

Appetite for Destruction

A review of the film



The Hunger Games

(2012)

Gary Ross (Director)



Reviewed by

[Christopher J. Ferguson](#)

During the weekend of March 23, 2012, *The Hunger Games* scored one of the highest opening weekends of all time, at about \$155 million. Unlike another PG-13 movie such as, say *Clash of the Titans*, *The Hunger Games* has stoked up debate and controversy not just because of the violent content but because the book is already popular with both teens and younger children and the violence in this case is teen upon teen.

The Hunger Games follows the story of Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), a 16-year-old girl who is chosen to fight 23 other teens in a game to the death in which only one can survive. The Hunger Games are held in a future North American society divided into 12 districts ruled by an authoritarian Capitol. Each of the 12 districts nominates one boy and one girl for the Hunger Games as punishment for having rebelled against the Capitol years prior. The teens must then fight to the death, although they can form temporary alliances and can receive gifts from outside sponsors.

Katniss endures, surviving off her skills with foraging, and eventually gets her hands on a bow. She and the boy from her district form an alliance, pretending to be in love so as to gain viewer sympathy and thus gifts from sponsors. The kids do battle, but the intensity of the battle scenes is watered down from the book and is less than standard PG-13 fare. Overall the movie does a competent job; the story is entertaining and well told.

If there is a weakness, it is that *The Hunger Games* rams its moral message down the viewers' throats. The denizens of the Capitol are so image focused as to be almost cartoonish (their penchant for dying their hair and skin into pastel colors doesn't help). Fortunately Suzanne Collins (the author of the book) does allow some of the Capitol's denizens to have some humanity. Lenny Kravitz's Cinna, Katniss's fashion designer, is the obvious example, but even Elizabeth Banks playing a Capitol minder and Stanley Tucci as a game-show-host-like interviewer are allowed to give their characters moments of warmth.

I always find it odd for best-selling novels or top-grossing movies to lecture us about materialistic culture. I generally find it trendy but hypocritical when most people complain about materialism. *The Hunger Games* has a bit of that trendy and familiar hectoring about materialism. This is the movie's only serious misstep, however, and is easily forgotten in what is a riveting and well-told story. So long as you don't take *The Hunger Games* seriously as social commentary, it's a lot of fun.

Young children routinely see movies rated PG-13, most often brought by their parents (during the showing of *The Hunger Games* the audience was roughly split between adults, teens, and children under 12). Professional groups like the American Psychological Association have worried about this violence exposure but, as I've discussed elsewhere, all this hand-wringing increasingly appears to have been misplaced (Ferguson, 2009).

Despite increases in the rates to which children are exposed to violent media, youth violence has declined precipitously. Careful analyses have found that even past studies did not demonstrate links between violent media and youth aggression, despite the common claim that they could (Savage & Yancey, 2008). Part of the error is that it was assumed that our brains treat all information the same, being unable to distinguish reality from fiction and treat information accordingly. Increasingly it is becoming evident that it was a major mistake to leave this assumption unchecked.

Other scholars have argued that debates about media violence have always been ideologically loaded (Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2008). It's worth asking why that is the case. Why are such passionate opinions evoked by the issue of media effects?

Very often the language of advocates and activists (including some scholars) on this issue focuses on informing and helping parents. From this, one would assume that making an educated decision to allow a child to watch violent entertainment is acceptable. But I don't think this really reflects the zeitgeist of this issue.

By and large, I have detected, both within the scholarly community and in discussions in the general public, a disdain for the decisions of other parents when those other parents' decisions don't reflect those of advocates for this "harm" position. In other words, I suspect

the advocacy efforts by some on the media violence issue have less to do with giving parents autonomy to make decisions and more to do with using fear, guilt, hyperbole, and harassment to prod parents into making the “politically correct” choice.

Over the past few years, the literature that activists and advocates have used to support the “harm” position has come under increasing criticism, and with good reason. The inconsistencies, methodological problems, and full-throated hyperbole of this field are discussed thoroughly in some of the works I’ve already cited.

Not everyone agrees with this, of course, but I think I can safely say as a parent that I’m informed about these issues. Therefore, I wrote in a recent Time.com essay (Ferguson, 2012) that I had elected to take my eight-year-old son to see *The Hunger Games*. My essay sparked another Time.com columnist to write a competing essay (Pols, 2012) in which she made clear that not only was she against taking her own child to *The Hunger Games*, but she was also against me taking mine.

