

From Ideological Manipulation to Physical Violence: The Dual Mechanisms of Repression in *The Hunger Games*

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The American writer Suzanne Collins is best known for her *The Hunger Games*, which vividly portrays the complex evolution of the protagonist Katniss Everdeen and other characters' identity under the manipulation of a totalitarian regime. Actually, the Capitol employs various strategies of ideological control to strengthen its rule, such as the hunger game, the reaping ceremony, religious symbols, discourse control, television broadcasts, specific narrative, etc. However, as conflicts get escalated, ideological control transforms into violence and direct force. Thus, it can be found that Collins's depiction of the media strategies and manipulation used by both the Capitol aligns with the French Marxist philosopher Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to some extent. Therefore, this paper tries to apply Louis Pierre Althusser's theory of ISAs to the interpretation and analysis of *The Hunger Games*. Through the lens of ISAs and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), this study analyzes a series of media strategies, repressive methods, and direct force to reveal how the Capitol regime controls and influences individuals through ideological manipulation and physical violence, and explore repression and control experienced by characters in different contexts, thus examining the dual mechanisms of repression employed by totalitarian governments towards the public and individuals.

Keywords: *The Hunger Games*, Althusser, ideological manipulation, violence, repression

Introduction

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy, including *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), presents a gripping dystopian narrative that explores the complexities of power, repression, and identity. Set in the futuristic nation of Panem, the trilogy follows the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, as she becomes a symbol of resistance against the totalitarian government, Capitol. The Capitol exerts control over its citizens through a combination of physical violence, ideological manipulation, and the spectacle of the hunger game—a brutal event designed to maintain social order by forcing citizens, even including children and teenagers, from the oppressed districts to fight to the death for the entertainment of the ruling elite. Through these mechanisms, Collins offers a profound reflection on the intersection of power, ideology, and identity, making the trilogy a rich source for critical analysis.

The central issue of the trilogy lies a critique of various contemporary social and political issues. One of the most prominent themes is the deep social inequality between the wealthy and dominant Capitol and the impoverished and oppressed districts, which mirrors real-world concerns about economic disparities and the exploitation of marginalized groups. The Capitol's domination is not only achieved through violence, but also

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through ideological control, using rituals like the Reaping Ceremony and media propaganda to instill fear and compliance in the population. Therefore, this paper will focus on ideological manipulation in the fiction and attempt to examine how the Capitol's control mechanisms align with Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), revealing how people are shaped and constrained by power.

Collins also reflects on issues like media manipulation and the desensitization of violence in society. The Capitol's use of the hunger game as a televised spectacle is a stark commentary on how media can be used to distract, manipulate, and control the public in the real world. This aspect of the trilogy resonates with modern concerns about the role of mass media in shaping public perception and normalizing violence. Additionally, the narrative explores the psychological effects of war and violence, particularly through Katniss, who suffers from trauma and post-traumatic stress as a result of her experiences in the game and the subsequent rebellion. These themes, deeply embedded in the trilogy, provide fertile ground through which the interaction between ideology, power, and identity can be explored.

The significance of this research lies in its examination of how *The Hunger Games* portrays ideological manipulation and its use of media strategies, repressive methods, and direct force to maintain control, specifically applying Althusser's ISA theory to analyze how the Capitol employs various forms of ideological control. Through the lens of Althusser's theory, this research will try to reveal how ISAs, through manipulation and interpellation, enforce the Capitol's oppressive rule, reflecting the dual mechanisms of repression—ideological control and physical violence—exerted by totalitarian regimes. This analysis will also try to shed light on the complex ways in which oppressive governments control and suppress both the public and specific individuals.

And when it comes to the objectives of this research, there is threefold. First, it aims to analyze the ideological control mechanisms used by the Capitol, including media propaganda, the Reaping Ceremony, and cultural symbols, to maintain its dominance. Second, the study seeks to explore the dual mechanisms of repression—both ideological and physical—employed by the Capitol to subjugate the people of Panem, examining how these strategies create an environment of control and fear. Finally, the research will consider the broader implications of these control mechanisms, particularly in how totalitarian regimes in the real world use similar strategies to maintain their power and subjugate populations.

The Hunger Games trilogy serves as a powerful allegory for examining the dynamics of repression and control in both dystopian and real-world settings. By applying Althusser's ISA theory to the series, this research seeks to uncover how totalitarian regimes use both ideological manipulation and repressive methods to maintain control over the public and individuals. This study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about how fiction can offer critical insights into the mechanisms of power and repression in contemporary society.

Ideological Manipulation and Physical Violence in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

This section will focus on a more targeted analysis of the dual mechanisms of repression employed by the Capitol, demonstrating how ideological manipulation and physical violence operate to maintain control over Panem's population. In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins masterfully illustrates how these mechanisms—one subtle and psychological, the other overt and brutal—are carefully orchestrated to reinforce the Capitol's dominance. Ideological control functions by shaping the perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the oppressed, ensuring compliance through rituals, media propaganda, and state-imposed narratives. Meanwhile, physical repression, including public executions, violent crackdowns, and the militarization of Peacekeepers, serves as a constant reminder of the consequences of defiance, instilling fear and deterring rebellion. Together, these

mechanisms create a system in which subjugation is not only enforced externally but also internalized by individuals, leading them to police themselves and each other in a manner that benefits the ruling regime. Thus, by using Althusser's theory of ISAs and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), this section will examine how the Capitol exerts its power over the districts, manipulating both their consciousness and their actions.

