

BREAD AND CIRCUSES: THE SPECTACULAR TECHNOLOGY OF ‘BARE LIFE’ IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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It might be no more than a coincidence that Giorgio Agamben starts from the figure of *homo sacer* in ancient Roman law to theorize the modern logic of political sovereignty and that the recent novel trilogy *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and its film versions rely on Roman gladiator games to channel ideas about totalitarian decisions on human life. However, I will argue in this essay that the political universe depicted by *The Hunger Games* and the biopolitical theories of Giorgio Agamben—for which he takes his cue from Michel Foucault—can mutually inform one another. In other words, I will try to read the two film sequels *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *Catching Fire* (2013), adapted from the novels (and with two more sequels announced that will cover the narrative of the final novel in the trilogy) from a biopolitical perspective. I will follow Agamben’s understanding of biopolitics as a political decision through which sovereign power decides which life can be killed and thus manages life/death, as linked historically both in Agamben and *The Hunger Games* to the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. Relatedly, modern science and technology come to play a crucial role in deciding on life/death, and therefore in the second part of the essay, I will look at how in Agamben and the Hunger Games political universe we can associate the management of death with a particular modern technological development—technology of the “spectacle”, as a certain management of attention. Views on the notion of spectacle as a historical development in the sound-vision media will be discussed in order to consider the link between a management of death haunted by totalitarianism and contemporary liberal democracies, a move which both Agamben and the films make in offering a critique of contemporary capitalist political economy.

Let me start with an outline of the Hunger Games political and economic structure and the main narrative line. The story takes place in a dystopian future state called Panem, which covers the North American continent after some catastrophic events destroyed the society as we know it. The state is governed from the luxurious and technically advanced city Capitol which, led by a dictatorial President, rules over 12 poorer districts that are exploited as producers of goods. The levels of poverty between and within the districts vary, and in District 12 some people even starve. An original 13th district was destroyed 74 years before the beginning of the story in an unsuccessful rebellion. As a punitive and cautionary outcome of this, the Capitol installed a decree that every year a boy and a girl aged 12-18, so called “tributes”, are to be picked out or “reaped”, from each district to fight to death in a specially

produced arena and a televised reality show called Hunger Games, until only one victor remains.

We learn of this history of the Hunger Games early on in the first film, from a little propaganda film screened on the day of the reaping in District 12, where we are also following the main character Katniss, who will choose to volunteer as a tribute in the Games in place of her younger sister who is chosen by the lottery. This early event already gives us a taste of how lives are politically and ideologically managed in Panem: the reaping is staged as a collective event secured by the police, with a striking contrast between the hyper-extravagantly dressed presenter on the podium (who is to give us a sense of the abundant but decadent life in the Capitol) and the coal-mining District 12 inhabitants dressed in bleak and grey tones (who embody the poverty of the working classes, and also the predominantly male labour in the coal mining industry). The propaganda film informs us that “a nation” and “a people” are to be defended against any further possible rebellions, and to commemorate that, Hunger Games are considered “a pageant of honour, courage and sacrifice” for the tributes involved. But how can we understand this operation of the state sovereignty, which under the banner of honour and sacrifice isolates certain lives from their immediate material contexts in order to be killed for the benefit of a people? Agamben's work can help disentangle this relation between sovereign power and life.

THE PRODUCTION OF BARE LIFE BY THE MODERN STATE

In *Homo Sacer* (1998) Agamben scrutinizes the figure of *homo sacer* from Roman law, who is an exile from the city and can be killed by anyone without committing a murder, but cannot be sacrificed in a ritual dedicated to the gods. This paradoxical legal status puts him therefore outside both human and divine laws, but at the same time includes him in these laws precisely through the exclusion (a possibility to be killed and not sacrificed). Agamben considers this relation between life and law, of being included through exclusion, a primary political operation through which life becomes included in a juridical order. What is at the heart of this relation is a notion of “sacredness”—an operation through which “life” becomes detached from its immediate material social forms of life (eg. worker, daughter, etc.) and becomes what Agamben calls “bare life”—marked solely through its political relation to sovereign power as a possibility to be killed. *Homo sacer*, historically expelled onto the outskirts of a Roman city, in western modernity comes to dwell permanently in the city, in the body of each citizen through the notion of the rights of “man” and their installment in the modern nation-state (an abstraction of “man” as that which is captured in its relation to law). To discuss this, Agamben relies on Michel Foucault's (1976) notion of “biopolitics” as a modern form of governing developed towards the end of the 18th century which aims to manage biological life of a population or people and is tied to the notion of the nation-state. The classical sovereign right to kill comes to be in modernity somewhat reconfigured—as a right to take care of or improve the life of the population or state citizens, but its management of death certainly does

not go away. For Foucault, modern biological racism is the mechanism through which the biopolitical state unleashes its right to kill. This is absolutely radicalized in the historical Nazi state, in which taking care of the biological People coincides perfectly with the eugenic treatment and killing of bodies that are marked as biologically inferior people.

