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Appropriating dissent: The three-finger salute and Thailand's pro-democracy movement

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Abstract

This paper examines the uses and implications of the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* franchise as a symbol of dissent in pro-democracy protests in Bangkok beginning in 2014. The raising of the salute by protesters demonstrates that concerted collective action is made possible through common consumption of popular culture narratives, functioning to mobilise the public and influence the narrativisation of contemporary political movements. Building on theories on mass culture, democratic participation, and the aestheticisation of politics, I argue that the appropriation of the three-finger salute in Bangkok reveals how popular cultural texts facilitate the rise of modern forms of crowds and masses that have the capacities to frame political subjectivity and collective identities, making legible and visible perceived and shared societal injustices.

KEYWORDS: mass culture, pro-democracy, protest, Thailand, aesthetics

Introduction

In the weeks following a coup d'état launched by the Royal Thai Army on May 22nd, 2014, student protestors appeared on the streets of Bangkok, raising not clenched fists but three upright fingers in salute. In the months that followed, the salute was widely seen raised by pro-democracy protestors in mass demonstrations and has since become the unofficial symbol of resistance against the military junta. 'Dear #HungerGames. We've taken your sign as our own. Our struggle is non-fiction,' wrote Twitter user Manik Sethisuwan (@Sethisuwan, 2014). On November 19 of that year, one day before

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the premiere of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1*, five students were arrested for raising the salute during a public speech by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who led the coup and later became head of the military government. The next day, more than 100 police officers and plainclothes security forces converged on Bangkok's prestigious Siam Paragon cinema after anti-coup protesters had promised to hand out 160 free tickets to the film. Students who raised the salute at the premiere were quickly detained by the police, who handed them over to military authorities for "attitude adjustments" (Chandler, 2014). Six years after the successful coup that overthrew a democratically elected prime minister and civilian government, the salute remains a lasting protest symbol during demonstrations on its anniversary and in current protests that call for a return to democratic elections.

The three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* as seen in on-going pro-democracy demonstrations in Thailand is one of a handful of protest symbols in contemporary social movements that are appropriated from popular cultural films and television shows. The salute allows for an analysis of the political uses and implications of mass cultural images and symbols against perceived injustice enacted by oppressive states. By examining protest symbols in recent social movements, it can be seen that mass culture plays an important part in the construction of public sites of resistance and the formation of political subjectivities. Key theoretical interventions made about the uses and function of popular and mass culture are and have been made within Cultural Studies, beginning with the Frankfurt School, though much of these earlier works understand mass culture as distractions that serve to pacify the public and thus maintains capitalist structures of domination and ensures the perpetuation of the *status quo*. The culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991) speaks directly to the commodification of culture and artistic objects and signifies how art and entertainment, while formerly autonomous, have now been subordinated to the profit motive. It is further argued in direr terms that the commodification of culture has led to the deterioration of critical consciousness, eradicating autonomous thinking and serving to perpetuate the status quo (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1993). In providing entertainment to the masses, the culture industry effectively distracts individuals from the inequalities and hierarchical structures of social reality.

However, what the raising of the three-finger salute in Bangkok highlights are the ways that mass culture can in fact be employed by citizens as a tool to challenge the status quo. The myth presented within the narrative of *The Hunger Games* has been taken on by Thai protestors, alluding to the fluid process of meaning-making that consuming films entails. In other words, the appropriation of the salute indicates not only how cultural

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texts are imbued with a hegemonic ideology that is legible to spectators but also subsequently how such ideology is interpreted (Hall, 1980). While films certainly contain social critique as a means to appeal to the masses, reproducing dominant ideologies on screen, spectators nevertheless might confront reflections of their own realities and glimpse the futility of mass culture in its form (Kracauer, 1995). The emergence of the salute in on-the-ground protest as coinciding with the release of *The Hunger Game* films is a significant factor in understanding how film both frames injustices on screen and how spectators affectively engage with these injustices as mirroring their own lived reality. Furthermore, the appropriation of the three-finger salute in Bangkok reveals how popular cultural texts facilitate the rise of modern forms of crowds and masses that have the capacities to frame political subjectivity and collective identities, making legible and visible perceived shared societal injustices.

