

## **District Thailand: Identification, spectatorship, and *The Hunger Games* in Thailand**

Simon Turner,  
Sainsbury Institute, University of East Anglia, UK

### **Summary:**

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014, The Kingdom of Thailand experienced its latest successful military coup. A few months later, in November 2014, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* was released in Thai cinemas sparking new protests using symbols from the series. With this article, I seek to examine the reception of *The Hunger Games* series in Thailand by different interest groups in light of recent political developments. I present a system of shared reference that is based on Jonathan Cohen's discussions of 'identification' and 'spectatorship' (2001) to illustrate the relationship between *The Hunger Games* series in Thailand, pro-democracy protesters, and the military junta. I aim to illuminate how the two opposing sides use and understand references from *The Hunger Games* as part of their actions in an ongoing tense political climate.

**Key Words:** *The Hunger Games*, Thailand, Identification, Spectatorship.

### **Introduction**

The opportunity to write an article regarding the recent Thai political situation came about when *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (MP1) was released in Thailand in 2014. Between 2014 and 2016, I lived and worked in Bangkok as a Cultural Studies lecturer. I came to Thailand two months after the 2014 military coup led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha ousted the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra and took power. Thailand has experienced nineteen coups over the past eighty years of which twelve were successful. Simply put, coups seem to be a normalised part of Thai politics (Farrelly 2010).

*The Hunger Games* (THG) is a dystopic series written by Suzanne Collins published from 2008 to 2010. The series follows the story of Katniss Everdeen who lives in Panem, a country that is presumed to be the USA in the near future and that now consists of the Capitol and Districts 1 to 13. In events prior to where the book series begins, the original

thirteen districts rebelled against the Capitol but failed. As punishment, District 13 was destroyed, forcing its survivors to go underground and plan their retaliation whilst the remaining twelve districts are compelled to participate in the annual Hunger Games. As part of the games, every district's child must enter 'the Reaping' in which one male and one female 'tribute' is selected at random and forced to fight the other twenty-three to the death (they must also kill their fellow district tribute). The games are intended as a means to quell future rebellions and remind the districts that the Capitol has ultimate power over them. In District 12, Katniss' younger sister, Primrose, is selected as 'tribute' for the 74<sup>th</sup> annual Hunger Games but Katniss 'volunteers' herself to protect her sister from almost certain death. Thus, a chain of events is set in motion that sees Katniss ultimately align with the surviving rebel government of District 13 to overthrow the Capitol.

Upon the release of *MP1* in Thailand, a new wave of student-led protests erupted in Thai provinces, though mainly in Bangkok. In response, a new wave of crackdowns by the junta began and protesters were arrested and taken away for 'attitude adjustment'. The junta responded harshly to the students who made use of symbols from the *THG* in their protests. I was somewhat surprised to learn that the film would not be prohibited, particularly in a country that has banned film adaptations of the musical, *The King and I*, both the 1956 original and 1999 remake, due to its representations of Thai monarchy, culture, and society. I had believed that the current Thai military junta would find the narrative of *THG* too close to home and equally wish to ban something that was generating potentially negative international press attention to Thailand and its new government.

In this article, I will present a tri-partite system (**Figure 1**) that comprises of *THG*, the pro-democracy protesters, and the military junta. I position these within a shared system of reference based on Jonathan Cohen's theories of identification and spectatorship (2001). I suggest that the series' narrative and symbols are utilised differently by the protesters and the junta. On the one hand, I suggest that the protesters identify with the narrative that they are able to relate their own lives. On the other hand, the junta, being aware of the series' and its narrative, perhaps do not wish to acknowledge such connections publicly. However, it is able to understand that others make connections and react accordingly such as by banning the use of the series' symbols in public.

The data for this article has been taken from official news reports that include interviews with protesters and junta officials, Thai government press releases, broadcasts, and governmental legislation. Methodologically, a weakness of this article is a lack of direct contact with protesters or representatives of the junta. The difficulty of conducting interviews is due to strict censorship laws in Thailand as well as the junta's crackdown on any dissenting views. I decided that as a foreign researcher residing in Thailand it was too dangerous to expose myself as supportive of the protesters or critical of the junta's actions whilst working in a public academic institution. Academics are often watched carefully by authorities in Thailand and there are examples of academics being arrested for publishing dissenting views. Indeed, in 2010 an academic in the history department of the same university I worked at was arrested for his criticisms of a government crackdown on student

protesters in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Publishing this article, which may easily be perceived as critical of the government, could lead to my arrest if I returned to Thailand.

I would like to note that this article is not intended to be a critique of Thai society nor Thailand itself.

### **A Background to Thailand's Contemporary Political Climate**

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014, the Royal Thai Army, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, took control of Thailand following prolonged political turmoil. General Chan-o-cha became the head of a government described as the 'toughest'<sup>2</sup> regime in forty years. Contemporary politics in Thailand are a product of a highly unstable and contested environment that has existed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Danuvasin 2012; Pavin 2014; Ungpakorn 2007). Following the death of King Rama V in 1908, Thailand has experienced a strained engagement with ideals of democracy (Leyland 2010, p.117). Objectively, consecutive Thai constitutions have enshrined the importance of democracy but it has been repeatedly undermined by successive governments, including the military (Thitinan 2008).

There are two major parties in Thai politics, the *Pheu Thai* [For Thais] Party (PTP) and the *Phak Prachathipat* [Democratic] Party (DP). Each has a signature shirt colour; red is associated with the PTP and yellow with the DP. Most of PTP's support comes from the poorer segments of Thai society, particularly those in the North Eastern provinces (McCargo 2005). The opposing DP's support comes from the middle/upper class strata of society, largely located in the centre of Thailand including Bangkok (Prasirtsuk 2010). On the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006, a military coup led by General Sonthai Boonyaratglin toppled the PTP government headed by Thaksin Shinawatra. This left Thailand 'without a constitution and without the rule of law' (Asian Human Rights Commission 2006). The 2006 coup is seen as a response to the autocratic rule of the Shinawatra government that 'did not respect human rights, the rule of law or democratic principles. It manipulated the media [and] intimidated its opponents' (Asian Human Rights Commission 2006). The new military leaders of Thailand, under the control of General Boonyaratglin, formed the Council for Democratic Reform (CDR) that remained in power until the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2007 when new elections were held and the CDR ceased to exist.

