

Copyright

by

Justin Sean Harrison

2016

**The Thesis Committee for Justin Sean Harrison
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:**

**Living in the Wasteland:
Character, Worldbuilding and Humanism in the *Mad Max* Series**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Thomas Schatz

Mary Beltran

**Living in the Wasteland:
Character, Worldbuilding and Humanism in the *Mad Max* Series**

by

Justin Sean Harrison, B.A.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

For Lauren Crawshaw. A fellow *Mad Max* fan. A brilliant, good-hearted person. And a really excellent, really dear friend. May you ride eternal, shiny and chrome.

Acknowledgements

To begin with, I'd like to thank my family – my parents Hope and John Harrison and my younger brother Peter. You encouraged my passions and pushed me to do the best work I can, and the result is a Masters of Arts from one of the best schools in the world. Gratitude and love to you all.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Thomas Schatz, who took an interest in my project when I introduced it to him, helped me develop my ideas and my fandom into a cohesive piece of academic writing and got me back on track when writers' block reared its ugly head. I would also like to thank Mary Beltrán, my second reader, who offered really valuable feedback during my revision process. Gratitude and gratitude.

I would like to thank my managers at the South Lamar Alamo Drafthouse, particularly Michael Wilchester and Anthony Chacon, who made balancing my day job and my thesis manageable. Gratitude.

I'd like to thank my friends: Lauren Crawshaw, Emma Godfrey, Elizabeth Lerner, Kate Roché-Suar, Doc Bustos, Eric Harzer, John Ryan, Laura Davilla, David Dobbs, Travis Gibson, Lane Mann, Jessie Stout, Britta Hanson, Bear Wright, Tammy Richner, Elias Zeidan, Pete Kunze, Kyle Wrather, Nick Bestor, Rebecca Jackson, Scott Carlton, Byron Fong, and Morgan O'Brien. Y'all listened, offered feedback, pointed me in the direction of some really useful literature and are generally excellent people. Gratitude and love to you all.

Abstract

Living in the Wasteland: Character, Worldbuilding and Humanism in the *Mad Max* Series

Justin Sean Harrison, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Thomas Schatz

The long-running *Mad Max* series is a seminal entry in the contemporary western science fiction canon, particularly within the post-apocalyptic subgenre. This thesis argues that a major reason for the series' enduring success is that it is a fundamentally humanist text. It further argues that *Mad Max*'s humanism is identifiable and trackable through the construction of its characters and the world they inhabit across the four films in the series. Subjects of analysis include the films themselves, as well as several books written on and about them.

Table of Contents

Introduction:	1
I – <i>Mad Max</i>: The Origin Point and the Outlier	10
II – <i>The Road Warrior</i> and <i>Beyond Thunderdome</i>: A Coherent Wasteland in Which Action Becomes Character	28
Welcome to the Wasteland	28
A Brief Summary from After the End of the World	31
On the Authorship of <i>Mad Max</i>	37
The Wasteland	42
The Wastelanders	48
Wrapping Up and Moving On	56
III – The World Does Not Have to Stay Dead: <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>, the Resurgence of George Miller and the Resurrection and Refining of <i>Mad Max</i>	59
<i>Fury Road</i>'s Challenges	59
The Opening Scene	62
The Creative Collective Behind <i>Fury Road</i>	66
Ideology and Character in <i>Fury Road</i>	73
Coda	84

Works Cited.....89

Introduction

George Miller is a singular director. This is not to say that he is some sort of hermit who crafts movies that exist solely within their own context. He is a member of the Australian New Wave alongside peers that include Peter Weir and Nicholas Roeg. He is a peer of John Carpenter, James Cameron and the late Wes Craven, whose action and horror work in the 1970s and 1980s would go on to form a considerable chunk of the modern genre film canon. For the purposes of this paper, the latter is more important. Like John Carpenter, James Cameron and their fellows, Miller created an iconic character upon whom a popular series of movies was built. Carpenter has Michael Myers/The Shape, and to a lesser extent Snake Plissken. James Cameron has the Terminator and to a lesser extent the Na'Vi. Miller has Mad Max Rockatansky, the Road Warrior. Once a noble cop, Max was broken by the senseless murder of his family at the hands of a sadistic gang of bikers. He became first a murderous avenger and then a burned out drifter, wandering the Outback as a series of apocalyptic crises warped it into the Wasteland. Each *Mad Max* film after the first sees Max's self-imposed isolation and apathy tested by an encounter with people in need, and each time he steps up to help them, he regains some of his own humanity.

