annual Hunger Games, her older sister Katniss volunteers to take her place. Unknown to the public at large until this moment, Katniss is given a name and a face as tribute, and that means as both victim and sacrifice, though voluntary. At the same time, in this moment of victimisation Katniss attains heroic potential, as the audience acknowledges her sacrifice with the traditional salute of the district instead of the applause that the MC Effie Trinket asks for:

To the everlasting credit of the people of District 12, no one person claps. I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. [...] All of this is wrong. [...] it seems I have become someone precious. At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love. (HG 27–28)

Katniss has placed herself outside the community by volunteering for almost certain death in place of her sister. This has made the community notice her. She gains a place in the community and initiates a moment of resistance as the group articulates [at first with silence and then with the traditional gesture] her victimisation. This open acknowledgement of ‘something wrong’ goes against the Capitol’s prescribed celebration of the event. Victimisation presupposes a perpetrator (Giesen 46). Holding out their raised hands to Katniss, the people of District 12 also point to the Capitol as the originator of injustice and suppression. Though lacking agency as a victim of the Capitol’s imposed ritual, Katniss evokes resistance in the audience as she draws admiration and acknowledgement from the community for her heroic self-sacrifice.

Despite this moment of initiative and resistance triggered by Katniss’s voluntary offer to be tribute, Katniss – as well as Peeta, her fellow tribute from District 12 – instantly becomes the passive plaything of the Capitol’s entertainment industry. A team of advisors tries painstakingly to create a media-friendly personality for her: Her prep-team grooms her according to Capitol notions of female beauty, her stylist Cinna turns her into the ‘girl on fire’ by his choice of costume, and her mentor Haymitch tries desperately to insert her into a televisable narrative – unsuccessfully as it turns out: “‘You’ve got about as much charm as a dead slug,’ says Haymitch” (HG 136). Katniss is neither naturally charming, nor can she adopt any of the fake personalities Haymitch suggests: “By the end of the [coaching] session I am no one at all” (HG 137). Unexpectedly, it is Peeta’s public confession of his love for her that turns her into a desirable and therefore memorable person despite her lack of televisable personality. In all this Katniss is a malleable object in the hands of others. She loses agency completely, has no say in her self-construction or self-presentation: “there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by Cinna’s hands, desirable by Peeta’s confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable” (HG 160).

Throughout the trilogy, Capitol-directed events construct her personality and, in her own perception, alienate her from herself. When her hunting partner Gale turns down her suggestion to flee into the woods, she feels rejected as a product of the Capitol’s machinations: “Does he think I am now just another product of the Capitol and therefore something untouchable?” (CF 115) In the end, Katniss even physically becomes a product of the Capitol when its medical experts rebuild her skin, which has been almost completely destroyed in the fire bombing that killed her sister.

The Capitol, however, needs more than pieces in its game of spectacle: It needs, as is constantly emphasised, ‘a good story’. Real-life suffering disappears behind the necessities of television presentation and the dynamics of watching the suffering of others. The film makes this very clear as we ‘watch’ Katniss ‘watching’ the presenters Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith ‘watching’, in their turn, a replay of a former Games. Caesar comments on the challenging setting in the desert and the interesting plot moment when “a tribute turns into a victim” (*Hunger Games* 24:45) and is either killed or becomes a killer – both depicted as victims on this occasion. Throughout, the Capitol is happy to ignore the fact that the screen spectacle involves real deaths and the real is treated as merely the copy of or, at best, useful raw material for life on screen. As an inverted hyperreality, televised life becomes more real than reality but conceals the fact that in this case it is not a virtual reality that is televised but real people dying real deaths.

As her only chance of survival, Katniss starts to perform the role that has been offered her in the romance plot with Peeta: for the camera she pretends to be in love with Peeta to draw sponsors for herself in the Games. The Hunger Games are designed to have one victor who has overcome – or survived – all his or her opponents in the arena. As Katniss realizes the Capitol’s need for a survivor to carry on their show, she forces the Gamemakers to choose between a double victory of both Peeta and her or a suicide pact with poisonous berries, which would leave no survivors at all. Holding out a handful of berries to Peeta, Katniss openly defies the rules of the Gamemakers. It is not, however, charismatic distance but the intimacy that has been offered the viewers that turns the victims into identification figures and thus into subjects. Starting as mere objects in the Capitol’s game of entertainment, they evoke empathy in the audience as suffering subjects. Katniss appears in constant struggle with the mundane, “looked at from a close range” (Giesen 17) and in intimate physical detail – she vomits, bleeds, feels sick when she cleans out puss from Peeta’s wound, faints, shivers in the cold. Not only does this intimacy not diminish her status as heroine,

it creates it. The star-crossed lovers gain their place in the community *because* the viewers become so intimately acquainted with them. While they are still victims of surveillance, they have already become the heroes of a story; they have acquired their own myth. This becomes relevant in the following year when the Capitol forces the victors of previous Hunger Games back into the arena for the 75<sup>th</sup> Games [the Quarter Quell]. The Capitol audience obviously resists this attempt to subdue [in fact kill] previous victors – because it thinks it knows these people. They have become Capitol heroes as a result of intimacy, albeit forced and staged [in fact faked] intimacy. The necessities of storytelling reduce distance, they create admiration and empathy, even though the personalities the victors project are fabricated. Creating their own media personality returns agency to the victors; it turns them all from victims to heroes.

