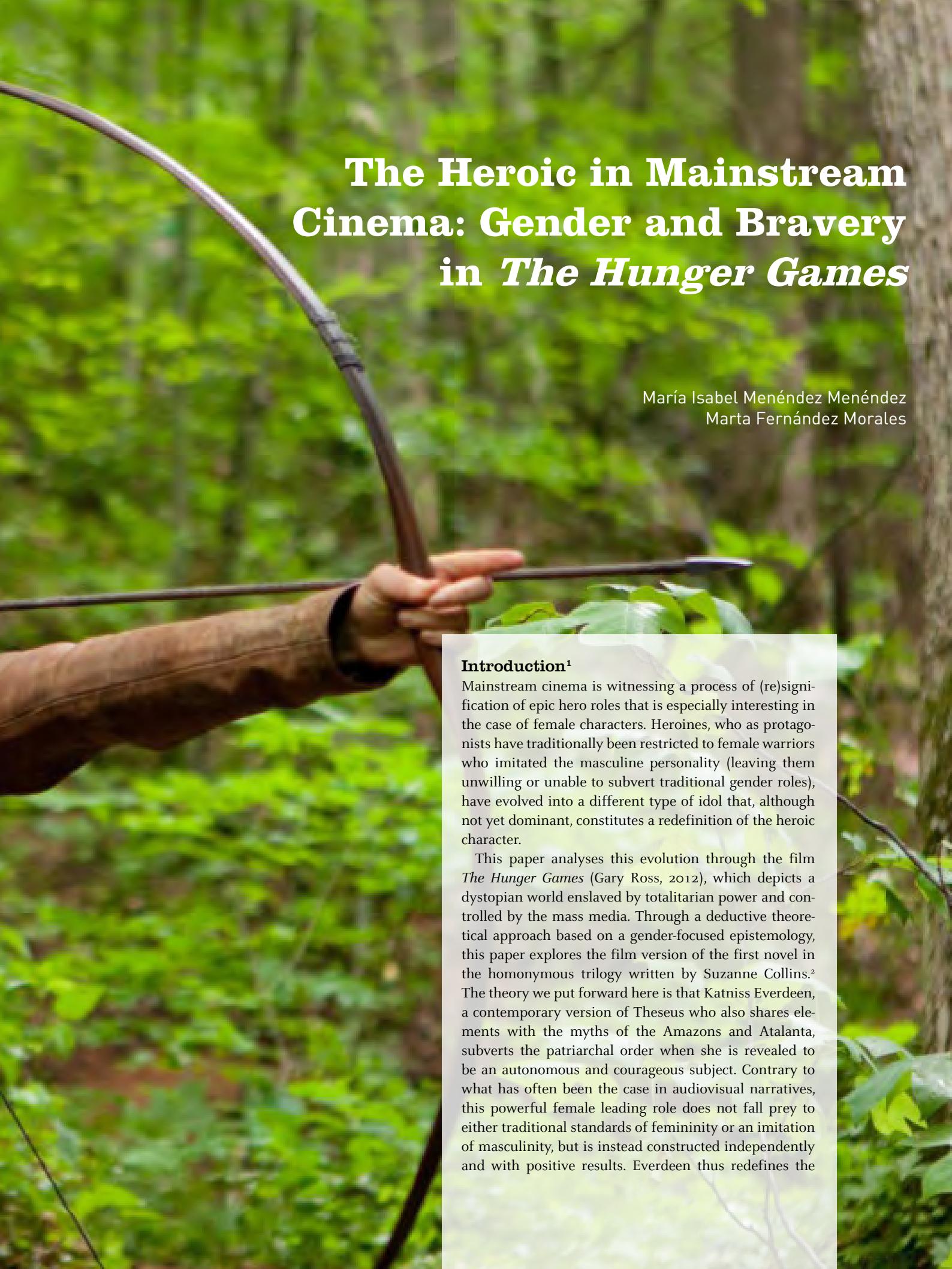


VANISHING POINTS

Figura 1



The Heroic in Mainstream Cinema: Gender and Bravery in *The Hunger Games*

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Introduction¹

Mainstream cinema is witnessing a process of (re)signification of epic hero roles that is especially interesting in the case of female characters. Heroines, who as protagonists have traditionally been restricted to female warriors who imitated the masculine personality (leaving them unwilling or unable to subvert traditional gender roles), have evolved into a different type of idol that, although not yet dominant, constitutes a redefinition of the heroic character.

