The Hunger Games: A Hunger, a Game, or a Calculated Viewing Option for Christians?

Have you seen the film *The Hunger Games (HG)*? Read the trilogy? What is your view of its legitimacy as entertainment fare? Its literary value or concerns regarding its brutal theme? As the movie with the third–best cinematic opening weekend in history and a universal buzz to match, this surprising piece of popular culture demands a response. I want to discuss two somewhat opposed responses Christians may take. I believe you can make a case for either one. What matters is *why* you choose and what to do with the story.

The film has been called *American Idol* meets *Lord of the Flies* for its unholy melding of pseudo–gladiatorial games with live reality TV–complete with elimination, only this type of competitive elimination is indeed Roman–styled: it's permanent. What's more, these are not hardened, adult warriors battling it out. Young teenage "tributes" from each district fight to the death within a mountainous domed "arena" while a viewing public ogles. Producers create real–time obstacles using godlike technology to up the ante and provide deadly tension. The whole thing is designed as a reminder of the rebellion that preceded the oppressive, dystopian government's stranglehold on its citizen subjects. Yet, the film (and reportedly the books) contains inherent appeal to some moral high ground and redemption. Are there compelling reasons for Christians to seek common ground with movie–goers who share faith as well as those who don't?

I think so, but first, some cautions, observations about audiences and points that require discernment.

A Brief Case for Critique and Avoidance

Kid–on–kid violence is just plain evil:

My initial concerns about the *HG* film centered on two things: its barbarous plot line of child–on–child executions together with its allure to children younger than the intended teen audience. I asked a group of high school seniors in a worldview–based Christian school discussion if they could, for the moment, suspend defense of their film viewing rights and agree that there was something deeply disturbing *in and of itself* about that theme: kids killing kids. They showed a dogged commitment to preserve the story along with their right to view it (methinks they protest too much); however , they admitted a bit grudgingly that something averse to human dignity and the *Imago Dei* (image of God) is built into the storyline. Eventually, we established together that kids killing kids is absolutely evil.

A too–young audience:

Understandably, the young worldview–trained movie critics quickly went back to their arguments for its permissibility as literature for appropriately mature youth. Which brings up another point: when I took my own 16–year–old kids to see *HG*, taking quite seriously the admonition that "parental guidance" may be needed, I was struck deeply by the average age of viewers. It's a teen film and book series, but most of the kids–who made up a good chunk of the audience–were either pre–teen or younger. This may well be indicative of nationwide audiences. The senior class agreed here too: that kind of negligence is the parents' fault. They seemed bothered by that, wondering how such young kids could even process the "violent thematic material and disturbing images" that assigned it a PG–13 rating. Indeed, Probe Ministries' research through The Barna Group shows that, though born–again parents still hold by far the biggest sway on their child's views, most (at least those surveyed up to 40 years old) don't do

well either possessing or passing on a cohesive *biblical* worldview of their own. And that doesn't even speak of unbelieving parents who might show up for some engaging entertainment unaware of the (further) desensitization, dehumanization and modeling this film risks.

Violent mimicry:

A recent, very poignant, *Twitter* post (tweet) belies the notion that such violence doesn't really have an effect on young movie–goers. It said something like: "Overhearing two 12–year–olds arguing about how they'd have killed Foxface [a *HG* character] better." The relationship of real–life violence correlated with viewing violence among children is well–documented, but is easily dismissed in the case of "my kids." When a Christian school classmate of my daughter said she wished that the violence in *Hunger Games* had been less muted by camera jiggles and off–screen implications, the connection to her love of horror films wasn't lost on us. The question we need to help young people constantly ask is, "Am I willing to be so in tune with the Lord and His desire for my holiness that I am willing to give up my popular media and entertainment at any given time?" If killing people is cool, something is wrong.

Are we jaded, voyeuristic hypocrites?

One of *Hunger Games* author Suzanne Collins' stated intentions in writing the books was reportedly to forcefully critique so–called reality TV. She derides "the voyeuristic thrill–watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically–which I find very disturbing. There's also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn't have the impact it should.{1} As I left the theater, I wondered, "Are we just one abstraction away from the curious and jaded crowds who drank in the macabre theater of the hunger games spectacle? After all, we're watching them

watching the killings for sport. No, I didn't watch in order to cheer on the "careers," the professionally trained assassins who hunted fellow teens in a pack. Nor do I condone any such thing. But I did buy a ticket for a movie, knowing the objectionable device by which Collins made her point. A *World* magazine review by Emily Whitten says it well: "…For all the beauty and moral high ground this story contains, it's just as true that the world Collins has created is terribly evil… For some viewers at least—especially younger or more impressionable teens—*The Hunger Games* may produce the same deadening effect on the conscience that Collins seeks to warn us against."{2}

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes:

Then there's what I call "the stumble factor." When a moral decision is under consideration——like whether to watch *The Hunger Games* or pass on it (or, perhaps to watch it privately)——we need to take into account the law of liberty that the Apostle Paul set forth in I Corinthians 8: 4-13. The essence of this ethic for the Christian believer is to consider the relative strength of an onlooker's faith when engaging in something you feel free before God to do and, to default to that course of action which avoids making the weaker brother or sister violate their conscience. This is the well-known passage in which Paul deals with the disputable matter of meat offered to idols in a day of rampant paganism. To some weaker-minded Christian believers, imbibing such remnants of idolatry was unthinkable. However, to those who knew that idols are powerless and that all things are sanctified if one's conscience is not being violated, eating temple-sold meat was perfectly fine.

