The odds are in our favor: Conciencia crítica y los filmes de los juegos del hambre

The odds are in our favor: Critical consciousness and The Hunger Games films

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Resumen: En el presente artículo se analiza el potencial de los filmes de The Hunger Games para apoyar el fomento de conciencia crítica en jóvenes. La presente investigación es un estudio de caso cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, en el cual se condujeron cinco entrevistas semi-estructuradas y semi-directivas como trabajo de campo, donde se seleccionaron a cinco jóvenes que habían visto todos los filmes de la saga. Mi conclusión es que los filmes de The Hunger Games tienen un fuerte potencial para fomentar el desarrollo de conciencia y pensamiento crítico en jóvenes, especialmente en los asuntos analizados. En la primera parte del artículo realizó una breve discusión del análisis de filmes con teoría política, resaltando la relevancia y utilidad de los filmes para discusiones de teorías y conceptos sociales y políticos. La segunda parte es una discusión con enfoque de teoría crítica de poder, conocimiento, opresión, resistencia y conciencia crítica que sirve como base para la discusión de los hallazgos del trabajo de campo. La tercera parte es la discusión de los hallazgos por cada uno de los temas que las y los entrevistados consideraron mostrados en la saga de The Hunger Games. Las últimas dos partes del artículo son la discusión metodológica y las conclusiones.

Palabras clave: Poder; resistencia; filmes; The Hunger Games; conciencia crítica.

Abstract: In this paper I analyze the potential of the Hunger Games films to help foster critical consciousness in young viewers. The following research is a qualitative descriptive and exploratory case study, in which I conducted five semi-structured and semi-directive interviews as field work, where five young individuals that have seen all the films in the saga were selected. My conclusion is that the Hunger Games films have a strong potential to foster the development of critical consciousness and thought in their young viewers, focusing on the issues mentioned. In the first part of the paper I make a brief discussion of the analysis of films with political theory, highlighting the relevance and utility of films for discussions of social and political theories and concepts. The second part is a discussion with a critical theory approach of power, knowledge, oppression, resistance and critical consciousness that serves as a base for the discussion of the findings of the field work. The third is the discussion of the findings of the field work by issues that the interviewees consider portrayed in the Hunger Games saga. The last two parts of the paper are the methodological discussion and the conclusions.

Key words: Power; resistance; films; The Hunger Games; critical consciousness.
1. Introducción

The Hunger Games (HG) was a saga of four films that were adapted from a trilogy of novels written by Suzanne Collins. The dystopic saga has been one of the most popular worldwide and was received very positively by the critics (Clark, 2020). The saga had a special impact in young viewers.

Sagas like the HG can be a powerful tool to share critical messages to a wide audience, due to its popularity and reach. In these critical times and realities is important to conceive alternative ways to foster the development of critical consciousness in young people since young people can be more open to reach for more inclusive societies and realities.

In the research I analyze the issues of power relations, oppression, resistance, inequality, poverty, hunger, media and propaganda, liberation and internal colonialism in the HG saga, according to the experiences and information reported by the young interviewees, integrating their voices regarding issues, experiences and knowledge in order to build conclusions and knowledge with a horizontal, more critical approach.

2. Film and Political Theory

Films are one of the most consumed mass media because they are widely accessible around the world, they are economically accessible, and they are easy to consume (time-wise). Due to these reasons, films have been a channel to spread to a wide audience different stories and messages. Even if the main purpose of films is to entertain, there are films that convey a social and/or political message and/or critiques.

In political theory, films are valuable to analyze because they enable the socio-political concepts and actions to be more easily visible and understood. Moreover, films are discussed and talked in daily life (Godmer, 2010:1-5).

Panagia, on the other hand, argues that films are relevant to analyze because they foster the visualization of social and political issues and can lead to alternative ways of resistance. For him, it is also a way to make political theory more accessible and interesting, challenging political theory’s focus on narrative only and the thinking that entails narrative-centrism which is an elitist notion (Panagia, 2013).