In the subsequent 2011 general election, the sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck Shinawatra, became the new prime minister of Thailand as the leader of the PTP. However, because of various reforms that her party instigated including a controversial amnesty bill (Diamond 2012), leaders of other political parties called for mass protests to remove her from power. Hundreds of thousands of DP supporters filled the streets of Bangkok, shutting the city down. On the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2013, all members of the DP resigned from parliament forcing Yingluck Shinawatra to dissolve the House of Representatives and call for a general election to be held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2014.<sup>3</sup> Voting at the general election was disrupted by another wave of mass protests by both the red shirts and yellow shirts. This was because the PTP was set to win the election once again which DP supporters disputed. However, due

to subsequent allegations of electoral fraud, the Constitutional Court of Thailand nullified the results and left the country in political limbo.<sup>4</sup>

By the 7<sup>th</sup> May, Yingluck Shinawatra and nine of her cabinet ministers were impeached by the Constitutional Court and an interim government led by Niwattamrong Boonsongpaisan came into power.<sup>5</sup> However, by the 22<sup>nd</sup> May, General Chan-o-cha declared the interim government void and established his own National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) that continues to govern Thailand.<sup>6</sup> On the 21<sup>st</sup> August, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha officially became Prime Minister of Thailand after receiving 191 of 197 votes in an assembly picked by the junta and in which he was the only candidate.<sup>7</sup> Whilst it is open to discussion as to whether or not Prayuth Chan-o-cha may be legally, or ethically, titled as 'Prime Minister' (PM), I will hereafter refer to him as such following convention in media reports and official documentation.

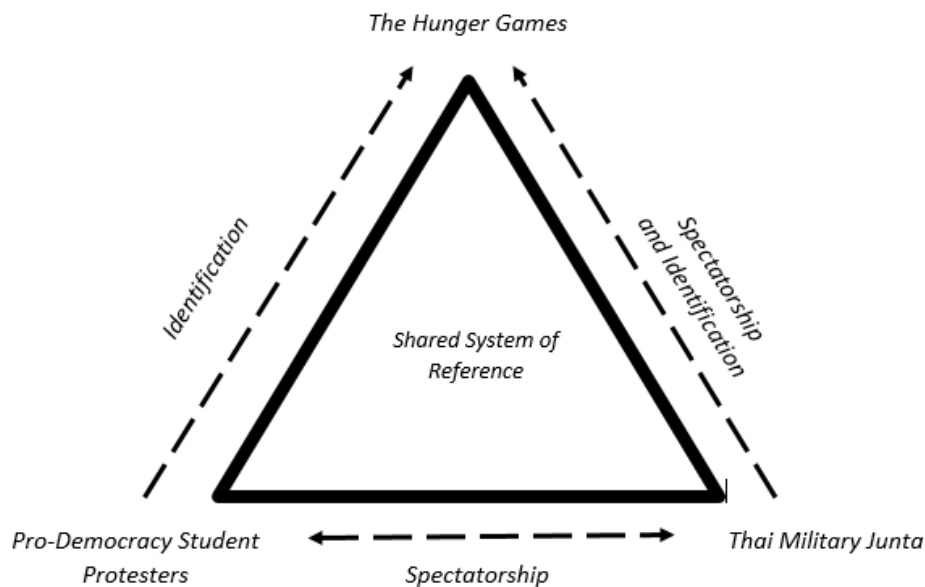
The large number of military coups in Thailand has led Nicholas Farrelly, to suggest that they are 'merely one part of a much broader repertoire of non-electoral, non-parliamentary and non-transparent politics' to such an extent that a democratic culture without military coups would be 'inconceivable' in Thai culture (Farrelly 2010, pp.281-2). The army has often referred to itself as the most disciplined institution in Thailand and has maintained a strong social and ideological presence in civilian life (Rakson 2010). According to Katsamaporn Rakson, 'in order to describe the military's role in Thai politics, it is important to understand how the Thai military preserves its professionalism while intervening in politics' (2010, np). For example, in the 1991, 2006, and 2014 coups, in which military generals overthrew democratically elected civilian prime ministers, the army justified its actions by identifying itself as a 'guardian of the state' (Rakson 2010, np).

Since the 2014 military coup led by PM Chan-o-cha, any criticism of the junta's dictatorial rule has been met with 'invitations' to ominously titled 'Attitude Adjustment' meetings. Little is known about what occurs at these meetings and those who are 'invited' must sign a memorandum of understanding pledging to not criticise the military otherwise they will not be released.<sup>8</sup> In April 2016, the junta announced an update to 'Attitude Adjustment' that is perhaps even more ominous and Orwellian. These are 'Re-education Camps', otherwise known as 'Camps of Understanding',<sup>9</sup> for those who continue to voice dissenting views after their attitudes had been supposedly adjusted. Re-education lasts longer than 'attitude adjustment' so that individuals do not continue their criticism. However, how this is achieved is not widely known.

## **Identification and Spectatorship**

In **Figure 1**, I have outlined a model built to explain reception of *THG* in Thailand. It is based on Austin's work on speech acts (1962) stating that successful communication requires a shared system of reference. In this instance, the shared system of reference is provided by *THG* to which protesters relate their actions and which the junta may see as a negative influence on its image and actions. It accounts for the reception of the series from two perspectives, the pro-democracy protesters and the military junta. It further accounts for

the two groups' perceptions of one another that I will examine later in the article as I believe that mutual spectatorship influences processes of identification and spectatorship with *THG*. I have distinguished between identification and spectatorship based on the work of Cohen (2001). In this model, identification and spectatorship occur within a shared system of reference provided by *THG*.