This paper analyses this evolution through the film *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012), which depicts a dystopian world enslaved by totalitarian power and controlled by the mass media. Through a deductive theoretical approach based on a gender-focused epistemology, this paper explores the film version of the first novel in the homonymous trilogy written by Suzanne Collins.² The theory we put forward here is that Katniss Everdeen, a contemporary version of Theseus who also shares elements with the myths of the Amazons and Atalanta, subverts the patriarchal order when she is revealed to be an autonomous and courageous subject. Contrary to what has often been the case in audiovisual narratives, this powerful female leading role does not fall prey to either traditional standards of femininity or an imitation of masculinity, but is instead constructed independently and with positive results. Everdeen thus redefines the

cinematic profile of the hero, especially as previously established in mainstream films featuring female warriors.

Epistemological Matters: Myth, Hero, and Mass Society

Mircea Eliade argued some time ago that to know the myths is to learn the secret of the origin of things (1968: 20). Myth, according to Joseph Campbell, is “the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human manifestation” (2011: 11). But myths cannot live and breathe on their own; they need to be embodied by individuals. This is what Eliade (2011) referred to in the mid-twentieth century as the myth of the eternal return.

In the so-called digital era, according to some authors, society has been demystified: science seeks to explain everything and technological development has reached such levels of perfection that the most basic aspect of

human life seems to have been forgotten: that human beings are organisms that live and die, and as such, they look for answers to help them make sense of their own existence and that of their universe.

Therein lies the need for redefinition in an era when people even speak of “the death of myth” (JAMET, 2011: 24). The eternal return occurring in contemporary society is embodied in four models that take human beings back to their original state: the return to others, or the sense of belonging to a whole by virtue of our inherent human sociability; the return of the figure of Dionysus through our definition of *homo ludens*; the return to the impulse, given that the mass media and, more specifically, new technologies make everything available at any moment; and finally, the return to the savage, to the animalistic (JAMET, 2011: 32).

Postmodern figures can also be explained from a mythological perspective. For Rollo May, in contemporary society myths allow us to answer the question “who am I?”, thereby giving meaning to personal identity. Moreover, they facilitate our sense of community, reinforce our moral values, and offer a way of facing the inscrutable mystery of creation (MAY, 1992: 32).

According to Roman Gubern, in an era in which profane mythology has replaced sacred mythology, myths explain and foster social cohesion, legitimating the status quo and reducing angst. Hence we find that the mass media offers audiences attractive characters and role models with whom they can identify. Myth becomes the raw material of the imaginary, of our identities, both private and collective, articulating a meaning to life: “the process of story production is inseparable from mytho-

poeia, or the process of myth generation” (GUBERN, 1993: 15). This explains why contemporary audiovisual narratives continue to draw inspiration from the world of myth and archetypes, as will be demonstrated in this article. In Campbell’s words, individuals create new myths, through novels or films, which give a sense of direction and meaning to their existence. Some modern myths are more successful than others, not only because of their capacity to guide us, but because of their ability to transcend time (RUIZ, 2012: 194).

The essential role of the hero/heroine is to serve as a vehicle for universal images that inspire the individuals of a society. “A hero, by definition, is one who finds solutions [to mythical situations], a happy ending to the wretchedness” (CAILLOIS, 1988: 28). In other words, the hero’s role is to resolve the conflict with which the individual struggles. “A hero is a myth in action” (MAY, 1992: 52), and they therefore encapsulate our aspirations, ideals and beliefs. Heroes are always transgressive, crossing over the threshold of the forbidden, questioning the limits imposed by society, often guided by a dream or even by utopia, and always undertaking an adventure which, in essence, constitutes a voyage into the unknown. They are also often defenders of social justice (BAUZÁ, 1998: 6).