Other theorists have highlighted the usefulness of films in political thinking; for Shapiro, films encourage political thinking; Benjamin considered that films could promote 'a new realm of consciousness' in the minds of the masses; for Badiou, films allow us to visualize and try to understand the “other”, the people that have been historically marginalized and hidden; for Kristeva, films foster the capability to criticize in the masses; and for Fraser films can be used to show the oppressions people face in their respective societies and the hope that they can overcome them, fostering a critical stance against the status quo (Fraser, 2018: 2, 42, 99, 142, 175). Finally, films can be a useful tool to open critical discussions in education, and challenge the so-called neutrality of academia; critical thought should be central in the academic discussion (Marcuse, 1971: 88).
3. Theoretical Discussion: Power and Critical Theory

To analyze the Hunger Games (HG) movies regarding the issues of power, resistance and oppression -to mention a few- and discuss their potential to foster critical consciousness, I use critical theory as the theoretical base. Critical theory is relevant to understand and analyze the topics at hand because it is a multi-disciplinary theoretical current that focuses on aspects of power relations and knowledge.

Critical theory is committed to build an understanding of the world, (especially the marginalized world or "developing world") that promotes emancipatory change, in the political, economic and social spheres (Jones, 1995). Moreover, according to Cox (1981), critical theory analyzes how the power relations and institutions in which theory is based came to be: it focuses in the context in which the situations and theory are presented and the possible change in the future. In this line, Farias (2017) argues that critical theory seeks to expose and criticize oppressive relations and institutions and to analyze alternative ideas and practices that have been historically marginalized that could help people to reach the final goal of emancipation.

On the other hand, critical theory acknowledges that western science has been universalized and imposed around the world, including the forms of producing and legitimating knowledge and the asymmetric power relations implied on it (Foucault, 1980: 66,69).

Adding to the previous arguments, Dussel (1973: 56,57) claims that a dialectic comprehension is needed to understand reality, which according to him it is about the understanding that passes through "the other"; he furthermore argues that there cannot be an absolute universal understanding of the world or a speculative intuition model that can be used to abstractly analyze situations with a formula; understanding is a dialectic relation that varies depending on each individual. Dussel’s argument about the dialectic aspect of understanding and generating knowledge is very relevant to this paper, since films could be that channel in which spectators understand “the other” by seeing it in the screen as a visual narrative.

Other perspective is the decolonial approach to critical theory, where Boaventura de S. Santos (2011) argues that the goal of this approach is to produce and validate knowledge clustered in the resistance experiences of all social groups that have been systematically oppressed, caused by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchies mainly. One of the main points of the decolonial approach is decolonizing knowledge, which uses the process of epistemic disobedience that refers to delinking from the so-called “universal” and “objective” knowledge. This decolonial alternative, on the one hand parts from the idea that the caring, preservation and regeneration of life is more important than capitalist production and on the other hand parts from the principle that decolonizing knowledge is about challenging the oppression imposed by western science and western education and about using alternative forms, models and tools to generate and socialize knowledge (where films could be analyzed as an alternative tool or channel).

An idea that is also relevant to discuss is what González Casanova (2006) has defined as internal colonialism. He argues that the elites have imposed and perpetuated the system that benefits them more by concentrating power and wealth. This system is not only imposed economically (could be in a capitalist economy or not) but also culturally, where the elites determine what is acceptable and what is not, justifying all the decisions as necessary for modernity and progress; everything that doesn’t comply with their idea of what is needed is considered inferior or primitive. This oppression and control use propaganda and mass media to make people interiorize it, so there is minimal or no resistance. In internal colonialism, the elites in colonized countries act as an intermediary of the western elites; they only seek to serve the perpetuation of the oppressive system that is manifested currently as neocolonialism (Fanon, 1963: 76, 86). This concept is relevant for this research because in a structure of internal colonialism, different ideas and concepts discussed by the interviewees manifest like power, oppression, inequality, resistance, and poverty.

Finally, critical consciousness is crucial for this paper due to the analysis of the potential of films to foster critical consciousness. The pioneer of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1970) argued that in order to achieve emancipation, it is necessary to develop conscientização, which can be translated as critical consciousness.
This is the process in which each oppressed individual realizes the structure of the oppressing system in which he/she is inserted so he/she can take action to liberate him/herself.

