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Perhaps We're Already There: Observing Power Through the Postmodernist Dystopian World of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023)

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Abstract

Movies are more than just works of art and fiction. Oftentimes, motion pictures portray, allude, and satirize social phenomena. This paper observes control mechanisms used by the government in Suzanne Collins' book adaptation movie *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023) to assert power over citizens. By analyzing selected movie scenes and dialogue related to power relations through textual and visual analysis, the study reveals parallelism of dystopian elements shown in the movie with current sociopolitical situation through Foucault's postmodernist view on power. The findings show that government in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* creates and utilizes citizens' internalized discipline through surveillance to establish power within them as docile bodies, echoing how subtle power is used by governments across the world to cultivate public orderliness in the modern days.

Keywords: dystopia, oppression, postmodernism, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, authoritarianism

Mungkin Kita Sudah Sampai di Sana: Mengamati Kekuasaan Melalui Dunia Distopia Postmodernis dalam *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023)

Abstrak

Film lebih dari sekadar karya seni dan fiksi. Seringkali, film menggambarkan dan menyindir fenomena sosial dalam masyarakat. Makalah ini mengamati mekanisme kontrol yang digunakan pemerintah dalam film adaptasi buku karya Suzanne Collins, The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes *(2023), untuk menerapkan dan menegaskan kekuasannya atas masyarakat. Lewat analisis adegan dan dialog film terpilih terkait relasi kuasa melalui analisis tekstual dan visual, penelitian ini mengungkap paralelisme elemen distopia yang ditampilkan dalam film dengan situasi sosial-politik terkini melalui pandangan postmodernis Foucault mengenai kuasa (power). Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemerintah dalam film* The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes *menciptakan dan memanfaatkan sikap disiplin yang telah diinternalisasi oleh masyarakat melalui pengawasan untuk membangun relasi kuasa dalam diri mereka sebagai tubuh yang patuh (*docile bodies*), mencerminkan bagaimana relasi kuasa se-*

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cara halus digunakan oleh pemerintah di seluruh dunia untuk membangun ketertiban publik di zaman modern.

Kata kunci*: distopia, penindasan, postmodernisme,* The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, otoritarianisme*

Introduction

Movies, in a broader sense, are not only products made for the means of entertainment but also a representation of the envisioned and processed cultural circumstances in a society.[1] Movies could reflect current condition of society but also predict what the future is going to look like according to the observation of moviemakers. Therefore, the rising popularity of certain movie genres usually mirrors societal hyper fixations or anxieties on particular issues.[2] Quoting *The New York Times*, Haas et al. noted that Hollywood films often portray contemporary societal anxieties through apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives, though these depictions receive little critical attention.[3] Literature works are overlooked as mere entertainment, while their existence point fingers to aspects that our society can do better. Society and literature works actively engaged each other in a way that the latter can be seen as an effort to construct and redirect the society and current world settings, as Haas et al. put in their book *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*.[4] While each movie genre may pique different interests on how viewers approach intended movie messages, in both popular and academic discourses, movies that shows post-apocalyptic narratives and society breakdowns are often recognized with its ability to reflect and amplify societal fears and anxiety relevant to its era.[5]

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1 M. Afifulloh, "The Representation of Fatherhood Identity on Netflix Cinema," *Pioneer: Journal of Language and Literature* 14, no. 1 (June 2022): 298, https://doi.org/10.36841/pioneer.v14i1.1713.

2 Joseph Trotta, "Loving the Futures We Hate: The Ubiquity of Dystopias in Popular Culture," in *Dystopian Worlds Beyond Storytelling: Representations of Dehumanized Societies in Literature, Media, and Political Discourses: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Valerio Alfonso Bruno et al. (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2024), 365.

3 Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4 Haas, Christensen, and Haas.

5 Trotta, "Loving the Futures We Hate: The Ubiquity of Dystopias in Popular Culture," 377.

Post-apocalyptic movies portray multiple ways possible for civilization breakdown, depicting the life of humanity in contrast to Thomas More's concept of an ideal society called utopia.[6] Claeys (as cited in Pospíšil[7]) attempted to define dystopia by tracing More's definition of a utopian village, which roots back to the conception of heaven and hell as opposites. The term *dystopia* has then evolved from a word that describes the hellish condition of society into a literary genre with the surge of 20th century literature's repeating themes on technological advancements, environmental destruction, and the rise of authoritarianism. As mentioned previously regarding how post-apocalyptic (i.e., dystopian) genre often gets attached to its ability of amplifying societal concerns, skeptics of genre classification pointed out that movie interpretation based on genre can lead to creating boundaries and rigidness when it comes to audience perception of the movie. However, Trotta argued otherwise.[8] Through the postmodernist point of view that shed light on the fluid nature of genre and power relations, genre classifications can provide room for breaking down genres to be ever evolving and dynamic as the modern world progressed, accommodating audience with even broader and up-to-date interpretations of literary work.