Unlike his peers, all of whom moved on from or lost the rights to their most famous creations¹, Miller has remained the primary creative voice behind Mad Max and the world he inhabits. This control of and commitment to his most famous creation is what makes him a singular filmmaker. He directed and co-wrote *Mad Max*, *Mad Max 2/The Road Warrior* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and co-directed *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* with George Ogilvie while co-writing again. The result of Miller's continued and constant hand in *Mad Max* has been

¹ The exception here being John Carpenter and Snake Plissken, but Plissken simply is not as iconic as Michael Myers, nor has the *Escape* series yet continued past 1996's *Escape from LA*.

a series of films that maintains thematic consistency whilst simultaneously diverging greatly in content. 1979's *Mad Max* is an exploitation film that develops into a full blown tragedy. 1981's *The Road Warrior* is an apocalyptic adventure with echoes of Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy and Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name*. 1984's *Beyond Thunderdome* begins as a riff on capitalism's vicious side before morphing into a family friendly romp that teams Mad Max with a group of borderline feral children who view him as a messianic figure. 2015's *Fury Road* is a full-blown epic, larger in scale than any of the previous *Max* pictures combined, and centering its title hero alongside his first true peer, Imperator Furiosa, as she battles a diabolical warlord who rather literally embodies the toxic nature of patriarchy. Of the four, *The Road Warrior 2* and *Fury Road* are the closest to each other in terms of content, and they are still dramatically different films by virtue of scale, focus and character work. Yet, despite the great differences in their content, the *Mad Max* films are joined by a common thread. While Max, the Wasteland and (in *The Road Warrior* and *Fury Road*) his trademark car, the V8 Interceptor, are the only textual elements to carry between the films, they share a thematic framework. Each of the *Mad Max* films explores civilization and human nature in a crucible, observing how the death of the world changes people for good and ill. And most crucially, each of the *Mad Max* films makes these observations with empathy and compassion for all involved.

Miller does not shrug off the atrocities of his villains or Max's own morally catastrophic decision to seek brutal revenge for the slaughter of his family, but he insists upon their humanity. The murderous bikers of the first *Mad Max* grieve for their fallen brother. The Lord Humungous, the warlord who lays siege to the innocents of *The Road Warrior* comforts his chief goon when the latter's lover/sex slave is slain. Auntie Entity and MasterBlaster, the antagonists of *Beyond Thunderdome*, are driven respectively by a desire to rebuild civilization and to look

out for each other (MasterBlaster is two people; Master, a little person, and Blaster, a developmentally disabled man). Even *Fury Road*'s Immortan Joe, the cruelest and most morally repellent of the series' villains, is to some extent a dying old man trapped in the poisonous hyper-masculine kingdom he built around the image of himself as a god king, unable to be anything other than the construct.

Conversely, Miller also creates heroes and heroines whose goals and desires are not only understandable in the context of their opponents being repellent, but in the context of the human condition as a whole. Max and his family are doing their best to get by as the world starts to fall apart, working to maintain decency for their own sakes as much as the world's sake. The settlers of *The Road Warrior* have built a successful community, and want it to thrive instead of simply surviving. The feral children of *Beyond Thunderdome* want to reach Tomorrow-morrow land and get out into the world beyond their tranquil but limited oasis. *Fury Road*'s Furiosa and the Five Wives of Immortan Joe seek liberation from a tyrant and the establishment of their own personhood after being treated as objects.

The result of Miller's attention to his characters' humanity is a series of apocalyptic films that run counter to the nihilism that can come with the genre. The *Mad Max* series is bleak, and the first film outright tragic, but the films are at their core humanist texts which insist that humanity is capable of moving past its many faults to heal and become something better, as evidenced by the gradual healing and redemption of Max Rockatansky across the series after his fall and transformation into the burned out Mad Max at the end of the first film.

While Miller's mastery of empathy is impressive, on its own it is not what makes him a unique filmmaker. James Cameron, despite his chronic failure to write dialogue that sounds human, built a tender romance and sad coming of age story into *The Terminator*. John Carpenter

has moments of grace and connection throughout even his bleakest pictures, be it RJ MacReady and Childs sharing a bottle as they wait for their inevitable deaths at the end of *The Thing* or Snake Plissken offering his hand to Maggie as the Duke bears down on them in *Escape from New York*. What specifically separates Miller from his peers, particularly when it comes to the apocalypse, is a combination of the *Max* films' Australian setting and their ultimately hopeful view of civilization.