Freire (1970) considered active pedagogic methods to foster critical consciousness, where this is developed through collective dialogue, discussion, and defying situations. The role of the educator in these situations is a dialectical and dialogical role. In line with this point, Rockwell (1999) argues that critical consciousness is developed because of the previous processes that people have experienced and their cognitive structures, which along with the external perspectives and knowledge, help to build learning on the individuals. Critical consciousness then, is not an entirely cognitive process, it is also a cultural practice that varies depending on each context, that is why it cannot only be considered in a formal education scenario, but can also be developed in alternative spaces, with alternative tools. What Freire and Rockwell argue is important for this discussion since films can be used both in formal and non-formal education as these defying scenarios that foster discussion and dialogue in order to help the oppressed to develop critical consciousness. However, it is worth noting that the oppressed individuals are the ones that develop critical consciousness by themselves according to their own understanding, experiences and knowledge, tools like films are contributory.

Critical consciousness development is the base to advance to emancipation, which is the final goal of critical processes and practices, in which stages like citizen formation are also important, whether in formal or non-formal education, making a positive difference related to the knowledge and effects of democratic participation, because this is essential for a viable democracy (Coviello, 2010; Print, 2007).

4. The Hunger Games

The four films of the saga (Lawrence, 2013, 2014, 2015; Ross, 2012) are an adaptation from the trilogy of dystopic novels of The HG (Collins, 2008, 2009, 2010) of Suzanne Collins. The HG are a cruel, gruesome, and mortal yearly event where 12 girls and 12 boys (one of each of the 12 districts) compete to death in a high-tech scenario where the last survivor wins. The HG were imposed by the Capitol as a reprisal against the districts for the “dark days” rebellion that happened 74 years earlier.

The Games are not only used to punish the districts, but also to divide them, to prevent them from uniting against the Capitol. Due to this, the Capitol makes sure that everyone in the districts and the Capitol watches the Games, even in districts like 12, where they normally have electricity only a few hours a day; during the Games they have electricity 24 hours a day. The Capitol is an authoritarian system that oppresses all districts and is governed by “President” Snow who is not chosen by the people and has a perpetual appointment. The Capitol has the “peacekeepers” who are an armed force that is used to control and oppress the districts (Collins, 2008; Ross, 2012).

The leading role of the films is Katniss, a 16-years old girl from district 12 (the poorest district) that volunteers to be the “tribute” of her district in the 74th HG instead of her younger sister Primrose, who was selected in the draft. Every person aged 12 to 18 years in each district can be randomly chosen to be the “tribute” of their district, but the draft is not entirely random since you can get a yearly ration of food in exchange for appearing more times in the draft, thus, being more probable that the poorest kids are chosen as “tributes” (Collins, 2008).

The dystopic saga shows a possible scenario in the future for our world, where environment destruction, armed conflicts, and natural disasters lead to the disappearance of everything but Panem. Panem is shown as the only “continent” with 12 districts.
5. Discussion and Findings

In order to analyze how the films influence the development of critical consciousness in young viewers, I conducted semi-structured and semi-directive interviews, through which I could gather crucial information about the issues and topics that the interviewees identify as issues portrayed in The HG saga. The main issues identified by the interviewees in the saga are the issues of power relations, oppression, inequality, resistance and more practical issues like hunger, poverty, media, and propaganda.

5.1 Power and oppression

In the HG films some of the main issues addressed (according to the interviewees) are power and oppression. It is worth noting that these issues are cross-cutting between them and with several of the social, economic, and political issues portrayed in the movie, being linked with the issues of resistance, inequality, poverty, hunger, etc.

Regarding the issue of power, the interviewees discussed the aspects of who was the power and examples in the films of how it is exerted. Interviewee 1 declared: “The people that have the power have the money; normal people don’t have the opportunity to be in power” (Personal interview). Interviewee 4 declares: “The system is like a dictatorship, where there is only one power” (Personal interview). Both interviewees highlight the fact that in the films there are asymmetric power relations, where the elites (centered in Snow) have the power and most of the people (the districts) don’t have it and are oppressed. In the saga, the Capitol is led by Coriolanus Snow, the authoritarian and perpetual leader of Panem until his defeat by the resistance (Lawrence, 2015).