Althusser's Theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs)

Althusser argues that ISAs, such as schools, churches, and media, primarily function through ideology to shape individuals' beliefs and maintain the power of the ruling class. However, Althusser also acknowledges that ISAs do not function purely ideologically; they can and do employ repression, though this repression is often subtle and concealed. For instance, schools may use punishment, expulsion, or selection to discipline students, while media organizations may engage in censorship to control cultural narratives (Althusser, 2006).

According to Althusser, while Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), such as the army and police, predominantly function through repression (including physical force), they also operate ideologically to ensure their own cohesion and promote the values of the ruling power. Conversely, ISAs predominantly function ideologically but may use secondary, symbolic forms of repression to enforce conformity when necessary (Althusser, 2006).

This framework is directly applicable to *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where the Capitol employs both ISAs and RSAs to maintain its control over the districts. The Capitol uses ISAs, such as media propaganda and the Reaping Ceremony, to manipulate the thoughts and beliefs of its citizens. However, when ideological manipulation alone is insufficient to ensure compliance, the Capitol turns to physical violence through its Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the Peacekeepers and the hunger game itself, to reinforce its dominance.

In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol exemplifies Althusser's concept that no apparatus is purely ideological or repressive. The Reaping Ceremony, for example, serves as an ideological tool to instill fear and compliance, but the physical act of selecting children to fight in the hunger game introduces a repressive element. This instills fear in every citizen that they may have to fight in the games at some point. Furthermore, the idea that you may have to kill your neighbor if you are both selected helps to keep people divided (Stoner, 2017). This interplay between ideology and repression is key to understanding how totalitarian regimes, like the Capitol, sustain their rule by shaping both the minds and bodies of their subjects.

Ideological Manipulation in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

In such a dystopian society, the Capitol exercises a variety of strategies in terms of ideological control over its citizens. Its control is manifested through various mechanisms which are specially designed to maintain its power and subjugate the districts. The Reaping Ceremony, mandatory viewing, enforced participation in the hunger game, and the manipulation of participants' public images, etc., can be considered as prime examples of such control. And these strategies are not only serves as activities, but the specially chosen words of these activities' names also play a significant role in implementing ideological control, for example, the word "reaping" in the name of the reaping ceremony, and the word "tribute" replacing the word "participant" in the game. It is through such strategies that the Capitol can not only exert physical dominance over its people, but also shape and influence their thoughts and beliefs, in an attempt to ensure their compliance and quelling potential dissent in a further way.

First, the reaping ceremony can be considered as a significant example of the Capitol's ideological control, including both its literal meaning and the actual form of participation for people. On the one hand, one girl and

one boy would be selected randomly as tributes for the hunger game at the ceremony which is held annually. The whole ceremony is conducted with super formality. Both the citizens and representatives of the Capitol would dress in a formal way. But the latter usually dresses in a magnificent way which contrasts sharply with the looks of the former. And a much huger difference between them is that all the residents are forced to take part in the ceremony, not only waiting to be chosen, but also viewing in a mandatory way, which helps to reinforce the Capitol's control and maintain a shared experience of fear and repression among the districts.

On the other hand, the Capitol's choice of language in the literal meaning of the reaping ceremony also plays a profound role in carrying out ideological control over its citizens. It is known that the word "reaping" is commonly associated with harvest. And in the context of this fiction, it actually symbolizes that the Capitol "harvests" children from the districts to participate in the hunger game. This metaphor highlights its definite control over the districts and its endless exploitation of their resources, even including their children. And in the West, the phrase "you reap what you sow" originates from the Bible, which conveys a notion that one's actions, whether good or bad, will have corresponding consequences. The metaphor of sowing and reaping is used to illustrate the principle of cause and effect, emphasizing moral accountability and the inevitability of consequences based on one's behavior. Therefore, the name of the reaping ceremony consistently suggests that the districts are being punished for their rebellion against the Capitol in the past, which helps to legitimize this brutal ceremony and instill a sense of fear and subjection into the public. Through this, it can be seen that the name of "The Reaping Ceremony" is specifically chosen and designed by the Capitol to carry out ideological control over its people. Thus, serving as one of the strategies of ideological control, the reaping ceremony's literal meaning and physical form are intricately designed to reinforce the authority's control and instill a sense of fear into the residents, as well as remind the districts of their subjection. It also normalizes the brutality of the game and legitimize this annual ceremony, in an attempt to desensitize the population and turns a horrific event into a spectacle.