The morphology of the hero can be analysed with the help of a number of key authors, from Vladimir Propp, who studied Russian folk tales in 1928, to Lord Raglan, who also identified the functions of the hero, in 1937. Others have observed that “there is a limited number of recurrent mythical themes [...] in relation to the number of characters” (BRELICH, 1958: 67). These recurrent motifs, however, do not always appear in complete form, and may even be intertwined with others (BAUZÁ, 1998: 25).

One of the most influential authors on contemporary cinema is undoubtedly Joseph Campbell, whose work served as inspiration for the famous *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) saga. In a text published in 1949, Campbell identified the steps taken in a hero’s adventure, from his departure to his return (CAMPBELL, 2011: 53-222); he explained, however, that this was not a rigid pattern, as many stories isolate or augment one or several of these elements, while others may unite several into a single cycle and some of the characters may even be merged, multiplied, or reappear transformed. According to Campbell, there are two types of heroes: those who accomplish merely physical feats, and those who achieve a spiritual feat. The latter are called upon to undertake a return journey, coming back transfigured, and teaching what he has learned to others (CAMPBELL, 2011: 26).

In terms of the hero’s functions, Savater argues that the hero “proves that virtue is the most effective triumphant action” (1983: 112). The hero’s greatest achievement is more than merely doing what is right, but also

MYTHS ALLOW US TO ANSWER THE QUESTION “WHO AM I?”, THEREBY GIVING MEANING TO PERSONAL IDENTITY

involves showing why it is right to do it: “[the hero] represents a personalised reinvention of the norm” (SAVATER, 1983: 113).

Thus, heroic examples inspire individuals to action and their world is the world of adventure. Adventure, then, is a time filled with meaning in opposition to the emptiness of routine; it is a time in which the guarantees of normality are suspended and, moreover, death is always present (SAVATER, 1983: 115). In conclusion, in an adventure the hero always seeks independence. All these elements can be found, as we will see, in the work that is our object of study here.

The Hunger Games: Between Myth and Media Culture

Suzanne Collins, author of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, has stated in numerous interviews that she drew inspiration for her books from the Roman circus and its gladiators, from reality television, from the media coverage of the Iraq War, and from the myth of Theseus. This means that the story is indeed indebted to mythology and to the mass media, but, in terms of narrative content it is still a story in keeping with Jamet's description above: a return to the savage and to the figure of Dionysus.

The action takes place in what was once the United States. Hundreds of years have passed, and the country is now called Panem (a name taken from the Latin expression *panem et circenses*). It is divided into districts, among which the Capitol holds a privileged status over the other territories, which are exploited and impoverished.³ With no civil liberties, practically no resources and controlled by the media, no citizen can leave his or her home district. As punishment for a previous revolution and to commemorate the victory of the Capitol, each year a pair of adolescents from each district (called

tributes) are sent to fight in a battle to death on live television: the Hunger Games. Not everyone in the population objects to this Roman-like circus: there are youths who train their whole lives in the hope of becoming tributes, and the masses follow the television coverage of the Games with fascination. The story's protagonist is sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, a rebellious heroine who volunteers to take the place of her younger sister, Prim, to save her from the tragic destiny that chance had reserved for her.

Apart from the obvious references to George Orwell's *1984*, there are echoes of many audiovisual products in *The Hunger Games'* narrative, such as the film *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Graser, 1987), based on a Stephen King novel of the same name. Set in a dystopian 2017 in which society has become a police state, the population is kept content with a television program where convicted felons have to flee from professional assassins. The presence of television as an Orwellian Big Brother also links Collins' work to the popular film *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), depicting a man raised under the watchful eye of the television cameras and the complicity of an acritical audience.

The life and death struggle depicted in *The Hunger Games* is reminiscent of *Battle Royale* (Batoru Rowaru, Kinji Fukasaku, 2000), a Japanese cult movie never screened in the United States, adapted from a novel by Koushun Takami, whose title is taken from the name given to wrestling matches in which wrestlers fight each other until only one is left standing. It also evokes the film *Highlander* (Russell Mulcahy, 1986), which predates the Japanese work by more than a decade, in which a group of chosen ones must battle it out with swords to the very last survivor, on the understanding that “in the end there can be only one.”