Until about halfway through the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games – and Katniss's first Games – she remains in a position as victim of Capitol ploys to destroy her. She does not act, she only reacts: she runs, she hides, she desperately dodges the Capitol-created fireballs. She is a piece in everyone else's game. Katniss's first independent action rather than *re*-action in the arena is to team up with Rue from District 11. Together they plan to blow up the food supply of the alliance that has been formed amongst the Career tributes, those who have trained for the Games rather than being forced into them and the most likely candidates for a victor. Katniss's decision to act comes at a high cost, because Rue is killed and the guilt of being unable to protect Rue will haunt Katniss. However, spurred on by this experience Katniss now starts to create her own narrative. With Rue's death Katniss's "power to manipulate the audience's gaze is fully actualized" (Mortimore-Smith 160). Against the rules of the Games, she memorializes Rue: She decides to commemorate her as victim when she decorates her body with flowers and salutes the dead girl with her district salute, the three middle fingers of the left hand raised to her lips and then extended to Rue.<sup>7</sup> "I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I" (HG 276).

It is at the moment of Rue's funeral that Katniss consciously starts to reject her position as victim: she starts to become an agent; it is "her first act of rebellion against Capitol rule" (Mortimore-Smith 160). This, however, is only possible *because* she was first a victim. She is the victim of constant surveillance for instance, her every move is watched. It is 'because' of this

that she has air-time and everyone sees her. Katniss uses the means of victimisation to turn them into means of resistance and thus self-assertion and independence. As she resists, she becomes an involuntary hero, rejecting the admiration others give her, and in this sense also negating her heroic status. Nonetheless, Katniss's salute resonates in District 11, as emerges later on when Peeta and Katniss visit the districts on their victory tour and the audience repeats it after Katniss's public acknowledgment of Rue's sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last goodbye I gave Rue in the arena. [...] I have elicited something dangerous. An act of dissent from the people of District 11. (CF 70)

The pattern of impulsive and involuntary heroic action that emerges out of a moment of victimisation is a pattern that repeats over and over in *The Hunger Games*. The harsh punishments that are put into place to smother thoughts of insurrection, for instance, turn into a moment of resistance at Gale's flogging, as Katniss flings herself between Gale and the new Head Peacekeeper wielding the whip. It is not Katniss's willingness to take the lash designed for Gale in her own face that saves him, however, but Haymitch's concern for the efficacy of televised spectacle with Katniss as star: "She's got a photo shoot next week modelling wedding dresses. What am I supposed to tell her stylist? [...] The first call I make when I get home is to the Capitol [...] Find out who authorized you to mess up my victor's pretty little face!" (CF 122–123). Haymitch uses the interests of the Capitol against the Capitol and thus turns victimisation into agency. Both surveillance and photo-shoot literally backfire on the Capitol.

Having styled Katniss into an *object* of consumption for the Capitol media game, the Capitol has turned her into a *subject* who starts to make the rules of the game. "It's moves and countermoves. That's all we gotta look at", Head Gamemaker Plutarch Heavensbee explains to President Snow in the film version (*Catching Fire*, 31:32–34). And indeed, every move of control the Capitol makes, is turned against them. The victors in the Hunger Games are forced into a fake narrative of individual heroic triumph, and they turn this against the Capitol as they unite – for a moment at least – at the beginning of the Quarter Quell. President Snow forces Katniss to wear her wedding dress for the interviews, but in front of the audience Cinna's pyrotechnics



transform the dress into a mockingjay costume, Katniss's token and the symbol of the rebellion in the districts. The mockingjay itself came into existence when the genetically engineered spy-bird, the jabberjay, was left to die and instead mated with mockingbirds – similar in fact to Katniss, who is literally produced as rebel by the decisions the Capitol forces her to make while she is on public view. The pattern goes down to a symbolically significant pun when the wounded victims of President Snow's increased terror regime are healed with 'snow'-packs because the cooling effect of snow is the only medical treatment the rebels have left.

