Genre and Narrative

Trying to determine which genre repertoires are exploited in *The Hunger Games* is a good way in to understanding what the film is ‘about’. These notes give some ideas for exploring links with students.

The original novel by Suzanne Collins has been marketed as a ‘Young Adult’ novel. In its modern guise the **YA novel** dates from the late 1960s with S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) – later adapted for the cinema in a version directed by Francis Ford Coppola in 1983 – and the novels of Judy Blume in the 1970s. The term has been used to retrospectively include well known novels from the 19th century onwards and has been characterised as catering for ‘young people’ aged 16 to early 20s. ‘YA’ novels are seen as addressing the ‘real’ concerns of adolescent characters and through them the concerns of adolescent readers.

The direct filmic equivalent of the YA novel is the **youth picture**, gaining prominence slightly earlier in the 1950s/60s in Hollywood and Europe (and also Japan). This broad term includes the teen romance, the high school film, the youth ‘problem picture’ and the ‘coming of age’ film. In addition, both literature and cinema has seen the development of ‘youth’ versions of well-established genres such as the Western or the crime film.

Suzanne Collins has acknowledged that one of the major influences on *The Hunger Games* was the Japanese novel and film adaptation *Battle Royale* (novel – 1999, film 2000). This popular but controversial narrative used the idea of a government forcing teenagers to ‘play’ a deadly game, in which they must kill each other until only one survives. The ‘battle royal’ is a traditional concept of a fight in which only one combatant survives and can be traced back to at least the Romans. Another generic influence on *The Hunger Games* may well be *Spartacus*, a novel by Howard Fast in 1951 and a film by Stanley Kubrick in 1960. This is the story of the slave in Republican Rome who leads a rebellion and which includes the famous and much parodied scene following an attempt by the Roman authorities to capture ‘Spartacus’. The defeated slaves are told by the Roman leader that they will all escape punishment if Spartacus surrenders. But one by one all the men announce “I am Spartacus” – conveying the strength in mass solidarity. This sense of a leader being offered collective support is echoed in the early scene in *The Hunger Games* in which the people of District 12 give their silent gesture of support (the ‘three finger salute’) for Katniss when she takes her sister’s place at the Reaping.

*Battle Royale* was marketed as part of Tartan’s ‘Asia Extreme’ brand – a controversial presentation emphasising ‘exoticism’ and violence as ‘attractions’. Recognised as **science fiction** but presented in a contemporary setting and sometimes viewed as a form of horror film, *Battle Royale* is typical of the fluid genre mix that is sometimes referred to as **speculative fiction**. This suggests that the narrative will have something to say about contemporary society in fairly obvious ways. (All science fiction is concerned with issues in the culture which produces it but this isn’t always easy to see.) By contrast, *Spartacus* was considered an ‘epic’ **historical drama** but its **political message** was sometimes very clear. Its scriptwriter Dalton Trumbo was one of the ‘Hollywood 10’ blacklisted by the Hollywood studios in the era of **HUAC** (House of Un-American Activities Committee). Wikipedia reports that various demonstrations against police and government have taken place in both the US and overseas (Thailand and Hong Kong) in which the ‘three finger salute’ from *The Hunger Games* has been displayed by protestors.

The political element in *The Hunger Games* derives in part from the **dystopian** fictional world in which Panem has developed. Dystopian worlds are popular in Hollywood fictions because they are often visually dramatic and also enable conflicts in narratives very easily. All such narratives have been heavily influenced by filmic adaptations of George Orwell’s 1984 – with the concept of a fascist leader like Big Brother, the ubiquity of surveillance technologies, the use of entertainment forms for control of the proletariat, the abuse of language in ‘Newspeak’ etc. Each of these is utilised in some way in creating the world of Panem.

The political reality in Panem is a form of totalitarianism with the elite treating a mass underclass almost as slaves, surfs or colonial subjects. ‘Resistance’ narratives represent one aspect of the **war combat** film with a distinct set of genre elements referring to sabotage, assassinations, small scale uprisings etc.