The bottom line of the above and a similar passage, Romans 14: 13-23, seems to be: live according to your own convictions without putting them legalistically onto others, but defer to others' convictions if you sense they have a weakness of conscience or simply a different conviction on a matter not

explicitly dealt with by Scripture. As Titus 1:15 states, "To the pure, all things [like the meat from pagan worship rituals] are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled." We need to care about those who don't yet believe, those believers who aren't free to act as we do or aren't for some reason able to expose themselves to things related to evil in any way without being compromised by it. Deference is godliness in this case.

A Brief Case for Engagement

The conversation with the Christian school seniors was instructive for everyone, including me. My original misgivings about *The Hunger Games*, written in an email to their administration, had been passed on to them. That memo referenced points of agreement with a very negative film review at an ultra–conservative Web site.{3} So, I knew going into the class discussion that I represented to at least some the legalistic, nay–saying, conservative older guy from that worldview ministry. The instructor had cleverly challenged the class with an extra credit assignment to write about the film and many students had passionately jumped at the opportunity. Now, these thinking kids were ready to stretch their rhetorical wings–or watch their classmates argue, at least.

Engagement does just that–it engages:

First, I polled the class. How many have seen *Hunger Games*?" All but four of the students' hands shot up. "How many haven't had a chance to, but intend to watch it?" Three of the remaining four hands went up. "How many of you stayed up late to catch the midnight premier?" A majority. "Did you enjoy it?" Lots of heads bobbing up and down."Okay, it seems we have a consensus. Next, I put a little syllogism on the board. It went something like this:

Premise #1: Romans 12:9b says, "…Abhor what is evil, cling to

> *what is good." (Phil. 4:8, Psalm 101:3, 2 Cor. 8:21, etc.).*
> *Premise #2: We've established that a central theme of The Hunger Games is evil (kids killing kids).*
> *Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong or very unwise for a believer to attend the film or read the books.*

As you might expect, the reaction was immediate and, though subdued, passionate. "That misses the point!" "Not necessarily!" So we broke down the argument and concluded that the main point of contention was premise #2: that violence against children is absolutely wrong to do. The issue here, they insisted, was the *portrayal* of violence, not the doing or condoning of it. Sharp young minds caught this crucial distinction, best illustrated by the fact that….

…Even God does it:

As a device, we agreed that violence and even worse elements are sometimes used by God Himself in Scripture. I mean, one would have to slice out entire passages like the story of Lot's daughters or the mass murders of Abimalech to avoid representation of rank evil in order to decry that evil. Thus, it's not necessarily morally wrong to depict even heinous evil for a moral purpose. Let your conscience be your guide (but be sure to develop a biblically tutored conscience): The students and I discussed similar themes in great literature from time immemorial. The ethic of a greater good coming from portrayals of evil in order to call it evil and contrast it with what is good came up. Together, we landed on a more nuanced, workable position. That's when I let my hair down about being a little subversive in my approach. Pointing to the internally logical but flawed argument on the board, I said, "Guys, this is what's wrong with so much in the Church today (and, I may add, why so many walk away from it)——*if* it's foisted on us without recognition of its subjectivity in application (remember the law of liberty of conscience in Romans 14?) and the need to reach our own conclusions outside

of legalism's tyranny." The room relaxed palpably.

Wrestling with the implications is necessary:

This is huge! Youth and emerging adults in churches and Christian schools and the homes of believing parents report a near–universal feeling of never measuring up, and of an us–vs–them, separatist ethos among older Christians regarding culture. As a colleague said dolefully, "Heaven forbid that we would actually teach them to navigate the culture through using a biblical worldview!" But parents and spiritual shepherds can't pass on what they don't have. Given the stress caused by social detachment and holing–up against the culture with its attendant fear–based Christian lifestyle so prevalent today, no wonder youths feel rebellious–such disengaged cloistering *should* be rebelled against. As their teachers do daily, I was attempting to model a reasoned, biblically centered discussion of disputable matters of conscience while calling mature students to a higher ethic focused on holiness, eternal perspective and loving one another––unmarred by life–robbing, one–conviction–fits–all legalism. If we cannot see the difference between primary theological doctrines and disputable social and cultural outworkings like which movie to watch, the fault lies within.