Mad Max and its sequels are explicitly set in, and barring *Fury Road* shot in Australia². The first *Mad Max* drew in part upon Miller's anxieties over vicious behavior during a then recent gas shortage and the behavior of Australian bike gangs, which would serve as the blueprint for the murderous Toecutter and his gang. *The Road Warrior* introduces the warped remnants of the Outback, now transformed by the apocalypse into the Wasteland, a blighted ruin of its former self that becomes a crucible in which those who survived the world's fall are pitted against the remnants of pre-war civilization and each other. From its introduction, the Wasteland becomes one of the few recurring elements across the *Mad Max* series. In fact, the Wasteland is arguably the most important recurring piece of the film franchise outside of Max himself, since, per Rosyln Weaver, it is a space that reflects directly upon the mental and emotional states of its characters, and is thus ripe for an analytical reading. Weaver views the Wasteland as desolate and permanently doomed; by her argument, the original *Mad Max* trilogy concludes with the wild children's escape to the coast, beyond the Wasteland, while Max, forever lost inside himself, continues further and further into the interior. While I disagree with that reading, and would in fact argue that the Wasteland's nature throughout the films shifts with the changing

² Due to an unexpected rainy season in Australia, *Fury Road* had to shoot in Namibia or work with the most floral apocalypse ever.

balances of power and collective identity, Weaver's work is both intriguing and an apt argument for the Australian specificity of the Wasteland being part of what makes the *Mad Max* series such a rich set of texts. This is not to say that Carpenter or Cameron's worlds are lacking; *The Terminator* remains one of the iconic images of the apocalypse, and Carpenter's New York prison island and Outpost 31 are fantastic examples of spaces that reflect upon and exist in conversation with the characters who inhabit them. But they lack the cultural specificity and narrative mutability that makes the Wasteland such an interesting setting.

Miller's work is also set apart by the fact that, from *The Road Warrior* on, his films are ultimately a good deal more optimistic about human civilization and the human condition as a whole than either those of Carpenter or Cameron. Carpenter likes people, but does not care much for civilization as a whole. Snake Plissken rediscovers some of his decency, but the President, Chief Hawk and the Duke of New York, the men who hold the power in his world range from ruthless to completely and utterly venal. In both the *Escape* films and *They Live*, Carpenter argues that the best thing to do is set fire to the monstrous system and try to protect the people you care about, or, in the likely event that you cannot do that, avenge them. Cameron's work is full-on nihilistic. Humanity's capacity for brutality dooms itself to annihilation at the hands of SkyNet in *The Terminator*, and only the sacrifice of messianic figures or awful choices by a few good people can open the door for anything even remotely resembling a better tomorrow. *Avatar*, Cameron's last picture, posits that humanity as a whole should be junked, and abandoned not only for a better way, but a better species, with the few humans wise enough to live on allowed to bear witness. Miller is not so fatalistic. Humanity absolutely has the capacity to bring about its downfall, and once that happens some will descend into brutality for the sake of their own glorification, but every Max film features a sizable group of people who

not only do not give into their worse aspects, but insist on working towards a better world, by methods as diverse as starting over in the ruins of Sydney or overthrowing a god king's fortress and redistributing all his wealth among the people. It is not simply the beauty of the language that lead Miller to close *Mad Max: Fury Road* on the question "Where must we go... We who wander this Wasteland in search of our better selves?" It is a thesis statement, arguing not only for the possibility of humanity rebuilding, but the necessity of the struggle to be decent. The nature of that struggle is one of the key aspects of the *Mad Max* series' thematic content, and ultimately the driving force behind the empathy that makes Miller a unique, vital filmmaker.

What follows is a textual analysis of the four *Mad Max* films that aims to both prove and reinforce the argument that the series is fundamentally humanist. What do I mean by that? Well, to go to one of the sources on humanism, the American Humanist Association has a manifesto which they have revised several times over the years. The most recent incarnation of this manifesto, written in 2003 says:

Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns and extend to the global ecosystem and beyond. We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility.³

Miller has not claimed the title of humanist for himself⁴, but at least per that definition, the *Mad Max* films are all in some way humanist texts. They place great value on human life, acknowledge the capability of humanity to dramatically affect itself for good and ill and pay

³ "Humanist Manifesto III," *American Humanist Association*, 2003, http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/humanist_manifesto_iii.