Postmodern framework has been applied in a number of dystopian literary research due to its cynical standpoint on grand narratives.[9] Audience often finds dystopian fiction's main characters as individuals who gradually come to recognize the pitfalls in their so-called perfect world. The usage of first person perspective in narrating dystopian literatures brings audience to interpret the texts or scenes actively and continually question the grand narratives, just like what Margaret Atwood did in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).[10] Additionally, both Jubair and Amraoui revealed the importance of narrators' postmodern

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6 Jan Pospíšil, "The Historical Development of Dystopian Literature" (Thesis, Palacký University, 2016), 7–11, https://theses.cz/id/dlhyhf/?lang=en.

7 Pospíšil, "The Historical Development of Dystopian Literature."

8 Trotta, "Loving the Futures We Hate: The Ubiquity of Dystopias in Popular Culture."

9 Anna Sri Astuti, "Viewing Postmodern American Youth Society through Uglies and The Hunger Games: A Turn from Nostalgia to Escape," *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 2022), https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v9i1.73907.

10 Ahmed Jubair, "Deconstructing Dystopia Applying Postmodernism to Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," *Journal of Global Scientific Researchin Social Sciences and Humanities* 9, no. 3 (November 2024): 2024–3417, https://doi.org/10.5281/jgsr.2024.10866843.

aspects in dystopian literatures to ensure the audience get the narrators' skepticism toward fictional governments, even when the movie seem to brainwash its audience to believe in grand narratives.[11] In this regard, reading dystopian fiction through a postmodern lens offers an exciting juxtaposition where audience can utilize tension between dominant ideological narratives and individual agency to expose the flaws of the superficial world itself as the story goes.

This framework finds a compelling illustration in *The Hunger Games* trilogy and its prequel, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023). *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, which books and movie franchises released between 2008-2015, narrated a hypothetical post-apocalyptic world where only Panem, the land that used to be North America, survive. After the *Dark Days*, a civil war era between the Capitol (Panem's capital city) and the thirteen districts, the new world is led by an authoritarian government. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* is a successor of the trilogy with plot serving as a prequel to the whole *The Hunger Games* series, adapted from book with the same title released in 2020. Narrating the story from *The Hunger Games'* future villain, Coriolanus Snow*, The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* guided audience through the contradictive and torn-apart principles of its main character. Unlike other dystopian first-person-perspective-narrators who question the grand narratives almost completely, Coriolanus' perspective served audience with the view of a compliant identity, making postmodern reading even more important to dissect the movie's messages.

Previous research on dystopian movies shows that fictional governments use exploitive measures such as classism and oppressive surveillance to retain control over citizens. Studies on dystopian movies using Marxism typically focus on gender and class struggles. By analyzing visual storytelling in dystopian movies through Marxism, studies by Andreani, as well as Sari and Tambunan, revealed that classism is employed to maintain control over citizens within a capitalist system.[12] By enforcing systematic labor and class creation,

[11] Jubair; Rania Amraoui, "Postmodern Consumerism and Zombification in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World" (University of Ain Temouchent, 2025), http://dspace.univ-temouchent.edu.dz/handle/123456789/6284.

[12] Amira Jati Sari and Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan, "Revealing the Horror of Capitalism Through Monstrous Narratives in Jordan Peele's Us (2019)," Atlantis Press, November 21, 2021, 14–24, https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211110.003; Indah Avin Andreani, "Strategy Of Oppression Against The People By The Ruling Elite Reflected In Suzzane Collins's The Hunger Games Novel Trilogy (2008): Marxist Theory" (Thesis, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, 2017), https://eprints.ums.ac.id/51130/.

which deduce one's sense of control over themselves, citizens are easier to control as they become more obedient and less critical under this system.