A fifth crucial repertoire derives from the industrial and institutional nature of Hollywood. Contemporary Hollywood requires major producers to focus on large scale blockbusters, preferably conceived with the potential for a franchise operation. Adapting the trilogy of *The Hunger Games* novels immediately offers that potential. Interestingly, as with the similarly conceived *Twilight* franchise, *The Hunger Games* was not developed by a major studio but by the largest ‘independent’ studio.
Lionsgate (which also acquired the Twilight creator Summit) and a trio of novels became a quartet of film adaptations. The requirement of the blockbuster is large scale spectacle utilising an 'ultra high budget' spent more on sets, locations and CGI than star names (at least initially). Exploiting the creation of futuristic dystopias such as Panem moves the narrative towards the action adventure. This is perhaps more a 'mode' (i.e. 'action') than a distinct genre repertoire. 'Adventure' implies a setting that is exotic and potentially dangerous. Traditionally in Hollywood 'action adventure' referred to narratives combining colourful and spectacular action with romance and drama. Industry has at various times seen the importance of genre mixes in which a central couple face dangers together. Contemporary action films have tended to explore the potential of female action heroes – either alone or part of larger teams (e.g. in superhero films). The Hunger Games uses a distinct kind of female action hero.

The final genre repertoire is a relatively modern category related to reality television, especially when linked to the TV game show. There are several antecedents in science fiction. The Truman Show (US 1998), though in some ways constructed for comedic effect, is sinister in its deception of an unknown subject whose daily life is watched by millions as a form of entertainment and controlled by a single 'ruler' figure. The elements of this genre repertoire link easily with those of the Orwellian dystopia – e.g. through the use of television screens and entertainment values such as the behaviour of the game hosts and live audiences.

Analysis
If students are able to recognise the significance of each of these repertoires, they should be able to think further about the film's narrative and its characters. In particular, students of Higher English could approach complex questions such as:

Choose a film or television drama in which a central character is in difficulty. Briefly explain what the difficulty is, and then discuss how the film or programme makers' presentation of the character's difficulties enhances your understanding of a central concern of the text.

What is 'the difficulty' in The Hunger Games? The film is set in a dystopian future or 'alternate' society and therefore life for most 'citizens' in the 13 Districts (as distinct from the Capitol) is 'difficult' in all circumstances.

The central character of the narrative is Katniss Everdeen. Her personal difficulties are rooted in her relationship with family, friends and the whole community of District 12. She is forced to become a tribute to protect her younger sister Prim. She must 'win' The Hunger Games, not for herself but because her family would be unprotected without her. But to win she must kill Peta, also from District 12 – as well as other tributes towards whom she might feel protective. If she does win, she knows that she will be used by the Capitol as part of the programme to control the districts. Her only course of action then would be to lead a rebellion against the Capitol – in which many people would be killed.

Katniss's difficulties arise not because she is weak, but because she is strong – and highly talented. Her dilemma is to know how best to use her strength.

The whole narrative is inspired by Greek myths and Roman gladiatorial games. Katniss has the potential to become Spartacus. The richness and complexity of the speculative fiction narrative means that the dilemmas faced by Katniss have resonances in contemporary politics. The extent to which the films are prepared to openly engage with the political ideas that are inherent in the generic elements and narrative development is one of the issues for some audiences.

In the sequence starting at roughly 43 mins into The Hunger Games, Katniss is required to 'perform' for the game sponsors. Her dilemma is to find a way to impress the sponsors who may provide her with support in her attempt to win the games. However, a stunning display of prowess with the bow will also alert the authorities to the threat she poses as an attractive and iconic figure. Note President Snow's warning to the Games Master that "a little hope [for the masses] is effective [in containing them] but a lot of hope is dangerous". Katniss does not only have athletic prowess, survival skills and weapon skills – she is also intelligent and charismatic. For the Capitol it might be better if a more malleable (and less intelligent) competitor won. This dilemma is only one of the 'difficulties' that Katniss faces – and not the most obvious one.

Other approaches
There won't be time to explore other ideas but I’ll try to include them in the next MEJ or on the AMES website. One possible alternative: Jennifer Lawrence's performance is central to the success of the film. What is it about her qualities as an actor and celebrity – her star persona that makes her perfect casting as Katniss? It might be interesting to consider Winter's Bone (2010) as her 'calling card'.

Resources
http://www.thehungergames.co.uk
http://lessonbucket.com/study-guides/the-hunger-games/the-hunger-games-study-guide/

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