⁴ He does, however, identify as a feminist.

careful, specific attention to the world in which the many broken people who make up *Mad Max*'s dramatis personae wander. This has not gone unnoticed by those who have written about the *Max* series, particularly with the recent release of *Fury Road*, but to my knowledge, there has never been a full length analysis of the *Mad Max* series as a humanist text. I will be consulting these earlier works as I carve out my own exploration of this series.

The most important pieces of writing for my paper are Adrian Martin's monograph *The Mad Max Movies*; an in depth argument about the strengths and weaknesses of the first three films in the series both as a whole and as individual films, one that I can both respond to and draw from to bolster my own arguments, and Roslyn Weaver's *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film*, which contains an extended segment on the Gibson trilogy, and compellingly argues that the series is ultimately fatalistic, providing a strong counter argument to push back against. Both Martin and Weaver are Australian writers, and they bring with them a specific perspective on one of their home country's most famous cultural exports that makes their work particularly valuable.

Martin writes about the the first three films through the lens of their action, and in fact goes so far as to say that "The ascription of 'higher motives and themes' is indeed a problem when one ends up with a detached, abstract, second order analysis that loses touch not only with what Miller called the 'kinetic quality of film', but also the energy and novelty that made these movies such an astonishing *event* within Australian cinema."⁵ I hope to avoid turning my work into a "detached, abstract, second order analysis," and while I would argue with Martin about the relative value of each film in the *Mad Max* trilogy, I plan to take his work on the series as action cinema, as films of movement and motion, and use it to ground my own humanist analysis of the

⁵ Adrian Martin, *The Mad Max Movies*, (Sydney: Currency Press, 2003), 6.

film, particularly in regards to the Wasteland's status as a space that reflects its inhabitants. Motion is constant throughout the *Max* films, from the literal (Max fleeing from Wez in the opening of *Mad Max 2*) to the figurative (Immortan Joe racing his own impending death to create a healthy heir and secure what he believes to be his ultimate legacy.) The blasted, hostile ruin that is the Wasteland makes motion necessary to survival, which in turn makes both the rare moments of rest in the series and the varying attempts characters make to move beyond a scavenger's existence all the more important in a consistently relentless world.

Weaver writes about the films starring Gibson in the context of apocalyptic Australian fiction. She considers the Wasteland in the context of both the Australian Outback and its history. In particular, she argues that the series is ultimately fatalistic, writing:

The films adopt an apocalyptic paradigm and Biblical language and imagery, but then subvert these aspects, sometimes comedically, in order to suggest that the positive sense of apocalypse, the new world, does not apply in this future Australia. Instead, this is a hellish vision, an apocalypse without the promise of heaven.⁶

While I disagree with Weaver's assessment of the Gibson trilogy, and would be very curious to learn her take on *Fury Road*, her consideration of the Wasteland as specifically a mutation of the Outback is invaluable. The *Mad Max* series has a genuinely unusual tonal balance, in part because of how different each film in the series is, and in part because of the national culture of Australia, and Weaver makes a point of taking that into account in her exploration of the series. She also places a good deal of emphasis on the Wasteland as a space that transforms its

⁶ Roslyn Weaver, *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 95.

inhabitants, which I plan to build on in my examination of the series villains and Miller's careful balance of their monstrosity and their humanity.

For *Mad Max: Fury Road*, I will draw upon Abbie Bernstein's *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*, a lengthy exploration of the creative development and production of the 2015 film, featuring concept art and interviews with actors, artists and screenwriters, as well as an introduction from Miller himself. I will also make use of the host of interviews conducted with the cast and crew during *Fury Road*'s release and its later run at the Oscars.

Mad Max and *Fury Road*, as a pre-apocalyptic tragedy and an epic which simultaneously continues and reboots Max's story (to the point of swapping out the now toxic series lead Mel Gibson for Tom Hardy) are the two most distinct entries in the series. They will each receive a chapter of their own. *Mad Max 2* and *Beyond Thunderdome*, which introduce the Wasteland and have the closest relation to each other textually, will share a chapter. Each chapter will examine Max's character development, the development of the Wasteland in conjunction with each film's cultures and characters, as well as the continuing advancement of the series' overall story. Upon completion, this monograph will hopefully have both sung the praises of this singular series, and more importantly, shined a light on what I consider to be both a crucial and under-explored aspect of its overall text.