A juxtaposition of this historicization of biopolitics and the Hunger Games politics reveals that the state of Panem is a curious mix of references to both ancient and modern histories. According to a quick Google search, Suzanne Collins, the author of the novels, is cited to have found inspiration from watching reality TV which started to unsettlingly blur with footage of the invasion of Iraq, as well as from the Greek myth of Theseus¹ and the Roman gladiator games. Thus for example, before the tributes enter the deadly arena, they ride in chariots along a monumental Roman-like track, cheered by the colourful audiences who seem to subscribe to the *Panem et circenses* ideology (Latin for “bread and circuses”), only to be greeted by the President from his elevated, and sinisterly fascist, speech podium surrounded with the Panem flags. What is crucially modern about this is that the whole pageant as well as the Games itself are televised. The studio interviews with the tributes mimic the *Big Brother* reality show procedures, and the arena is, in the manner of *Survivor*, a bounded piece of outside geography (woods, water surfaces), in this case designed and absolutely technologically managed by the game operators who easily induce fires, poisoned fogs or genetically engineered creatures in order to prescribe life/death in the ways they see fit to stage a spectacular show.

In this cross-historical staging of politics, we can read Agamben's operation of the modern state sovereignty isolating through a decree the bare life of the tributes, who are made killable in a reality TV game show, as a sacrifice for the people. Managing life of “a people” thus also presupposes managing deaths of certain people—the lower class kids from the districts—but ultimately is about managing everybody. One of the crucial moments in the first film is when a girl named Rue from District 11, with whom Katniss made friends in the arena, is killed by another tribute. Katniss does not accept her life as expendable but instead mourns her death, and then stares directly at the camera raising her hand as a sign of solidarity with District 11. This triggers a riot in District 11 and also turns Katniss into a symbol of a budding social rebellion. The President's response to this is to make clear to the main game producer, Seneca, that he is to control the game and thereby suppress any social dissent, because he “likes him”, marking him also as bare life to the state. And by the end of the film, for his failure to manage the game outcome and thus contain social unrest, Seneca will be made to commit suicide.

HOW IS BARE LIFE INCLUDED WITHIN THE CITY?

“Where there is bare life, there will have to be a People - on condition that one immediately add that the principle also holds in its inverse formulation: Where there

¹ The Athenian Theseus slew the creature Minotaur in the labyrinth on Crete to which the defeated Athenians had to send every number of years seven boys and seven girls to be devoured.

is a People, there will be bare life.”(Agamben 1998:179). Agamben sees an inherent fracture in the modern biopolitical management of a people, which produces in a single stroke also excluded bodies. He comes to trace the meanings of “people” in modern European languages, pointing out that on the one hand, it designates a unified political body, but on the other, it designates members of the lower classes—poor, inferior or excluded. Historically, Agamben argues, in ancient Rome there was a clear division between *populus* and *plebs* with their distinct institutions and magistrates, while ever since the French Revolution, “people” has become a sole referent of sovereignty, which comes only together with a marked presence of excluded bodies within the city. He sees the biopolitical projects of modern nation-states as an attempt to create a single and undivided people, which opens a fracture through which bodies can be marked as biologically unfit in various ways (raced, pathologized, etc.) and made expendable. And for Agamben, a radicalization of this is the Nazi state which strove to produce a racially undivided people, thus not being able to tolerate the presence of those who could not be integrated within the city and placing them in a special localization for the included exclusion of bare life—the camp.