Katniss as heroine is a product of the Capitol, but as I am arguing, she can only be Katniss, the heroic face of the rebellion, because the Capitol gave her a face as a victim first. In fact, the rebel leaders in District 13 continue to use Katniss merely as symbol, as a heroine in a show, as the Capitol did, literally as the face of the rebellion, not its head. They repeat the process of using Katniss for their own purposes, with the result that Katniss in the end kills the rebel president Coin and not President Snow, which finally breaks the circle of victimisation but also results in the loss of Katniss's hero status. It is not a new thing of course to say that each system produces its own subversion and that the hero needs to become like the villain in order to triumph: Brutus was in the end more dangerous to Caesar than all the kings of Barbary, and Hercules killed the Hydra with her own poison.

The screen-made heroine Katniss's oscillation between her status as victim, anti-heroine, or heroine, her status as victim even while she is marketed as heroine by the rebels, raises poignant gender questions. On the web there is a flaming discussion [reported and commented on in Firestone and O'Keefe] on whether Bella Swan, post-feminist romance heroine of the *Twilight* series, or Katniss Everdeen makes the more important statement on gender roles. The vote usually goes to Katniss as a third-wave feminist, independent and self-reliant female. But as Laura Miller has pointed out, Bella acts to get her man, while Katniss mostly reacts (quoted in Firestone 209).<sup>9</sup> At first sight, however, Bella is hardly heroic, while Katniss appears to be. Part of Katniss's potential as heroine comes out of her predicament as victim. She is given no choice but to fight [or die]. And it is only when President Snow manoeuvres her irretrievably into a corner, threatening not only her life but the lives of her friends and family, that she abandons all attempts to conciliate the Capitol:

I see the end of hope, the beginning of the destruction of everything I hold dear in the world. [...] Here's what's strange. The

main thing I feel is a sense of relief. That I can give up this game. [...] That if desperate times call for desperate measures, then I am free to act as desperately as I wish. (CF 86)

As Snow makes clear, she has nothing to lose. He forces her to take an heroic stand.

### 3. Hero – Anti-hero – Perpetrator

Despite the empathy and admiration Katniss evokes, she is repeatedly paralleled to characters whose negative traits are foregrounded, which adds anti-heroic traits to Katniss's characterisation. For instance, she shows definite parallels to Haymitch, the sullen, aggressive, and permanently drunk earlier victor of District 12, who is now Katniss and Peeta's mentor. During the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, it is one of Katniss's assets that, unlike the gentle and kindly Peeta, she can decode the messages behind the sponsor-funded gifts that Haymitch sends her into the arena to help her survive, supports like burn medicine, broth for the sick Peeta, and so on. Katniss's ability to interpret the items Haymitch allows to reach her as stage directions for her effective self-presentation in the arena sets up a non-verbal communication channel between them that goes undetected by the Gamemakers. Sullen and aggressive herself [though not usually drunk], Katniss actually turns her own – unheroic – imperfections into a strength as they enable her to connect to the world outside the arena by decoding Haymitch's heavily disguised instructions.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, like Haymitch, Katniss withdraws into a self-indulgent and drug-induced private world when she loses what she loves [District 12, her sister]. Having been used by others and discarded, Katniss allows herself to be victimised not only by others but by self-pity.

On more than one occasion, Katniss is also paralleled to President Snow, which gives her anti-heroic features not only as victim but as perpetrator. Like Snow, though for different reasons, Katniss repeatedly tastes her own blood in her mouth [e. g., "My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood", HG 99; "filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood", HG 333]. Snow gets headaches in "a spot over his left eyebrows, the very spot where I myself get headaches" (CF 24). The rebel leader Coin uses Katniss and Snow against each other, "playing them both for fools", as Snow realizes too late (MJ 403). And like Snow, Katniss produces victims; she sees herself as perpetrator: "Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly" (MJ 259).

Katniss, equipped with bow and arrow, represents more than anything else the virgin huntress. She is self-reliant, withdrawn, and essentially a cold fighter. Within seconds, for instance, she is able to pull herself together and concentrate on the task before her after seeing Cinna beaten to pulp in front of her eyes just before she is launched into the arena for the Quarter Quell. Despite the love-triangle between her, Peeta, and Gale, Katniss does not really love either of the two, as is frequently made clear in the book, though she relies on them and needs them. Gale recognises this when Peeta wonders whether Katniss will eventually choose either of them as lover: “Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without” (MJ 371). With her potential for destruction, Katniss is what Gil Haroian-Guerin has described as a Diana-hero, a “female hero who [can] rebel against and revitalize a troubled, old world” (Haroian-Guerin 2). Aligned with the triple goddess Phoebe, Diana, and Hecate, goddess in heaven, on earth, and in hell, the Diana-hero has apocalyptic powers of transformation: she is deadly and brings destruction, something which aligns her with the perpetrators. In fact, Katniss frequently accuses herself of her own flawed character: “No wonder I won the Games. No decent person ever does” (CF 134).