When resistance to the perceived injustices of state power is intensifying and often can be seen as framed through mass culture and its mythical narratives of dissent, freedom, and democracy, contemporary popular culture holds immense power in creating public spheres of action through which the masses gather and affect change in society. For example, the *V for Vendetta* Guy Fawkes mask is a well-recognised symbol of the *Occupy* movement and of *Anonymous*, a "hacktivist collective"; the Harry Potter universe has often been used as a metaphor for fighting against imposing evils and the division of social groups in the US; the cloak and bonnet from *The Handmaid's Tale* visualise the allegorical narrative for current US policies that subjugate women's rights, especially reproductive rights; and the themes of hope and female empowerment found in *Star Wars* that continue to be seen in US protests against the Trump administration. Identifying and examining the significance of how, when, and why these mass cultural symbols and narratives are appropriated can help in understanding the public perception of current social anxieties, the power of contemporary culture industries, as well as the evolving nature of activist work in today's digital age.

Methodology

This paper focuses on rethinking the political uses of mass culture through analysis of appropriations of mass cultural symbols in contemporary social protest movements. Through narrative and content analysis of The Hunger Games and through comparative ethnographic accounts of mass mobilisations that employ mass cultural symbols in Thai protests since the 2014 coup, I draw on their textual evidence and embedded narratives, their visual representations, and their appearances in social protests to arrive at a tenta-

tive conclusion about the uses of mass culture in political movements. Analytical and interpretive research is conducted via analyses of narratives, images, news articles, blogs, social media coverage, official state documents, and other textual evidence. I situate my work in conversation with the work of the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools of Cultural Studies on the culture industry and on subculture, respectively, and the theoretical interventions made by French cultural theorists in their interrogations of everyday life. Furthermore, I draw heavily on work that theorises political subjectivity in the public sphere and the political potential of crowds and assemblies, notably works that consider how political collectives form in public. These theoretical foundations allow me to present an alternative perspective on how mass culture informs political uprisings, how art can make legible state repression and perceived injustices, and how civic participation in public spheres is transformed through capitalistic consumption.

Visual activism and the influences of dystopian film

Imagined and first appearing in The Hunger Games (2010) by Suzanne Collins, the three-finger salute is described as a symbol to show appreciation for a fallen tribute, an individual who has been chosen to participate in the annual Hunger Games. The dystopian trilogy, adapted by Collins herself into four films—*The Hunger Games* (2012), *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay Part 1* (2014), *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015)—is set in Panem, a fictional nation said to be somewhere in the Rocky Mountains of North America in post-apocalyptic Earth. The Capitol of Panem is a technologically advanced, utopian city where the nation's wealthiest and most powerful citizens live. Home to a tyrannical dictatorship, the Capitol holds total political and economic dominance over the surrounding existing twelve districts, enforcing its rule through an army of peacekeepers, capital punishment, propaganda, and the fear of nuclear devastation. It is this setting, accompanied by themes of economic disparity, rebellion, community, and tyranny, to name a few, that provides points of comparison to the Thai political landscape.

This comparison could be seen made as early as 2012, coinciding with the release of the first film, with an activism campaign "Hunger is Not a Game" (launched by The Harry Potter Alliance) aimed at tackling global economic inequality and global hunger with the hashtag #HungerIsNotAGame (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d. a). The community then again mobilised for the release of *Catching Fire* (2013) with a distinct focus on Katniss as a symbol of rebellion vis-à-vis their own civic engagements against corruption and capitalism, calling out Lionsgate's ill-conceived glamorisation of the trilogy's characters and overt neglect of the films' themes that speak against celebrity, spectacle, ex-