Regarding some ways that power is exercised by the elite (centered in Snow), Interviewee 3 declares that “The decisions that president Snow makes are for his own convenience, for example when he poisons his political enemies to stay in power” (Personal interview). On the other hand, Interviewee 5 says that

An example is the elegance of Snow, i.e. he always wears a white rose in his lapel; something so beautiful involves the evil of this person. I think it’s an interesting contrast: how people mask their evil with good intention, justifying themselves, since white roses are a symbol of pureness. Is what conservatives preach: sacrificing things to “keep order and peace” whatever it takes (Personal interview).

What both interviewees discuss about how Snow uses power is relevant, since not only he uses it to perpetuate in power but he also tries to generate legitimacy to his authoritarian regime by justifying his actions, claiming that he is protecting order and peace, as it is shown in the video that the people in the districts have to watch every year in the reaping of the Games (where the tributes of each district are drafted) (Ross, 2012). Regarding this point, Bolivar Echeverría (1995), argues that in an oppressive society generalized peace is impossible, because the elites impose a distributive injustice that uses violence to impose it to the oppressed groups, maintaining a pacified zone for the elites and using propaganda to manipulate the oppressed into accepting this violence, which is clearly exemplified in the HG saga. The issue of oppression is closely linked with power; in the HG saga, power relations are intensely asymmetrical, leading inevitably to the power group oppressing the weaker group(s).

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1 To keep the privacy of the interviewees, they will be cited as Interviewee 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. All the interviewees agreed to be cited and agreed to get the audio of the interview recorded.
Regarding this topic, the interviewees shared that “Everyone who wasn’t from the Capitol was oppressed” (Interviewee 1, personal interview). On the other hand, Interviewee 2 declared that “In the first scene of the Cornucopia in the first movie it is shown, where the first to be killed were the smallest and weakest; the weaker they are, the less capability they have to resist oppression” (Personal interview). The interviewee argues that the weakest (referring to the 74th Hunger Games) couldn’t resist oppression, manifested in their death by hands of the stronger tributes, which turn into oppressors. This controversy of tributes turning into oppressors will be further discussed when discussing internal colonialism.

5.2 Inequality

When there are intensely asymmetrical power relations, the power group oppresses the other groups to keep the status quo, causing inequality. Regarding inequality the interviewees argue that: “The districts were controlled by the elites, and all districts where oppressed. The elites were rich and benefitted and the others lived in bad conditions” (Interviewee 1, personal interview). “It is clear that all the structure keeps the districts in a precarious situation to prevent a rebellion” (Interviewee 2, personal interview).

In contrast, some interviewees discuss the issue of inequality related with labor: “In the issue of inequality…the Capitol was a dictatorship and distributed the economic activities by district” (Interviewee 3, personal interview). “The distribution of wealth wasn’t equal between districts and with the Capitol, supposedly all districts contributed to the Capitol but weren’t retributed based in their work” (Interviewee 4, personal interview). Both the interviewees argue that inequality and power relations are shown in how the Capitol controlled the economic activities of the districts and how production was distributed. In this issue the Capitol exerts its power by controlling spatial relations between production and consumption by determining who can consume space and who can’t in different areas (Castells, 1974). This can be seen by how the Capitol separates each district with walls (whether concrete walls and/or electrified fences) that are heavily guarded by peacekeepers.

Elaborating more about labor in the HG, Kain (2012) points the issue of the nefarious work conditions on the districts, like in the coal mines on district 12, where miners don’t have any rights, social security or protection measures, and they get misery wages.

In this issue is relevant to discuss Marx’s idea of alienation of labor. He argues that work of the proletariat under a capitalist production system alienates the worker and disposes the worker of its capacity as free and conscious being. Marx begins to explain the first type of alienation, where he argues that the process is such where the more the worker produces, the more his value as a free person decreases. He says that “The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production, the more it increases in power and scope. The worker becomes a commodity that is all the cheaper the more commodities he creates” (Marx, 2000: 86). The idea of alienation is present in the HG saga because the Capitol imposes economic activities and production levels to the districts in slave-like conditions. Regarding labor, it is also relevant to analyze Marcuse’s work. He argues that the rising productivity of labor remains linked to rising repression, which contributes to raising productivity (Marcuse, 1971: 36). In the HG saga, the benefits, and wages of the workers of the districts don’t increase with increases in productivity, they threaten workers with torture if they don’t comply with the production levels imposed.
5.3 Resistance

Resistance is a central issue that interviewees have discussed about the HG films. The interviewees declare that “Katniss turns into the hope of the resistance to change the authoritarian system of the last 75 years” (Interviewee 1, personal interview). “Katniss turns oppression into the idea of freedom and united the districts to achieve the fall of the oppressive system” (Interviewee 3, personal interview).