The relations of power created through means such as media control, surveillance, and doctrine are explored more extensively through postmodern theories. Latham and Hollister analyzed that governmental authority in *The Hunger Games* trilogy is gained through punishment and disciplinary forces to citizens. Through Foucault's framework on his postmodern concepts of power, Latham highlighted the use of disciplinary power through media regulations among and to citizens.[13] Sri Astuti's study further elaborated this idea by stating that citizens in *The Hunger Games* trilogy are controlled by doctrines.[14] It is common for governments in dystopian literary works to put on technological, philosophical, or even religious dogma to citizens and make them scared of the outside world, creating an illusion that the world they live in is perfect.

Latham and Hollister's analysis of media control illustrate concerns that also resonates in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*.[15] As Western governments today increasingly regulate information in online media and normalize surveillance coated under the name of security or user convenience (e.g., biometric data collection, AI policing, etc), a postmodern reading becomes crucial in uncovering how power is subtly exercised beyond traditional institutions. Previous research has examined means of government control in various dystopian films through lenses of Marxism and postmodernism, but no attention has been given to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. This study fills in the gap by analyzing how *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*' portrayal of government control reflect contemporary sociopolitical anxieties viewed through a postmodern framework. Foucault's theory on power is chosen to justify how the literature work can be seen through postmodern lens. To examine how Panem gain and retain power over citizens in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, a textual analysis of the film's narrative and cinematographic elements is conducted. Movie elements are selected and put into

[13] Don Latham and Jonathan M. Hollister, "The Games People Play: Information and Media Literacies in the Hunger Games Trilogy," *Children's Literature in Education* 45, no. 1 (March 2014): 33–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-013-9200-0.

[14] Astuti, "Viewing Postmodern American Youth Society through Uglies and The Hunger Games."

[15] See also: Laura Zornosa, "We're Not Too Far From 'The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes,'" *TIME*, November 17, 2023, https://time.com/6337113/hunger-games-squid-game-dystopian-reality/.

the context of Foucault's perspectives to uncover the complexities of power aiming to answer the questions of:

1. What control mechanism is used by the Capitol to maintain dominance, as depicted in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* from Foucault's theory on power?
2. How do these depictions resonate with the present-day sociopolitical anxiety and concerns?

Methodology

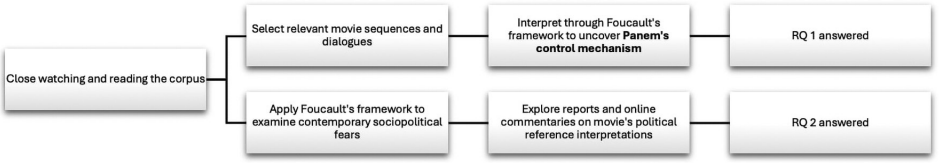


Figure 1: Analysis steps.

This study adopts the qualitative research approach, utilizing textual analysis to examine how power and control are portrayed in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. According to *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication and Research Methods*, textual analysis involves understanding language, symbols, and pictures being presented in visual, written or recorded text such as but not limited to: books, movies, ads, interviews, social media, etc., to interpret what the text may tell us about current cultural and sociopolitical phenomena.[16]

To apply the postmodern framework, the study draws upon Michel Foucault's thoughts and lectures on power contextualized into the corpus of the research. Foucault's books, key concepts of Foucault's lectures and writings, and credible online sources of commentaries to Foucault's concepts such as The School of Life's video on YouTube and The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's website on Foucault's theory of Power were used as sources to understand Foucault's postmodern view of power to a limited extent.

To map out the system of control within Panem, close attention is given to the movie's narratives and cinematographic elements such as shot angles

[16] Jennifer Morey Hawkins, "Textual Analysis," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Mike Allen (SAGE, 2017), 1754–56, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.

and character blockings to understand how the movie authors depict the oppressive government. In addition, a close reading of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes'* (2023) script is conducted via a free-access movie script website. Movie sequences and/or dialogues are then selected as proofs to governmental oppression. As Foucault believes that power is not exclusively owned by an institution but rather exists between each individuals,[17] scenes portraying relations of power between citizens and the authorities are prioritized to be selected and analyzed. These scenes are then interpreted through Foucault's theory on power to uncover how the Capitol exerts and maintains dominance across Panem.