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ploitation, and capitalist consumption (Finke, 2013). Refocusing and reclaiming the trilogy's narrative, the community relaunched their campaign, now called "Odds in Our Favor" after Lionsgate invoked copyright infringement laws on the previous name, specifically pointing out 'the disparity between the Hunger Games franchise's poignant content and its vapid, exploitative marketing strategy' (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d. b). This reclaiming of the trilogy and repoliticisation of its narrative signals an important moment when fans and spectators at once rejected the culture industry's aim of perpetuating the status quo, denied the distribution studio's capitalist function, and spawned public spheres of action against existing injustices around the world including but not limited to health-care access, homelessness, food security, and gender equality, all that make up "the 12 districts of economic inequality" (Richardson, 2013).

The politicisation of The Hunger Games is indicative of how film and popular culture can lead to solidarity-building and community interventions locally and globally. The relationship between The Hunger Games and Odds in Our Favor and other social justice campaigns that follow this trilogy speak to not only the aestheticisation of politics, as Walter Benjamin proposed in his classic essay, but also to the visuality of politics, especially in the digital age. From protest signs and television advertisements, to memes, gifs, TikTok, and other social media formats, and to gestures and costumes – politics is beyond the conceptual and is aesthetic in its visual accessibility to the general public. The reclaiming of The Hunger Games' narrative by online social activists affirms the revolutionary potential of politicising the aesthetic. The leaders of and activists involved in Odds in Our Favor first made use of Tumblr as a social platform to organise and disseminate their ideas and since has moved to their own oddsinourfavor.org domain, further engaging with spectator fans and calling for wider civic participation in their activist campaign.

An early phase of the campaign called for spectators to document their use of the three-finger salute iconography from The Hunger Games franchise as a symbol of their resistance against economic inequalities. Within the franchise, the three-finger salute is a gesture used by district citizens in lieu of applause for the selection of tributes as a symbol of both solidarity with the tributes and discontent with their exploitation by the capitol. The salute was first seen raised in District 12 of Panem, when the narrator Katniss Everdeen volunteered as tribute and was taken away to compete in the 74th Hunger Games, and subsequently evolved into a general symbol against the tyrannical dictatorship. Moving beyond the fictional works, the use of this symbol in campaigns and protests against global inequality soon reached Thailand, empowering youth activists

there to organise against the then looming military coop and to raise the salute in silent rebellion. In May of 2014, Thai protestors raised the three-finger salute during demonstrations against the military takeover of Thailand's civilian government, appropriating the salute as a symbol of their anti-establishment, anti-coup, pro-democracy aims. For Thai protestors, the salute symbolises resistance, unity, and overall opposition to the ruling military junta. With the popularity of the salute, the Thai military junta—the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—deemed the symbol subversive and banned its display in November 2014 in an effort to quell the uprising, enforcing its ban through arrests and censorship of the newly released film (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

For whom the protesters are raising the salute and the many stages of its visual transformation—from its description in print, to its performance on screen, to its real-life deployment, and to its designation as an act of subversion—all speak to the dynamics of looking and seeing, of encoding and decoding, and of the political gaze. The call for collective visuality of the three-finger salute as a symbol of rebellion echoes Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2015) focus on how the *performance* of protest movements might be *right* and his claim that political activism must become *visual activism* if it is to resonate widely and communicate in contemporary terms. Visual activism in the digital age involves 'creating, performing, and disseminating memes in urban public space and across social media networks to involve, extend, and create a political subject' (ibid.). For the protesters in Bangkok, the aesthetics of visual activism in the public sphere enabled a wider distribution and recognition of their demands. Their raising of the salute helped disseminate their calls globally. The reclaiming of the fictional narrative and the transformation of the three-finger salute into a visible symbol of dissent performs activism well in this sense. The salute, like the Black Power fist, is easily recognisable and, more importantly, transforms a mass cultural visual artefact into a political symbol belonging to the public.