In the Panem biopolitical economy, the crucial social divide on which the capitalist totalitarian state is based and which it radicalizes is not the historical racial one (and the society is in this regard represented in the films as diverse) but rather the class difference— between the rich Capitol elites and the poor district labourers. Furthermore, particular bodies from the districts are made killable—young female and male bodies aged between 12 and 18—in other words, kids in their formative educational age through which they are to enter the capitalist marketplace. And the education of kids in the richer districts (Districts 1, 2 and 4), closer to the Capitol spatially and ideologically, consists of physical training as a preparation for the killing game in the arena, which they consider an opportunity for wealth and fame. It is also interesting to consider the arena as a material space into which the state of Panem isolates young, working and lower class, bare life (although, as I already noted, all lives are potentially bare to the state). For Agamben, the paradigm of the modern localization of bare life is the camp, in its totalitarian historical specificity on the one hand, but on the other, as a modern political structure which erupts each time bare life is to be given a material localization. In this sense we could think of the function of the Hunger Games arena as a technologically spectacularly produced space of the inclusive exclusion—including bare lives from the districts in the Capitol city by excluding them into a certain location. One of the tributes, Johanna, in the second film, angrily observes in the arena that “you cannot put everyone in here”, which means that the state isolates specific bare lives into the space of a reality TV arena in order to preserve the existing political order.

To think just for a second cross-historically as *the Hunger Games* attempt, it would be interesting also to look into the historically specific space of the gladiator arena and the public spectacle through which the ancient Rome was managing expendable

life within the city—but it is not my intention to do this here. On the other hand, the notion of “spectacle” as linked specifically to the modern technology of television is something that I would like to consider more. Reality TV is a technology in the films through which the totalitarian Capitol manages poverty and death, and it is also a technology specific to contemporary capitalist democracies, which witnessed an explosion in the popularity of reality TV in the late 1990s. In my view, both the films and Agamben indicate this crossing between the management of death haunted by totalitarianism and contemporary liberal capitalist technologies—to which let me turn more.

TECHNOLOGY OF THE SPECTACLE

Modern technology is absolutely crucial to the management of life/death in the Hunger Games society: high tech trains and aircraft, bioengineering, total technological manipulation of the game arena, televised game show—all deployed by the Capitol. Timothy Campbell (2011) has argued that, in order to fully unpack Agamben's account of how modern state sovereignty produces bare life and, crucially, how contemporary capitalism continues to do so, it is necessary to foreground the role of technology in this. Campbell argues that Agamben, in his views on technology, somewhat too easily collapses the historical specificity of the Nazi technological manipulations of life for the purpose of eugenics, into a rather universalizing view of how contemporary capitalist democracies produce docile and inert bodies through technologies such as “proliferation of spectacles” (Campbell 2011, 61). Campbell points out that the “spectacle” for Agamben puts docile bodies in capitalism at danger of a sovereign right to kill potentially being unleashed and turning them into bare life.

Agamben discusses the spectacle in the volume of essays *Means Without End* (2000), commenting on Guy Debord's notion of the “society of spectacle” (1967) and understanding it in the following way: “The becoming-image of capital is nothing more than the commodity's last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production.” (Agamben 2000, 75) Agamben offers a Marxist analysis of how capitalism expropriates productive activity from its use value, and also considers that this alienates language from what he calls its common use or communicability. He argues that the contemporary spectacle is an extreme form of the expropriation of language, which obscures that language is the very possibility of communicability rather than some assumed content of a sign. Discussing Debord's notion of the “integrated spectacle” (1988), as particularly relevant to the post-1989 unification of the deployments of spectacle in eastern socialist states and in western capitalist states, Agamben briefly mentions a specific technology which plays a major role in this unification—television. In other words, we could say that for Agamben, the “integrated spectacle” is primarily *televised*. He further claims that this contemporary

“spectacular-democratic regime” is the final stage in the evolution of the modern state form, towards which both tyrannies and democracies, racist and progressive states are all heading (Agamben 2000, 85). On the one hand, the integrated spectacle still activates modern national identities, but on the other, it organizes into a kind of supranational police state in which the norms of international law are constantly broken.

Agamben’s brief mention of television, and his conceptualization of the spectacle as an alienation of language from communicability in the sort of post-state contemporary moment are fairly abstract at this point. Can we unpack more precisely the technologies associated with the spectacle historically, and what is its relation to the state?