**Figure 1:** System of communication illustrating how both protesters and the junta receive *The Hunger Games*

I suggest that the protesters and the junta relate to the series differently and thus seek to ask a question that Cohen proposes when exploring modes of reception, namely, ‘what are the different forms of engagement ... by audience members[?]’ (2001, p.246).

According to Cohen, ‘the process of identification may begin because of a ... realization that a similarity exists between the audience member and a character (Maccoby and Wilson 1957)’ (cited in Cohen 2001). A key word I take from this quote is ‘realization’ because I propose that both the protesters and the junta ‘realise’ that there is a similarity between themselves and *THG*. However, I would modify this by saying that the protesters realise and subsequently identify with the context of the series’ narrative as well as the protagonists’ actions, seeing a similarity with their own position in junta ruled Thailand. On the other hand, the junta spectates in a more distanced mode of ‘recognition’ that does not necessarily involve a personal identification with the narrative. It is possible that the junta leaders personally identify with the film on a level of intimacy similar to that of the protesters. However, as a political and military faction in control of Thailand it is likely that they must maintain intellectual and public distance in order to protect the legitimacy of their rule. In other words, whilst the protesters identify with *THG*, the junta reacts to the protesters’ actions and any identification is not made openly because to do so would risk legitimising or encouraging perceived similarities between themselves and the antagonists of *THG* narrative.

Before continuing with examining the protesters' and junta's modes of engagement, I would first like to define and explain how I utilise the terms 'identification' and 'spectatorship'. It is not within the scope of this article to give a detailed taxonomy of identification as a term used within audience studies overall. However, to distinguish between modes of reception, separating spectatorship and identification, as opposed to using identification for all processes of reception described in this article is relevant.

### ***Identification***

Identification is an extremely multifaceted concept. Cohen writes that the term 'has not been carefully conceptualised ... in empirical audience studies' (2001, p.245). Furthermore, Martin Barker writes that identification has a range of uses (2005), drawing attention to Cohen's acknowledgement of its breadth as a concept that ranges from 'the social effects of media in general (Basil 1996; Maccoby and Wilson 1957); to the learning of violence from violent films and television (Huesmann, Lagerspetz and Eron 1984)' (Barker 2005). Barker argues that over time, the term has 'been stretched ... without considerations of coherence of evidence' (p.358). Elihu Liebes and Tamar Katz (1990), coming from a media studies perspective, discuss identification as 'similarity' (being like) and 'modelling' (wanting to be like). Sonia Livingstone has written that identification is akin to imagining a 'being in someone else' situation (1998).

In this article, I am using the term 'identification' to describe the protesters' feelings of affinity and connection with *THG* characters and narrative, specifically the protagonists including Katniss Everdeen and the district rebels. This is in contrast to earlier work on identification, including that of Sigmund Freud (1940/89) and Richard Wollheim (1974) who presented a 'nonconscious imaginative process resulting from psychological pressures' (cited in Cohen 2001, p.251). Indeed, Wollheim writes that identification is not imitation because imitation is conscious, whereas identification is unconscious as 'a person surrenders ... his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's viewpoint' (cited in Cohen 2001). I would not argue that pro-democracy protesters in Thailand are entirely imitating the protagonists of the series, though there are similarities, however I do not perceive the protesters' identification with *THG* series as a surrender of their consciousness. Rather, I present their engagement as a conscious connection to their own lives in Thailand that is made in reference to *THG* and its symbols. This is in line with what Cohen describes as identification which 'focuses on sharing the perspective of the characters; feeling with the character, rather than about the character' (2001, p.251).

### ***Spectatorship***

Spectatorship, like identification, is also a difficult term to operationalise. Michele Aaron (2007) distinguishes between 'spectatorship' and 'viewing' arguing that the spectator is not the viewer who 'is the live, breathing, actual audience member, coming from a specific socio-historical context' (p.1). Similarly, Judith Mayne (2002) writes that 'spectatorship is

not only the act of watching a film, but also the ways one takes pleasure in the experience, or not' (p.1). In other words, a spectator not only views the film, but also interacts with the film as a cultural text. Cohen (2001) argues for a separation of identification and spectatorship. In both instances, there is a process of engaging with characters and the narrative but not necessarily of process of relating these to oneself. For Cohen, 'identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them' but spectatorship is a more distanced form of identification (2001, p.245). Similarly, Barker writes that 'if audiences "identify" with particular media characters, they may come to "take part" in the story to such a depth that they become open to its 'values' or 'messages'' (Barker 2005).

It must therefore be considered how much the junta leaders identify with the characters of *THG*, at least publicly. A further distinction must be made between identification and different types of reactions from other interest groups, in this case, the junta who may not see *THG* narrative as similar, nor relevant, to what is occurring in Thailand. In other words, we should consider the case of individuals or groups who relate characters to others, whom they may know or recognise but not to themselves. Returning to Barker's comments on openness to values and messages (2005), what happens when a particular audience understands a message but is not open to its values? I suggest that the junta understands the message of the *THG* series, understands why protesters identify with the film's message, and perhaps in some instances see similarities between themselves and the antagonists of *THG*. However, whilst the protesters' engagement with *THG* is that of identification, the junta's public engagement is a reactionary one. In other words, rather than engagement through public identification, the junta engages through spectatorship because of need to be publicly distanced from connections with *THG*'s antagonists.

