Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series is a unique contribution to the genre of dystopian fiction. From Zamyatin’s *We*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *1984*, Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, to more recent stories told in book and film—*Omega Man, THX 1138, Terminator, Robocop, V for Vendetta, Children of Men, Book of Eli, The Matrix, I Am Legend*, and the list goes on and on—*The Hunger Games* series presents a unique melding of two different visions of the future: that where the oppressor is an external force and another where the source of oppression lies within the individual human being.

The comparison of these two different visions of the future was the opening gambit in Neil Postman’s 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. I am going to read Postman’s Foreword to his book accompanied by a series of images in this presentation as a prelude to my argument: that whereas Collins has written a story that shows us our future society where both sources of oppression—external and internal—are present and operative, the adaptation of the books to a blockbuster movie franchise has excised one half of that warning—the likelihood that we deprive ourselves of our own freedom and enjoy the way of life in which we have erased our capacity to think. I would like to explore with you why that is...

[2] “We were keeping our eye on 1984.

When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves.

[3] The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwelian nightmares.
But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling....

[4] …Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.
Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing.

1 Bracketed numbers are the slide numbers to be shown corresponding to the lines in Postman’s Foreword.
[5-6] Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression.

[7-8] But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history.

[9-10] As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities [and desire] to think.


[12] What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.


[15] Huxley feared those who would give us so much [information] that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.

[16-17] Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us.

[18-19] Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.

[20] Orwell feared we would become a captive culture.

[21] Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.”

[22] In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain.

[23-25] In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure.

[26-27] In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us.

[28-29] Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.
This book is about the possibility that Huxley…

not Orwell, was right.”

I would like to explore with you my claim that Postman’s argument in Amusing Ourselves to Death is supported by the film adaptation of The Hunger Games. Readers of the series experience the Orwellian nightmare of Panem through the character of Katniss Everdeen. In many ways she is a remarkably resilient hero, beset by many of the same fears and doubts as Orwell’s Winston, but living on the periphery of Panem—the exploited District 12—she develops a physical and psychological toughness that the metropolis-dweller Winston lacks. As Katniss meets residents of the Capitol and sees the city for herself, readers are given a third-person perspective on the decadent and superficial way of life of Capitol citizenry. They are living the post-apocalyptic equivalent of Huxley’s London in Brave New World. Though she doesn’t quote it, the sarcastic Katniss could easily echo Miranda’s ironic speech from The Tempest, the source for Huxley’s title: “O wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in’t.”

Readers, therefore, are treated in The Hunger Games to a rather unique type of dystopian story, one that skillfully melds both Orwell’s and Huxley’s visions of our future. Collins has drawn from the distant past with the imperial allusions of panem et circenses, the Latin names of Capitol dwellers and thralls, the genocidal program against Carthage (District 13), and the more recent past of Appalachian mining supported by company towns run by coal companies, televised war reporting interspersed with messages from network sponsors, and ubiquitous surveillance. She seamlessly weaves media culture into this socio-historical context with clear depictions of reality television, celebrity culture, sexual objectification, and the public appetite for gossip, glamor and an unlimited provision of food. Thus, the Huxleyian pleasure dome of the Capitol is supported by a brutal Orwellian totalitarian regime whose exploitation and use of force are usually beyond the notice of the preoccupied and happy Capitol dwellers.

It is therefore notable that the film adaptation, while presenting an effective Orwellian vision of America/Panem, dulls the satirical edge of Collins’ Huxleyian vision of Capitol decadence and indifference to the plight of those not living the Capitol’s version of the good life. The film depicts (though it is toned down from the books’ descriptions) the suffering and oppression of the Districts. It brings Katniss quickly and forcefully into the position of a rebel against the regime. We are made
to see President Snow and his cronies anticipating a resistance organizing around
the plucky Katniss. This brings into narrative focus the David vs. Goliath, action-
guaranteed battle between the government of Panem and the soon-to-be formed
band of District rebels. Our attention is diverted from the complicity of the Capitol
citizens and their way of life as causes for the exploitation of those on the periphery
of influence, wealth, and power, and the Orwellian brutality of its government. The
scenes of Capitol luxury and superficiality are reduced to mere gee-whiz colorful
ornamentation on the Orwellian storyline.

