

# Mad Max: Fury Road

## Challenging Narrative and Gender Representation in the Action Genre

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George Miller redefined the 'post-apocalyptic' genre with his *Mad Max* series (1979–2015). It appeared as though the franchise was dead due to the somewhat lacklustre response to the concluding film of the original series, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* in 1985. After years of attempting to revive the series, *Mad Max: Fury Road* began production in 2013 amongst a degree of scepticism from fans of the series. Miller had moved away from post-apocalyptic worlds and turned 'family-friendly', giving us the adaptation of *Babe* (1995) and its underrated sequel *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998) as well as *Happy Feet* (2006) and its sequel (2011). However, when released, *Mad Max: Fury Road* was met with critical and commercial success, re-establishing Miller as the 'road warrior' of the post-apocalyptic genre.

Despite Miller's departure from the franchise, the 'post-apocalyptic', '... has become a genre in its own right, with all the tropes and traditions that implies' (Crewe 2016: 37). *Mad Max: Fury Road* embraced the world that the genre suggests and not only was the film praised for its visuals and breakneck pace but also its gender representation. The protagonist, played by Tom Hardy, becomes a secondary figure within the narrative, which, "... reinvigorates the Max Rockatansky character by acknowledging his vigilante roots, but then developing his supporting role amid the wider cast of characters in *Fury Road*, many of whom take centre stage over its nominal hero" (McLean 2017: 145). The central character then becomes Imperator Furiosa (Charlize

Theron), a character that at first appears to be in league with, or at least working for the antagonist, Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). However, Furiosa quickly becomes the chief protagonist of the narrative. This article will explore the key components that made the film a subversive text within the action/post-apocalyptic genre. There will be a discussion of the film's narrative (or lack of), Miller's visual language and gender representation.

### Narrative and Genre

The end of the world has been a site of exploration throughout cinema history. During the 1950s, a plethora of films was produced, blending the genre with science fiction. Films such as *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953) and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) saw society crumble from alien invasion. The 1960s saw an adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend* in *The Last Man on Earth* starring Vincent Price (Ubaldo Ragona & Sidney Salkow, 1964) and George A. Romero unleashed his seminal zombie apocalypse *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. All of these films within the post-apocalyptic genre reflect societal fears in a range of contexts:

To suggest that the ubiquity of apocalyptic and dystopian stories represents a bubbling-up of widely held fears about today and tomorrow – an expression of anxiety motivated by increasing economic inequality, the spectre of terrorism and the encroaching

threat of climate change, among other predictors of doom and gloom. (Crewe 2016: 34)

Miller developed and combined many of these fears of real-world disasters to create his dilapidated environment. *Mad Max: The Road Warrior* (1981), for instance, includes a prologue that features 'archive footage' of a nuclear disaster, causing the ruin of the planet. Miller's films also make effective use of their national landscapes, turning the nightmare of the apocalypse into a believable reality when, '[...] filmmakers choose to turn the streets of our cities and the dusty back roads of the outback into apocalyptic, dystopian worlds' (Dunks 2015: 92). Miller embeds *Fury Road's* narrative with many of the familiar tropes, utilising Australia's outback as a playground for his many extravagant set-pieces.

*Fury Road* was noted for its minimalist narrative. And indeed, Miller himself has commented on this as it was his intent from the start: "I wanted to tell a linear story – a chase that starts as the movie begins and continues for 110 minutes." There are few digital effects and even less dialogue' (Sperling: 2014). Given the series' prior success and its place within popular culture, the film had blockbuster ambitions from the start, with a budget in excess of \$150 million (Lang 2015:). The narrative, as Miller notes above, was meant to be as minimal as possible to display the visual scope of the environment and provide as many spectacular set pieces as possible. As



