

Mockingjay: Part 1 (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours 3 min.

Our Content ratings (0-10): Violence 5; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (0-5): 4.5

*O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
so that those from earth may strike terror no more*

Psalm 10:17-18

The long wait is over for the film that we might call “the beginning of the end” of the Hunger Games series. In order to include more details from the novel (as well as to rake in more at the box office), the filmmakers have followed the lead of the adaptors of the Harry Potter and the Twilight novels by deciding to make two films of the last book in the trilogy. Thus, although this part ends with a rebel victory, it also leaves much to be resolved, especially the fate of Peeta, Katniss Everdeen’s beleaguered lover.

The first half-hour, set deep within the underground HQ in rebellious District 13 where the rescued Katniss has been taken, might tax the patience of action lovers, but it effectively establishes the doubts and torments raging in the mind of Katniss, upset and worried because Peeta had been left behind (and shows what a fine actress Jennifer Lawrence is). At this point she is no Joan of Arc for the rebels, but rather a traumatized teenaged girl unsure of herself and suspicious of the machinations of President Alma Coin (Julianne Moore) and chief adviser Plutarch Heavensbee (Philip Seymour Hoffman). At one point the overwhelmed Katniss says, “I never

wanted any of this, I never wanted to be in the Games, I just wanted to save my sister and keep Peeta alive.” Disappointed by the girl’s unwillingness to jump in right away and play the role of Joan of Arc, the President says to Plutarch, “This is not the girl that you describe.”

As the rebels seek to convince Katniss to become their “face of the revolution” in the propaganda wars designed to unite all of the districts of Panem against the Capitol, the nefarious President Snow (Donald Sutherland) uses Peeta as his poster child in a series of broadcast interviews by the oily Caesar (Stanley Tucci). Dressed in an immaculately white suit, Peeta pleads with the rebels to lay down their arms, that civil war is not the answer to their problems. Katniss is sent back to her home village in District 12 with childhood friend Gale (Liam Hemsworth) where she witnesses first hand the terrible destruction wrought by the Capitol’s hovercraft. Back in the rebels’ underground bunker she strikes a deal with the President Coin, one that includes a pardon for Peeta. Her last demand is a humorous yet serious one (in a place where the scarcity of resources has led to the prohibition of pets)—that her sister Primrose be allowed to keep her cat that Katniss had found and brought back from their devastated home district.

Her now sober mentor Haymitch (Woody Harrelson) and her style-obsessed escort, Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks), work to prepare her for the role of Mockingjay. They too add a touch of humor, Haymitch chaffing under the rebels’ prohibition of strong drink, and the now plainly dressed Effie worrying how they can, in such a scarce society, make Katniss glamorous for the camera. Their problem proves to be even deeper in that the camera-shy Katniss, shot against a studio produced background of destruction, fails to deliver her lines convincingly. Haymitch, becoming aware that Katniss must throw away a script written by others and be herself, pulls together a camera crew that follow her into combat in District 8. The scene in the

crowded hospital there is very moving, as one by one, the injured and their caregivers recognize their visitor. When one asks why she is here, she simply replies that it is to see you. Those who can, struggle to their feet and offer her the three-finger salute. Visibly touched, Katniss now understands her role of bringing inspiration and hope to the people.

The camera crew is sending out images of the visit, so that when President Snow watches, he gives an order for an immediate aerial attack in the hope of destroying his quarry in the destruction. The hospital that Katniss has just left is bombed, so enraging her that she declares on camera, "I have a message for President Snow: If we burn, you burn with us!" This, and her and Gale's downing of two attacking hovercraft bombers with explosive-laden arrows shot from her bow and his crossbow, galvanizes the rebels. Mockingjay/Joan of Arc has arrived! Thenceforth the film becomes a showcase for the importance of media in shaping public opinion and galvanizing viewers to support a cause. Snow's using the televised executions of black hooded rebels gives the film a stark relevancy in the wake of ISIS televising the beheading of its prisoners in Iraq and Syria. And the suspenseful mission to rescue Peeta must assuredly call to mind the SEAL mission sent to assassinate Osama Bin Laden—in both cases images of the operation being sent back to headquarters.

That the Hunger Games series has impacted people worldwide is borne out by incidents in Thailand reported by the Associated Press. On Wednesday, November 19 five university students were briefly taken into custody in northeastern Thailand during a speech by the country's coup leader and appointed Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha. They had stood up and given the three-fingered salute seen in the earlier films, meaning in the movie thanks, respect, and farewell at first, and then as a symbol of resistance against the tyranny of President Snow.

In Bangkok, a theater cancelled all showings of the film when

a group of students announced that they planned to stage a meeting following one of the shows. Two students were stopped outside the theater, and a third taken into custody by the police. One of the three, Nachacha, 21, told the AP before being led away, "When people have been suppressed for some time, they would want to resist and fight for their rights. The 'Mockingjay' movie reflects what's happening in our society."

Maybe *director* Francis Lawrence has not given us "just a movie" after all. Of a certainty, its message for people of faith, as well as for those in countries where freedom is curtailed, mirrors that of the Scriptures, that God is not an indifferent deity, but one who sides with the oppressed and despised.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Dec. 2014 issue of Visual Parables.