Moreover, the banning of the symbol, reifies the protesters as such, legitimises their calls for democracy, and marks the formation of political subjects. In June 2015, 14 students holding a protest at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok were arrested and charged with violating a ban on political gatherings as well as with sedition, which is just one example of many. When the military junta proposed a referendum on the constitution in 2016, it also put into place a law that made criticism of that referendum a criminal offence. After a series of pro-democracy protests between January and May 2018, organisers faced multiple charges of sedition, holding political gatherings, violating the Public Assembly Act, the Road Traffic Act, and sections 215 and 216 of the Criminal Code. According to one of the protest organisers, Nuttaa Mahattana, 'We asked for elections and

got charged with sedition' (Maida, 2019, p. 5). Military spokesperson Colonel Weerachon Sukhondhapatipak noted in 2014 about the three-finger salute that 'If it is an obvious form of resistance, then we have to control it so it doesn't cause any disorder in the country' (Hudson, 2014). It is through these charges and through the arrests of those raising the salute that protestors are recognised as citizen subjects, identified as a citizen to be governed only to be denied their agency. As Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 72) put it, 'the very question of identification only emerges in between disavowal and designation,' with the subject represented in the act of articulation and enunciation. This in-betweenness of Thai protestors under the military junta also reveals the complex matrix of power dynamics that exist in contemporary society. They are essentially navigating through and challenging the capitalist function of mass culture that works to subjugate them as mere consumers, moving against notions of popular culture as escapist, organising around perceived injustices, and confronting hegemonic powers and oppressive regimes.

Clearly, for a Hollywood blockbuster franchise to be appropriated in this way greatly challenges earlier theories on mass culture that implies audience members as passive consumers with their participation limited to their purchasing power. What is interesting to note about the appropriation of the three-finger salute is its classification within the dystopian fantasy genre. According to apparatus theories on spectatorship, the film apparatus' function is to make spectators unaware of its existence, to make images on the screen appear natural and continuous. Cinematic techniques that allow for this to be achieved, such as montage, editing, and other moments of transformation before the final film product, are utilised to further a certain political ideology. This notion of film as presenting a version of reality is complicated in dystopian fantasy films, like *The Hunger Games*, which are premised on the unreal. Spectators enter the narrative of fantasy films already with a preconception that what is seen as not entirely realistic. These films temporarily remove spectators from the world as they know it and show them the world as it might be or cannot be, providing alternate perspectives on human nature and society. Spectators are hailed into the film as a consumer of mass culture, yet also alienated from the narrative by their encounter with an unreal world. While the danger of dystopian fantasy films lies in their capacity to deliver hegemonic ideologies subliminally to passive spectators, it can also lead to self-reflexivity on the part of conscious spectators. Instances of the reappropriation of film symbols, like that of Thai protesters with the three-finger salute, reveal that such dystopian narratives can indeed act as an impetus for social change, that they expose the faults and fissures of lived reality, serving as more than a space of escape for spectators but instead as a catalyst for resistance movements.

Presenting an argument of fantasy culture as effectively oppositional to escapist entertainment, John Fiske (1989) takes pleasure to be a key issue in popular culture that allows for consumers to partake in social and political action. The demonstrations that deploy the three-finger salute brings to light popular culture as a site of struggle, as Fiske asserts, on the micropolitical—the ways in which the texts of popular culture are received and read by the public—rather than macropolitical level. Change rarely occurs at the macro level; instead, it creeps forward by increments at the micro-level as people refuse or accept the meanings that the "power bloc" urges upon them through television, advertisements, clothing styles, and so forth. Directly responding to Lionsgate's promotional activities for The Hunger Games and their overt dismissal of the trilogy's key themes, fan activists effectively worked on the micro-level to redirect attention to real-life political and societal woes, to instead focus on their lived realities of inequality and oppression. As Fiske notes, popular culture is inherently oppositional and is fundamentally a bottom-up means to rebel against the hegemony of the powerful by making use of contradictions in popular texts and reading them oppositionally.