#### 4. Diana-hero: Destruction and Renewal

In line with the symbolism of the moon goddess, however, the destruction that Katniss brings is a destruction that prefigures rebirth. Notably, the powers of regeneration in *The Hunger Games* are all associated with Peeta. Symbolically aligned with the dandelion, an early spring flower after a long winter, Peeta is the one who bakes cakes, paints pictures, plants primrose bushes in the end, and loves with unquestioning devotion [as long as he is in control of his own emotions].<sup>11</sup> Katniss, on the other hand, is the hunter-destroyer. Notably, she does not *create* fire herself but works as a transmitter. Aligned to the moon goddess, she *reflects* the fiery beams others project onto her: First, Cinna invests her with artificial fire, then the districts turn her into their symbol of rebellion before she even knows about it. Despite her nickname ‘girl on fire’, direct contact with fire destroys Katniss, made very clear as she turns into a burn victim through the rebels’ own bombs.

As Diana-hero, Katniss has a number of encounters with the moon that signal moments of transformation. After she has drugged Peeta in *The Hunger Games* to keep him quiet, she watches the moon as she waits for the morning

to go to retrieve the medicine Peeta needs to survive. From the caring virgin she is about to change into the huntress and fighter. As a link to her forbidden hunting activities in the woods, the moon gives Katniss a sense of reality and connection to home that she has otherwise lost: “For some reason, I badly want it to be my moon, the same one I see from the woods around District 12. That would give me something to cling to in the surreal world of the arena, where the authenticity of everything is to be doubted” (HG 364).

Both Peeta and Katniss cling to their view of the moon as they try to survive their final cold night in the arena.

The only indication of the passage of time lies in the heavens, the subtle shift of the moon. So Peeta begins pointing it out to me, insisting I acknowledge its progress, and sometimes, for just a moment, I feel a flicker of hope before the agony of the night engulfs me again. (HG 397)

After the announcement of the Quarter Quell and her participation in another Games, it is when she becomes aware of the “faint shafts of moonlight” coming through the window that Katniss is able to accept the fact that she has to go into the arena again (CF 197). Again, the moon helps her transform, in this case from a helpless and hunted creature into a self-directed person who comes to terms with her situation. Moonlight also accompanies her desperate effort to stop pointless killing and encourage the soldiers of District 2 to surrender. Initially Katniss seems to be directing her appeal to the moon only, in apparently private colloquy with the planet that guides her: “It’s strange standing outside [...], but with no visible audience to deliver my speech to. Like I’m doing a show for the moon” (MJ 238). After the end of the war, Katniss finally emerges from the drug-induced petrification after her sister’s death when Buttercup, the tomcat beloved by Prim and despised by Katniss, makes peace with her in the moonlight: “He must know that the unthinkable has happened and to survive will require previously unthinkable acts. Because hours later, when I come to in my bed, he’s there in the moonlight” (MJ 434). Between Peeta’s planting the primrose bushes, Katniss’s return to her hunting activities in the woods, and the reconciliation with Buttercup in the moonlight, Katniss eventually reopens contact with other human beings. Throughout the series, the moon directs Katniss’s engagement with the world around her at critical moments, symbolising her aloofness and her changeability, but also her ability to work as transmitter and connecting agent.

In terms of *gender* politics, *The Hunger Games* – at least temporarily – breaks with gender stereotypes, assigning stereotypically

female traits to Peeta. But Katniss as the aloof Diana-hero continues to be notably feminine, even when she does not perform stereotypical femininity for the cameras. For instance, she takes on both the father and the mother role for her sister Prim and for Rue, she looks after the injured Peeta, she steps between the unconscious Gale and the Peacekeeper, who is flogging him, and she visits and comforts the people in the hospital in District 8 during the rebellion. In the end, Katniss is reinserted into a traditional gender role, “the epic heroine defaulting to a safe, stable, and highly insular heterosexual reproductive union” (Broad 125). In this sense, the trilogy offers no lasting reinterpretation of gender roles. It continues along the lines of “girls must create harmony, so they need somebody to help” (O’Keefe 43). In terms of *hero*-politics then, the character does not so much represent a girl in the role of a typical male hero as offer a model that derives its strength from processes of transformation and mediation, arguably stereotypically feminine traits. Katniss becomes a link: she connects the districts and reflects their needs and desires, she connects femininity and masculinity, she transforms herself from victim into hero, and others follow her. Though Snow credits her with having “provided a spark” that caused the “inferno” of rebellion (CF 26), his assessment is not quite accurate. Katniss passes on the fire that others project onto her – Cinna, Gale, the people in the districts hungry for revolt – more than she ignites it herself.