### **Identification, Spectatorship, and *The Hunger Games***

In this section of the article, I will account for the processes of identification and spectatorship by examining reception of *THG* by the protesters and junta in Thailand. Firstly, I will examine identification paying attention to how pro-democracy protests manifested as well as how the protesters described their actions. This analysis will highlight how the protesters identify with the *THG* narrative by finding similarities between it and their own plight. Secondly, I will examine spectatorship and the junta's position in relation to the *THG*. Attention will be paid to discourse both about and from the junta including televised broadcasts by PM Chan-o-cha and news reports. News reports may be described as both about and from the junta because Thai broadcasters and media outlets must comply with strict junta laws. If they do not, their broadcasting licenses will be revoked.<sup>10</sup> Thus, what may or may not be printed/broadcast must pass a censor that is strictly controlled by the junta. Finally, I will explore how pro-democracy protesters and the junta spectate one another. This reciprocal mode of engagement is important because the two groups' perceptions of one another may influence their own.

### ***Protesters and Identification***

It should be noted before continuing a discussion of the pro-democracy protesters, that university students, who make up the majority of examples in this article, are not the only group opposed to the junta. Indeed politicians of the now ousted PTP continue to campaign against the junta in ways that are still legal, as do their largely rural supporters in the North. In Bangkok however, where the majority of pro-democracy protests take place, the junta has come face to face with a difficult task of controlling symbolic protests (Sombatpoonsiri 2015, p.94).

Cohen writes that 'identification with media characters is a result of a carefully constructed situation. Thus ... studies of identification must account for the production of identification targets' (2001, p.251). Initial protests led by students in the first weeks of the junta's rule involved handing out sandwiches after martial law banned students from distributing leaflets (the sandwiches were meant to be their lunch that day).<sup>11</sup> However, what garnered the most attention was the use of the three-finger salute inspired by *THG*.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, students sought peaceful means of protest after the authorities banned any political assembly of more than five people from voicing opposition to the coup (those assemblies that support the coup have curiously not been banned nor prosecuted<sup>13</sup>). Frustrated by their inability to assemble, students took to symbolic expressions (Liou 2016), the most famous of which was the three-finger salute in *THG* series. The salute was used when Katniss mourned the death of a fellow tribute, Rue. Since the series' release in both its original book format and blockbuster film adaptations, the salute has become a global symbol for grassroots resistance. In *THG*, the salute is utilised to demonstrate the districts' solidarity against the Capitol. In Thailand, the salute is being used by anti-coup groups to show solidarity against a strict military regime (**Figures 2 and 3**) and often in front of PM Chan-o-cha himself. For example, at a press event in North East Thailand, five law students of Khon Kaen University stood in front of the PM, revealing t-shirts rejecting military rule whilst making the gesture. The students were immediately taken into military detention and sent to 'attitude adjustment' (**Figure 4**).

It is important to consider what happens when reality and fiction come close together. As part of the pro-democracy protests held at cinemas in Bangkok, protesters had bought 200 tickets which they distributed by holding a competition through Facebook titled 'Raise Three Fingers, Bring Popcorn and Go to the Theatre' (Facebook is widely used in Thailand for shopping and competitions).<sup>14</sup> In order to win free tickets individuals had to answer the question, 'How does the Capitol resemble Bangkok?' The page was hosted on the Facebook page for the League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy (LLTD) but was quickly censored and blocked in Thailand by the junta and is no longer available online. *THG* narrative is immediately put into a Thai context when students draw on references from the films and book. According to the Associated Press, 'The raised arm salute has become an unofficial symbol of opposition to Thailand's May 22<sup>nd</sup> Coup, and a creative response to several bans the ruling junta has placed on freedom of expression'. Posing with the gesture,



an anti-coup protestor tweeted an image with the caption ‘Dear #HungerGames. We’ve taken your sign as our own. Our struggle is non-fiction. Thanks’ (**Figure 2**).

Dear #HungerGames. We've taken your sign as our own. Our struggle is non-fiction. Thanks.  
#ThaiCoup #Thailand



**Figure 2:** Protester making the three-finger salute in Bangkok<sup>15</sup>.

The junta’s crackdown on this symbol implies that it recognises connections between its regime and the symbols being used by protesters. Indeed, according to work on speech acts (Austin 1962) for any form of communication to be deemed ‘successful’, it must take place within a system of reference or a mutually understood context. In this case, the three-fingered salute in the Thai context is largely meaningless without knowledge of *THG* as a shared frame of reference and its ultimate use as a symbol against Capitol oppression. For the protesters, it is a symbol of their own struggle, something they have identified with and adopted. For the junta, knowing what the symbol means, it is a form of ‘legally dangerous’ dissent. If the salute had no meaning for the junta, then it would be unlikely that it would have responded in the ways that it did. Stacey Liou points out ‘for a receiver to make meaning of the sign, she must be familiar with both the reference that utterance makes as well as the broader system within which that particular reference is embedded’ (2016, pp.14-5). Indeed, Liou argues that ‘some member of the [junta] must have read and/or

watched *and understood* [emphasis in original] the films in order to grasp what the salute signifies' (2016, p.17).



**Figure 3:** Protesters utilising the salute made during a speech given by PM Prayuth Chan-o-cha.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 4:** Students make the three-finger salute in front of PM Prayuth Chan-o-cha at a press conference in Khon Kaen.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 5:** Ms. Natchacha Kongudom posing in front of a poster for MP1.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that these protesters are making direct relational links between Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, and the Capitol of Panem indicates a form of conscious identification taking place on the part of the protesters. One of the arrested student protesters, Natchacha Kongudom told reporters that ‘the three-finger sign is a sign to show that I am calling for my basic right to live my life’. Three of the student leaders who purchased the tickets, including Natchacha Kongudom, were accused of organising the gathering, arrested, and taken to a nearby army camp for ‘attitude adjustment’ as stated by Colonel Kittikorn Boonsom of the Bangkok Metropolitan Police.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Junta, Spectatorship, and Identification**

