Urban Assault, Past and Future: Firebombing and Killer Robots in Suzanne Collins’s *Mockingjay*

By
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Suzanne Collins merges past with future in a fascinating picture of postmodern urban warfare, staged and televised, emerging from a retro twentieth-century firebombing. Her novel *Mockingjay*, the final book in the Hunger Games trilogy, may be studied alongside several canonical war novels and poems to examine issues of human rights, and how we “see” and execute war. The novel begins and ends in the ashes of District Twelve where firebombing destroyed ninety percent of the population. With this framing move, Collins addresses the violence of the Twentieth Century through the medium of young adult literature, tapping historical memories to move beyond the textbook and create a visceral contemporary experience. Collins does not stop with outmoded strategies, however, but provides a dire warning about the future fate of embattled cities. In the battle for the Capitol, at the heart of the novel, she exposes and challenges the direction in which current and future wars are moving, particularly televised and automated urban warfare.

Collins’s trilogy describes the country of Panem, a post-apocalyptic dystopia where the affluent and decadent Capitol District rules the other twelve districts with an iron fist. Its primary method of retaining order and discouraging rebellion is the annual *Hunger Games* extravaganza, a Roman-gladiator-meets-reality-television moment, where twenty-four children are chosen to fight to the death in televised arena combat. In the first novel, Collins documents Katniss’s first victory in the arena, followed by a necessary return engagement the following year in the second novel, *Catching Fire*. Katniss unwittingly becomes the face of rebellion when secret District Thirteen orchestrates her televised escape from the Games. As punishment, the Capitol razes her home, District Twelve, by aerial firebombing. In *Mockingjay*, the rebellion escalates to all-out war against the Capitol, eventually involving all thirteen
districts and toppling the government.

Reviewers and critics generally describe the novels as science fiction or fantasy, and many, including Susan Dominus, Laura Miller, and Eric Norton, agree that the trilogy portrays a dystopian society. They situate it in a long history of dystopian novels both for adults and young adults, and examine the various influences that the author tapped for inspiration.1 While some critics have suggested that the trilogy is about the experience of adolescence, the "arena" of high school, or the experience of the outsider,2 Collins herself has insisted that "they’re absolutely, first and foremost, war stories" (qtd. in Margolis 27), and it is as such that I and my students read *Mockingjay*.

By reading it as a war novel, we see Collins pursuing a dual strategy of exposure and challenge. Although Panem seems to have progressed beyond current military technologies — it no longer possesses "high-flying planes, military satellites...drones" or biological weapons, which were all "brought down by the destruction of the atmosphere or lack of

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1 Collins acknowledges the influence of the classical world, especially the Roman gladiators, the story of Spartacus, and the myth of Theseus and the sacrifice of children to the Minotaur. Susan Dominus reports Collins's debt to Spartacus, while Rick Margolis documents her acknowledged use of the Theseus myth. Margaret Skinner points out the source of the country’s name; from Juvenal's *Panem et Circenses*, bread and circuses, tying the Capitol’s governing strategies to those of the ancient Romans (110). Several note the resemblance of Collins’s District Twelve portraits to Depression-era photographs, and Andrew Stuttaford notes the influence of Emile Zola’s coal-mining saga *Germinal*.

2 Laura Miller presents a plausible reading of the first novel, *The Hunger Games*, as an allegory of the young adult experience, particularly high school. The work of the stylists, the detailed descriptions of costumes/outfits, and the notion of an arena, where the children are constantly watched, and where “the rules are arbitrary, unfathomable, and subject to sudden change” (134) support this reading. I agree that this is a valid reading for the first novel, but I believe it begins to break down by the second and third books. I do not think you can read the firebombings in *Mockingjay* as anything other than war. Andrew Stuttaford reads the trilogy through the politics of the Occupation movement, as “one of eternal appeal to those on the outside” (45).
resources or moral squamishness” (Collins 130) — the ubiquitous hoverplane is a fully capable replacement, creating a firestorm every bit as destructive as those of the mid-twentieth century. As *Mockingjay* opens, stunned Katniss Everdeen walks the streets of the firebombed district, stumbling over skulls and the decomposing remains of those who were not incinerated completely. Collins’s treatment of the firebombing in the first six and last five pages of the novel draws clear connections between District Twelve and the firebombings of cities such as Dresden and Tokyo during World War II. The Capitol’s hoverplanes targeted “old wooden homes embedded with coal dust” (7) in District Twelve, just as the RAF targeted the *Aldstadt*, the medieval wooden center of Dresden, and the United States selected many Japanese cities, in part, because they were “congested and burnable” (Kerr 259). The few survivors of Katniss’s district lived because they retreated to the Meadow — one of the few open areas — just as Dresden’s survivors sought relief outdoors in parks such as the Grosser Garten.