I think this exchange speaks to a large degree to some of the underlying dynamics of the media violence debates. Although often wrapped up in the language of public health or objective science, these discussions of media effects, I suspect, have much more to do with moralization and the imposition of one’s moral values on others, particularly other parents. Perhaps this is because, no matter what our background, child rearing is an inherently stressful process. Deciding that other parents are worse than ourselves is an easy way to inflate our own self-worth and distract us from our own self-doubts.

Upon seeing the film, my son neither curled into a fetal ball nor rushed to strangle the nearest child. In fact, he declared the movie “boring” because it didn’t have enough action, which, compared with *Clash of the Titans*, it didn’t. This led us to a discussion of how he would make the movie better (more bad guys, less kissing), which would have been missed had I not taken him.

From this, I raise the argument that the movement to shield children from everything objectionable in many ways does them a disservice. I doubt that the move to bubble wrap childhood, or what I call *innocence preservation*, is as wise as it may seem. Given that we know that children begin to distinguish reality from fiction from fairly young ages (Tullos & Woolley, 2009), I argue that a one-size-fits-all, “ban everything objectionable” approach to media use in childhood is not very sophisticated. I’ve called for the retirement of standard social cognitive models of media use (Ferguson & Dyck, in press), to be replaced with something more akin to a *uses and gratifications* approach that assumes that interaction with media is more subtle, individualized, active, and complex.

There’s little secret that some scholars would like to see a “universal” ratings system (e.g., Gentile, Maier, Hasson, & Lopez de Bonetti, 2011). And in her essay, Pols (2012) suggests that children shouldn’t see movies unless they are old enough to read the book on which it is based. Of course, this would cut out many PG and G movies while presumably allowing children to see many PG-13 and even R-rated movies as long as they are based on easy-to-read fare such as comic books. But, at the end of the day, I’m increasingly convinced

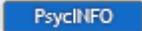
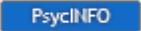
that such one-size-fits-all approaches have less to do with protecting children and more to do with protecting the sensibilities of more conservative parents who take offense at the parenting decisions of others.

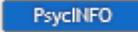
Perhaps society is gradually becoming more aware of this. Children's literature has become darker over the past decades, sparking off similar debates about books as with *The Hunger Games* (e.g., Gurdon, 2011). There's no evidence that children have been harmed by this trend and good reasons to think that allowing some exposure to the darker side of humanity allows children to prepare for it in real life, or foster their creativity.

My own research suggests that children do best when exposed to violence in media alongside their parents (Ferguson & Garza, 2011) rather than being shielded from it. Parents and children can discuss the context of objectionable content, and, by being part of the process, parents can have a better idea of what their individual child is ready for. Reflexive shielding, by contrast, may leave children less prepared for when they are inevitably exposed to objectionable material; as well, it may stifle their creativity.

Of course, scholars and parents will be debating these issues into the foreseeable future. *The Hunger Games* is neither the starting point nor the ending point for such debates. And, given the success of the first movie and the fact that Collins's book is part of a trilogy, we can look forward to two more movies to wring our hands over.

References

- Ferguson, C. J. (2009). Media violence effects: Confirmed truth, or just another *X-File*? *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, 9*, 103–126. doi:10.1080/15228930802572059  
- Ferguson, C. J. (2012, March 20). *Is The Hunger Games too dark for kids?* Retrieved from <http://ideas.time.com/2012/03/20/is-the-hunger-games-too-dark-for-kids/>
- Ferguson, C. J., & Dyck, D. (in press). Paradigm change in aggression research: The time has come to retire the general aggression model. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.  
- Ferguson, C. J., & Garza, A. (2011). Call of (civic) Duty: Action games and civic behavior in a large sample of youth. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*, 770–775. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2010.10.026  
- Gentile, D. A., Maier, J., Hasson, M., & Lopez de Bonetti, B. (2011). Parents' evaluation of media ratings a decade after the television ratings were introduced. *Pediatrics, 128*, 36–44. doi:10.1542/peds.2010-3026  

Grimes, T., Anderson, J., & Bergen, L. (2008). *Media violence and aggression: Science and ideology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 

Gurdon, M. (2011, June 4). Darkness too visible. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303657404576357622592697038.html?mod=WSJ_Books_LS_Books_6

Pols, M. (2012, March 22). *Why I am NOT taking my 8-year-old to The Hunger Games*. Retrieved from <http://ideas.time.com/2012/03/22/why-im-not-taking-my-8-year-old-to-the-hunger-games/?iid=op-main-mostpop1>

Savage, J., & Yancey, C. (2008). The effects of media violence exposure on criminal aggression: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *35*, 772–791. doi:10.1177/0093854808316487  

Tullos, A., & Woolley, J. (2009). The development of children's ability to use evidence to infer reality status. *Child Development*, *80*, 101–114. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01248.x  