Figure 2



The Roman Empire and its gladiators are other obvious references, expressly acknowledged in the names chosen: from Panem itself to the names of Capitol residents (Cornelius, Seneca, Cinna), and, above all, in the broadcast of a high-tech televised Roman-like circus, in which the tributes, like gladiators, are trained expressly and are allowed to choose their weapons. There is also a revision of the technological myth, with futuristic weaponry, bio-engineering, and other fantastical resources used by the media machinery and by the authorities to keep the population in check. Another element taken from Classical Antiquity is the famous cornucopia, or horn of plenty, which appears in the Games as a place stocked with supplies needed for survival (weapons, food, etc.).

When she was promoting the film, Collins also acknowledged the influence of the myth of Theseus as a source of inspiration. For her, Katniss is a "futuristic Theseus". In the classical myth, Minos, the king of Crete, had a monstrous stepson, the Minotaur, who fed on human flesh and was kept hidden in a labyrinth built by Daedalus. Minos had another son, Androgeos, who went to Athens to participate in that city's games and was murdered by the Athenians. To punish the Athenians, Minos demanded that every nine years, seven young men and seven maidens were to be sent to Crete to pay for his murdered son with their lives. The youths would be offered to the Minotaur, and if one of them managed to defeat the beast in the battle, Athens would be freed from the tribute. On the third occasion, Theseus, the only son of Aegeus, the king of Athens, volunteered to go. Once in Crete, the tributes awaited their fate, while they were treated with the magnanimity reserved for sacrificial victims. It was at this moment that Ariadne, Minos's daughter, offered Theseus the ball of thread he would use to escape the labyrinth and a dagger with which to slay the Minotaur.

There are many different versions of the myth of Theseus, especially with respect to the denouement: Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne in Crete, for which he was vilified or glorified depending on the interpretation (OMATOS, 2009: 263). This idea also appears in Collins's story, as at the end of the first book, Peeta Mellark, like Ariadne, is abandoned by Katniss Everdeen despite having been her ally.

The inversion of the hegemonic hero: amazons and female warriors

Amazons are a female symbol that has appeared repeatedly in works of art and literature, although there are no sources that can establish their existence beyond the Greek mythical narrative, in which they are described as a nation of women descended from Ares, the god of war, and the nymph Harmonia. According to Sebastián Martínez (2010: 22), their name has given rise to vari-

ous false etymologies: in classical Greece, it was said to allude to the fact that, according to the legend, Amazon women removed their right breasts, cauterizing or flattening them in order to be able to shoot arrows more easily. It also referred to the fact that they lived together in isolation from the society of men. Their neighbours, the Scythians, called them *Oiorpata*, man-killers, according to Herodotus. The Amazons inhabited a utopian past in which women lived by their own codes as warriors.⁴ Their depiction shares some elements in common with other female warriors, such as the Valkyries of Norse mythology, the female gladiators of Rome or African warrior women (MAINON AND URISINI, 2008: 17). Popular culture has (re)appropriated the term "amazon" to describe societies dominated by women, and also to identify women who rebel against the system.

Although there are variants, it is possible to identify a series of common traits for this type of heroine: she is an aggressive fighter; she is a member of an organisation or culture governed by women, and is therefore not defined by her relationship with a man; she evinces some sort of empathy towards others of her own sex; she uses weapons and tools typically associated with fighters; she dresses and adorns herself in warrior's garb; she is independent and does not need a man to save her; she lives in or comes from a lost civilization; and she may be homosexual, bisexual, or even asexual (MAINON AND URISINI, 2008: 24-27).

Fantasy tales about women of this sort are common to audiovisual culture, especially in science fiction (MAINON and URISINI, 2008: 18). The first onscreen images of Amazons located them in exotic or prehistoric scenarios, nearly always with a blonde, scantily clad white-skinned woman as protagonist, and whose weapons were invariably bows and arrows. It is a curious fact that, although the weapons of the future are assumed to be highly sophisticated, contemporary images of heroines insist on ascribing to them an anachronistic weapon.