Following the protests led by Natchacha Kongudom and others, PM Chan-o-cha stated that ‘[he] is not concerned by the three-finger protest’ and that he does not know ‘whether it is illegal or not’; however, by making the salute individuals could ‘jeopardise their futures’. PM Chan-o-cha’s comments regarding the legality/danger of those who made use of the three-fingered salute are also germane. At the very least, the junta is aware of the series’ narrative

and potentially the similarities between its own actions and that of the Capitol. In this instance, difference between identification and spectatorship is found in the salute's symbolic meaning (Liou 2016). The fact that the junta banned public meetings of five or more people<sup>20</sup> and arrested and/or questioned those that made use of the symbol indicates that it did indeed recognise its use. It is, in other words, a spectator to the use of the salute by the protestors and its underlying meaning of subversion based on *THG* series. As I have discussed above, the three-fingered salute has meaning within the Thai context only if one is familiar with both *THG* series and the politics of Thailand.

However, it is possible that members of the junta also identify with *THG* albeit privately. While discussions of identification are usually concerned on a relationship between the audience and the central protagonists (Cohen 2001), we may also consider the results of identification with antagonists: in this case, between the junta and the Capitol/President Snow in *THG*. Cohen writes:

[o]utcomes of identification may include increased liking or imitation but can also include negative feelings. Identifying with extremely negative characters who are evil or very violent may evoke some understanding or even sympathy for them during reading or viewing but strongly identifying with such a character is likely to cause dissonance, guilt or even fear (Cohen 2001, p.252)

The results of such an identification could potentially explain why the junta in Thailand has been so willing to distance itself from the student protesters and *THG*. In this instance, the junta may realise that there are similarities between its actions and those of the Capitol thus identifying with the antagonists of *THG*. Does the junta in Thailand see itself reflected in the portrayals of the Capitol in *THG*?

Whilst I am thinking hypothetically here and cannot speak directly for the junta and its leaders, there is evidence to support this idea found in discourse used by the junta to rationalise or explain the actions of the protesters. The student protesters are often referenced as innocents who have been corrupted by malicious forces.<sup>21 22</sup> For example when PM Chan-o-cha was asked who was behind the recent spate of student protests he replied: 'lobbyists living overseas'.<sup>23</sup> It is implicitly understood that the junta is referring to the PTP. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri states that 'the junta attributed the reason for this trend to a possible mastermind' and that 'the failed attempts to "make peace" with students reflected the fact that 'there must be someone backing the students' (2015, p.103). I further agree with Sombatpoonsiri that:

the representation of the students as being manipulated by political forces carry with it the implication that the students themselves are not seeking to threaten the wellbeing of the Thais directly... Accordingly, in order to undermine the salience of their protest whilst avoiding the risk of any crackdown on them 'backfiring' on the junta itself, the dissidents are presented

as ‘innocent saboteurs’ who do not realise the damage. (Sombatpoonsiri 2015, p.104)

Perhaps realising, therefore, that attitude adjustment and camps of understanding were possibly not stopping protests but rather strengthening identification with the *THG*, the junta has shifted its discourse from one of blame to one of understanding and compassion. Simultaneously, references made to an unknown group could have the dual function of reminding the Thai people of protests between the PTP and DP that marred the previous two governments of the Shinawatra siblings.

It is entirely possible that the junta both identifies and spectates in the shared system of communication that I have described, but their identification with the series may be an unwelcome one when it is associated with negative characters. Indeed, when similarities are seen by other groups such as the protesters who use such instances to bolster their own position, the junta might wish to distance itself from a public position of identification to one of spectatorship. However, it could be argued that this distancing is not always successful based on the similarities between the junta’s discourse regarding the protests and *THG* antagonists’ regarding the fictional rebels.

### **The Junta and Protesters as Mutual Spectators**

I would like to now pay attention to the curious relationship of mutual spectatorship found between the protesters and the junta. I hope to highlight the somewhat ironic scenario in which the junta’s actions, both to legitimise its rule and delegitimise the protesters, reinforce the protesters’ identification with the film by fostering opportunities for identification. To do this I will provide examples of the ways in which the junta both constructs itself as the leader of Thailand and sanctions its actions in the media.

When the military took power in May 2014, they did so during a period of political and civil unrest with massive DP marches against a PTP government. The military claimed that its intervention was necessary to save Thailand from continued political strife. After having seized power, PM Chan-o-cha gave a speech explaining the reasons why the military did what it felt necessary:

The reason NCPO [National Council for Peace and Order] has taken control of national administration was because of the prolonged political deadlock, protests, and violence. There were also widespread illegal activities that were affecting the well-beings [sic] of the people. The caretaker government was unable to perform their duties effectively.... The NCPO has taken control of the situation in order to stop violence and loosen some constraints that have prevented the previous government from moving the country forward, and to solve urgent national crisis. This is to return happiness to the Thai people.<sup>24</sup>

The speeches from President Snow and PM Chan-o-cha mimic one another in peculiar, though likely unintentional, ways. If we compare the above speech to a propaganda speech in *THG*, given by the antagonist, President Snow, at the beginning of the first film:

War, terrible war, widows, orphans, a motherless child. This was the uprising that rocked our land. 13 districts rebelled against the country that fed them, loved them, protected them. Brother turned on brother until nothing remained and then came the peace, hard fought and sorely won. A people rose up [the capitol] from the ashes and a new era was born...We swore as a nation we would never know this treason again. (*The Hunger Games* 2012)

Similarities exist in the references to periods of strife in Panem and Thailand and the necessity for intervention to bring peace or 'happiness' to the people. Both PM Chan-o-cha and President Snow make use of discursive framing processes (Snow 2008) in their speeches to serve the interests of their respective ruling elites. Outlining his coup as a necessary action to save the country from destructive unrest, PM Chan-o-cha has framed his actions as rational in order to garner support.

