

## Movie Review: The Slick *Hunger Games* Purges All the Horror

- By [David Edelstein](#)
- New York Magazine

The audience at Monday's packed preview of *The Hunger Games* came out juiced and happy, ready to spread the good word, while all I could think was, *They've just seen a movie in which twenty-plus kids are murdered. Why aren't they devastated?* If the filmmakers had done their job with any courage, the audience would have been both juiced *and* devastated.

**Comment [1]:** Experience. The writer lets us in on his personal experience at the theater.

Like millions of others, from preteens to fogeys, I found the first of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* novels smashingly well-written and deeply upsetting: I was shaking when I put it down, haunted both by the carnage and my own complicity in rooting for the deaths of the children trying to kill the heroine, Katniss Everdeen. The book and its two sequels are set in an unspecified future in which a country — presumably the former United States — is divided into twelve fenced-off districts many miles apart. Each year, to remind people of its limitless power, a totalitarian government holds a lottery to select two children per district to participate in a killing ritual televised to the masses, complete with pregame ceremonies and beauty-pageant-style interviews. Out of 24 children, only one will live. And we pray it will be Katniss, who volunteers for the games — unprecedentedly — in place of her little sister, the lottery “winner.”

**Comment [2]:** The WHAT. Carries the writer's distinctive opinion right from the start. “Your interpretation of the WHAT factor expresses your personal opinion and sets the stage for your critical analysis.”  
- Fink

**Comment [3]:** Edelstein again draws on personal experience. This time it's his experience with the book. He gives his opinion rooted in his feelings. The emotional appeal. WHY and HOW did it make him feel that way?

**Comment [4]:** Plot of the book. Here is the WHY and HOW the book made him feel.

Both the novel and its obvious inspiration, the shocking Japanese film *Battle Royale*, are cruel as well as kinky: When a child dies, we breathe a sigh of relief that the good guys have one less adversary, but we rarely go, “Yes!” We feel revulsion for this evil ritual and the system that holds it in place, for the government that believes the surest way to guarantee obedience is the sacrifice of children. But if the movie's director, Gary Ross, has qualms about kids killing kids he doesn't share them with the audience. The murders onscreen are quick and, apart from a mean girl stung to death by wasps, clean. The cutting is so fast that you can hardly see what's happening, which has already won Ross praise for his restraint, his tastefulness. Tasteful child-killing! In spite of the body count, the rating is PG-13. Think about it: If Ross had made the murders agonizing and tragic — truly horrifying — he'd likely have gotten an R. But by taking the sting out of death, he has made a slaughterfest for the whole family. With the exception of one egregiously adorable character, no one is even mourned or missed.

**Comment [5]:** Research. Edelstein knows his stuff (or he looked it up). There is some plot in here wrapped with solid research. He is setting up the BUT...

**Comment [6]:** Here it is BUT... the director falls short here, according to Edelstein. HOW does he fall short?

**Comment [7]:** Here is HOW. Edelstein explains exactly HOW the director falls short. His opinion is backed up by the HOW.

Ross's penchant is for showbiz satire, a pleasant enough approach in *Pleasantville* but ruinous in *Seabiscuit*, in which a great book about the torturous underbelly of horse racing became a lame, movie-ish period piece. His approach to *The Hunger Games* is hackish and dimwitted. From the first scene on, the film is all shaky close-ups, so you rarely have a chance to take in the space, and the editing is so fast (three angles when one will do) that you can barely focus. (There were times I wished Katniss would turn her arrow on the camera operator.) As Katniss's dissolute mentor Haymitch, a former Hunger Games champ, Woody Harrelson has no chance to establish a comic rhythm — or, more important, disgust at the system he's now a party to. The

**Comment [8]:** Research. Drawing on the director's past.

**Comment [9]:** A powerful statement of OPINION.

book's most fascinating, mercurial character, the costume designer Cinna, is now a blandly nice guy played by the agreeable but dull non-actor Lenny Kravitz.

**Comment [10]:** And here is the WHY and HOW the director's approach is "hackish and dimwitted."

Watching *The Hunger Games*, I was struck both by how slickly Ross hit his marks and how many opportunities he was missing to take the film to the next level — to make it more shocking, lyrical, crazy, daring. A highlight of the book is how Cinna uses his showbiz savvy to make the reluctant Katniss — who can't conceal her loathing of the decadence and inhumanity of the conspicuously consumptive District 1 — a star, the center of the pre-Hunger Games pageant. But in the movie her entrance in a costume that's literally in flames is so poorly framed you can't savor her triumph. Ross throws away what could be a startling image of child warriors rising out of tubes to face one another in a semicircle, each knowing that he or she might have seconds to live. The novel's most unnerving detail, that a pack of man-eating synthetic mutts have the eyes of murdered children, is inexplicably left out: Now they're just generic beasts.

**Comment [11]:** Here is some more back-and-forth opinion, plot, and HOW and WHY the film does not hit it's "marks." Too much plot?

*The Hunger Games* has two great assets: the score by James Newton Howard, which manages to be at once thrilling and plaintive, and the Katniss of Jennifer Lawrence. The actress is not a conventionally chiseled Hollywood ingenue or a trained action star. But there's a steadiness in her blue eyes that makes her riveting. She brings the same grim self-containment to Katniss that she had as Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone* — and she looks mighty good with a bow and arrow. Without words, Lawrence makes it clear that Katniss's task is not merely to stay alive but to hold on to her humanity at all costs.

**Comment [12]:** A positive statement of opinion from Edelstein! HOW and WHY are these two great assets?

**Comment [13]:** A great film.

**Comment [14]:** Here is HOW and WHY. Notice Edelstein always backs up what he thinks about the movie with HOW and WHY he thinks it.

A few other actors register in spite of the speed-freak editing. Josh Hutcherson has a strong, sorrowful countenance as Katniss's fellow District 12 contestant Peeta, and there are fun performances by Stanley Tucci in a blue bouffant as a talk-show host; Wes Bentley in a manicured, black-fungus beard as the Games' high-tech coordinator; and Donald Sutherland in a white mane as the demonic lion of a president. I liked the cutting back and forth between Katniss and the Hunger Games control room, where contestants are monitored and special effects — fireballs, rampaging dog monsters — are devised and dispatched. (The book is told from Katniss's perspective, so we're not privy to the government's machinations.) Shots of Katniss running through the woods, the canopy of trees above her streaking by, evoke her heightened fight-or-flight instincts — one of the few instances in which Ross's visual strategy suits the characters' emotions.

**Comment [15]:** Some more props for the director, despite "the speed-freak editing." Notice he tells us WHY he likes them. "Shots of Katniss running through the woods ... evoke her heightened fight-or-flight instincts." He never states an opinion without telling us WHY or HOW.

Back to the audience: satisfied, buzzing. *The Hunger Games* is likely to break box-office records, and I have no doubt the majority of its audience will like it and love (for good reason) Jennifer Lawrence. But where is the pervasive, lingering sense of loss? Where is the horror? Maybe the true horror is how easily the movie goes down.

**Comment [16]:** And the lead out. The article comes full circle- back to his experience at the film.