According to Asunción Bernárdez, these early female warriors were "phallic women", that is, figures who adopted characteristics associated with men: "they exhibit values of masculinity in a social system that separates what is masculine and what is feminine as oppositional categories" (BERNÁRDEZ, 2012: 95). The particular aspects of masculinity or virility, which constitute what today we would call the *Alpha Male*, were based on the qualities most closely associated with traditional masculinity: "strength, courage, cunning, ambition, [and] power" (ZURIAN, 2011: 291). In mainstream cinema, the model of such masculinity is embodied by hyper-virile characters played by the likes of Bruce Willis or Jason Statham in their action films. According to Bernárdez, the cinema's "phallic women" were an unexpected result of second-wave feminism, since they embodied "the most com-

mercial and popular vision of the feminist claims that were being made by social movements and in the more radical theories of those years" (BERNÁRDEZ, 2012: 97).

Examples of these characters, many of them inspired by comics or video games, include: Lara Croft, played by Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001) and its sequel *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont, 2003); Milla Jovovich's Alice in the saga that began with *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002); Halle Berry's Catwoman in the movie of the same name (Pitof Comar, 2004); and The Bride played by Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill: Volumes 1 y 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003 and 2004).

As Bernárdez explains (2012: 101), these characters are split between two representations that are, in principle, incompatible: on the one hand, they reflect the most conservative image of the *femme fatale* with their hyper-femininity; while on the other, their body language is masculine and their use of weapons and violence constitutes an assimilation and imitation of classic masculinity. Moreover, these characters are often led by an absent male figure or motivated by a maternal instinct that pushes their independence as individuals into the background. Such contradictions suggest that, despite appearances to the contrary, these characters are not models of empowerment. They do not support emancipation or independence, but in fact consolidate the traditional masculine/feminine hierarchy, and are thus incapable of subverting the canonical model, even if they redress the invisibility of women in leading roles in mainstream films.

However, such hegemonic depictions are being subverted by what some authors refer to as "feminist heroic fantasy" (PITARCH, 2008: 40), or, as others prefer to call it, the "post-feminist media culture" (CHICHARRO, 2013; BERNÁRDEZ, 2012), a movement notable for female leading roles and female empowerment, which allows for the subversion of heroic stereotypes.

Katniss Everdeen and the heroic

Katniss fits the image of the Amazons described by Mainon and Ursini, as she uses the traditional Amazon weapon (a bow and arrows) and she fights aggressively. She also displays gender empathy, especially in her relationship with Rue (young girl from District 11 who is also a tribute), but also with other female characters. As for her relationships with males, she exhibits no interest in romantic ties or in motherhood, in spite of the attraction she feels for her friend Gale Hawthorne. Despite her youth, she is independent and is even responsible for maintaining her whole family. And, to complete the Amazon profile, she also comes from a lost civilisation (the post-apocalyptic Panem).

The basic heroic quality of undergoing constant trials is a central element in the plot of *The Hunger Games*, a

story that revolves around an ongoing test that effectively perpetuates the hero's quest as described by Joseph Campbell (2011: 53-222), in which a great mission, an allegory for the universal human journey, is intertwined into the narrative of the myth. Thus, the purpose behind the quest in *The Hunger Games* responds to a greater good: to save the people from tyranny. This purpose is revealed to Katniss gradually as she progresses on her own journey, for each stage is, in reality, the acquisition of a higher level of consciousness.⁵ For Campbell, the hero's journey has three main stages: *departure*, or separation; the trials and victories of the hero's *initiation*; and the *return*, or reintegration in society, within which he identifies various steps (2011: 40); however, as noted above, Campbell also points out that these do not always appear as separate steps or not in the same order. What follows is an overview of the most important stages of the hero's journey as undertaken by Katniss Everdeen.