This view of popular culture and mass consumption is key in understanding the ways in which current social movements appropriate the increasingly popular trend of fantasy films and literature. When the three-finger salute is recognised by those who have read or seen The Hunger Games and when spectators mutually understand its narrative and experience similar oppressions in their lived reality, there rises a sense of solidarity and of shared resistance to oppressive forces which can support and encourage progressive action on the micro-social level. The sense of solidarity created through narratives of economic inequality and resistance in The Hunger Games functions similarly to enact social action. In an op-ed by Atiya Achakulwisut in the *Bangkok Post*, she suggests that 'The power of a symbol or symbolic gesture lies in its ability to inspire a kindred spirit. That ability hinges on how the coup makers choose to react to it. Suppression is sure to augment its power and cause resistance to multiply' (Sullivan, 2014). This kindred spirit is not only fostered through the raising of the salute, but the junta's suppression of the salute works to bolster protestors as well. Mass culture can thus be a tool for action, and this is apparent in the clear appropriations of various dystopian symbols in contemporary activism.

As widely recognised and consumed products of mass culture, dystopian narratives have the capacity to affect change on a global scale. When something like the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit organisation led by youth fans, can establish chapters in 42 nations around the world, doing on-the-ground work to increase literacy, to promote gen-

der equality, and to empower youth to participate in political action (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d. b), a re-examination of fantasy culture as more than merely escapist entertainment for certain fans but as powerful works of art that can influence social change is needed. For the Harry Potter Alliance, fictional works of art play important roles in the process of what founder Andrew Slack (2010) terms *cultural acupuncture*. This term refers to the use of ideas from a culture which is of particular resonance to audiences and, by "pushing these areas", create a civic effect. The appropriation of The Hunger Games' three-finger salute and its rebellion narrative in Thailand already shows the political and cultural significance of mainstream cinema and popular culture, and as such, serve as a key site to further interrogate the democratising potential of mass culture and to challenge existing theoretical frameworks on civic participation and collective agency.

Politics and the sensible

According to the Human Rights Watch's country page for Thailand, currently the government under the leadership of Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha, in his second term in office after "flawed" elections that took place in 2019, 'has done little to address the repressive legacy of military dictatorship' (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Officially, the government of Thailand is based on a constitutional monarchy, similar to the United Kingdom. Functioning as the head of state, King Maha Vajiralongkorn rose to the throne in December 2016 after the death of his father, the much-beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October of that year. As the prime minister, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who seized power in a May 2014 coup, serves as the head of the parliamentary government. The protests that saw the raising of the three-finger salute were part of a larger period of political instability that began a year earlier in 2013, though political strife had long troubled the country for years since the founding of the constitutional monarchy in 1932.

The turbulence that came about in October 2013 centred around former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been in self-imposed exile since the military deposed him in a 2006 coup; an attempt to pass an amnesty bill that would have enabled his return to Thailand without having to face a conviction for abuse of power as well as possibly being able to reclaim his impounded assets was made. A polarising figure, his populist ideologies were popular with Thailand's rural villagers, while urban elites and the middle class accused him of corruption and autocratic rule (Mullen, 2013). In May 2011, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra won a landslide victory with the Pheu Thai Party, which maintains close ties to Thaksin. The primary aims of the anti-government protests be-

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ginning in 2013 were removing the Thaksin regime and replacing the government with an unelected "People's Council," constituted by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) in order to achieve political reform (Phongpaichit, 2014). After sporadic violence that led to several deaths and countless injuries, Yingluck and her democratically elected government was removed from office by the Constitutional Court on May 4, 2014 over another matter of regarding the transferring of a senior security office in 2011. A few weeks later, the Royal Thai Army declared martial law throughout the country to curb the escalating political crisis, and two days later on May 22, 2014, seized power in a coup, with General Prayuth Chan-ocha named prime minister by the military-appointed parliament. Formally adopting the name National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the military junta remained in power until July 10, 2019 when general elections two months earlier, held in accordance with the new 2017 constitution drafted by the ruling junta, saw the pro-military Palang Pracharath Party successfully nominated Prayut Chan-o-cha to remain, controversially, as prime minister.