Collins’s stunning use of firebombing, a strategy heavily

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3 The city of Dresden was attacked by hundreds of British and American bombers three times over a fourteen-hour period on the night of 13-14 February, 1945. The clear weather, lack of air defenses, and low altitude approach permitted an accurate strike on the bomber’s target, the Aldstadt section of the city, creating a firestorm in which 25,000-40,000 people died. The actual number of dead has been difficult to determine, due to the severe destruction and the amount of refugees in the city of Dresden when it was bombed. Vonnegut uses the figure of 135,000 dead (239), the number used by David Irving, whose book Vonnegut refers to in the novel. I use the estimate provided by Frederick Taylor, who cites cemetery documents found in 1993 that tally just over 23,000 burials. Allowing for errors in accounting, Taylor settles on figures of 25,000-40,000 (448).

Similarly, the firebombing of Tokyo on the night of 9-10 March, 1945 created a conflagration, a rapidly moving super fire spurred by winds up to 28 MPH which drove the fire through the city, even into untargeted areas (Kerr 190). The fire left 83,793 dead, 40,918 injured, and over 1 million people homeless (Kerr 207). Kerr notes that “no single act of war, before or since, would exact as great a toll in life and property as was inflicted on Tokyo between midnight and dawn” (189) on this night.
practiced in both the European and Pacific theaters during World War II, invites an interdisciplinary approach to classroom study. Reading alongside Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, centered on the firebombing of Dresden in 1945, students might explore themes of urban warfare, PTSD, and witnessing. Critical thinking can be encouraged with questions such as: How do we learn from the past? What price do civilians pay in wartime? What historical efforts have been made to control weapons and how successful have they been?\(^4\) Another useful, and shorter, pairing is James Dickey’s poem “The Firebombing.” This 1966 poem presents a pilot persona struggling to accept his role in the firebombing of a Japanese town during World War II. The poem juxtaposes the young pilot’s mission with a post-war speculation on individual and state responsibility inherent in firepower employment. Like Collins, Dickey uses the trope of the home to expose the twentieth century strategy of targeting civilians, to question the military necessity of firebombing, and to invite American readers to imagine their homes in flames.

Even more compelling than the attack, however, is Collins’s depiction of the “reaping of the dead” (385) at the end of *Mockingjay*. Here, students should be challenged to discuss and write about the aftermath of war, realizing war’s impacts do not end when the firing ceases. After the war, Katniss returns to District Twelve, where she finds other survivors working to clear the town of human remains. She watches “teams of masked and gloved people with horse-drawn carts. Sifting through what lay under the snow this winter. Gathering remains” (384). Collins’s use of horse-drawn carts here shows the primitive state to which the district has been relegated by the Capitol, but it also begs a comparison to Vonnegut’s closing scenes, where protagonist Billy Pilgrim and his fellow POWs travel back into Dresden on a horse-drawn, coffin-shaped cart

\(^4\) It might be quite productive to research and compare the early Twentieth Century efforts to ban poison gas (successfully) and aerial bombing (unsuccesfully). Or, for a more contemporary debate, learners might research current efforts to restrict the use of land mines.
after the firestorm (248), to participate in “corpse mining” operations, removing bodies from the cellars for a second burial. The condition of the horses — bleeding, parched, their hooves cracked — brings Pilgrim to tears for the first time in the war. With this image, Vonnegut links Pilgrim to the horses, both through their mutual lack of agency, and by metaphorically harnessing Pilgrim to the dead. As the war ends and the POWs emerge into a new springtime, Vonnegut juxtaposes the image of the horse-drawn cart with the singing of birds, implying hope for the future of the world despite the burden of the dead with which the survivors are forever linked.