It is this ability to transmit and transform that makes Katniss unpredictable and therefore fascinating to watch for both friend and foe. Snow sees his fascination with Katniss as the reason for his defeat: “My failure”, says Snow, “was being so slow to grasp Coin’s plan. To let the Capitol and districts destroy one another, and then step in to take power [...] But I wasn’t watching Coin. I was watching you, Mockingjay. And you were watching me.” (MJ 403) Coin, as Snow correctly observes, uses Katniss as a front, the face, not the head, of the rebellion, a hero for the screen, not for the real world.

## 5. Hero Simulation

Like other dystopian fiction, *The Hunger Games* trilogy explores the uneasy distinction between ‘reality’ and simulation (cf. Booker 123; Day 167). For Plutarch Heavensbee, Head Game-maker turned rebel, the screen is the place where the better life is played out. When Plutarch expresses concern that Katniss might lose self-control and be a bad example to other people in the bunker in District 13 during a bombing

attack, he is much relieved at her suggestion to “just pretend I’m on camera” (MJ 157). The consciousness of being watched brings out Katniss’s better, or at any rate more admirable, self. According to Plutarch, “one is always better with an audience” (ibid.). “Better” in Plutarch’s use of the word means more profiled, more controlled, and in the end simply more useful to his own projects.

*The Hunger Games* trilogy proposes but then rejects the idea that heroes are created purely via the media. “Simulation, in this series, is always a temporary state: the real can be hijacked, but it always returns”, as Helen Day also observes (174). At first, Katniss is unable to project her own screen personality; she is created almost exclusively through others: through Cinna’s costume, Caesar’s clever interview questions, Peeta’s confession of love, even Haymitch’s mentoring. Katniss’s survival depends on her ability to draw the audience gaze (Mortimore-Smith 158). Initially, Katniss is only fascinating when she is able to slot herself into the [media] role set up for her by others, and she is worried that the audience will spot this as mere play-acting, that “unlike Peeta, the image *she* projects masks an absence” (Day 174).

Her inability to completely mask an absence is eventually her strength. Katniss draws the gaze of sponsors, rich and poor alike, but it is only the Capitol audience, submerged in artificial stimulus and unable to separate a mask from a face, that is fooled by Katniss’s performance of her romance with Peeta. People in the districts are able to identify the rebellion behind the performance. “You were pretty good [...] with the love-crazed schoolgirl bit. The people in the Capitol were quite convinced. Unfortunately, not everyone in the districts fell for your act”, as Snow explains (CF 23). The districts interpret Katniss’s “little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, not an act of love” (ibid. 24). In other words, the districts watch Katniss force new rules on the Capitol Gamemakers by forcing them to accept a double victory. “And if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same?” (ibid.)

Katniss derives her impact as inspiration for and face of the rebellion through the media opportunities she gains against her choice as a victim of Capitol power games and via the surveillance imposed on her. The rebels later draw on the audience’s familiarity with her face and her [partly faked] story when they create ‘propos’, propaganda spots, to undermine the Capitol domination of broadcasting. Fulvia, the programme director, outlines the need to create Katniss as rebel heroine:

"We think it might be best to build you, our rebel leader, from the outside ... *in*. That is to say, let's find the most stunning Mockingjay look possible, and then work your personality up to deserving it! [...] Just how grimy can we make her without disgusting people? At any rate, she has to be something. I mean, obviously this" – Fulvia moves in on me quickly, framing my face with her hands – "won't cut it". (MJ 50)

Like Plutarch originally from the Capitol, Fulvia overestimates the effects of a mask, the mere fabrication of substance. The *Hunger Games* insists that heroes and heroines are more than mere media creations. In fact, Fulvia's plan to create a "stunning Mockingjay" in the studio fails spectacularly: Katniss only resonates as a screen-heroine when she is authentic. Grudgingly, rebel leader Coin has to allow Katniss to endanger herself in real-life fighting in order to produce usable propaganda material: "'And if you're killed?' asks Coin. 'Make sure you get some footage [...]', I answer" (MJ 85).