Throughout this sustained history of political strife, social change, corruption, military rule, and controversial elections is the general public's resilient demand for accountability, for transparency, and for a vision of democracy. The comparisons drawn between experienced political and social injustices in Thailand and the narrative of The Hunger Games should come as no surprise, yet the appropriation of the three-finger salute as a symbol of covert defiance and political expression against the military junta and for democratic representation from 2014 until today reveals the importance of visual culture and visible solidarity. Politics contains a certain aesthetics centred on what can be seen and what can be said and heard, or as Jacques Rancière (2004) theorises, "the distribution of the sensible" is what is used to identify what can come to perception at a certain moment in history and in which hierarchical position within a larger field of appearance it reveals itself. The sensible is both already there and always open to new configurations. Dystopian and young adult films such as The Hunger Games is nothing spectacularly new in terms of generic conventions and social criticism, but it came about at a time when Thailand's political landscape was in turmoil and when student activists were finding their voices.

University student Nachacha Kongudom, who was photographed in front of a Mockingjay, Part 1 poster with one hand covering her mouth and the other raising the three-finger salute and then being led out from a movie theatre by undercover police, makes the connection between fiction and reality clear: 'The "Mockingjay" movie reflects what's happening in our society. When people have been suppressed for some time, they

would want to resist and fight for their rights' (Ehrlick, 2014). The fictional narrative made visible, made sensible, not only a certain commonality regarding the inequality and oppression faced by protestors in Thailand, but also their calls for justice, the junta's intentions and fears, and the many voices throughout Thailand and the world regarding the country's future. Politics, then, is to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible.

It is evident that the appropriation of mass cultural symbols in protest such as the three-finger salute reveals how a political community comes into being through a shared understanding and perception, shared participation that creates a separate yet common world. From this, the salute can be seen as effectively functioning as a form of dissensus, or as a *gap* in the configuration of sensible concepts. Dissensus is an expression of the political that challenges the perceptible consensus when what is sensible is disrupted, and marking the emergence of democratic practices (Rancière, 2004; 2010). Moments of dissensus are based on the understanding that political disagreement cannot be defined in advance, thus allowing for the possibility of unforeseen social and political emancipation. The aesthetic value of the three-finger salute being raised uniformly in protest lies in the salute's capacity to promote group cohesion and to express a collective vision of political agency. With its sudden emergence alongside the release of the films, which were only censored after the fact, the salute performs a 'double effect' that allows both 'a readability of political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock' by that which resists signification (2004, p. 63). The three-finger salute as political art effectively introduced something novel into the realm of the sensible, disrupting the aesthetic order, revealing fault lines in established power hierarchies, and exposing the normalisation of social injustices.

Democracy and visual collective action

The appropriation of mass cultural symbols like the salute in Thai protests works dissensually to unsettle and threaten dominant political and social discourses. The question is whether such appropriation is capable of proposing new forms of collective identity that repoliticises art toward true democratic ends and to resist the culture industry's tendencies to reproduce mass conformity. Though discussions of democracy traditionally involve engagement with its conventional forms, such as political party membership, petitioning, or voting, it is important to move beyond such limitations in the digital age and to assume a more fluid conception of participative democracy that considers how political agency is performed through a variety of textual, visual, graphic, and virtual communication forms (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Contemporary protest movements in

the previous decade were among the first to use global social media in combination with the traditional aesthetics of protest, such as posters, banners, and slogans, to actively work to foster "visual thinking" (Mirzoeff, 2015) about what a visual text represents, what protestors are calling for, and how groups communicate key ideas and demands. The public nature of raising the three-finger salute is in itself a performance of democratic existence through resistance. Thai protestors are demanding recognition, making themselves visible, legible, and heard. In doing so, they constitute *the people*, and through the aesthetics of protest, rupture conventions of not only engaging politics but also the conventions of mass culture consumption.