On the other hand, the other interviewees consider relevant the three-finger salute that is used for the first time in the first film, when Katniss volunteers as the female tribute of district 12 to save her sister from that destiny:

Katniss is the spark that ignites the resistance, using the three-finger sign, making that sign to turn into a symbol of resistance…when there is a spark of hope things can change, this can be seen in social movements that despite repression can’t be extinguished: there is always a way to use strong symbols to empower these movements (Interviewee 2, personal interview).

This is supported by Interviewee 4: “When people begin to use the three-finger sign peacekeepers begin to silence them, even killing some; the Capitol saw it as a resistance symbol, which in the third film turns into real resistance” (personal interview). Interviewee 5 also supports this argument. These three interviewees argue that the three-finger salute turns into a crucial symbol of the resistance. In the HG, this symbol is a sign of respect and/or admiration in district 12 and it began to be adopted by the resistance when Katniss does the salute for the camera when her friend Rue is killed in the 74th HG (Ross, 2012).

It is also relevant to retake Marcuse's idea of radical power, in which the oppressed group resist by three stages: exhibit, propose and politicize. In the HG saga the first stage (exhibition) can be seen from the moment when Katniss does the three-finger salute when Rue is killed to the moment, she destroys the arena where the 75th HG were being held (Lawrence, 2013; Ross, 2012), exhibiting that she won't comply with the Capitol's oppression anymore, igniting the spark of the resistance. The second stage (propose) is exemplified with the formal resistance force that is led by district 13 against the Capitol, that propose to defeat Snow and liberate the districts, the third stage develops in the last two movies with all the actions of the resistance, politicizing the oppression of the Capitol, inspiring hope in the oppressed people of the districts to join the resistance, overthrow Snow’s regime and bring equality and democracy to Panem (Lawrence, 2014, 2015).

The interviewees also discussed the idea of liberation, and if they perceive it in the HG films. It is relevant to analyze their arguments since the they have contrasting ideas of what they understand by liberation; some of the interviewees considered that liberation was achieved in some way: “At the end there is liberation; when they won the war [the resistance], the Capitol lost” (Interviewee 1, personal interview); “At the end [the resistance] achieves its goal, they overthrow Snow, then it is a way of liberation, they no longer have that dependence” (Interviewee 3, personal interview); “When the resistance is fighting to end with the dictatorship they are fighting for liberation” (Interviewee 4, personal interview). The three interviews consider that the resistance achieved liberation, considering liberation as the defeat of Snow and his authoritarian regime, that could be interpreted as liberation in a functional form. On the other hand, the other two interviewees have a different approach about liberation in the HG films: “I don’t know, maybe they achieved some liberation at the end, but not emancipation” (Interviewee 2, personal interview). The last interviewee argued the following:

I think is interesting when Katniss kills the new president [Coin], because at the beginning of the resistance the goal was liberation, but is distorted to revenge as Coin really wanted…they were only changing the person as it happens with political parties, the new regime was going to be similar to the previous one and Katniss didn’t want to endorse Coin’s regime (Interviewee 5, personal interview).
Both interviewees consider that liberation wasn’t achieved in a complete sense. Interviewee 5 argues that it was more like a revenge led by Coin. In the last film of the HG Snow and the Capitol are defeated by the resistance and Alma Coin\textsuperscript{2} declares that she would assume the interim leadership of Panem while it is “stabilized”, showing a tendency to transform into another Snow; this path is stopped by Katniss, who kills Coin to prevent another authoritarian regime, leading Panem to have democratic elections, where commander Paylor\textsuperscript{3} is elected (Lawrence, 2015).