The framework is also a tool to answer the second research question. This study does not only identify mechanisms of control shown in the movie, but it also explores how these depictions resonate with contemporary sociopolitical fears and anxieties. To enhance this perspective, reports and online commentaries related to the movie's theme spread on the internet are also explored, providing insights to how modern audiences interpret the movie's political relevance.

Results and Discussion

Uncovering Panem's Use of Disciplinary Power as Control Mechanism

Panem's Dark Days awaken the Capitol's need to constantly assert dominance throughout its whole territory. They have been fighting with guns and blood, which continued to be commemorated through *The Hunger Games* where a pair of children from each district will be sent to Capitol trying to stay alive in a survival arena. However, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* showcases the ineffectiveness of such brute exhibition to retain power, as the Games become significantly less popular after just a decade. Through the life of its main character, Coriolanus "Coryo" Snow, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* unveils a progression of power mechanisms used in Panem. Mechanisms that can permeate not only citizens living in the heart of the country, but also through the whole Panem districts. When forceful, aggressive measures of power cultivate loath and resistance, subtle enforcement immerse in citizens' way of life, shaping them into a unity of compliant society. This subtle

[17] Dianna Taylor, "Introduction: Power, Freedom and Subjectivity," in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London: Routledge, 2014), 3–5.

enforcement is shown through the utilization of surveillance and making citizens as docile bodies in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*.

Surveillance

Proven by the upswing of other contemporary dystopian works like George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* franchise, post-World War II Western contemporary dystopian movies reflect a growing concern toward state surveillance and political obedience. Movies under this genre are alike in a way that they describe a condition of compulsory obedience and the abuse of technological advancement to concretize surveillance and control over citizens (Sari, 2020). Suzanne Collins' *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* continues the tradition by portraying a post-apocalyptic society in which technological tools are used for surveillance. However, it then gets replaced by more insidious forms of social control: society itself became government's surveillance tool. This transition marks a shift that resonates with the implementation of Foucault's disciplinary power, where the state's oppressive logics are finally internalized by the citizens.

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes exhibits implementations of Foucault's disciplinary power through institutions in which its protagonist, Coryo, went into. Starting off by showing the systems implemented in the Academy (the school in which Coryo and other Capitol students study), where the students are disciplined to support the continuation of the tenth annual Hunger Games in the middle of its popularity drop among viewers through the student mentorship program. The Academy students are put under immense pressure, as the mentorship program becomes a crucial final project for their graduation—and for Coryo, a life-or-death situation that determines whether he can continue his education with a prize granted only for the best mentor.



Figure 2: Academy students standing in rows. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [09:02]. Accessed via archive.org.



Figure 3: Top academy students getting seats in front of the student crowd. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [10:39]. Accessed via archive.org.

Their mentoring program is being closely watched, not only by the Academy but also by the whole Panem through a livestream. The students' excitement and dedication to the game is an exhibit of how a good Panem citizen should act toward The Hunger Games, which result in subjects internalizing the system's gaze. Most of the students, even though some of them are shown to be either against or nonchalant about the Games (like Sejanus Plinth and Pup Harrington), adjusted their behaviors to align with institutional expectations even without direct coercion. As shown in Figure 3, Sejanus (second from left) cannot help but lower his gaze throughout the mentoring program orientation, while the other students look straightforwardly in courage and confidence.

Moreover, through the failure of *jabberjays* (Figure 4), genetically-modified species that can mimic and record human voices, created by scientists in the Capitol to track rebels in all over Panem's districts during the Dark Days, the narrative foregrounds how surveillance becomes internalized in every Panem citizens, not only the ones under an institution.



Figure 4: A caged jabberjay. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [1:17:22]. Accessed via archive.org.



Figure 5: Coryo operating a jabberjay with a remote control. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [1:17:29]. Accessed via archive.org.

The creature's impeccable animal-like features and remotely controllable voice recording quality make them a perfect weapon for surveillance during the civil war. However, the rebels used jabberjays to feed false information to the Capitol, and it marked jabberjays' obsolescence as a war surveillance device. Even though the war has ended and no advanced technological surveillance tool is being utilized anymore, this surveillance tool left District citizens with a collective trauma. The fear of being watched and punished by the Capitol has trained them to spy over each other to make sure that everyone is behaving in the way the authorities wanted. In a private discussion with Coryo, Dr. Gaul explained:

Dr. Gaul:	*Jabberjays we call them. We sent them out during the war to pick up rebel conversations, squawk it back to us word for word.*
Dr. Gaul:	*A failed experiment, but an instructive one. I'm rounding them up district by district now to see what better purposes they might serve.*