In June 2014, a group of some 100 protestors gathered in a shopping mall in Bangkok and raised the three-finger salute in defiance of the military junta's warnings, curfews, and control over media. The collective demonstration led the mall to shut down and to the arrival of two army trucks and machine-gun mounted Humvee. A protestor told the Associated Press that 'I am here because I don't want a coup. I want elections and democracy' (Murphy, 2014). Collective action such as this proves how visual protest is premised on the ability of artistic practice to aesthetically reclaim the public sphere as a site of large-scale interests of the dominant elites or, in this case, the reclaiming of a shopping mall by the working class and oppressed. Providing a positive and productive understanding of crowds and their political potentials is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Assembly* (2017, p. 295), in which they extend their concept of multitude in order to develop a dynamic concept of assembly, defined as 'a constitutive right, that is, a mechanism for composing a social alternative, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production'; It is hoped that once the assembly is formed, the promised 'democratic and just society' (2017, p. xiii) will duly follow. While the March 2019 elections saw little change to leadership, the voices calling for democracy in Thailand have nevertheless strengthened since 2014.

Illustrating the lasting importance of this salute as a political symbol and how it continues to be seen as subversive many years after it was first raised in defiance, in January of 2019, the top police official of northern Lampang province was suspended after an activist flashed the anti-junta hand gesture during a deputy prime minister's visit there (Charuvastra, 2019); in April of 2019, the leader of the Future Forward Party flashed a three-finger salute to his supporters as he left a police station after hearing a sedition complaint filed by the army (Selway, 2019); in August, Thai poet and author Siraphop Kornaroot flashed the salute while being released on bail after being arbitrarily detained for almost five years under Thailand's draconian *lèse-majesté* law (Zsombor 2019); and in

October an anti-junta art exhibition in Bangkok featured pieces depicting the salute. Most recently, the salute has been widely appropriated by the Future Forward Party (FFP). The FFP, founded in March 2018 with a progressive and anti-military platform that aimed to decentralise the bureaucracy and to improve social and economic equity, came apparently out of nowhere to come in third in the 2019 elections. Led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the opposition party is popular among young people and has continued to deploy the three-finger salute in their rallies and demonstrations.

The FFP and its supporters continue to appropriate the three-finger salute in their anti-military demands and aims and in public demonstrations. Theorising a space for political engagement and strategies for social movements and political reform, Jodi Dean (2016, p. 79) notes that a political crowd is one 'authorised by neither capital nor the state' and argues for the discussions of democratic change also to rethink the importance of the political party. She emphasises the need for a political party to operate as a 'gap' between the people and their place in capitalist society (2016, p. 206). She continues to note the importance of the party, especially when individualist and anarchist trends that emerge from democratic social movements might undermine the collective power of the movement: 'States will not just stop oppressing, arresting, and imprisoning those who resist them … A Left that eschews organising for power will remain powerless. This is why we are talking about the party again' (2016, p. 207). What the three-finger salute allows for is a sustained identification with not only anti-military, pro-democracy aims of the crowd but now with an established political party capable of social change on the macro level.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the FFP was dissolved in a Constitutional Court ruling in February 2020. The party was cited for having violated election laws regarding donations to political parties, though critics would argue that the dissolution was characteristic of the military's continued interference in Thai politics (Regan, 2019). In response, massive demonstrations took place, crowded on the lawns of several universities, all protesting the dissolution of the FFP and for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (Takahashi, 2020). The crowds concertedly raised the three-finger salute and signs that read, for example, 'When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty' and 'Or do the people also have to carry out a coup d'état?'. According to Dr Puangthong Pawakpan, Assistant Professor in International Relations at Chulalongkorn University, the protests that occurred at the dissolution of the FFP and the anger of the crowd differs from anti-government movements of the past:

> The experience of students of this generation is shaped by military rule – and they hold different perspectives from the generation above them … This generation, they don't care what Thaksin did—the politicians that they saw are not like Thaksin Shinawatra. Under the military government, the students were made to feel like they had no hope—they saw a government that was incompetent, ignorant, arrogant, indifferent to the suffering of the people, and one that acted as if it was going to stay in power for a long time. They saw how the constitution was rewritten to ensure this. (Chia 2020)

These new protests, then, are not simply anti-military but, in fact, is a movement calling for the return of party politics, looking at the FFP as a symbol of hope and democracy.