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUND-VISION MEDIA

Jonathan Crary (1989) has looked into the historical technological developments behind Debord’s idea of the society of the spectacle, asking whether the spectacle is a useful concept to think how power functions noncoercively in the 20th century modernity. Crary understands the spectacle as linked to a historical moment when sign-value of a commodity on the level of fashion, advertising and communication comes to take precedence over its use-value, and is interested in when that historical moment occurs. After considering the developments of mass consumption in the 1870s, Crary picks up a cue from Debord, who made a brief reference to the 1920s but did not elaborate on it. Crary argues that there were significant developments happening in the 1920s which started to organize perceptual consumption in new ways and constructed a new kind of observer. These are the technology of television, developing with the links to corporate, military and state control; and the technology of sound film, developing in the context of corporate film industry. The integration of sound and vision demanded a new kind of attention from the viewer, and it was different from both the radio and the early silent cinema. Crary argues that “the full coincidence of sound with image, of voice with figure, not only was a crucial new way of organizing space, time, and narrative, but it instituted a more commanding authority over the observer enforcing a new kind of attention” (Crary 1989, 102). While on the one hand, somatic mechanisms of attention were being targeted by corporate advertising, social theorists such as Walter Benjamin were criticising such standardization of perception by calculated technologies embedded within the power hierarchies.

These calculated technologies developing since the 1920s, Crary continues, also meant a link to the rise of fascism and later Stalinism and the ways in which these regimes deployed the sound-image propaganda to manage bodily attention to their own ends. The Nazi party, which already relied predominantly on the radio propaganda, also considered that TV should promote national cohesion centered on the image of the Führer and had in mind mass TV viewings, in contrast to the corporate model of molecularized home viewing for the maximization of sale profits.

Relatedly, Crary notes, Debord spoke of the “concentrated” spectacle of the totalitarian regimes and the “diffused” consumption of spectacle characteristic of the USA, and he saw the two as eventually collapsing into an “integrated spectacle” that has taken over the entire social production of perception—which is a diagnosis on which Agamben relies.

Furthermore, Crary asks whether the spectacle as a modern technology of power relates in any way to Foucault’s ideas about surveillance in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault there contrasts the spectacle as an ancient management of bodies, and the panoptic technology of surveillance as particular to modernity. While in antiquity the public spectacle (in temples or theatres) was making accessible to many people a small number of objects, thus emphasizing public life, in modernity bodies are organized in a way to provide for a small number of people a view of a great multitude, managing the relation between individuals and the state. Foucault sees the panoptic mode of power as developing in the late 18th century, remarking that “our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance” (Foucault 1975, 217). Crary, however, thinks that if Foucault had perhaps thought more about television, it might not have been difficult for him to consider TV as a further perfecting of panoptic technology (Crary 1989, 105). The ways in which the technologies of surveillance and spectacle can manage bodies and organize attention are for Crary not opposed, but could be read in ways in which they in modernity collapse into one another in a more effective disciplinary apparatus, as in TV technologies that monitor the viewers’ behaviour.

HOW DO THE HUNGER GAMES MANAGE ATTENTION?

In the previous section I introduced briefly Crary’s genealogy of the sound-vision film and TV media, possible slippages between what is considered liberal and totalitarian state deployments of those and between their spectacle and surveillance modes, in order to understand better Agamben’s views on the televised spectacle as a technology in which contemporary democracies and sovereign management of death happily meet: “(...)the spectacular-democratic world organization that is thus emerging actually runs the risk of being the worst tyranny that ever materialized in the history of humanity,” (Agamben 2000, 86).

The Hunger Games films certainly share this depressing diagnosis of the contemporary capitalist spectacle. The management of viewing the Hunger Games reality TV show is an absolutely crucial method through which a capitalist prescription of poverty/luxury and a totalitarian deployment of death come to perfectly coincide, and in which spectacle and surveillance merge into one another, as Crary proposed these disciplinary technologies might. That capturing attention is the key is nicely encapsulated in an exchange between Katniss and the character Gale in the beginning of the first film, when he notes that if no one watches, they do not have the game, to which she replies that it is simply not going to happen. Attention of the Capitol audiences is thus all consumed in fashion styles, lavish parties, and the entertainment

of supporting your favourite tributes in the show. What is in it for the young district contestants (apart from death) is that the sole victor is awarded wealth with which they can support their family and friends, and they become huge celebrities in the Capitol. For this purpose, youngsters in the richer districts train in special schools and volunteer for the Games, undergoing thus the reality TV kill-to-success education. Another major reality show management of attention in the first film is that of a “young love” between Katniss and Peeta, the male tribute from her district, deployed by Katniss to gain them the audiences’ support; but also deployed by the state in the end to paint the decision to pronounce them both victors as a triumph of young love (and not due to their defiance). However, the attention of the district viewers is not particularly diverted, and Katniss’s acts of defiance in the arena come to trigger instances of social unrest.