Only in authentic contact with her audience, is Katniss able to project hero-status. Intimacy, the very anti-heroic exposure of suffering, doubt, and pain, adds to Katniss's authenticity and ability to fascinate. When she visits the hospital in District 8, Katniss washes off the make-up her prep-team has put on for the planned propo and is glad to have done so: "Hungry fingers devour me, wanting to feel my flesh. [...] How ridiculous, how perverse I would feel presenting that painted Capitol mask to these people. The damage, the fatigue, the imperfections. That's how they recognize me, why I belong to them" (MJ 101). Katniss resonates with her audience because she can create this connection. In the media-saturated world of Panem it is Katniss's authenticity and not her screen-produced persona that draws followers in the districts, that in fact turns her into a heroine before she knows she is one: When she accidentally meets fugitives from District 8 in the forest, she is slow to recognize the reproduction of her own token, the mockingjay, as emblem of the rebellion. Notably, the rebel mockingjay is stamped on a biscuit, something that can be devoured and internalised at a moment's notice. In contrast, when after her appeal to pro-Capitol fighters in District 2 to stop the fighting Katniss turns away from her audience and allows the screen image to override and overwrite her direct interaction with the people, she loses control of the situation: "My words hang in the air. I look to the screen, hoping to see them recording some wave of reconciliation going through the crowd. Instead I watch myself get shot on television" (MJ 242).

Katniss remains anti-heroic in her refusal to accept admiration. She hates to be looked at and prefers to retreat into the forest, her house, even into wardrobes or storage cupboards, to avoid the gaze of others. Rather like Batman, Katniss is a post-traumatic hero.<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally different from the relentless martial arts heroines of action cinema like Lara Croft or Beatrix Kiddo, whom Dietmar Voss categorises as "machine-heroines" (Voss 201), Katniss is defined and haunted by her emotional weaknesses. Traumatized by the early loss of her father and the failure of her mother to provide for the family, she is forced into independence at the age of 11. The terror of the Games causes further trauma, as Katniss cannot free herself from guilt at having killed her opponents. This trauma increases, as each move she makes to help the rebels results in further destruction. Each hero produces victims, as again Bernhard Giesen has pointed out (Giesen 45). From her position as autodiegetic narrator Katniss does not communicate triumph about her success; she descends further and further into an unresolved trauma from which eventually only Peeta can rescue her.

Even as established heroine of the rebellion, Katniss is used and abused by those around her: "every emotion I have has been taken and exploited by the Capitol or the rebels" (MJ 372). The people in charge, either the Capitol or the rebel government, victimise her, treat her as object throughout. While Coin hesitates to send Katniss into dangerous situations at the beginning of the rebellion, she seems to count on her greater usefulness as martyr when the rebels are close to victory.

"She doesn't need you as a rallying point now. As she said, your primary objective, to unite the districts, has succeeded", Boggs reminds me.

"[...] There's only one last thing you could do to add fire to the rebellion."

"Die", I say quietly.

"Yes. Give us a martyr to fight for", says Boggs. (MJ 298–299)

Snow also tries to break her, "to turn her into a victim and therefore once again demonstrate the Capitol's power. [...] He seems to believe that if he makes Katniss a victim, people will no longer be inspired by her" (Henthorpe 132). As hero who has outlived her usefulness, Katniss is eventually exiled to the destroyed District 12: "The truth is, no one quite knows what to do with me now that the war's over, although if another one should spring up, Plutarch's sure they could find a role for me" (MJ 425–426). In the meantime, Plutarch wants her to perform in a new televised singing programme (*ibid.*). Unlike Katniss, who sees almost exclusively the personal dimension



of her involvement in the rebellion, Plutarch, the Head Gamemaker turned rebel, only sees her uses as screen personality. Never fully accepting her status as heroine, Katniss continues to oscillate between victimisation, heroisation, and deheroisation through others.

As Katniss overcame her victimisation by inserting herself into a romance narrative, she overcomes trauma through narrative, as Tom Henthorne has pointed out (137–138), turning others into the heroes of their own stories but commemorating them in apparently trivial moments of closeness: “Lady [the goat] licking Prim’s cheek. My father’s laugh. Peeta’s father with the cookies. The colour of Finnick’s eyes. What Cinna could do with a length of silk. [...] We seal the pages with salt water and promises to live well to make their deaths count” (MJ 435). Telling the stories of those who died and those who survived [Katniss telling her own story of course as autodiegetic narrator] can be reconstitutive not only on a personal level, but also on a social level, “enabling a community to [...] come to terms with shared trauma” (Henthorne 137). The personal and the social intersect in the endeavour to narrate and commemorate heroic deeds.

## 6. Victims and Responsibility

While Katniss falls victim to her own severe trauma and her feelings of guilt, there is never a suggestion in the book that she has actually made the wrong choice. When Katniss tries to escape the consequences of her actions, Gale fiercely calls her to order:

“It’s all my fault, Gale. Because of what I did in the arena. If I had just killed myself with those berries [...] everyone else would have been safe [...]” “Safe to do what? [...] Starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven’t hurt people – you’ve given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it.” (CF 113–114)

Gale is in fact the far more conventional candidate for a hero: relentless, virile, fiercely protective of his own but merciless to his opponents, dedicated to a good cause, and, unlike Katniss, “born with [a] camera-ready face [...]” (MJ 91). It is Gale and not Katniss who is eventually triumphant not only in the rebellion but afterwards as well. The trilogy, however, focuses on Katniss and Peeta, both of whom have clearly anti-heroic traits and are therefore perhaps more approachable or more palatable for contemporary cultural preferences.