Unlike older, more obvious forms of power like feudal or monarchical systems that exerts power upfront, disciplinary power operates through subtle, internalized mechanisms that encouraged self-regulations like surveillance.[18] Foucault stated that the main objective of disciplinary power is to make individuals more obedient, as personal obedience can be very useful to the authorities.[19] Disciplinary power's goal is to produce individual obedience

[18] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

[19] Marcelo Hoffman, "Disciplinary Power," in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London: Routledge, 2014), 27–40.

not by forcing them, but by making them participate in their own control. Obedience will become embedded in everyday routines and social expectations, and over time individuals will define themselves within the structures. Personal obedience will develop into what Foucault calls *individuality*, an attribute that makes an individual distinguish between themselves and other individuals that they think are like and unlike them. Here, individuality does not come in the sense of personal freedom, but as a product of classification and normalization. Finally, the enforcers will harvest the advantage of the individualities that have been connected and developed into the total bodies of the whole society where citizens behave the way the authorities want them without needing constant external forces.



Figure 6: Coryo in a truck full of tributes with Academy's neat red suit uniform.. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [20:08]. Accessed via archive.org.



Figure 7: The Tributes dressed in shabby attires from their respective districts, tempted to kill Coryo. From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [20:05]. Accessed via archive.org.

An exhibit of this is a scene where Coryo sneaks into a truck of District tributes for the 10th Hunger Games (Figure 6). Inside the truck, his clean and privileged Capitol appearance provokes hostility.

Reaper (District 11 tribute):
What's the matter, pretty boy?
Treech (District 7 tribute):
You in the wrong cage?
Coryo: *No. This cage [truck] is delightful.*

Some tributes are tempted to kill him (Figure 7) because they identify him as part of their oppressor (the Capitol). The camera shot Coriolanus in total opposite with the other tributes that are standing up. However, the same height in angle and the amount of lights that they get revealed that they are actually equally worthless. And then, Lucy Gray, Coryo's soon-to-be love interest, intervenes by saying that killing Coryo would only result in brutal consequences because the Capitol can hunt their families back home even before the Games starts in the Arena.

Reaper: *I will kill you right now.*
Dill (District 11 tribute):
He'll do it too. Reaper killed a Peacekeeper back in 11.
Bobbin (District 8 tribute):
I say we all kill him.
Brandy (District 10 tribute):
I'm in. Nothing left to lose now.
Lucy Gray: *Y'all got family back home? They'll kill them if you hurt him. Then you.*

The fact that this is enough to make them halt the killing, and that the tributes acknowledge that the Capitol is capable of tracking and hunting down their family members for any disobediences is an exhibit of how Panem's disciplinary power seeps through its citizens. The tributes internalize the fear of surveillance immediately, and it gets in so deeply that it controls their actions even without visible coercion from any authorities. This scene exemplifies how Panem's citizens have absorbed the logic of discipline toward themselves and each other in anticipation of punishment.

What is particularly striking is the fact that Lucy Gray, a district, took up on Capitols' logic and individuality to pacify her fellow tributes. Since Coryo is a Capitol, it is an expected quality for him to internalize the individuality of compliance in Capitol's highly propagandized and institutionalized society. Not like in Districts where even though surveillance through visible enforc-

ers like Peacekeepers exists, there is not much propaganda through media and established institutions like schools. However, in the truck scene, Lucy Gray complies to the individuality that Coryo internalized and spread it out to the other District tributes. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes this phenomenon as the *art of distributions*, in which space, bodies, and functions are organized to create *cellular individuality* in an enclosed space filled with individuals. He gives examples of enclosed spaces with established institutions like schools and military barracks: all the exact places where Coryo cultivates his disciplinary logic. Lucy Gray, however, embodies it through The Hunger Games and so does the whole of Panem. Just like how Coryo puts it as an afterthought of his exile period that "*the whole world is an Arena*", the surveillance and self-discipline tactics have extended far beyond institutional walls into all over Panem.