The departure consists of five steps, which can be identified in Gary Ross's film: the "call to adventure" is the so-called "reaping", where the tributes are chosen, which upsets the ordinary world of Katniss's life in District 12. This is followed by the "refusal of the call", or Katniss's natural resistance to the horror that looms ahead. Next is the "supernatural aid", a meeting with a protective figure in the form of a talisman, which in Katniss's case is the golden *Mockingjay* pin given to her by her friend Madge,

THE HUNGER GAMES IS A STORY THAT REVOLVES AROUND AN ONGOING TEST THAT EFFECTIVELY PERPETUATES THE HERO'S QUEST AS DESCRIBED BY JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Figure 3



and the appearance of an explicit mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, a seemingly irresponsible drunk whom the protagonist has no option but to trust. The “crossing of the first threshold” is the arrival at the Capitol following the initiatory journey on the train, beyond which is darkness, the unknown, and danger. And finally,

“the belly of the whale”, where the hero is swallowed up by the unknown and thus leaves the ordinary world to enter the magical world, is the place where Katniss and the other tributes are taken for combat training, bringing her fully into the entrails of the monster: surrounded by people of the Capitol and forced to follow its rules.

The stage of *initiation* is, for Campbell, the place where the most psychoanalytical resources are present. Notable among the steps of this stage is “the road of trials”, when the hero plunges further into the realm beyond the first threshold. In *The Hunger Games*, this is the period that she spends in the belly of the whale, where she is required to submit to a range of harsh rules. Another step is the “ultimate boon”, when the heroine is revealed to be a superior being; in Katniss’s case, this step is reached when she is chosen to be the symbol of the rebellion. Over the course of this journey, she makes allies (such as Cinna, her stylist) and enemies (some tributes who perceive her as a rival).

Finally, the third stage, or the *return* presents us with a protagonist who had never imagined she could be successful and who, expressly before setting out, had lamented her scant chances of survival. The first stage of this return to the ordinary world is the “refusal of the return”, as Katniss does not want to accept the responsi-

bility placed upon her as a revolutionary leader, as is the case in most heroic narratives; the “magic flight” and the “rescue from without” appear suddenly, when the Capitol decides to pardon the lives of Katniss and Peeta, declaring both of them winners; and the “return home” and the “freedom to live” appear at the end of the story.

In *The Hunger Games*, the hero’s journey will be repeated in the subsequent instalments, following a circular model in accordance with the pattern described by Campbell. In this way, the trilogy presents the completion of the protagonist’s personal growth as the common benefit for her sacrifice. Katniss thus exhibits that other basic heroic quality: her incessant wandering, for the journey is itself trial and action. According to Campbell, this heroism is of a spiritual kind: the hero must return to teach others what has been learned from the quest.

Continuing with the theoretical model proposed above, it is important to note that Katniss, as we have seen, is a mythical warrior whose originality lies in the fact that she does not fit the profile of the phallic heroine. This protagonist is an autonomous agent who has assumed responsibilities far beyond the norm for her age, and who does not succumb to the romantic myth (it is indeed an innovation that in this story, aimed at a young audience, romance is merely a strategic ploy) or to the traditional standards of femininity. Although Theseus is the main inspiration for Katniss, she also bears some clear similarities to Atalanta of Arcadia, the rebellious heroine and skilful archer who, according to Appolodorus, took part in the Argonauts’ expedition to fetch the Golden Fleece. Atalanta represents the independent woman who rebelled against the patriarchal norms of ancient Greece. In this sense, Katniss may be viewed as support for Savater’s argument that “virility is essential in a hero, regardless of whether the hero is male or female” (1983: 122); in other words, the hero seeks a fulfilment that is not the exclusive property of males, and in Katniss Everdeen’s case, she does this without imitating men, without becoming either an archetypal model of femininity or a transvestite or masculinised woman. Ultimately, she is faithful to her memory: she never forgets where her strength comes from (SAVATER, 1983: 123), i.e., from her people and her land.

Everdeen’s character is a political hero: she embodies the moral ideals of society, possessing exceptional values recognised by the community, and she is strong and noble-hearted (CARDONA, 2006: 59). Along with her morality, her strength is one of her most prominent qualities. As Simmons argues, “she is an adolescent heroine who embodies passion and moral values in a world in which there is still black and white, before maturity has projected onto her psyche that range of greys that characterises adult morality” (quoted in BERNÁRDEZ, 2012: 107). She is also brave, although not to the point of exempting her-

Figure 4



self from the human condition: she is often afraid, and frequently doubtful. As director Gary Ross pointed out in an interview, “[w]hile some fight to survive, Katniss does it to keep her humanity. She is a tragic heroine who goes from killing in order to survive to accepting that her death could save the life of her loved ones.”⁶ In *The Hunger Games*, the strongest survives, but also by the most cunning, and, above all, the most human, the one with the finest moral qualities, as required of an epic hero. Katniss protects those who are weaker, and, although she provides the people with bread and circuses (something that she cannot rebel against), she does it in her own way, without losing her dignity.