The cultural critic Peter Moersch has remarked on a tendency in contemporary society to heroise victimhood: We have fallen into the habit of seeing ourselves as victims of circumstance, of childhood traumata, of institutions beyond our control. This leads – taking up an argument by Slavoj Žižek – to a postmodern subject that rejects not only the grand narratives that seemed to have produced a lot of damage in the name of a so-called good, but a postmodern subject that rejects all responsibility, that transfers responsibility to institutions and gives itself up either to apathy or the pleasure principle (Moeschl). *The Hunger Games* trilogy presents such a society: the districts have sunk into apathy under the Capitol’s suppression and the inhabitants of the Capitol lose themselves in sophisticated hedonism and immediate gratification. This state of stasis is broken up by Katniss, as she uses her position as victim to become a symbol for rebellion, as she turns reaction into action, as she transforms weakness into a feeling of community, and also as she burdens herself with a responsibility that almost crushes her.

Rather than the victim as hero, where victimhood is heroised and thus accepted, *The Hunger Games* presents a heroine who starts out as victim and turns into a heroine because she manages to assume control over her situation and turn the mechanisms of victimisation into strategies for resistance – first in commemorating the victim Rue, then in rescuing Peeta along with herself, both in defiance of the game rules made by the Capitol. As accidental and reluctant heroine, Katniss also has clearly anti-heroic traits and almost succumbs to trauma. Aligned to the moon and its goddess, the huntress Diana, the Diana-hero Katniss waxes and wanes: she moves between darkness and light, between her position as victim and heroine, one always conditioning the other. *The Hunger Games* does not celebrate a stereotypical heroic journey from weakness to strength, the heroine overcoming obstacles on the path to eventual triumph. Each of Katniss’s moments of triumph offers new perils, doubts, questions, and burdens. And even though Katniss’s resistance to the Capitol enables others to overcome suppression, Katniss herself pays a very high price, as her sister, whom she initially sets out to rescue, is among the victims of the rebellion. In the end, Katniss is neither a triumphant nor a tragic hero; she is a survivor. As Young Adult dystopian fiction, *The Hunger Games* has didactic tendencies that come built in with the genre. As such, it seems to be making a case for leaving postmodern apathy behind and assuming social responsibility, including the costs that come with it, a point that has frequently been made in earlier dystopian fiction

as well.<sup>13</sup> The role of the heroic in such dystopian contexts seems specifically to assume such responsibility, to become aware of what one's decisions entail and to accept such consequences: "sometimes it's better to do something wrong than right", the bounty-hunter Rick – also an anti-heroic hero – remarks in Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick 212). The built-in flaws, fractures, and failures that occur when a single individual takes on the burden of a large group merge the hero or heroine with the anti-heroic. Emphatically, in these fictional renderings this is not a taint, but an acknowledgment of human limitation that is also the greatest human strength: making use of the anti-heroic to question outmoded exemplars of heroic traditions. Katniss's strong impulse to help and protect others provides a model for the heroic that has feminine as well as masculine undertones. She is a catalyst more than an instigator, made clear by the fact that most of her rebellious actions are impulsive and become significant only in the interpretation of others. As Diana-hero, Katniss is a heroine of connection between old and new, of transformation. Her ability to reflect the light that others direct onto her, magnify it, and pass it on proposes a concept of the heroic that is predicated on empathy, participation, and transformation, merging masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. If Katniss is indeed the 'most today' of contemporary heroines, as Andreas Kilb claims, then it is tempting to conclude that even in popular culture, which is always accused of simplifications, the anti-heroic, flawed, imperfect, and therefore more complicated hero or heroine retains a stronger attraction than straightforward and clearly outlined [masculine?] heroes.

**Stefanie Lethbridge** is a senior lecturer at the English Department of Albert-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg and likewise a member of the Collaborative Research Center 948. Her research interests include the heroic in satirical representations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in contemporary popular literature.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Storey 10–12, which follows the argument by Antonio Gramsci.

<sup>2</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 2008; *Catching Fire*, 2009; and *Mockingjay*, 2010, in the following abbreviated as HG, CF, and MJ. To date, three film adaptations have been released. *The Hunger Games* [2012], dir. Gary Ross and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* [2013], dir. Francis Lawrence grossed ca. 400 Mio \$ [Imdb]. *Mockingjay Part 1*, dir. Francis Lawrence, was released on 20 Nov. 2014 to considerable public and critical acclaim.