Like Vonnegut and Dickey, Collins suggests that for the war’s survivors “the questions are just beginning” (389), a very contemporary observation that echoes today’s conversation about the firebombings of Europe. In a poignant conversation with Katniss, Plutarch, designer of the Hunger Games and architect of the revolution, explains: “Now we’re in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated. But collective thinking is usually short-lived. We’re fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction” (379). Although Plutarch suggests that humans are evolving beyond war, one is left with the impression that we have heard this argument before. Collins’s deliberate choice to include a firebombing in the trilogy exposes a new generation to the horrors of this practice, compels further

5 Recent scholarship has spawned an international debate over the ethics and morality of strategic bombing, and a re-assessment of the military necessity of this practice. Two texts have been particularly controversial because of the ethical questions they pose: The Holocaust and Strategic Bombing (1995), Eric Markusen and David Kopf, and Jörg Friedrich’s Das Brand, published in German (2002), and in English as The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945 (2006). In opposition to these texts are others which present strategic bombing as justified by military necessity, such as Frederick Taylor’s Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945 (2004). In his important text Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan (2006), A.C. Grayling merges these two strands of analysis, asking if the bombing was a crime against humanity or “justified by the necessities of war” (1).
study of historical accounts and literary representations of firebombing, and illustrates her concern with keeping these memories alive and relevant in the twenty-first century.

Collins is not simply looking back in this novel, however, as she also presents a very contemporary portrait of high-tech, televised, urban warfare. Whereas *The Hunger Games* depicts the ultimate in reality television — arena combat, staged and managed — in *Mockingjay* Collins presents *actual* warfare that is staged for film crews. As the rebels prepare for an invasion of the Capitol, she and her squad are told “you will be the on-screen faces of the invasion” (257). The rebels take special measures to protect their mascot while showing her in combat: in the city, “a special block has been set aside for filming. It even has a couple of active pods on it. One unleashes a spray of gunfire....But it’s still an unimportant residential block with nothing of strategic consequence” (273). This image is fascinating not only because of its examination of combat photography, but also for its implications for future urban warfare.

For the people of Panem, images of combat are used for both entertainment and propaganda, presenting a rich classroom opportunity for researching and discussing how we “see” war. As Susan D. Moeller points out in her study of twentieth-century combat photography, “the camera has brought the exotic and dangerous near; it satisfies a lust for seeing the action, with the bonus that the viewer at home is never in any danger.” Like voyeurs, she suggests, an “armchair audience

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6 Studies of historical and literary accounts are often intertwined. Ann Rigney (“All This Happened, More or Less: What a Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden.” *History and Theory*. Theme Issue 47 (2009): 5-24. Web. MLA International Bibliography. 13 Jun. 2012.) notes that *Slaughterhouse-Five* “has had a demonstrable impact on public perceptions, especially American ones, of the Allied bombing of Dresden” (8). The novel, Rigney explains, “was arguably the catalyst that helped turn ‘Dresden’ into a site of American memory evoking large-scale and morally questionable destruction on the part of the Allied forces” (23). She argues that we should look at the novel not for its depiction of history, but for “the sort of cultural work it does in the present” (20).
gazes at, but does not participate in, war” (3). Learners can explore combat photography ranging from Matthew Brady’s Civil War photos to the use of selfies and social media in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even more productive might be a study of filmed war, responding to Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that the televised coverage of the 1991 Gulf War was so technologically distanced that the enemy became “invisible” (43), resulting in a “clean war, white war, programmed war” (56). In the scene above, Collins shows the dangers of programmed and mediated war for Katniss and her colleagues when the staged set explodes, emerging as a lethal trap that kills soldiers and film crew alike (276). As Collins thus collapses the boundaries between war and entertainment, she challenges us to re-examine how we see war.