As another example, we may compare the following two extracts, one from *THG* and two from speeches given by PM Chan-o-cha. In the first, President Snow of Panem is addressing the nation from the Capitol prior to a nationally televised execution of rebels for which viewing is mandatory:

Citizens, tonight I address all of Panem as one. Since the dark days, Panem has had an unprecedented era of peace. It is a peace built upon cooperation and a respect for law and order. In the past weeks, you have heard of sporadic violence following the actions of a few radicals...those who chose this destructive path. Their actions are based on a misunderstanding of how we have survived, together. It is a contract. Each district supplies the Capitol like blood to a heart. In return, the Capitol provides order and security. To refuse work is to put the entire system in danger. The Capitol is the beating heart of Panem. Nothing can survive without a heart. The criminals that kneel before you use symbols for the purpose of sedition that is why all images of the mockingjay are now forbidden. Possessing them will be considered treason punishable by death. Justice shall be served swiftly, order shall be restored, those who ignore the warnings of history, prepare to pay the ultimate price (*The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* 2014)

Below, I present two extracts from speeches given by PM Chan-o-cha detailing his reaction against protests:

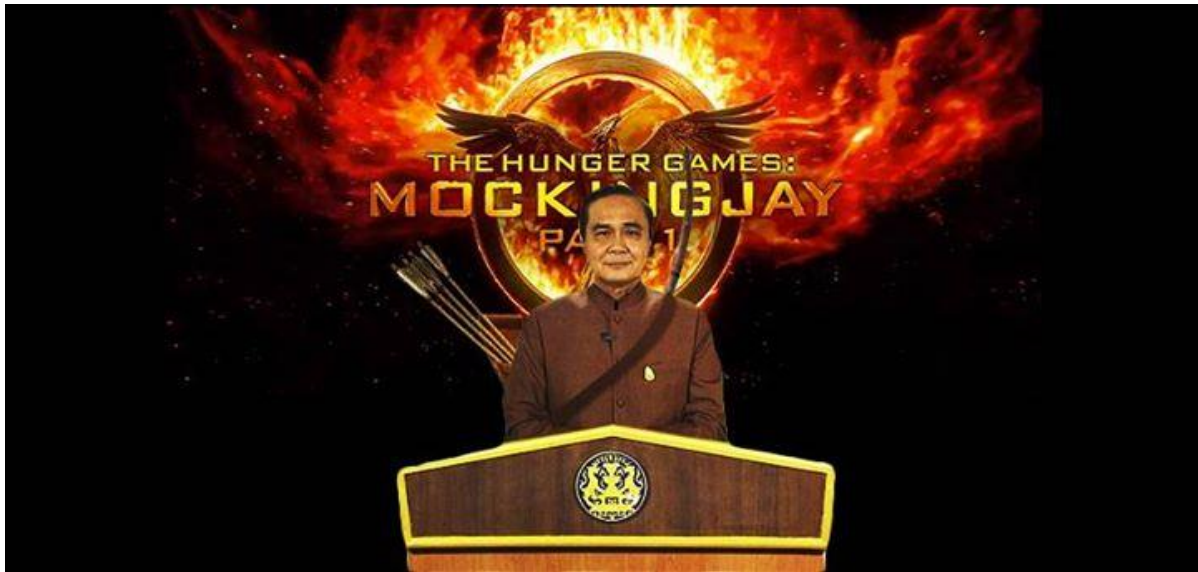
Right now, there are people coming out to protest. So do you want to go back to the old days? I'm asking the people in the country, if you want it that way, then I will have to enforce the law... We are not doing this for the soldiers. I'm doing this to protect the honor and dignity of all Thais. We cannot step back anymore. We have to stop arguing... The most important thing right now is to keep peace and order in the country.<sup>25</sup>

The army is never afraid of performing our duty but we are concerned about more losses and injuries to people because many sides do not understand and oppose the army. If there is any further loss of life ... the country will definitely collapse, and there won't be any winners or losers.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in a response to accusations that the military arbitrarily arrested a pro-democracy student activist who was captured at night on his university campus by unknown men (he had a bag thrown over his head and was bungled into an unmarked car), the PM stated:

Officials acted on an arrest warrant... Officials could use any measures to arrest him. The arrest doesn't have to happen in front of camera, which could then trigger a protest... No one is allowed to oppose [the NCPO]. I dare you to try to oppose [the NCPO] ... I don't care what the international community would think about this.<sup>27</sup>

Has there ever been a time when PM Chan-o-cha read a speech by President Snow from *THG* and considered its message similar to those that he gives on his weekly addresses to the people or in media interviews? The similarities are clear, President Snow warns the districts that if they rebel then the Capitol will falter, and if the Capitol falters, then so does the entirety of Panem. Compare this with PM Chan-o-cha's speech concerning the protests. He talks about the 'old days', arguing that his is acting to protect the 'honour and dignity of all Thais' and that if people oppose his junta then '[Thailand] will definitely collapse'. President Snow bans the use of mockingjay symbol, now a symbol of rebellion in Panem, PM Chan-o-cha likewise arrests those who use the three-fingered salute in public as a means to protest the junta. Finally, President Snow makes an outright threat to rebels in his speech stating that if caught they will be executed, the Prime Minister, whilst not so explicit, makes a similar threat stating that the army is never afraid of performing its 'duty'. What exactly this duty might entail is left to the imagination, but a lack of concern regarding the international community are nonetheless chilling. The similarities between President Snow and PM Chan-o-cha have not been lost on the Thai public with images of the latter being portrayed as the former widely shared on the internet in the form of various memes (**Figure 6**).