<sup>3</sup> The immense popularity of the novels has spawned a number of essay collections that are journalistic rather than

academic in nature. While the short contributions to these collections mention a large number of issues, they develop few of them in any detail. I will reference them only when immediately relevant to my argument.

<sup>4</sup> Lena Steveker draws attention to the nostalgic ideals of 'male Selfhood' in the Harry Potter series as well (83).

<sup>5</sup> This is Joseph Campbell's basic narrative for the heroic.

<sup>6</sup> In an oral communication during the discussion after a lecture given at Freiburg University in May 2014, Giesen emphatically rejected a possible causal connection that created a hero out of a victim.

<sup>7</sup> In the film version, Katniss extends her hand directly to the surveillance camera and thus the entire television audience, emphasising the public significance of the death ritual and turning it into an open gesture of defiance.

<sup>8</sup> The film version makes the connection even more explicit by showing riots in District 11 in direct response to Katniss's gesture.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly Broad: "Katniss yields to others to make decisions for her, making the correct choice only when there is no choice left to be made" (125). Broad's claim that Katniss does not even choose her own partner in the end is not quite convincing, as Katniss clearly rejects Gale when he cannot tell her whether or not it was his bomb that killed Prim.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the Quora.com discussion on "How similar are Katniss and Haymitch?" <http://www.quora.com/The-Hunger-Games-book-trilogy-and-creative-franchise/How-similar-are-Katniss-and-Haymitch>. 2012. Accessed 14 Nov. 2014.

<sup>11</sup> On the symbolic impact of the dandelion, see Broad 123–124. In *Mockingjay*, Peeta temporarily hates Katniss when the Capitol 'hijacks' him, i.e., systematically drugs and conditions him to see Katniss as a threat. But even in his hijacked state, Peeta manages to warn Katniss of the planned bombing.

<sup>12</sup> For Batman as a post-traumatic hero, see Gaine.

<sup>13</sup> For example in Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* [1953] or Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano* [1952].

## Works Cited

- Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987.
- Booker, M. Keith. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Broad, Katherine R. "'The Dandelion in the Spring': Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games Trilogy.'" *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*. Ed. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz. New York: Routledge, 2013: 117–130.
- Bröckling, Ulrich. „Negationen des Heroischen – ein typologischer Versuch.“ *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*. 3.1, 2015: 9–13.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd rev. ed. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008.
- Cartlidge, Neil. "Introduction." *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. Ed. Neil Cartlidge. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012: 1–8.
- Catching Fire* (2013). Dir. Francis Lawrence. Lions Gate 2014.

- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. London: Scholastic, 2009.
- . *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. London: Scholastic, 2009.
- . *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*. London: Scholastic, 2010.
- Day, Helen. "Simulacra, Sacrifice and Survival in 'The Hunger Games', 'Battle Royale', and 'The Running Man'." *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012: 167–177.
- Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* London: Gollancz, 2007.
- Firestone, Amanda. "Apples to Oranges: The Heroines in 'Twilight' and 'The Hunger Games'." *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012: 209–218.
- Gaine, Vincent M. "Genre and Super-Heroism: Batman in the New Millenium." *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*. Ed. Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011: 111–128.
- Giesen, Bernhard. *Triumph and Trauma*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004.
- Haroian-Guerin, Gil. *The Fatal Hero: Diana, Deity of the Moon, as an Archetype of the Modern Hero in English Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996.
- Henthorne, Tom. *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.
- The Hunger Games*. Dir. Gary Ross. Lions Gate, 2012.
- Kilb, Andreas. "Das singende, schießende Spottvögelchen." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20 Nov. 2014: 11.
- Korte, Barbara. "(Re-)Bonded to Britain: The Meta-Heroic Discourse of Skyfall (2012)." *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*. 2.1, 2014: 68–77.
- Moeschl, Peter. "Das Opfer als Held: Zur Ambivalenz der Viktimisierung." *Weimarer Beiträge* 49.3, 2003: 445–450.
- Mortimore-Smith, Shannon R. "Fueling the Spectacle: Audience as 'Gamemaker'." *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012: 158–166.
- O'Keefe, Deborah. *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled by Their Favorite Books*. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Olthouse, Jill. "'I Will Be Your Mockingjay': The Power and Paradox of Metaphor in the 'Hunger Games' Trilogy." *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*. Ed. George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud. Oxford: John Wiley, 2012: 41–55. Print.
- Simmons, David. *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Steveker, Lena. "'Your Soul Is Whole and Completely Your Own, Harry': The Heroic Self in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Heroism in the Harry Potter Series*. Ed. Katrin Berndt and Lena Steveker. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011: 68–83.
- Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. 6th ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Voss, Dietmar. "Heldenkonstruktionen: Zur Modernen Entwicklungstypologie des Heroischen." *KulturPoetik* 11.2, 2011: 181–202.