Are You, Are You, Coming to the Film? – A Movie Review of Mockingjay Part 1

by Helen Coats

“I doubt you know what honesty is anymore,” says the tyrannical President Snow of post-apocalyptic North America to Katniss Everdeen, the bow-wielding heroine of *The Hunger Games* dystopian film series. His words cut right to the core of the franchise’s third installment, *Mockingjay Part 1,* a film that focuses on the battle between good and evil and the confusion that arises when the protagonist can no longer distinguish between the two. Unlike its predecessors, *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay Part 1* relies upon psychological tension to ensnare audiences, rather than elaborate fighting sequences. To understand the movie requires prior knowledge of the plot and characters of the first two films or their book counterparts, written by Suzanne Collins.

The plot begins several days after the ending of *Catching Fire*, where Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) learned of the government’s ruthless obliteration of her Appalachian hometown, District 12. Katniss herself is plagued with guilt because her previous acts of rebellion against the government, known as the Capitol, triggered uprisings across Panem, the futuristic North American state. The Capitol bombed District 12 in hope of shutting down uprisings in the Districts. Katniss, her best friend Gale Hawthorne (Liam Henderson), and other refugees seek shelter in District 13, a rebel District that manufactures nuclear weaponry and aims to overthrow the Capitol. Alma Coin (Julianne Moore), the scheming, economical President of District 13, asks Katniss to become a televised symbol of the revolution known as the “Mockingjay”. Katniss agrees only under certain conditions, which include that a rescue mission must be attempted to save her fellow friend and victor of the 74th Hunger Games, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson). Peeta, as one of the Capitol’s first prisoners of war, is televised in pro-Capitol propaganda clips. Katniss is torn between her duties as the Mockingjay and her love for Peeta as she realizes that her continued cooperation with the rebels may result in Peeta’s torture and death. Meanwhile, a full-fledged war breaks out between the Capitol and the Districts, and everybody’s lives – including those of Katniss’s sister, Prim (Willow Shields) – are endangered.

*Mockingjay Part 1* is a well-made film for several reasons. Firstly, the splitting of *Mockingjay* into two movies allowed for a well-rounded adaptation that changed very few plot devices from the book. The decision to split the movie was contested by fans because that often leads to a bloated script and disorienting, overlong action sequences. The best example of this is *The Hobbit* trilogy, three two-and-a-half-hour-long films adapted from a book that is barely three hundred pages long, which resulted in the addition of characters and battles that were not present in the book. *Mockingjay Part 1* did not stray from its source as often as *The Hobbit*, but rather used the additional screen time to highlight the political motives and themes the book presents and expand them. Scenes between Julianne Moore and the late Philip Seymour-Hoffman, who played morally ambiguous rebel Plutarch Heavensbee, show both the actors’ genius for subtlety as they attempt to manipulate Katniss in order to work towards the conquest of Panem. Their interactions, which are both fascinating and true to the book, would likely have been cut had not the book been adapted into two films.

The tone of the film is also excellently upheld. Though the first two *Hunger Games* films were of the action-adventure genre, *Mockingjay Part 1* leans more towards war-adventure. While the first two films showed over-the-top action sequences and bright costuming to reflect the richness of the Capitol, *Mockingjay Part 1* is full of gray sets, gray costumes, and extended periods of hiding in gray warehouses to reflect the stretched resources of District 13 and the poverty caused by wartime. As food is rationed, so is the close contact between Katniss and Peeta. Though she sees him on TV, Katniss never holds a face-to-face conversation with Peeta throughout the course of the film. Lawrence’s and Hutcherson’s chemistry pulls the audience along through the desperation they throw into their characters. Likewise, Katniss does not talk personally with President Snow except through a communication device, but the menace that Donald Sutherland gives to the character of Snow leaves the audience with no doubt in their minds that he is a man who would kill off any family in war without hesitation. Another way the tone of war is preserved is by how the film shows the effects of Katniss’s actions on the rest of Panem. When the rebels televise her singing “The Hanging Tree,” a chilling ballad about a man hung for murder, the song becomes a war cry for the Districts. Though Katniss is only indirectly involved, the sheer power of watching hundreds of men and women on screen singing her song shows how much persuasive power rests upon her shoulders.

Purists may complain that there are some changes from the book. For example, Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks), a comedic clotheshorse from the Capitol, plays a much larger role in the movie than in the book, replacing another character named Fulvia as Katniss’s stylist. Despite this, Banks’s performance is delightful, and her character’s confession that she misses coffee, and her fruitless attempts to look fashionable with only gray material to work with, are nothing but crowd-pleasing. Other changes to the book were made concerning the way in which the mission to rescue Peeta was carried out and a slight change of wording to “The Hanging Tree”.

Flaws from the two previous films return to plague *Mockingjay Part 1*, such as shaky camera footage. There are even times where the camera is not completely focused, making certain people’s faces go slightly fuzzy during close-up shots. The use of rubble comes across a bit heavy-handed, even though they are in a war setting, because it seems like most of the outdoor sets are made up of huge chunks of cinderblock thrown randomly about a sound stage. Compared to *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay Part 1*’s sets seem fake and could have been copied and pasted from any other post-apocalyptic film. Likewise, costuming is less impressive, though this may be due more to the dreary setting of District 13 than a lack of imagination on the part of the costume designers.

While the special effects team did their job flawlessly, hair and make-up designers did not. Katniss’s hair repetitively changed lengths throughout the film so that sometimes the hair was long enough to justify the length of her braid and sometimes it was obviously not long enough to sustain one. Also, while Katniss wears minimal makeup when not on camera, her sister Prim obviously has on thick eye shadow and lip-gloss wherever she is, even at nighttime. Because of the austerity of District 13’s rations, the fact that Prim is allowed to wear make up during wartime detracts from the realism of the film and is inconsistent with the impoverished state of the Districts.

All in all, while *Mockingjay Part 1* was a satisfying film that left the audience yearning for more, it did not quite reflect the brilliance of *Catching Fire*. One can only hope that Lionsgate will return to its former excellence in *Mockingjay Part 2.*

Four out of five stars.