



Agathokakological Agony: Power, Surveillance and Trauma in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies*, *Pretties* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract

Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction has become an influential literary form for examining the relationship between political authority, technological advancement, and the psychological consequences of institutional domination. Rather than presenting futuristic societies as idealized spaces, contemporary dystopian narratives expose the human cost of authoritarian governance through systems of surveillance, bodily regulation, media manipulation, and coercive discipline. Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005) and *Pretties* (2005), together with Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), portray fictional societies in which citizens are systematically conditioned to accept state authority at the expense of individual autonomy and emotional well-being. This article examines how these novels represent power as a pervasive force that extends beyond physical punishment into the regulation of identity, behaviour, and memory. Employing Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study argues that trauma in these narratives is not merely the consequence of violence but an integral outcome of political systems that normalize fear, conformity, and social inequality. Through a comparative textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that institutional authority is sustained through the production of obedient subjects, while the protagonists' experiences reveal that traumatic memory can become a source of resistance. The study contributes to scholarship on Young Adult dystopian fiction by bringing Foucauldian power theory and trauma studies into a single comparative framework.

Keywords: Dystopia, Young Adult Fiction, Power, Surveillance, Trauma, Michel Foucault, Cathy Caruth, Scott Westerfeld, Suzanne Collins.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed the increasing popularity of Young Adult dystopian fiction, a genre that reflects contemporary anxieties regarding political authority, technological advancement, social inequality, and the erosion of individual freedoms. Unlike traditional science fiction, which often celebrates scientific progress, dystopian fiction presents imagined futures characterized by oppression, control, and social fragmentation. Such narratives function as cautionary tales that expose the potential dangers of unchecked power and institutional domination.

The title of this study employs the term *agathokakological*, a rare word derived from Greek roots meaning "composed of both good and evil." The concept is particularly relevant to dystopian fiction because authoritarian governments frequently justify oppressive policies as necessary for the greater good. The state in *Uglies* claims that mandatory cosmetic transformation eliminates discrimination and social conflict, while the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* presents the Games as a reminder that peace depends upon obedience. These official narratives portray state intervention as benevolent; however, they conceal practices that diminish personal freedom and inflict lasting psychological harm. The contradiction between apparent benevolence and underlying oppression forms the central concern of this article and

explains the use of the phrase *Agathokakological Agony*.

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* are among the most influential works within this genre. These novels depict societies in which governments exercise extensive control over citizens through surveillance, bodily modification, social conditioning, and public punishment. While the methods of control differ, each text illustrates how power structures manipulate individuals in order to preserve political stability and maintain social hierarchies. Michel Foucault's theory of power provides an effective framework for examining these systems of domination. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern power operates through disciplinary mechanisms that regulate bodies and behaviours rather than relying solely on physical force. Similarly, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory offers a means of understanding the psychological consequences of violence and oppression. Through these theoretical perspectives, this study investigates how power functions within the selected novels and how trauma emerges as a consequence of authoritarian governance.

Literature Review

Scholars of dystopian literature have consistently argued that dystopian narratives expose the hidden operations of political power. Studies on Young Adult dystopian fiction emphasize

themes of surveillance, resistance, identity formation, and social control. Critics of *The Hunger Games* have highlighted Collins's critique of media spectacle and authoritarian governance, while research on Westerfeld's works has focused on body politics, beauty culture, and technological regulation. Early studies of dystopian literature primarily focused on canonical texts such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Booker (1994) argues that dystopian fiction functions as a form of social criticism by exaggerating existing political and cultural tendencies until they become visible in their most oppressive forms. Similarly, Moylan (2000) suggests that dystopian narratives should not be viewed as entirely pessimistic because they preserve the possibility of resistance even within authoritarian systems. These foundational studies established dystopian fiction as an important medium for examining the relationship between authority and individual freedom. The growing popularity of YA dystopian fiction after the early 2000s shifted scholarly attention toward adolescent protagonists confronting institutional oppression. Unlike earlier dystopian narratives, contemporary YA novels emphasize identity formation alongside political resistance. Claeys (2017) observes that modern dystopian fiction increasingly explores how governments regulate not only public institutions but also private lives, emotions, and personal identities. Consequently, political domination is presented as something that operates through everyday practices rather than through military force alone. Although previous scholarship has examined power and resistance in these novels, comparatively fewer studies have explored the interconnected relationship between Foucauldian power and trauma theory across multiple Young Adult dystopian texts. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining how systems of surveillance and punishment produce psychological trauma and shape individual identity.

Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault and Power

Michel Foucault conceptualizes power as a network of relations operating through institutions, practices, and discourses. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that modern societies rely on surveillance, normalization, and disciplinary techniques to regulate behaviour. The concept of panopticism illustrates how individuals internalize authority when they believe themselves to be constantly observed. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is particularly relevant to dystopian fiction, where governments seek to control citizens through continuous monitoring and regulation. The selected novels reveal the operation of such mechanisms through bodily transformation, public punishment, and technological surveillance.

Cathy Caruth and Trauma

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully processed at the moment of its occurrence. The effects of trauma often return through intrusive memories, psychological distress, and emotional fragmentation. Trauma is therefore not limited to physical suffering but includes the enduring psychological consequences of violence and oppression. The protagonists of the selected novels experience various forms of trauma resulting from social control, coercion, and institutional violence. Caruth's framework enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between power and psychological suffering.

Punishment and Bodily Regulation

In *Uglies* and *Pretties*, bodily transformation functions as a mechanism of social control. Citizens are required to undergo cosmetic surgery that standardizes physical appearance and promotes conformity. The promise of beauty becomes a form of coercion through which individuals willingly submit to state authority. The procedure extends beyond cosmetic alteration and includes neurological modifications designed to limit critical thought. As a result, the body becomes a site of political intervention. Foucault's argument that modern power operates through the regulation of bodies is clearly reflected in Westerfeld's portrayal of enforced beauty standards. Similarly, *The Hunger Games* employs punishment as a political strategy. The annual Games serve as a reminder of the Capitol's victory over the districts and function as a public demonstration of power. Children become instruments through which the state reinforces obedience and suppresses dissent.

Surveillance and Panopticism

Surveillance constitutes one of the primary mechanisms of control within the selected texts. In *The Hunger Games*, tributes are constantly monitored through cameras and technological devices. Their actions are broadcast to the entire nation, transforming private experiences into public spectacle. The arena resembles Foucault's Panopticon, where individuals modify their behaviour because they are aware of constant observation. The tributes internalize surveillance and regulate themselves accordingly. In *Uglies* and *Pretties*, surveillance extends beyond physical observation. Technological systems monitor citizens' movements, behaviours, and interactions. The government employs information control to suppress dissent and maintain social order. Such practices demonstrate the transition from overt domination to subtle forms of disciplinary power.

Brainwashing, Social Conditioning, and Ideological Control

The selected novels illustrate how authoritarian systems rely upon ideological conditioning to secure compliance. In Westerfeld's dystopian society, citizens are taught to value physical beauty above individuality. Social acceptance depends upon conformity to state-imposed standards. The Capitol manipulates public consciousness through media representations and propaganda. Citizens are encouraged to perceive the Hunger Games as entertainment rather than violence. Through repeated exposure, cruelty becomes normalized. These practices reveal how power operates through discourse and ideology. Individuals become participants in their own subjugation because they internalize the values promoted by dominant institutions.

Trauma as a Consequence of Power

The operation of power in the selected novels generates profound psychological trauma. Katniss Everdeen experiences repeated exposure to death, violence, and fear. Her participation in the Games results in emotional distress that continues beyond the arena. Likewise, Tally Youngblood confronts trauma arising from identity fragmentation and social manipulation. The realization that her society has engineered conformity creates psychological conflict and emotional instability. The trauma experienced by these characters extends beyond individual suffering. Entire communities become affected by institutional violence. Families witness the loss of loved ones, while citizens live

under persistent conditions of fear and uncertainty. Trauma thus functions as both a consequence of power and a mechanism through which power sustains itself.

Resistance and the Reclamation of Agency

Despite oppressive conditions, the protagonists resist structures of domination. Katniss's refusal to comply fully with the Capitol's expectations transforms her into a symbol of rebellion. Her actions expose the vulnerabilities of authoritarian power and inspire collective resistance. Similarly, Tally's growing awareness of governmental manipulation enables her to challenge dominant ideologies. Resistance emerges through critical consciousness and the rejection of imposed identities. These acts demonstrate that power is never absolute. As Foucault suggests, where power exists, resistance also becomes possible. The selected novels therefore emphasize the capacity of individuals to reclaim agency despite systems of control.

Conclusion

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* present compelling critiques of authoritarian governance through their exploration of surveillance, punishment, bodily regulation, and ideological control. Employing Michel Foucault's theory of power and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this study has demonstrated that institutional authority functions through mechanisms that regulate both bodies and minds. These practices generate profound psychological trauma while simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchies.

The selected novels reveal the human cost of absolute power and highlight the enduring consequences of oppression. At the same time, they underscore the possibility of resistance and the resilience of individuals confronting authoritarian systems. As works of Young Adult dystopian fiction, these narratives continue to offer valuable insights into contemporary concerns regarding surveillance, identity, freedom, and human agency.

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