The use of media also serves as a significant tool for ideological control. The hunger game is not only an act of violence but also a televised spectacle, turning a brutal event into entertainment for the Capitol's citizens. Instead of being humanistic, the entire nation enjoys these games via media and other technological accessories. Media thus, in Althusserian context, becomes an ideological state apparatus that is subservient to capitalist class and functioning ludicrously and absurdly (Noreen, 2019). And the broadcast serves two purposes: It desensitizes the population to the violence and suffering experienced by the tributes, while simultaneously reminding the districts of the Capitol's unchallenged authority. The spectacle is carefully managed to shape public perception, ensuring that any dissent is seen as futile, and the Capitol's power remains unchallenged.

Physical Violence in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

While ideological manipulation forms the foundation of the Capitol's control, physical violence is employed as a direct and brutal method to enforce compliance when ideological control proves insufficient. The hunger game itself is the most blatant display of physical violence used to reinforce the Capitol's dominance. By forcing citizens, even including children and teenagers from every district to kill each other in a public arena, the Capitol sends a clear message to its citizens that rebellion will encounter extreme punishment. The violence of the game can not only maintain control through fear but also serve as a constant reminder of the Capitol's ability to take life at will, ensuring that any thought of resistance would be quickly suppressed.

And it should be pointed out that the Capitol's use of violence extends beyond the hunger game. In *Catching Fire*, for instance, when signs of unrest begin to surface in District 12, the Capitol sends Peacekeepers to impose martial law. These enforcers use physical violence to crush dissent and reassert control, often resorting to public punishment, such as floggings, to make an example of those who challenge the regime. This escalation from ideological control to physical violence highlights the fragility of the Capitol's authority, and even the totalitarian governments: When ideological manipulation alone fails, brute force would be used to maintain order.

In *Mockingjay*, the use of physical violence intensifies, culminating in a full-scale war between the Capitol and the rebels. The Capitol's willingness to target civilians, including the destruction of District 13, reveals the extent to which it will go to suppress rebellion. Here, physical violence becomes not only a tool of control but also a method of total eradication of opposition. The Capitol's tactics in the war demonstrate the ultimate reliance on violence when ideological manipulation is no longer effective.

Therefore, it can be found that in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Peacekeepers are the enforcers of the Capitol's laws and serve as the visible embodiment of the Capitol's physical control over the districts. They are similar to a militarized police force, whose task is to maintain order, suppress dissent, and ensure that the districts remain compliant with the Capitol's rules.

In *The Hunger Games*, Peacekeepers are presented as the authority figures who enforce the Capitol's rules within the districts. In District 12, where Katniss lives, the Peacekeepers ensure that illegal activities like poaching are kept in check, although some of them turn a blind eye due to their personal needs for food. Their presence in District 12 serves as a reminder of the Capitol's control, though they are not overly oppressive in the beginning.

In *Catching Fire*, after Katniss won the hunger game with Peeta, rebellion begins to stir in the districts, and the Capitol responds by sending new and more Peacekeepers to District 12 to crack down on any signs of dissent. Under the command of a more brutal leader, Romulus Thread, the Peacekeepers become harsher and more violent, using public whippings and executions as a way to enforce obedience. This is a clear example of RSAs in action, as the Capitol resorts to physical violence to suppress any signs of rebellion.

In *Mockingjay*, Peacekeepers are involved in full-scale warfare, as the Capitol uses them to try to suppress the rebellion that has broken out across Panem. Their role shifts from everyday enforcement to combat, as they attempt to defend the Capitol's power in the face of widespread insurgency.

Thus, the Peacekeepers serve as the Capitol's physical enforcers, reflecting Althusser's notion of RSAs, which use coercion and violence to maintain order and suppress opposition when ideological control alone is insufficient.

Conclusion

By applying Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), this paper has explored how the Capitol's strategies of control align with real-world totalitarian practices. Through ISAs such as media propaganda, cultural symbols, and the Reaping Ceremony, the Capitol instills fear and compliance in its citizens, significantly shaping their beliefs and behaviors to prevent rebellion. These ideological strategies, while predominant, are supported by RSAs, with the Peacekeepers and the hunger game acting as physical forces to enforce the Capitol's dominance through violence when ideological control alone proves insufficient.

The part of discussion reveals that the Capitol's use of ideological manipulation is specially designed to normalize oppression and desensitize the population to violence, transforming brutal acts into public spectacle. However, as tensions rise and rebellion stirs, the situation would intensify, highlighting the fragility of its ideological control. This shift from manipulation to overt violence highlights the dual nature of repression in totalitarian regimes: When ideological control is not effective enough, brute force would be employed to suppress dissent and maintain order.

Through the examination of the Capitol's dual mechanisms of repression, this study demonstrates how *The Hunger Games* trilogy serves as a powerful allegory for the mechanisms of power and repression in both dystopian and real world, and contributes to a deeper understanding of how fiction can reflect and critique the oppressive tactics employed by regimes to control both the public and individuals under Althusser's theory.

The Hunger Games trilogy provides a fertile ground which we can examine contemporary concerns about political repression, media manipulation, and the normalization of violence in society. Collins' work not only offers insights into the mechanisms of power in totalitarian states but also warns of consequences of authority without restriction or supervision, making it an abundant text for understanding the complex relationship between ideology, control, and resistance in the real world.

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