This sustained hope can be seen throughout Thai Twitter and other social media platforms with popular culture references and metaphors being used to express rebellious anger and resilience. Two of the most widely seen images are of *Les Misérables*'s "Do You Hear the People Sing" and of The Hunger Games' three-finger salute. As Judith Butler (2015, p. 11) notes about political subjectivity, the assembly of collective political bodies is a politically performative act that 'delivers a bodily demand for a more liveable set of economic, social, and political conditions.' The groups of university students protesting for democracy and an end to military interference reveal the relational and equitable plurality that is made visible through collective action, and it is through these being visible that a true politics of democracy can be realised. Social and political protests are not only concerned with seeking recognition from the broader public; instead, they seek to disrupt existing political structures, transcend or abandon hegemonic ideological trappings, and create new possibilities. The mere sight of protests can be leveraged to effect political change by persuading lawmakers of the strength of public sentiment. The enduring nature of the three-finger salute in pro-democracy protests in Thailand since 2014 reveals that mass culture facilitates the organisation of political thought and helps to frame political subjectivity in public spheres of action. No longer reliant on the fictional narrative of The Hunger Games, the salute has been reclaimed by the people and has become a symbol synonymous with resilience against oppressive powers.

Conclusion

The increase, both in frequency and intensity, of global demonstrations in recent years, from the many protests in the United States against the Trump administration and toward certain universal values, to the global Black Lives Matter movement, to the pro-democracy demonstrations in Bangkok against the rule of the military junta, to the Um-

brella Movement and continued pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong against growing mainland Chinese imposition. Within the political unrest and the disillusionment of many protestors, popular culture has permeated the narratives of resistance and calls for change. It is through presenting possibilities and through oppositional spectatorship that such dystopian narratives have the capacity to lead to civic action among both filmmakers and the general public. Viewing these works as constructing possibilities of a hyperbolic future different than that of today is what allows for audiences to engage in current social and political discourse.

With symbols and phrases from Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Divergent, The Handmaid's Tale, and other works in popular culture manifesting themselves in real-life social protest movements, mass culture must be understood as crucial to civic consciousness in order to locate and realise its distinct social and political potential. The instances when film symbols permeate on-the-ground protests, when these symbols are remade to function as tools to disrupt the status quo, and when these symbols are effectively separated from its mass cultural source, all highlight the counterhegemonic potential of mass culture and the ways in which cultural symbols are (re)claimed by the public to resist existing power structures and to exert a collective identity for a change. Contemporary resistance movements that are informed by the collective consumption of mass culture have shown that subverting capitalist modes of production and its dominant ideologies may be possible, and it is because of this that mass culture must not be taken for granted nor brushed aside as escapist in the study of social movements and progressive democratic change.

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Povzetek

Članek preučuje uporabo in posledice pozdrava s tremi prsti iz franšize *Igre lakote* kot simbola nestrinjanja na prodemokratskih protestih v Bangkoku, ki so se začeli leta 2014. Pozdrav protestnikov kaže, da usklajeno kolektivno delovanje omogoča skupna raba pripovedi popularne kulture, ki mobilizira javnost in vpliva na narativizacijo sodobnih političnih gibanj. Na podlagi teorij o množični kulturi, demokratični udeležbi in estetizaciji politike trdim, da prisvajanje pozdrava s tremi prsti v Bangkoku razkriva, kako priljubljena kulturna besedila olajšujejo vzpon sodobnih oblik množičnosti in množic, ki so sposobne oblikovati okvir politične subjektivnosti in kolektivne identitete, zaradi česar zaznane in skupne družbene krivice postanejo čitljive in vidne.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: množična kultura, demokracija, protest, Tajska, estetika

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