

Katniss wouldn't like it

LA TIMES

11/25/13

The 'Hunger Games' heroine wouldn't buy what the Capitol Couture website sells.

By Andrew Slack

LAST SPRING, CoverGirl announced a makeup line called the Capitol Collection, a marketing tie-in with the "Hunger Games" film franchise, based on the novels by Suzanne Collins.

The makeup is supposed to draw its users closer to the world of Panem, where Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) must fight to the death against other teenagers who have been forced by the powerful Capitol to participate in the nation's annual blood sport.

Lionsgate, the studio responsible for the films, is promoting "Hunger Games: Catching Fire" and CoverGirl makeup with a website, Capitol Couture.

The site is a visually stunning, in-character spectacle, with contributors pretending to work for, and live in, the Capitol. Using quotes, products and photographs from real-world fashion designers further blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. This is perhaps the most creative and brilliant marketing campaign I've ever seen. It is also one of the most disturbing.

During the making of the first "Hunger Games" film, di-

rector Gary Ross (who did not direct the second film) explained his shooting philosophy. "If you shoot it like a slick glossy Hollywood movie ... you lose the feeling of reality and urgency that you need all the way through — you're turning into the Capitol, you're not examining the Capitol anymore."

Has Lionsgate become the Capitol? Its marketing strategy is turning an anti-classist epic into a platform for the novels' villains.

At its core, "The Hunger Games" is about economic inequality. In the books, the country of Panem is a future version of the United States, after nuclear disaster wipes out most of the population. In Panem, the fraction of people living in the Capitol controls almost all of the wealth. In 12 outlying Districts, people work long hours in Capitol-approved industries at dangerous jobs with low pay. Starvation is a daily reality.

If the books are supposed to function as a cautionary tale against the real class divide in the U.S., we need not look far for evidence. The future of Panem is upon us: More than 20 million Americans can't find full-time jobs, 22% of children live in poverty and middle-class wages have been largely stagnant since 1974. Meanwhile, corporate profits are at an all-time high.

If the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist, the same can be said of systemic economic inequality. The pull of the

American dream is still so strong that many believe the only reasonable explanation for poverty is that it's poor people's fault. We don't blame the system — and in Panem, you don't blame the Capitol.

Thus, the rhetoric of austerity does not touch the 1% who own 40% of our economy. Instead, the rest of us fight over which crucial (for us) but hardly costly program to cut: food stamps, health insurance, unemployment benefits, Head Start, domestic violence counseling, even education.

To its credit, Lionsgate and "Hunger Games" do have anti-poverty partners — Feeding America and the World Food Program. If the studio's marketing was even a fraction as creative in pushing those group's messages as it has been in crafting its orgy of conspicuous consumption, it might be achieving something true to the films' themes. But in our culture, even when you're making movies about the fight against structural class inequality, if there's a profit to be made, message be damned.

But even though Lionsgate has dropped the ball, a coalition of fan activists is taking up the cause. Since 2005, the Harry Potter Alliance has mobilized the fans of many popular books, movies and TV shows to advocate for important causes that relate to the stories they love. We've sent five cargo planes to Haiti, built libraries across the world and funded the protection of thousands of civilians in

Darfur and Burma. We've supported marriage equality and the Dream Act.

Now with our Imagine Better Network, we are mobilizing fans of Superman on immigration reform (after all, Superman came to America without papers), "Star Trek" (on GMO labeling) and, of course, "The Hunger Games."

We can't produce our own multimillion-dollar marketing campaign, but we can hack Lionsgate's. Wherever the studio and its promotional partners post an advertisement for the movie, you'll see our members posting pictures of themselves doing the three-finger salute — the Districts' symbol for solidarity in the face of the Capitol. Instead of letting the studio's campaign silence or distort the film's message, activists will draw attention to the reality of economic inequality in America and to organizations that are working to end it.

In the first week, thousands participated.

Perhaps Lionsgate will embrace the simple but radical message of its blockbuster films: No one should have to go hungry in a nation of plenty. After all, fantasy is not an escape from our world but an invitation to go deeper into it.

And we will keep going deeper until the odds are in everyone's favor.

ANDREW SLACK is the executive director of the Harry Potter Alliance and a Nathan Cummings Foundation fellow.