5.4 Media and propaganda

As mentioned before, the interviewees highlighted issues that I incorporated into the analysis, because I haven’t considered them before conducting the interviews as central in the HG saga; these are the role of media and propaganda, which can be analyzed as forms of exercising power and control over the oppressed people, in this case, the districts: “The issue of the control of the masses using “bread and circuses” is present in the films; in this case is a reality that dehumanizes people by making children fight to death to win a prize” (Interviewee 2, personal interview); “There is control of the media and for example for districts 1 and 2 it was like the “American dream” to be part of the Capitol. There is also the issue of violence as entertainment and oppression, like sacrificing your children as tributes is a punishment” (Interviewee 5, personal interview). Both interviewees highlight the cruelty of sending children as tributes to be killed in the Games, and the fact that the Capitol uses that as a reality show for everyone, not only to inspire fear but also to normalize violence in the people of Panem, making it acceptable and to turn the oppressed into oppressors (by making the district children to kill each other).

On the other hand, there is the issue of propaganda, which is pointed out by the interviewees: “The topic of political propaganda, when they prepare them [tributes] for the Games, they create a story, and that is the point, we have to create the correct story for people to consume and have hope” (Interviewee 2, personal interview); “They put Katniss as their leader [the resistance] but like marketing. In our reality when there are social leaders, the media tries to impose an agenda and the essence of the person is lost” (Interviewee 5, personal interview). The interviewees have contrasting opinions of the role of propaganda in the HG saga and in reality. Interviewee 2 highlights the positive role of propaganda for the resistance, to give hope to the resistance and make people join the resistance, however Interviewee 5 argues that by using propaganda with Katniss as the symbol of the resistance, she loses her essence.

In the saga, the Capitol has the control on media, controlling the only media that reaches everyone (television). By controlling media, the Capitol controls the public agenda unilaterally, to prevent the districts to threaten the status quo (Hauge, 2013). It is relevant to analyze this topic with the ideas of Sartori depicted on “Homo Videns” (1998); he argues that a crucial issue of mass media (like television) is disinformation or “fake news”, which is defined by Sartori as the distortion of information, sharing news to deceive and/or manipulate the public, which is clearly seen with the Capitol propaganda. Regarding propaganda, it is defined by Castillo (2010) as actions that seek to defend and spread a system of ideas. The author adds that propaganda usually implies the intentionality to manipulate the public. In the movies, both the Capitol and the resistance use propaganda to gain support as the interviewees argue, with the “propos” which are the television spots that Katniss stars to motivate the resistance to fight against the Capitol (Lawrence, 2014).

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\textsuperscript{2} Alma Coin is the leader of district 13 and the resistance.
\textsuperscript{3} Commander Paylor is the leader of the resistance of district 8 in the third and fourth films, at the end she is elected president of Panem.
5.5 The Hunger Games and problems of our world

The HG saga also shows issues that illustrate problems of our realities, like poverty and hunger, however, is it worth noting that topics like racism and environmental issues are not addressed in the films according to the interviewees. The five interviewees claim that in the films the issues of hunger and poverty are portrayed, for example, Interviewee 2 says that “In district 12 people suffered from hunger and poverty, a scene that shows this is the buffet in the party on the second film, where people vomit to keep eating that makes you think “how can these people vomit to keep eating when that food could be used to feed the people in district 12?”” (Interviewee 2, personal interview); the interviewees identify another specific scene where the issue of hunger is astonishing: “When Peeta throws a burned bread to Katniss, it is shown that Katniss lived very precariously, she didn’t even have enough to eat” (Interviewee 4, personal interview).

In contrast, Interviewee 1 relates poverty in the films with reality: “For example people that have COVID-19 and don’t have enough resources suffer and several of them don’t receive medical attention because hospitals are full and/or because they can’t afford it, these people suffer because they are poor just like the districts in the HG” (Interviewee 1, personal interview). Issues like hunger and poverty are portrayed crudely in the films, which according to Simmons (2012) can be compared to our reality, where the Capitol represents the USA regarding food waste. Moreover, Hauge (2013) highlights the issue of the consumerism and food waste in the Capitol allowed by the oppression against the districts. The author of the novels, Suzanne Collins, has also argued that she intentionally used a critical tone in the dystopic saga to point out issues of injustice in our world like hunger and exploitation of the poor (Simmons, 2012).

