

Capitol spectacle

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue



TRIBUTES: In *Catching Fire*, Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) and Peeta (Josh Hutcherson) continue to resist the power of the Capitol. © 2013 LIONSGATE ENTERTAINMENT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

At the beginning of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, the second film based on Suzanne Collins's novels, Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence) is relieved that she has made it out of the Hunger Games alive, along with her friend Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson). Every year the ruling power known as the Capitol organizes a televised contest in which children—two selected from each of the Capitol's 12 districts—are required to fight to the death.

Katniss's relief makes it all the more crushing when the Capitol—uneasy because Katniss has become a beacon of hope—announces that the "tributes" fighting in the next round will be drawn from past victors. Since Katniss is the only female victor in the history of her district, there's no doubt that she'll be sent back into the arena.

Catching Fire explores a world in which subjugated people stand on the edge of being pushed too far. The fast-moving plot is well suited for the screen. The story's

handling of gender, race and class feels elegant and contemporary. Collins avoids clumsy moralism by offering a good story, which centers on an ordinary girl whose courage and humanity shine. In the plot's romance, gender depictions don't just defy stereotypes; they reveal how those stereotypes can tyrannize and brutalize. The film offers an alternative love story that is tender and sweetly human.

Though set in the future, the film—like any good dystopia—illuminates the present, pointing to our own society's decadence and disregard for human life. The allusions to Rome are effective. Horse-drawn chariots parade the tributes into the Capitol. Roman names for the elite stand next to the botanical names of the people of the districts. At a feast, Katniss and Peeta refuse a vomit-inducing drink that lets partygoers empty their stomachs in order to better eat and taste everything.

I was prepared to enjoy the theological heart of the story, with its allusions to self-sacrificing love, martyrdom and exile. But my moviegoing experience was bizarrely affected by the movie-related ads that were shown before the film began.

One ad was for a collection of CoverGirl cosmetics. The "Capitol beauty studio" website (www.covergirl.com/catching-fire) advertises "12 districts. 12 looks. 1 exquisite collection." Models are arrayed in hair styles and makeup that are every bit as outlandish as those that the film presents as ridiculous aspects of Capitol self-indulgence.

CoverGirl would sell us a "luxury" look for District 1. For "the fishing look, inspired by District 4," CoverGirl offers a model made over as a fantastical mermaid with teal lips and blue and green eye shadow, crystals glued to her face, and her hair obscured by fans, netting and feathers.

District 12, which is Katniss's home, is a hard-bitten place where people labor six days a week in the coal mines and are desperate for food. So CoverGirl offers "the mining look," with coal used as heavy eye makeup, highlighted by a flash of canary yellow. For each district, the CoverGirl website offers before-and-after shots, time-lapse videos, tutorials and products.

CoverGirl is not the only company attempting to negate the message of *The Hunger Games* and use the film as one more money-making spectacle. Subway is using a *Catching Fire* product tie-in to sell "fiery footlongs," and Net-a-Porter offers a line of clothing called "Capitol Couture" designed by the film's costumer, Trish Summerville.

In other words, in their marketing products tied to *The Hunger Games*, companies are inverting the critique contained in the movie itself. The very thing that the film asks us to despise—the decadence and pretension of the Capitol—is what the advertisers want us to admire. The Capitol's oppressive system is regarded as nothing more than an instance of style. This confuses the powerful witness of the film, and it demonstrates just how much *The Hunger Games* addresses our own world.