**Figure 6:** Image of PM Prayuth Chan-o-cha depicted as President Snow in *The Hunger Games* series.<sup>28</sup>

In discussing interpretive publics, Liou discusses what she calls ‘reflexive consideration’ (2016, p.1) meaning the ways in which a speaker’s ‘utterance’ requires interpretation on the listener’s part. I suggest that the protesters reflexively consider their position when listening to the junta’s, namely PM Chan-o-cha’s, speeches that have the opposite to that which was intended. Barker, for example, has argued that such authoritative discourse can in fact fan the flames, as it were, for dissenters (2007). In the case of *THG*, the district rebels see such speeches and the actions that follow as a reason why they should rebel against the Capitol. Similarly, when the junta in Thailand give such speeches, the protesters may be drawing further parallels between the antagonists of the *THG* series and the junta reinforcing their identification with the rebels which the junta observes and continues attempts to stop.

Overall, there is something of an emergent ‘vicious circle’. In response to the junta’s power grab in early 2014, student protesters have continued to challenge the junta and protest against military rule using symbolism from *THG* despite bans and public threats against their safety. The junta, spectating this group’s actions has taken various steps to assert the regime’s authority. In his speeches, the PM attempts to convince the Thai people that these are exceptions and that the majority want peace, and that he is the man to provide this as long as people do not contradict or challenge him. The protesters interpret these threats and speeches as further proof that their situation is similar to that of *THG* thus reinforcing their initial identification with the series and the processes begins again. Despite all of this, *THG* series, in all its formats, is legal for consumption in Thailand. Whilst I do not necessarily agree with the junta’s policies on political demonstration, I do believe that to ban the series in Thailand would only serve to exacerbate a vicious circle because it would indirectly recognise that the series’ narrative does have relevance to Thailand. Although the ban on the three-finger salute may have already done this.



## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to discuss *THG* in Thailand in light of the 2014 military coup led by PM Chan-o-cha. To explain the series' position in Thai society I discussed how the protesters, the junta, and the series are connected through two different modes of engagement; identification and spectatorship. I proposed that these occur within a shared system of reference that is provided by the series so that each side may interpret the other's actions/discourse. The 2014 coup had particularly interesting timing as the fall of a democratically elected civilian government that was overthrown by a totalitarian military junta occurred only months before the release of *MP1* with a narrative that almost mirrored the events during this time. I followed the contextualisation of Thailand's recent political unrest by showing how *THG* series has been taken up by anti-coup groups and individuals in Thailand.

Protesters made use of the three-finger salute as a symbol of their protest against PM Chan-o-cha and his military junta following the narrative of the series. I then explained that the protesters identify with the series because of similarities with their own lives. For the junta, I suggested that, publicly, spectatorship takes place instead of identification. Therefore, they banned symbols being used in public demonstrations. I did however suggest that private identification is possible though this is difficult to ascertain without direct access to junta leaders. Even if this were possible, it is unlikely that an individual would admit to similarities between themselves and the antagonists or legitimise the protesters' actions by validating connections with the protagonists. I then proposed that mutual spectatorship takes place between the protesters and the junta because as the junta reacts against the protesters, the protesters find further validation which, in some sense, forces the hand of the junta to react and quell protests.

It is still unclear when, or if, the junta will voluntarily give up their firm grasp on Thailand as it repeatedly delays elections. Recently the previous King, Bhumibol Adulyadej died and his son, Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun, became the new King after an unprecedented delay. It is likely that the junta will use the death of a much-revered King as an excuse for further electoral delays. It is worth noting, however, that in the end of *THG* series, Katniss and the rebels overthrow the government of Panem and sentence President Snow to death for his offences against the country and the people. As PM Chan-o-cha continues with his extensive repression of the Thai people, I cannot help but wonder if his downfall will also be at the hands of the people whom he claims to love and protect, though I hope in a much less violent manner.

## Biographical note:

Simon Turner is Research Fellow in the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, University of East Anglia. His primary research interest is global manga fandom in online communities and he currently explores the socio-legal context of online Japanese manga fandom per UK legislation. Contact: [Simon.d.turner@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Simon.d.turner@uea.ac.uk).

## References:

- Aaron, Michele. *Spectatorship: The power of looking on*. Wallflower Press, 2007.
- Austin, John, and Urmson, James. *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Barker, Martin. The Lord of the Rings and 'Identification': A Critical Encounter. *European Journal of Communication*, 20.3, 2005, pp.353-378.
- Cohen, Jonathan. Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, 4.1, 2001, pp.245-264.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games Trilogy*. Scholastic, 2012.
- Council, Thailand Constitution Drafting. 'Thailand Constitution of 2007.' 2007.
- Chambers, Paul. 'Understanding Civil-Military Relations Today: The Case of Thailand with Implications for Emerging Democracies in Asia.' *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 10.2, 2010, pp.1-24.
- Chambers, Paul and Waitoolkiat, Napisa. Khaki Veto Power: the Organization of Thailand's Armed Forces. In Chambers Paul (eds.) *Knights of the Realm: Thailand's Military and Police, Then and Now*. White Lotus Press, 2013.
- Chambers, Paul and Waitoolkiat, Napisa. 'The resilience of monarchised military in Thailand.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46.3, 2016, pp.425-444.
- Charoen, Danuvasin. 'The Analysis of the Computer Crime Act in Thailand.' *International Journal of Information* 2.6, 2012, pp.519-526.
- Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Development since Thaksin's Downfall*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014. [WWW document] URL <https://muse.jhu.edu/>. [visited 29/04/16].
- Diamond, Larry. 'The coming wave.' *Journal of Democracy* 23.1, 2012, pp.5-13.
- Farrelly, Nicholas. 'Why democracy struggles: Thailand's elite coup culture.' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67.3, 2013, pp.281-296.
- Fry, Gerald W. 'A Comedy of Errors: A Critical Analysis of the Political Drama in Thailand.' *Harvard International Review* 35.4, 2014, pp.29-31.
- Craig, Peter, and Strong, Danny, writer. *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1*. Dir. Lawrence, Francis. 2014. DVD. Lionsgate.
- Leyland, Peter. 'Thailand's constitutional watchdogs: dobermans, bloodhounds or lapdogs.' *Journal of Comparative Literature*. 2, 2007, pp.151-170.
- Leyland, Peter. 'The Struggle for Freedom of Expression in Thailand: Media Moguls, the King, Citizen Politics and the Law.' *Journal of Media Law* 2.1, 2010, pp.115-137.
- Liebes, Tamar and Katz, Elihu. 'Interacting With "Dallas": Cross Cultural Readings of American TV.' *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 15.1, 1990, pp.45-66.
- Liou, Stacey. 'Unspoken Insurgences: Interpretive Publics in Contentious Politics.' *Political Theory*, 2016, pp.1-20.
- Livingstone, Sonia. Audience research at the crossroads: The implied audience in media and cultural theory. *European journal of cultural studies*, 1.2, 1998, pp.193-217.
- Martin, Brian. *Justice Ignited: The dynamics of backfire*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and spectatorship*. Routledge, 2002.
- McCargo, Duncan. *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. Vol. 4. NIAS Press, 2005.