The opening scene of Max atop a cliff

Geoff King notes, '... narrative coherence of the blockbuster is often said to have been undermined by an emphasis on the provision of over-powering spectacle' (2002: 179). Miller can certainly be seen to play within this convention. However, King also comments that within blockbuster narratives, there is a, gradual development of narrative events, building slowly and inexorably across the length of a film towards a climax, often spectacular in nature' (2002: 185). Miller uses King's notion to great effect, building one chase sequence on another within a conventional three-act narrative. Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis describe conventional three-act structure as the following:

Act One introduces characters, goals, and conflict(s) and ends with a first turning point, which causes a shift to Act Two. A turning point, which may be signalled through

dialogue, setting, or other visual or sound techniques, represents a moment when an important change has occurred that affects a character or situation ...Act Three presents the dénouement, a series of events that resolves the conflicts that have arisen - not always happily. When the concluding moments of the film tie up all the loose strands, leaving no unanswered questions, the film is said to provide closure. (2005: 38)

In the opening scene, we are quickly introduced to Max, urinating atop of a cliff. Through sparse voice-over narration, we are brought up to speed about the environment in which he must survive, a world of 'fire and blood'.

Snippets of audio inform us of an oil war, the result of which is the dystopian land.

Max provides his backstory as a 'road warrior', a former cop, trying to survive. In many regards, the limited exploration of character in Act One relies heavily upon audiences' familiarity with the franchise and Max's backstory. The scene then shifts into its first prolonged chase sequences, where we are introduced to the 'War Boys', minions of the antagonist Immortan Joe. The very minimal first-act subverts our expectations as we barely have time to settle into the environment. We are introduced to Furiosa, who is dispatched by Immortan Joe for resupplies:

The film's conflict ignites when Immortan Joe discovers that not only has Furiosa deviated from her course on a routine supply mission to the neighbouring citadel of Gas Town, but she has also taken his wives out of their vault and has made off with them to a location only she knows. Thus, the extended car-chase sequence begins. (McLean 2017: 147)

The set-pieces during Act Two build on one another. The War Boys converge on Furiosa, with Max being used as a blood bag for Nux (Nicholas Holt), chained to the front of a car, face covered by a metal mask. A 'quieter' moment occurs when Max is thrown clear of the car that imprisons him and he discovers the oil tanker that Furiosa has hijacked. This moment of relative peace is disrupted with a fight between Max and Furiosa, with Max just barely getting the upper-hand.



Furiosa taking the oil tanker off course

This brief action sequence establishes the dynamics between the characters, and Miller uses these scenes to great effect. Max quickly realises he will need to rely upon Furiosa as he cannot start the oil tanker. Action is, obviously, central to the genre, however, '... like dance numbers in a musical, they can be integrated with long-running lines of action' (Bordwell 2006: 105). More scenarios occur as Immortan Joe pursues relentlessly, with his wives becoming more and more involved in the retaliation spearheaded by Furiosa.

The concluding action sequence occurs after Furiosa learns that her home, the 'Green Place', no longer exists.

Max decides to go his own way but changes his mind after realising their best chance of survival is to head back to the Citadel. Referring back to Pramaggiore and Wallis' view on Act Three, many of the conflicts are resolved during this final



A moment of 'peace' Furiosa and Max fight

chase, particularly for Furiosa rather than Max. Nux, now turned ally to Furiosa and Max, sacrifices himself to save the surviving rebels, thus achieving his place in the afterlife in Valhalla. Furiosa, rather than Max, confronts Joe and kills him. Max eliminates some of Joe's minions and later, once again, becomes a 'blood bag' for Furiosa after she is critically wounded. The group finally arrive back at the Citadel, revealing to the citizens Joe's body. The Citadel celebrates and Furiosa, with the remaining wives, ascend to take control. Max, however, blends into the crowd and exchanges a respectful look with Furiosa before departing into the unknown. The focus on resolving Furiosa's conflicts again demonstrates Max as a secondary figure and subverts the gender stereotypes of the action genre.