Seeking redeeming elements in secular art:

I believe all art, including film and literature like *The Hunger Games*, that resonates so resoundingly with its audience does so primarily by tapping into something redemptive–after all, the audience members are human, made in God's image, and thus long for the way the world was meant to be. This deep–seated connection to the hearts of people with the redemptive themes of books and movies and other forms of art is short–circuited by whitewashed, disingenuous portrayals of reality often found in "Christian" art. One Christian blogger reviewing *The Hunger Games* stated unequivocally that it "does a better job of depicting Biblical truth than much that passes

for ‘Christian’ literature or film. It is not a shiny, neat, tidy story. It is full of violence, treachery, pride, oppression, greed, indifference, tyranny, and the misuse of power. It kind of looks like parts of the Bible that way.” *The Hunger Games* avoids the unrealistic, passionless, half–hour TV show resolutions nearly universal in popular level Christian fare. “Basically, it [*HG*] is a picture of a world without any good news, without any gospel. It is exactly the world that we would be living in, and that some do live in, if Jesus had not come.”{4} Contrasting the realistic depiction of a fallen world and mankind with the gospel of hope, creative works like *The Hunger Games* can be used constructively.

I offered the class several redemptive elements I saw in the film’s heroine Katniss Everdeen (again, I’ve not read the books). The most glaring depiction is as a Christ–figure, when she offers herself up in place of her young sister, who was randomly chosen as the district’s tribute, presumably a death sentence for her. In fact, Katniss’s character bears an uncanny resemblance to the ideals Romans 12:14–21, at least in a one–dimensional way (warning, this section contains movie spoilers):

> *“Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them.” Katniss’s reaction to the game, the professional “tributes” and to the arbitrariness of “fate” foisted on her by the show’s producers didn’t include literal blessing, but her dignity and restraint were apparent.*
>
> *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Katniss seemed to be a beacon of heartfelt servanthood in the raising of her sister and caretaking of her mother, excruciating as it was. In a very moving scene, Katniss sings a lullaby as Rue, her adopted little sister of sorts, dies in her arms from a game–inflicted injury. Katniss wept bitterly for her loss, a humanizing scene in an otherwise nihilistic story. She nursed a girlhood acquaintance and fellow tribute back to health from serious injury. Katniss entered into the*

lives of others in a vital way.

“Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.”– Katniss displays a disarming unselfconscious manner. She was told she was good with a bow and arrow by her love interest back home and those on her team during the games–but she didn’t come off as cocky. She originated from the poor coal–mining district but that didn’t seem to denigrate her as a person in her own mind. She only wondered at the excesses and snootiness of the Capital residents rather than resent them, and she chose to buddy up to the weakest of the contestants.

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” All the other tributes came up out of their elevator tubes onto the playing field swinging swords and throwing knives. Katniss ran away perhaps for survival’s sake, but she did seem to act in defiance of the Darwinian kill–or–be–killed ethic. In this, too, she was only one of a few.

“…Never avenge yourselves…on the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him….” Katniss didn’t set herself up to avenge her persecutors but rather to get in their way by blowing up the food and equipment; she didn’t fire on them from a superior position high in the trees. Rue, a cute little girl who helped turn deadly wasps into weapons against ambushing careers was technically her enemy–one who might’ve been luring her in for the kill. In the spirit of the hunger games, Katniss would have been wise to execute her just in case. But she ended up feeding her and making an alliance that went beyond the pragmatic.

“Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.” What did the dignified treatment of Rue’s remains say about Katniss’s character? The film’s moral climax was embodied in a hand sign of respect toward the cameras following the death of Rue. This universally understood ode to the dignity of the

> *dead caused a brief but unsuccessful rebellion among viewers. Katniss had risen above the crass cheapness assigned to human lives, overcoming evil with truth and goodness. What does that say about human nature?*
>
> *Again, redemptive themes like this work because we all share deep knowledge of the incalculable value of a human life. What a wonderful jumping–off place for witnessing of the One who assigns and eternally redeems that value.*

The Hunger Games is a force of popular culture that raises critical questions in a risky way. I firmly believe that it's not a simple issue of right or wrong whether to view or read this powerful story. Believers need to decide discerningly, in good conscience and with a view toward their decision's affect on their own mind and hearts as well as others whether to pursue it for entertainment or cultural engagement.

Endnotes

1. "Conscience Killer?" *World*, April 7, 2012, Emily Whitten. http://www.worldmag.com/articles/19312.
2. Ibid.
3. "How Hungry is America for The Hunger Games," David Outten with Tom Snyder, posted March 22, 2012, MovieGuide.com. http://bit.ly/I6ey52.
4. How "The Hunger Games" Reflects Biblical Truth, posted March 31, 2012, www.DownshoreDrift.com. http://bit.ly/I1Y0xl.

See Also:

Redeeming *The Hunger Games*