- Muntarbhorn, Vitit. 'Human Rights in the era of "Thailand Inc."' *Peeenboom* 63, 2006, pp.320-345.
- Pongsudhirak, Thitinan. 'Thailand since the coup.' *Journal of Democracy* 19.4, 2008, pp.140-153.
- Prasirtsuk, Kittti. 'Thailand in 2009: colored by turbulence.' *Asian Survey* 50.1, 2010, pp.203-210.
- Rakson, Katsamaporn. *The influence of the military in Thai politics since the 1990s*. Asia Research Centre No. 166, 2010. [WWW document] URL [http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Asia-Research-Centre/\\_document/working-papers/wp166.pdf](http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Asia-Research-Centre/_document/working-papers/wp166.pdf). [visited 02/04/16]
- Royal Thai Army. 'Udomkan Kum-Lung-Pol Khong-Tub Bok (The ideology of Thai Army)', 2009. [WWW document] URL [http://www.rta.mi.th/data/article/thai\\_02.pdf](http://www.rta.mi.th/data/article/thai_02.pdf). [visited 02/04/16]
- Snow, David. Framing Processes, ideology, and discursive fields. In Snow, David., Soule, Sarah., and Kriesi, Hanspeter (eds.) *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- Sombatpoonsiri, Janjira. 'Securitization of civil resistance: Thailand's military junta and beyond.' *Journal of Resistance* 1.2, 2015, pp.85-126.
- Streckfuss, David. 'Kings in the age of nations: the paradox of lèse-majesté as political crime in Thailand.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37.03, 1995, pp.445-475.
- Streckfuss, David. *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason, and lèse-majesté*. Routledge, 2010.
- Thailand Criminal Code. Art 112, 2009.
- Unpakorn, Ji. *A Coup for the Rich: Thailand's political crisis*. Workers Democracy Pub., 2007.

## Notes:

- 
- <sup>1</sup> <http://concernedscientists.org/2010/05/thai-professor-on-hunger-strike/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Washington Post, 'Thai anti-coup protesters say it with sandwiches', June 8th 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://world.time.com/2013/12/08/thai-pm-yingluck-dissolves-parliament-but-tensions-remain-high/>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/21/thailand-elections-court-rules-february-poll-invalid>.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304655304579547060394849976>.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/thailand-army-chief-announces-military-coup>.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/prayuth-installed-as-thai-prime-minister/>.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36079040>.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://muslimnews.co.uk/news/south-east-asia/thailand-junta-place-re-education-camps-muslim-south/>.
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/thai-broadcast-regulators/2960610.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/thailand-sandwich-eaters-among-targets-crackdown-100-days-after-military-takeover>.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/nov/20/hunger-games-inspires-thai-protesters-three-finger/>.
- <sup>13</sup> <https://coconuts.co/bangkok/news/protesters-tell-us-ambassador-go-home/>.
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/world/hunger-games-screenings-cancelled-in-bangkok-after-protesters-use-films-threefinger-salute-20141120-11qi2u.html>.

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://time.com/2816496/hunger-games-salute-becomes-a-real-sign-of-dissent-in-tyrannical-thailand/>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-30110280>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-19/thai-protectors-arrested-for-hunger-games-salute/5904480>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://indo.wsj.com/posts/2014/11/21/film-hunger-games-usik-junta-thailand/>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-thailand-hunger-games-human-rights-20141121-story.html>.

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/world/asia/thailand-referendum-constitution.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/world/asia/thailand-referendum-constitution.html?_r=0).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-politics-idUSKBN0P61GQ20150626>.

<sup>22</sup> The reason that the junta may be unwilling to reveal who they think are behind the student protesters, if indeed anyone is, is due to Thailand's strict defamation laws that harshly punish accusations against those who make insulting or comments deemed to be false against others, regardless of whether the comments are true or not. For defamation to have taken place, an individual's reputation has to be considered damaged in court, again, if the damaging comment is true is, largely, irrelevant. A good example of this is the case of British human rights defender, Andy Hall, who exposed slavery and human rights abuses within the Natural Fruit Company (NFC). The NFC was allowed to pursue a legal case against Hall for defamation despite proof that they had engaged in slavery and human rights abuses against its own workers. Despite Hall's expose having proof, this does not prevent a defamation case in Thailand. As such, the junta in Thailand may be hesitant to say who they think is behind the student protests outright without risking a defamation case being brought against them.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-politics-idUSKCN0XI0KI>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://phuketwan.com/tourism/future-thailand-under-army-general-prayuths-full-speech-20367/>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/thailands-new-military-ruler-warns-dont-protest-its-no-use/>.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.chiangraitimes.com/thailands-army-chief-cautions-anti-government-protesters.html>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/22/thailand-investigate-army-abduction-student-activist>.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/life/2014/11/28/1417169580/>.