The concept of "*the whole world is an Arena*" is further demonstrated through how the Capitol no longer needs jabberjays to instill the fear of law enforcement. While Peacekeepers remain visible enforcers, the citizens' internalized fear of the Capitol's knowledge and surveillance drives submission to the authorities. During Sejanus' secret meeting with a group of rebels, Mayfair threatened to report the group to his father, the mayor of District 12. Her threat alone is enough to result in her death, as the rebels fear what the Capitol would do if the rebellion plans were exposed to the authorities. Similarly, Coryo showcases this snitching tendency when he records Sejanus's subversive actions with an old, unused jabberjay. Although the jabberjay is a tool in this context, but it is his fear of being associated with Sejanus that bring him to submit the bird to Capitol. In other words, Coryo is turning in Sejanus to the Capitol in fear of losing his own life, with a jabberjay as only a helping tool. This act reflects a broader tragedy where under disciplinary power, people are compelled to suppress humanity in order to protect themselves, revealing how fear and obedience erode humanity collectively.

Docile Bodies

In a state that pushes disciplinary mechanisms to control citizens, if a sign of resistance is shown, their strategy is not to restrain, but to constrain the act. By restraining desires, one would still want to do the act, not like constraining when one is made to want a certain thing that is considered appropriate to desire by the authorities.[20] Such normalization of controlled desire is

[20] Todd May, "Foucault's Conception of Freedom," in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London: Routledge, 2014), 76–77.

a hallmark of dystopian societies, where power operates not only through visible coercion but through the internalization of values that sustain the existing order. Interestingly, this brings us to Foucault's concept of freedom. Foucault argues that to create power relations, each subject must have some degree of freedom. Without freedom, one will completely dispose of the other, and therefore, no relations of power can happen.[21] With disciplinary power, authorities created citizens' freedom by constraining what they might want to do into acts that are "safer" for the authorities' reign. To distinguish the quality of what Foucault means by freedom with its positive meaning of the rights to speak and act, the word freedom that refers to Foucault's concept of freedom will be in italic from now on.

The previous part of this study showcased Capitol's means of disciplinary power all over Panem. Though the result shows that power relations put the authorities in a winning position, their reign is arguably shakeable, especially in the Districts. Evidence found in scenes that are Capitol-heavy is noticeably different, as Panem's power grip is more absolute. As a background, the continuity of The Hunger Games in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes'* time frame is questioned because they have a significant decrease in the number of audience watching the livestream via television. An Academy student, Sejanus Plinth and the Academy Dean, Casca Highbottom, are two characters who argue against the continuation of the Tenth Hunger Games. Dean Highbottom disputes the Games because he thinks that the Games are his past mistake, and Sejanus hates them because he is originally a district and the Games do not fit right with his morals. However, they both get silenced with the mentoring program, where twenty-four of the best Academy students, including Coryo and Sejanus, are assigned as mentors to assist the twenty-four tributes from twelve Panem districts.

In the Academy classroom scene (Figure 8), Coryo and Dr. Volumnia Gaul (a renowned Capitol scientist and the Head Gamemaker for the Tenth Hunger Games) are placed alongside Sejanus and Dean Highbottom to whisper to them the speech of *freedom*. This scene goes back and forth between close-up and high-angle shots of each speaker. The high-angle shots like Figure 8 shows the four characters in a triangle, with opposers of the Capitol sitting, highlighting higher power relations held by Coryo and Dr. Gaul as the Capitol's sympathizers.

[21] May, "Foucault's Conception of Freedom."



Figure 8: An Academy class. Coryo and Dr. Gaul (standing), Dean Highbottom (sitting in the class center), Sejanus (sitting between Dr. Gaul and Coryo). From *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2023), [27:23]. Accessed via archive.org.

Dr. Gaul: *And I came here to ask your star mentor a question. What are the Hunger Games for?*

Coryo: *They're to punish the districts for their uprising, to commemorate the end of the war...*

Dr. Gaul: *Commemorate the..." Dull, dull, dull. Punishment can take myriad forms. Why not drop bombs, cancel food shipments, stage executions? Why Games?*

Sejanus: *Shouldn't we be asking ourselves whether or not they're right in the first place? ... The Capitol is supposed to be everyone's government now. It is supposed to protect all of us. I don't see how making children fight each other to the death is protecting anyone.*

Dr. Gaul: *That sort of sympathy might interfere with your mentoring assignment.*

Dean Highbottom: *Perhaps the Capitol students are ill-suited to be mentoring tributes. Perhaps the Game's time has passed.*

Coryo: *Dean Highbottom is wrong. My classmates, too. Maybe Sejanus is onto something here.*