Many readers of the book series have noted (and usually lamented) that Lionsgate,
the corporate owners of the film rights to Collins’ story, seem to have
malfunctioning irony meters. They have merchandise tied in to the film that parody
Capitol aesthetic and moral values: a line of cosmetics by CoverGirl (Procter &
Gamble), a fashion line, Capitol Couture, by famous designers, Subway “fiery”
sandwiches and contest to win a “Victory Tour,” and the Catching Fire Barbie
collection. I argue that the effect of this on the story is to virtually eliminate from
the films the critique of American media and consumer culture that Collins’ books
so penetratingly skewer. In the films, Huxley’s nightmare is positively embraced as
visually engrossing set design, costuming, makeup, and visual effects. The social
effect is that it diverts moviegoers from reflecting on their participation in and
compliance with Capitol values. How has the film adaptation succeeded in giving us
only one half, the Orwellian, of Collins’ dystopian vision?

In The Hunger Games series, the Capitol citizens are pacified by their lifestyle, kept
busy and fascinated with a constant diet of their technically sophisticated and
visually engrossing media culture. This lifestyle is supported by the Capitol’s
exploitation of the resources and people of the Districts. The knowledge of the
Capitol’s oppression is readily available; the curious thing is that almost no one acts
on that knowledge. Though strict control of the news and travel is maintained by
the government of Panem, Capitol citizens could become aware of the extent and
severity of their injustice. Effie Trinket, for example, as an escort for District 12
tributes, can see firsthand the living conditions of 12’s population. Some of the
Peacekeepers stationed in 12 look the other way from the life-sustaining black
market economy. We do not know how stylist Cinna learns about District
oppression, but he takes the important step of quietly (at first) acting to defy the
Capitol’s system. Citizens of Panem who defy the Capitol’s system are easily
isolated, defamed, enslaved, or eliminated if necessary.
The Capitol appropriates the possible signs and symbols of rebellion—Cinna’s designs, the mockingjay, the dual victor conclusion to the 74th Hunger Games, and Katniss herself—and reintegrates them as sources of entertainment through its media culture. This is the key step, I argue, where life imitates art, and how the filmmakers have erased the Huxleyian vision of the books. As representatives of American media culture, Lionsgate must subsume artistic and critical fidelity to the demands of its stockholders and Hollywood competition for blockbuster status. Their success depends on the effectiveness of the pleasure they inflict on the public. The techniques to promote interest in an entertainment spectacle are the speciality of Gamesmakers. And no Gamesmaker who wants to avoid the fate of Seneca Crane is going to produce an event that questions the ethics of media production and consumption, celebrity adoration, and wearing enough pieces of flair. The vision of Brave New World and its warnings must be sacrificed for the film adaptation.

Collins’ story is a satire of contemporary American society: we are the Capitol. The “Districts” supply the resources and much of the labor for “The American Way of Life.” Our fossil-fuel economy requires that we extract the needed coal, natural gas and oil from the places that have it, with as little regard as is financially practicable for the ecological and community integrities of those places. The Capitol is the center of wealth, knowledge and power. That corresponds to the axis of corporations, academic research institutions, and government. This center is supported by the periphery, its natural resources and human population, and sustaining the lifestyle of that center depends on not treating the places and communities of the periphery, those that supply our resources and labor, as people and places in their own rights, with integrities of ecology and economy distinct to their particular land.

If Collins’ critique tells the truth about us, then how do the controllers and operators of our socio-economic system distract us from meaningful criticism and action against the system? By deploying weapons of mass diversion through media culture. For The Hunger Games movie franchise, the signs of Capitol decadence are appropriated and reintegrated as desirable commodities: tie-in merchandise, e.g., CoverGirl makeup, Barbie dolls, as well as viral marketing campaigns like the Capitol Couture collection by Net-a-Porter featuring designers Trish Summerville, Alexander McQueen and Dior.

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2 Films that satirize conspicuous consumerism, self-indulgent debauchery, or Hollywood itself tend to be low-budget, independent, foreign (Simon, L. A. Superheroes, S. O. B., La Dolce Vita) or oblique (Dawn of the Dead, Fight Club).
The symbols of Capitol defiance are also appropriated and reintegrated as emblems of democratic ideals or social consciousness (“Down with the Capitol” posters and t-shirts, mockinjay pins, etc.). By becoming an observer or participant in the film Event, the Districts’ resources that support it fade into irrelevance. Where do the ingredients for the CoverGirl cosmetics come from? What is Procter & Gamble’s ecological and labor record? What are the sources for Subway’s sandwich ingredients and how is the land treated where they are grown or raised? Where are the designers’ clothing lines made and under what labor conditions? The success of the film franchise depends on moviegoers not asking these questions or, to forestall the more nosey among us, being satisfied with answers invoking vocabulary like “organic,” “sustainable,” and “fair trade.”

Lionsgate’s marketing team and visual artists and designers have done an excellent job of drawing on the propaganda of the past for many of their promotional materials, and show important artistic and historical knowledge in their works. NB: these are all in support of the Orwellian vision, not the Huxleyian.

Huxley was right about us.

Orwell was right about everyone else.