One last issue that is relevant to discuss about problems of our realities that is portrayed in the HG saga is internal colonialism, because it is composed by several of the issues discussed, including power, oppression, inequality, poverty, and propaganda. I decided to include this issue in the discussion after conducting the interviews, since the interviewees discussed points that structured together refer to a structure of internal colonialism in the HG films.

One narrative that indicates internal colonialism in the HG saga is that the oppressed wanted to belong to the elites, to be the oppressor, instead of changing the system: “There were some districts that even if they were slaves of the system, they wanted to belong to it and win the HG to obtain the wealth the Capitol promised, even if they knew they were in an unfair system” (Interviewee 1, personal interview). A narrative related to the previous one is the idea of limited freedom or a kind of simulation of freedom: “In the films there is a limited freedom, like “you are free but not really”, which happens in reality; you can’t get out of certain area like with borders, and there are parts that you can access or not depending on your social status” (Interviewee 5, personal interview). In internal colonialism individuals may think that they are free because they are not literally in chains, but that doesn’t indicate liberation, since individuals suffer from multiple oppressions but are allowed a minimum degree of freedom that allows the status quo to continue intact, which is reinforced with the imposition of culture by the Capitol; by using propaganda they make the oppressed people (districts) to comply with the system without a significant resistance, until Katniss ignites hope in the districts.

As mentioned before, for internal colonialism to be established and perpetuated, both oppression and culture imposition are necessary. Regarding these elements the interviewees say that “The domination of the Capitol against the districts is like Latin America; we are no longer a colony but we are still a colony in some sense, we are being oppressed by the foreign and local elites” (Interviewee 2, personal interview); “It is shown how the districts do what the Capitol wants because the Capitol has the peacekeepers watching and oppressing them to make them comply with the Capitol’s imposition” (Interviewee 3, personal interview). According to both interviewees, oppression is not only physical but is more complex and is used by the Capitol to make the districts abide with the Capitol’s commands.
On the issue of racism, interviewees consider that it wasn’t really addressed in the HG films: “I don’t remember racism in the films, there were white and black people as elite and oppressed” (Interviewee 2, personal interview). The other interviewees argue that they didn’t see racism in the films, making the films a relevant tool to foster critical consciousness in issues like inequality and economic justice, but not for issues like racial justice.

On the other hand, about environmental issues, the interviewees consider the following ideas: “It isn’t directly addressed but it is mentioned that Panem is what was left from catastrophes caused by human predatory practices” (Interviewee 2, personal interview). For the interviewee it is understood that due to human’s environment destruction and natural disasters Panem is the only existing continent on earth, but in the saga environmental issues are not addressed directly. Moreover, other interviewees consider that environmental issues were not addressed at all in the HG: “I didn’t see that the filmmakers wanted to raise awareness about the environment” (Interviewee 4, personal interview).

5.6 Critical consciousness and action: the Hunger Games potential

Analyzing the discussion of the interviewees I argue that the HG films can be a useful tool to foster the development of critical consciousness in young people for the topics discussed previously. Regarding critical consciousness the interviewees refer the following: “The films raise awareness about issues in your reality and other communities, like what happens in our region” (Interviewee 4, personal interview); “I consider that the HG films open your perspective, they show scenarios that give you valuable learning... It makes you think of how to prevent a scenario like that” (Interviewee 3, personal interview). Both interviewees argue that the HG films helped them realize about critical situations in their realities and to think how to change things for better. Moreover, they refer that the films motivate them to take action: “The films reinforced the idea of the need to take action. I consider that these sci-fi films can be very useful to show and explain realities and concepts that can make people take interest in these topics, like me, so they realize that they need to do something to make things change” (Interviewee 2, personal interview).

The potential of the HG films to foster critical consciousness has also been shown in other cases; in Thailand in 2014, people used the three-fingered salute from The Hunger Games to protest against the military, who took power in an anti-democratic way. In response the authoritarian regime arrested any group of protesters with more than five people and submitted them to “attitude adjustments”. The protests also happened in social media, where hundreds of users of twitter shared pictures, videos, and messages to call to resist the authoritarian regime using the three-finger salute (Child, 2014; Liou, 2017; Rivera, 2014). Moreover, actresses and actors of the saga like Natalie Dormer, Sam Clafflin and Donald Sutherland expressed their support to these protests and declared it was a privilege that the symbols of the movies are used to resist (Sky News, 2014; Vyse, 2017).