It can be implied from the dialogue that the mentoring program is a compromise to Dean Highbottom's discontentment towards the Games, though not stated plainly. By involving students, who are often deeply associated with pure and unpolitical individuals, the Capitol offered a way to turn sharp criticisms toward the Games into sympathy. Coryo's shift from defending the Games to partially agreeing with Sejanus' critique served as a realignment to Sejanus' rebellious suggestion into an "acceptable" chance of reformation as

he continues with offering a solution to make the Games thrive. Sejanus and Coryo provided us with a more obvious example as proven with the continued dialogue below:

> Coryo: *Maybe we should be viewing those tributes as human beings. If we need people to watch, we should be letting them get closer to the tributes before the Games. To make the stakes personal.*

And when Coryo persuades Sejanus who snuck in the Arena to pay condolences for Marcus (Sejanus's District mentee) in their District's tradition.

> Coryo: *You need to decide right now. Do you wanna fight these tributes, or fight for them? Because if you wanna make real change, you need to stay alive to do it.*

Coryo is giving Sejanus the *freedom* that can be done outside of the Games. As if he said that Sejanus can do any reformative act, but it needs to be outside of the Games, because now they need to comply with the authorities by supporting the Game. The reality is, there is so little change that can be achieved after the Games. Coryo does not care if Sejanus can change the situation or not. He only cares that this time, saving Sejanus is going to be more beneficial for his survival because rescuing Sejanus means saving the tuition prize for him. The way he gets into Sejanus is not through prohibitions, but by compromising. Coryo assured Sejanus that what he is doing cannot tear down the Games the way he wanted to, there are other things he can do to discontinue the Games later. But for now, compliance to the authorities is a way to go. Here, the body does not need to be forced. They are guided into self-regulation, participating in what they believe is their own choice. These scenes exemplify how constraints are in use: they do not work by stopping people doing what they desire to do but rather shaping them into a certain kind of ways that the Capitol still can accept and is less unsettling to the existing order; and that is when they become what Foucault coined as *docile bodies*.

Docile bodies are not made *en masse*. They are not made through seeing the society as an indissociable community, but rather as a collection of individuals. They are exercised on subtle coercion, as the authorities aim to control even the most "infinitesimal" parts of their bodies: gestures, movements,

attitudes, etc.[22] Once docile bodies are controlled, they signify the elements of the authorities instead of themselves. To ensure that the control mechanism over docile bodies is sustained, uninterrupted, constant, and supervised, use of subtle coercion is employed in the processes of their daily activities. Along with the discussion of docile bodies, Foucault also coined the term *political anatomy*, which is symbolized by *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* through the presence of student mentors. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* portrayed the mentors (except Sejanus), as already-docile bodies. They think and behave precisely like the Capitol wants them to be: a bunch of elitists and profit-oriented people. Once a group of docile bodies operates, a political anatomy (also coined as the *mechanics of power*) is formed. Furthermore, once one has a hold over others, they might operate exactly like one might wish. The magic is, when a group of individuals become docile bodies, not only will they become more "skilled" and useful for the one who is in higher power relations, but they will also be more obedient and less likely to resist.

Viewing the Present through Panem: How Means of Control Become Normalized

In the first quarter of 2025, Amnesty International's Annual Report found out that the world's political situation is simultaneously walking toward authoritarianism.[23] The authoritarian tendency among governments around the world has been an ongoing discussion among scholars. Heldt and Schmidtke argued that international organizations such as World Bank has been less powerful in promoting democracy compared to organizations such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and New Development Bank (NDB) that are not created under a pro-democracy country.[24] Stanford University's Freeman Spongli Institute (FSI) for International Studies also highlighted on how several influential countries are important spectacles in analyzing the authoritarianism trend.[25] The excess of capitalism and globalization, the na-

[22] Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*.

[23] Amnesty International, *The State of the World's Human Rights: April 2025* (2025), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/8515/2025/en/.

[24] Eugenia C. Heldt and Henning Schmidtke, "Global Democracy in Decline?: How Rising Authoritarianism Limits Democratic Control over International Institutions," *Global Governance* 25, no. 2 (June 2019): 231–54, https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02502005.

[25] Melissa Morgan, "Understanding the Global Rise of Authoritarianism," Stanford: Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, November

ture of the elected party in the current presidential election, and technological advances in terms of connectivity and surveillance have become important factors in promoting authoritarianism practices.