### Gender Representation

The blockbuster action genre has predominately been considered to cater to a male audience, and typically features a male protagonist:

Spectacular blockbusters usually offer plenty of scope for socio-cultural analysis in terms of gender-role construction, both in their themes and in the seemingly testosterone-driven dynamic of the rollercoaster aesthetic. (King 2002: 195)

However, as noted above, *Mad Max: Fury Road* challenges this convention and focuses on Furiosa rather than the title hero making its representation of gender more complex, as, '... the film does not simply reverse gender stereotypes. Despite its overt attempts at a feminist message—for instance, the chattel wives' refrain, "we are not things"—moments where masculinity is reconfigured are more nuanced' (Coning 2016: 175). Max is never emasculated. Instead, Furiosa is his equal if not better as she is a proven warrior with just as many (if not more) skills than Max. As their trust builds over the course of the narrative, Furiosa recognises Max as an outsider even to the masculine environment overseen by Immortan Joe. Miller depicts this ancient form of patriarchy as having caused the destruction of society as men, '... or, at least, unchecked masculinity – has brought about the collapse of society and has kept it in the dirt, and Miller depicts exactly why' (Gallagher 2015: 52). Max's reluctance to be part of any form of society that has developed since its collapse keeps him at a distance.



Furiosa discovers the 'Green Place' no longer exists

The very few lines of dialogue spoken by Max during the duration of the film demonstrate his reluctance to engage with the world's inhabitants as well as his distrust of this 'new' society and, '... seems unfazed by either the beauty of the Five Wives or the prospect of working on equal terms with Furiosa' (Gallagher 2015: 54). Furiosa, similarly, speaks very little and primarily gives orders to the wives to keep them alive. Most dialogue is spoken between the wives and Nux in the oil tanker as they drive through the desert. One of the best examples of the gender subversion occurs when Max has to rely on Furiosa's superior skills:

... he hands a rifle to Furiosa after missing twice; she then successfully takes the shot. This gesture, whereby a male character acknowledges his female counterpart's superior skill, is fairly novel in a genre where

women—even tough ones—are often relegated to the role of sidekick or sex object. (Coning 2016: 175)

Miller does not depict this as a defeat but rather the trust and bond that has grown between the two characters:

... it's not feminist because Theron's character gets to engage in as much violence as any other action lead, but because the world director and writer George Miller has created shows the horror of sexism and the necessity of freedom from patriarchy. That is what's truly terrifying to some men – not that Theron has more lines than actor Tom Hardy. (Valenti 2015: [Online])

This, however, is in conflict to Immortan Joe's sense of masculinity.



Max and Furiosa share a respectful look before Max disappears into the unknown, their bond established



During a crucial moment, Max needs Furiosa's expertise



Face of patriarchy – Immortan Joe

Joe's decaying body – he is encased in a plastic suit with breathing apparatus, lined with military medals – demonstrates the ancient patriarchal order that must be overthrown. Furiosa challenges Joe's notion of society, and power, and Max increasingly depends on her skills to survive which further subverts the patriarchy (and genre). Furiosa literally rips the face off of Joe, removing the

image of established patriarchy and thus establishing a new order.

#### Conclusion

Miller's world not only challenged expectations from fans of the franchise but fans of the action genre. By reducing Max's role as the central protagonist to a secondary character, Miller's blend of action with gender politics gave new dimensions to the typically male-



Removing the established order



Max praising one of the wives' survival techniques

orientated, well-worn genre. Hardy's performance of Max should be praised, giving the sense of a fully formed character that he 'inherited' from Mel Gibson's interpretation of the character, utilising the minimal dialogue to emphasise his detachment from society: 'As his arc is completed, he rediscovers his sense of trust, his willingness to be involved with others, and his own identity' (Gallagher 2015: 55). However, Theron plays against her image from the popular glamour of Dior advertisements and balances Hardy's taciturn nature. The use of a narrative structure that reduces the conventional three-act to the bare minimum motivates the best chase sequences of the twenty-first century. By taking on patriarchy, Miller's collaboration with Theron and Hardy rewrite the action playbook.

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