To quell the emerging unrest, in the second film Katniss and Peeta, in their televised post-victory tour of the districts, are made to give convincing politically appropriate speeches so that people “forget what the real problems are”, as Katniss’s mentor Haymitch remarks. However, as such script is becoming implausible for the resisting districts, the state police is becoming blatantly murderous, and the spectacular technological infrastructure quite smoothly turns into its surveillance mode in which the districts are carefully monitored and Katniss’s every movement is inspected by the President himself. The game producer Plutarch concocts an attention strategy the President finds brilliant: the television screens are to switch back and forth between shots of Katniss’s supposed obsession with her dresses and wedding, and those of public floggings and executions of agitators, so that the districts fear even more but also stop perceiving Katniss as a symbol of the rebellion. When even this fails to discipline the districts’ attention, the Capitol decides to reap tributes for the upcoming 75th Games from the existing pool of victors as to eliminate them. Significantly, Peeta’s last effort to stop the Games is to say in a live studio broadcast that Katniss is pregnant, but even the reproductive dimension of their heterosexual love which could reproduce the national body at this point does not halt the state decision to kill.

By the end of the second film, however, the rebellious tributes and their helpers will manage to completely divert the attention of the President and start a successful rebellion by beating the Capitol at its own game: by taking control of the arena technology and in this way also the televised spectacle. This is done quite literally, when Katniss fires an arrow charged by a lightning produced in the arena into the arena dome, smashing the whole structure to pieces and turning all the viewers’ screens throughout Panem to black. What will ensue from this is only yet to be seen in the next film.

RETHINKING POLITICS

Agamben on the other hand, will also see in the contemporary spectacle a possibility for different politics, but for him this will not involve a resistance against

the state as in the *Hunger Games* narrative. He argues that the contemporary spectacle at the same time alienates language from its communicability *and* also produces in a new, massive way, the very experience of language as pure communicability or the fact of speaking. Instead of some assumed language content or proposition, communicability refers to the experience of being-in-language of human beings as “pure mediality” (Agamben 2000:58), and the contemporary spectacle is specific for producing this. Agamben links this experience of language to the production of what he calls “singularities”—forms of life without any condition of belonging to the state nor claiming a state identity (Agamben 2000, 86). The spectacle is then, on the one hand, a final stage in the state form which alienates language, but on the other—and crucially—a dissolution of the bond to state identity and to language as preformed content. In this dissolution from the state belonging Agamben reads the possibility of a community of singularities not haunted by the state sovereign right to kill. From this Agamben will go on to rethink what politics itself might mean. It relates to the communicability of language and means exposing the word in its mediality, without transcendence, as he says. “Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such.” (2000:116). Could we think of this kind of politics in relation to *The Hunger Games* as a film medium?

One way to think how mediality might be at play in *The Hunger Games* is the way in which the medium of a reality show is rendered visible in its particular narrative and visual strategies, such as a romantic love scenario or a compete-to-success and celebrity story, in which young adults participating in these shows are most commonly being framed. The novels, which have been marketed as young adult fiction, depict the reality and celebrity TV procedures that are sound-vision media formats and thus particularly well suited for a visual (re)representation in the film medium. The films, through framing and editing the scenes in certain ways, try to play with positioning the audiences of the films themselves in the same shoes as the Panem audiences of the Games in the narrative, whose viewing manages class and age differences and killable lives. Similarly, the film screen visualizes how the screens throughout Panem smoothly switch back and forth between the spectacle and surveillance modes, unleashing the nation-state power to kill. In this way, the films are trying to make visible and critique the exploitative, murderous and military haunting of the western capitalist entertainment TV screens, or to recall Suzanne Collins’s remark, such moments in which reality TV and footage of the invasion of Iraq begin to unsettlingly blur. At the same time while playing around and critiquing the medium of reality TV and its functioning within the global capitalist biopolitical economy, *The Hunger Games* films themselves are surely part of the capitalist production of the spectacle (if we choose to stay with this notion). They are embedded within the western corporate structures of film industry production, distribution and consumption, and with their stylish high-production appearance and big box office numbers, also seem to quite successfully manage the visual-auditory attention in a rather spectacular way.

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