These adverse trend seep into popular imaginaries, shaping and being shaped by popular media representations. As governments around the world became more eager in collecting data security and analyzing citizens' digital activities, regulatory online privacy frameworks are usually double-edged. Data privacy agreements may come across as protective, but by approving the terms and agreement, citizens also allow relevant parties to track their digital footprints that oftentimes relate heavily to their real-life activities. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* echoed this anxiety where mechanisms of control through surveillance such as jabberjays can dictate the society to comply with the authorities.

Moreover, in modern times, the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) has been so normalized in public places. Piza et.al. (2019) found out that throughout 40 years of CCTV use on crime surveillance purposes, the use of this technology has resulted on a "significant and modest" decrease of crime rate.[26] *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* embodies the fear of technologies made for security purposes being revamped as tools of control. The authorities may not add more prohibitions to what is written in the law, but subtle mechanisms like data privacy agreement and placements of CCTVs in public places put citizens in a place where their agreement and normalization to these means of surveillance can become something that the authorities use to grip more control over them.

Additionally, it is included in the movie that the airing of The Hunger Games is also a mean of control by the Capitol. During the reaping, when Lucy Gray starts to sing in lyrics that is accusative to the Capitol, a peacekeeper gives the cameraman a gesture to stop the camera rolling. However, considering the distinctive nature of this year's The Hunger Games that aims to be more entertaining for audience, the cameraman says that "*Capitol says keep rolling*," and so they keep recording. This scene underlines that the Capitol sees the airing of The Game as a significant tool of control. Quoting Foucault that relations of power cannot be established without "production, accu-

8, 2021, https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/understanding-global-rise-authoritarianism.

[26] Eric L. Piza et al., "CCTV Surveillance for Crime Prevention: A 40-year Systematic Review with Meta-analysis," *Criminology & Public Policy* 18, no. 1 (February 2019): 135–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12419.

mulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse," Panem have full control of what its citizen watch so they can keep the power relation dynamics.[27] Similarly, in today's world, governments increasingly attempt to regulate media platforms. The regulations are usually sharp to certain narratives and contents that challenge dominant ideologies. The regulations of digital contents and spaces mirror the Capitol's calculated use of spectacle: aiming to control not through overt restriction but through managing the visibility and accessibility to the content. By comparing these cinematic representations with current sociopolitical dynamic, we see how fiction can help us sense the subtle, creeping forms of control in our own world.

Conclusion

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes offers a cinematic lens, through both narrative and visual movie elements, on how governments employ dominance over citizens in an authoritarian context. While exposing visible coercion such as physical punishments (public executions in the Hanging Tree and enforcement through Peacekeepers), a postmodern reading reveals that intangible and normalized mechanisms within the society is what makes the power grip stronger.

Through disciplinary power mechanisms, illustrated by the use of jabberjays for surveillance and media control, the Capitol created a society of docile bodies. These power tools shape behaviours and construct people's identities, letting power get internalized through their everyday life and gestures without constant brute forces. This answers the first research question by showing that the Capitol's mechanism of maintaining dominance lies in disciplinary power, which shapes citizens' behaviors into self-regulating compliance.

As *art imitates life*, these depictions echo sociopolitical anxieties in the real world where means of power are fused into systems, technological advancements, and even ideologies to make it normalized by public. The rise of surveillance through technologies such as governmental data collections and strategic censorship of social and mass media contents are some real-life examples. Thus, this movie serves as an allegory of the postmodern condition where subtle powers are being heavily used instead of exposing violent forces, which reflects answers for the second research question.

In conclusion, more than just a dystopian movie, *The Ballad of Song-*

[27] Michel Foucault, quoted in: Latham and Hollister, "The Games People Play."

birds and Snakes dramatizes the evolving domination of an authoritarian government through disciplinary forces such as surveillance. The movie provided a reflection on the complicity of our own world's structure of control. Therefore, it offered us a mirror to see that the most effective dominance are probably through those that do not seem like it at all.

This study adds to the discourse of how movies can act as a mirror for society, especially amid the discussion of rising authoritarianism in the 21st century. However, this analysis is limited to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* as a corpus and the application of Foucault's theory on power to a limited extent. Further research could explore more literary or cinematic works, other cinematographic elements, or a broader methodological framework to provide a more holistic view on how oppressive power arise and how resistance may emerge.

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