***The Hunger Games* (Dir. Gary Ross, 2011): BBFC Case Study**

* BBFC Rating: 12A with cuts

*The Hunger Games* is the film adaptation of the first in Suzanne Collins’ international bestselling trilogy set in a futuristic, dystopian world. Even before the film’s submission to the BBFC for classification, the Hunger Games novels were extremely popular, particularly amongst 11-14 year olds, and sold many millions of copies worldwide. As in the books, the film follows a resourceful teenager, Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to take part in an annual competition in which children living under a totalitarian regime must fight each other to the death in a televised reality show called 'The Hunger Games'. Participants are placed in a large outdoor environment that can be manipulated by the authorities, with only one competitor allowed to survive and win the 'game'.

The film was first sent to the BBFC for classification in January 2012, in an unfinished form, for an advice viewing. It had a 12A category request from the distributors; a specific request can often be helpful in giving the BBFC an idea of the target market that the film makers see for the film.

The BBFC's Guidelines at the time for 12A/12 stated 'Moderate violence is allowed but should not dwell on detail. There should be no emphasis on injuries or blood, but occasional gory moments may be permitted if justified by the context'. When the film was submitted to the BBFC for advice the key classification issues were:

* the sometimes dark and possibly disturbing tone of the film
* scenes of threat and violence, some involving sympathetic characters
* sight of injuries and blood
* the use of weapons, particularly knives, by children, and possible imitable behaviour

Alongside these details, the unusual and potentially difficult theme of children and teenagers forced to inflict violence or even death on each other, in order to survive, needed careful consideration.

The BBFC Guidelines allow for challenging subjects at the more junior categories, as long as they are handled sensitively and appropriately for the anticipated audience. At the junior categories, and on the borderline between categories, the BBFC considers elements such as the degree of fantasy in the film, the level of connection to the real world, and the extent to which the film presents a despairing view of the world, or lacks a clear moral perspective.

The Guidelines also take into account the motive of the film maker in creating the context of the film, and can make allowance for whether the film has any special merit. Examples of films with complex, mature themes, passed at PG or 12A, include *Lord Of The Flies*, *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas*, *The Lovely Bones, The Fault In Our Stars* and *Never Let Me Go*. Like *The Hunger Games*, these narratives also involve lethal violence and premature death amongst children and young people

Though there was clear appeal to young teenage audiences, and the complex and disturbing theme was handled in a way likely to be acceptable to viewers aged from 12 to 14, the BBFC informed the distributor that certain sequences placed an emphasis on blood and injuries that was unlikely to be acceptable at 12A - but that the film could be classified 15 without any cuts.

The distributor wanted to achieve a 12A classification, and made some changes to *The Hunger Games* and submitted the film for a second advice viewing. Given the challenging nature of the film, BBFC Director David Cooke and the BBFC Presidents viewed the film.

Additional changes were discussed, particularly the further reduction or removal of bloody effects during the ‘cornucopia’ battle scene. Whilst the BBFC does not provide the running time of any cuts or changes made at the advice stage (primarily because we do not retain a copy of the advice version), a description of what was removed at the advice stage is always published on the BBFC website. Some cuts are visual alterations, such as darkening or obscuring details, rather than actual 'cuts' which reduce the running time of a film.

At the request of the BBFC, the distributors of *The Hunger Games* provided an estimate of what they removed at the advice stage: approximately 14 seconds were digitally altered to remove or cover up digital blood effects and bloody injury detail and approximately six to eight seconds were cut. There were approximately 20 seconds of cuts and changes in total, at the advice stage. These changes were mainly made to: (1) a scene where the new Hunger Games participants watch a recording of an earlier Hunger Games for research; (2) during a set piece battle scene as the games start – the ‘cornucopia’ sequence; (3) sight of a character attacked by creatures; (4) a scene in which the heroine injures herself, with some bloody detail and (5) sight of a character holding a knife to another’s face.

A revised version of *The Hunger Games* was submitted to the BBFC for formal classification in February 2012, and four further cuts were required to remove some remaining sight of blood and injuries that breached the terms of the 12A/12 Guidelines. Some of these involved the further reduction of shots that had already been reduced at the advice stage. In total, approximately seven seconds of material was digitally altered during the formal classification of the film.

The violence that remains in the classified version of the film is generally lacking in blood and there is no dwelling on injury detail. Much violence occurs off-screen, and there is less focus on moments of violence than in the novel on which the film is based.

The BBFC rated *The Hunger Games* 12A in March 2012, with BBFCinsight that advises of ‘intense threat, moderate violence and occasional gory moments’. The long BBFCinsight for the film provides parents with further information about the category-defining aspects, together with more details, such as an insect attack on Katniss that results in her experiencing vivid hallucinations.

The DVD version of the film came to the BBFC for an age rating in May 2012, and, as it was identical to the 12A rated theatrical version and did not raise any concerns under the Video Recordings Act, was passed 12. The ‘international cut’ DVD version of *The Hunger Games* was also submitted to the BBFC. This version restored much of the previous material cut or changed for the theatrical 12A version, and was therefore rated 15, with new BBFCinsight warning parents of ‘strong violence and threat’. This 15 rated version also has its own long BBFCinsight.

The film proved popular with audiences and critics, topping the UK box office over the Easter period. There were 43 complaints made to the BBFC by members of the public about the film’s violence, theme and about the cuts that were made. Some correspondents criticised the decision to cut the film for 12A, particularly young fans of the book who believed the film should remain intact, and that any cuts to the violence would sanitise its impact.

The film was also seen by the Advisory Panel on Children’s Viewing (APCV); this is a panel of experts brought together by the BBFC to provide advice on issues relating to the classification of works for children. The Panel comprises members with a range of relevant professional expertise and responsibilities, and allows the BBFC to access skills and informed views on child welfare and development. The APCV meets three times a year. Members viewed and discussed the 12A version of *The Hunger Games* in July 2012, and also looked at the cut material. The Panel noted the ‘classic fairy tale’ narrative tropes, clear moral messages and strong central female character. Members thought the 12A certificate appropriate and useful, and considered children in this age group would already possess some awareness of the film’s debates on violence and media manipulation – and indeed many would be aware of the actual books upon which the film is based. When asked their view on whether the cuts of more violent scenes ‘sanitised’ the film’s violence (as some critics of the edits had claimed), the Panel concluded that what remained in the film was sufficiently aversive to convey the horror of the situation.