This is why when she survives the Games, Katniss becomes a model for all those around her and will subsequently be the symbol of the rebellion against tyranny. She thus demonstrates, in the sense outlined by Savater regarding the profile of the hero, why defying totalitarianism is the right thing to do, however high the price to pay for such defiance may be. She courageously and valiantly embarks on a life-threatening adventure far removed from the ordinary world: in the arena, where the Games take place, nothing is as it is in reality; everyday codes do not apply in a magical space and time, defined in the film by the trappings of science fiction. But Katniss will achieve independence for herself and for her people, as inevitably happens in all heroic tales.

Conclusions

If a hero's main function is to respond to suffering, Katniss Everdeen is the exemplification of the hero. She not only offers hope to the wretched population of Panem, but also manages to become a mythical symbol, threatening the powers that be thanks to her integrity and courage. Her ethical position is clear not because she has to kill, as this is something over which she can make no decision, but because she is conscious of the unjust treatment of the people by those in power: the class struggle and the renunciation of individual well-being for a greater good constitute the only path to salvation.

The Hunger Games offers a revision and a subversion of gender roles that is unusual in young adult films. Katniss Everdeen is independent and courageous, intelligent and autonomous, even in the most hostile situations. Although she matches the media stereotype of the Amazon warrior, her character is neither masculinised nor hypersexualised. In this sense she breaks with the hegemonic canon of female leading roles in popular culture. Katniss subverts the patriarchal order because she does not conform to gender standards and she redefines the leading female role that mainstream cinema had reserved for the women warriors of previous films. The narrative arc developed over the course of the trilogy depicts Katniss as a political rebel who opposes a totalitarianism that had

appeared inevitable, and who is called upon to save the world – a task which, in pop culture, is seldom entrusted to women. ■

Notes

1 This article has been developed as part of the project titled “Violencia de género y cultura popular: representación y recepción”, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality and the European Social Fund’s “Fight against Discrimination” Operative Program (official reference 115/12).

2 *The Hunger Games*, published in the United States in 2008, was the first volume in a trilogy that was completed by *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). In 2012, a film based on the first novel and with the same name, directed by Gary Ross, became an instant box office success. In 2013 and 2014, screen versions of the second and third parts, both directed by Francis Lawrence, were also worldwide hits. The third novel was divided into two films, and the second –and last cinematic instalment– is expected in 2015. This article focuses on the film adaptation of the first novel, although for contextualisation references are made to the subsequent instalments of the trilogy.

3 In “*The Hunger Games*’ Feral Feminism”, published in *The Nation* (23/04/2012), Katha Pollitt characterises Panem as a society based on brute force, hunger, technological magic, and constant vigilance, in which the Capitol has the “dated-futuristic look of a fascist Oz”, with an aesthetic “somewhere between the late Roman Empire, the court of Louis XVI and the Cirque du Soleil.”

4 Some authors suggest that the legend may have a partly factual origin. For example, Davis-Kimball and Behan (2003) documented the existence of certain cemeteries devoted exclusively to female warriors in southern Russia. Originally of the Scythian and Sarmatian peoples, they would have migrated eastward as far as China, and as far west as the British Isles. According to some authors, these were the inspiration behind the Greek historian Herodotus’s record of the Amazons (500 B.C.E.).

5 The second film, released in November 2013 with the title *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, exhibits a deeper social commitment in terms of plot, which is also the case with the book. The demands made on Katniss are also greater, as she must assume an active role against the rebellion, and a commitment and initiative that are further accentuated in the third instalment.

6 *Fotogramas*, 2023 (2012), 13-24.

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