6. Methodology

The methodologic approach in this research is a qualitative descriptive approach, composed of the methodological instruments of semi-structured and semi-directive interviews (Márquez Duarte, 2019). On the other hand, a comprehensive bibliographical and hemerographical research has been conducted about the HG films and about the discussion of critical theory, power, oppression, internal colonialism, etc., that together with the information provided by the interviewees compose the analysis of this paper and helped me reach the conclusions that I will discuss in the following pages.
The specific qualitative method for this research is composed of a case study (Creswell, 2003), describing the experiences and information that the five interviewees considered about the potential of the HG films to foster critical consciousness and thought. The interviews were conducted by videocall and phone call (instead of in person) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, I used the Atlasti software to process and analyze the information gathered in the interviews, which helped the categorization and organization of the information to incorporate in my research. The interviewees were chosen with a qualitatively significant criteria, in which specific interviewees that comply with the specific criteria relevant for the research are chosen. In this case, I chose young people from Mexico that had seen all the HG films and that were willing to be interviewed.

It is worth noting that I used a horizontal knowledge creating process, instead of a rigid hierarchical vertical process because I incorporated into my analysis categories and issues after conducting the interviews, based in the information that the interviewees shared; in this way I could analyze valuable information for this research, for example including media and propaganda as categories of analysis. In this way knowledge is built in a more horizontal and decolonial way, where as a researcher I don’t impose an agenda, but rather produce knowledge dialectically and dialogically with the interviewees. The way I conducted the research during the COVID-19 pandemic could be useful for thinking of alternative forms of conducting fieldwork when physical contact is not possible; the fact that this research bases on the perceptions of young people that have seen all the HG films allowed me to conduct field work by conducting the interviews online, to evaluate how these films can be used as a tool to help the development of critical consciousness. This form of conducting research is also an alternative to the traditional form of conducting research in an “abstract way” where interviewees are only seen as sources of information that researchers can extract; in the interviews, I asked if there were other topics that the interviewees considered that were addressed in the films, besides the topics I asked about, which was very positive because these topics nurtured my research.

Finally, it is important to note that this research is an exploratory research and conducted with a descriptive approach, as such it is not the objective to universalize results, the objective is to shed light on the potential of the HG films to foster critical consciousness in the specific case of the interviewees I inquired.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I analyzed the potential of the Hunger Games films to help foster critical consciousness in young viewers. Films can be a powerful tool to share critical messages to a wide audience, since they are more accessible than books and scientific journals and are easier to consume. Thus, they could be used in formal and non-formal education settings to promote young viewers to develop critical consciousness with what Freire and Rockwell have presented as defying and dialectical situations and practices. I argue that these films can be used as tools to help young individuals to develop critical consciousness and thought.

Moreover, the discussion of critical theory and power has served as a base for the analysis of the HG films according to the information reported by the interviewees, which revolve around the issues of power relations, oppression, resistance, inequality, poverty, hunger, media and propaganda, liberation and internal colonialism as a concept that encompasses several of the issues discussed by the interviewees. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the HG saga doesn’t address social critical issues like race and environment.

The HG films can be used as a critical channel that by showing dystopic scenarios raise awareness about the issues discussed in order to motivate spectators to develop critical consciousness and thought of their realities and how to reach a more inclusive reality with social justice. However, it is worth highlighting that this is a qualitative descriptive exploratory research with a critical theory approach, with no intention of universalizing results; the goal is to show that the HG have potential to help young viewers develop critical consciousness for the specific case of the individuals interviewed. Possible further steps could be to have a bigger sample or analyze the potential of other films to develop critical consciousness.
To conclude with this paper, I want to highlight the phrase depicted in a scene of the 2nd film of the saga: “The odds are never in our favor” (Lawrence, 2013). This phrase illustrates the potential of the HG films: by showing crude scenarios where young spectators can link issues like the ones discussed with their realities, these films can foster the development of critical consciousness and thought in the viewers.

8. References


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