The most chilling element of Mockingjay’s war, however, is the description of the “active pods” which may “unleash a spray of gunfire” on the city block. In the rebel assault on the Capitol, Collins presents a frightening preview of the use of fully autonomous weapons. Streets near the perimeters of the city are laced with cameras, connected to automated pods that attack any movement on the street. Designed to prevent infiltration by the rebels, they soon create a hell of indiscriminate destruction, as refugees from the city’s outskirts flood toward its center, themselves becoming targets of the automated weapons. Katniss watches as “a pod’s activated ahead of us, releasing a gush of steam that parboils everyone in its path” (341). Weapons are no longer selective, or targeted, but attack all equally: “peacekeeper, rebel, citizen, who knows? Everything that moves is a target” (Collins 341). While the actual methods used by Collins’s pods are various and futuristic, their existence is not as far-fetched as readers might think, and as the author suggests, they present unique problems for the prosecution of future wars.

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7 Baudrillard’s use of the term “white” here, I believe, is not a reference to race or skin color but to what he later calls a “war without victims...[a] blank war” (73). Whiteness thus reflects the white or blank page of the silenced.
As military planners increasingly embrace the concept of fully autonomous weapons, colloquially known as "killer robots," organizations ranging from Human Rights Watch to the United Nations Convention on Conventional Weapons are concerned about their potential use. Fully autonomous weapon systems, or "lethal autonomous robots" (LARs), are systems that "once activated, can select and engage targets without further intervention by a human operator" (U.S. DOD Directive 3000.09, qtd. in Sauer). The International Committee for Robotic Arms Control has called for an international dialogue on the use of these weapons, arguing that "machines should not be allowed to make the decision to kill people" (Mission statement). In this debate, some argue in favor of automated weapons, suggesting that "automation can also make war more humane" because it will eliminate killing due to fear, revenge, or ethnic retaliation (Arkin qtd. in Keller). Others, like human geographer Stephen Graham, counter that increasing the use of automated weapons will threaten both civilians and soldiers by removing the selectivity of targeting.

Students should be encouraged to examine and participate in this debate, which will dramatically impact the world they inherit. On the one hand, the use of autonomous weapons is tempting because it promises to save soldiers' lives. (Ironically, this is the same argument used by airpower advocates in the 1920s to justify the future bombing of cities.) Reading poetry such as Wilfred Owens's "Dulce et Decorem Est" or Randall Jarrell's "Death of a Ball Turret Gunner," which portray extreme bodily injury in war, may support arguments favoring automated weapons to prevent human losses. Tim O'Brien presents an equally compelling example in the "Landing Zone Bravo" scene of Going After Cacciato (Chapter 20), where helicopter gunners, fearing for their lives, fire unceasingly during a combat insertion, ultimately killing one of their own soldiers because of this fear. In opposition, of course, are arguments for human rights and the protection of civilians in war. Significantly, when war becomes more automated,
Graham explains, "civilian urban populations, where visible at all, are rendered not as bodies of urban citizens with human and political rights requiring protection," but as "little but physical and technical noise," (40) as Collins illustrates in her novel.

Suzanne Collins thus presents a striking mash-up of twentieth-century air war strategies and futuristic, postmodern, and potentially all-too-real visions of urban warfare. Her use of the Young Adult genre as a medium for doing so suggests her desire to expose a new generation to the plight of civilians in war, and, as Kailyn Mc Cord argues, with the struggle of survivors to "maintain humanity" (108) in the face of extreme violence. At the end of Mockingjay, we see shattered heroine Katniss Everdeen and her co-survivors building an illustrated book about their experiences, to serve as a permanent record of those atrocities when human memories fail. For them it will function like other war memoirs, as "the place where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory" (387), thus using the power of literature to bear witness. In this metafictional moment, Collins seems to be signaling her own difficulty in describing war to her young adult audience; like Katniss, her dilemma — and ours — is how to "tell them about that world without frightening them to death" (389).

Works Cited


About the Author

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