I - *Mad Max: The Origin Point and the Outlier*

When discussing the *Mad Max* series, the first movie is the strangest one to explore. There are a number of reasons for this. There is its downbeat tone – *Mad Max*'s last act sees the once noble cop Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) lose his family to an act of horrible violence, and subsequently cast aside his morality, his compassion and his sanity for the sake of a revenge that leaves him a hollow man with nothing to live for. There is its setting; while *Mad Max 2*, *Beyond Thunderdome*, and *Fury Road* take place in the mythical space of the Wasteland, *Mad Max* is explicitly set in a crumbling but recognizable Australia. On a related note, *Mad Max* is the only film in the series that does not frame its events as a legend in the making or tied to history. *Mad Max 2* and *Beyond Thunderdome* both feature narrators who pass on the story of their encounter with Max to an audience, and *Fury Road* closes with a quote from “The First History Man” which places the film’s events in a larger historical context. There is also its cast of characters, which draws much more heavily on action and exploitation archetypes than the casts of the subsequent films.

Max, prior to his rampage and descent into madness, is a prototypical good cop on the edge, if one more troubled by his affinity for violence than some. His nemesis, the biker gang leader known only as the Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne), is a well-performed and memorable variation on the bloodthirsty biker. The series would swiftly move away from archetypes and into a more distinct vein for its characters. *Mad Max 2* in particular would develop Max into a silent, amoral drifter more closely aligned with Toshiro Mifune’s wandering ronin and Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name than Harry Callahan, and that structure would in turn serve as the basis for his character for the remainder of the series. The late Toecutter would be succeeded

by the Lord Humungous, a scantily-clad, muscle-bound, soft-spoken Wasteland tyrant, and the first of a series of memorable, distinctive antagonists. Connected to its more archetypal characters and more down to earth setting is the fact that *Mad Max* is perhaps the most talkative movie in the series, rivaled only by the back half of *Beyond Thunderdome*, where the pidgin English of a tribe of lost children Max encounters becomes incredibly important to both their story and *Beyond Thunderdome*'s thematic content. *Mad Max* is, in other words, unlike any other *Mad Max* movie; it is a series pilot that was never meant to be a series pilot.

But, as unusual as *Mad Max*'s narrative content is in relation to its successors, it still sets up the characters, themes and narrative structure that the rest of the series will deploy to some extent. On a textual level, *Mad Max* movies will always be humanist movies. Without fail, every *Mad Max* movie in the series will pay attention to the state of its characters and the world that they live in and have helped build. They are always critical of the self-destructive cycles of violence that people can perpetuate against each other and trap themselves in. They are never casual about the moral and emotional consequences of violence, even as they feature thrilling and inventive action sequences. They do not treat Max as a static action figure, but a continually growing and changing character, one whose transforming moral and mental state is always a key aspect of the film's storytelling.

Within *Mad Max*, this may be seen in Miller's continual attention to the consequences that Max's violent life has for himself and the people he loves, as well as for the people who becomes his enemies. Max struggling to comprehend his grief over the maiming of his partner and later completely shutting down after the destruction of his family is just as important to the film's success as its opening and closing chases; indeed, they inform each other. The violent life

of a cop in the last days of Australia takes its toll on Max until he snaps and becomes even more violent and terrifying than the bikers whose actions lead to his rampage.

In terms of the *Mad Max* series' structure and internal archetypes, the first film can be stripped down to a structure which all three of its sequels begin from and rework to differing extents. Max is always an outsider or intruder who becomes involved in a pre-existing conflict between a Warlord figure and a group of oppressed people. The oppressed people call upon a reluctant Max, who initially aids them out of begrudging self-interest, but later comes to care for and help them because of his innate decency and compassion. The story's action comes to a head in a climactic chase in which the Warlord figure and their minions are defeated, but often at great cost to Max and his allies. With the Warlord dead and a better future for his allies ensured, Max bids them farewell and resumes his wanderings.

In *Mad Max* itself, Max's outsider status comes from being one of the few cops left in the failing Australia. His allies are his fellow officers and his family, who he wants to leave the force to spend more time with. The Toecutter is the Warlord, and the oppressed people anyone who has the misfortune to land on his bad side, which in practice translates to just about everyone. Max initially opposes the Toecutter and his gang because it's the right thing to do, but in an inversion of the formula *Mad Max* created, becomes more selfish and self-centered as the movie progresses, culminating in his emotional shutdown after his child's death and his wife's annihilation⁷ and his subsequent vicious revenge. The deaths of Toecutter and his gang certainly mean that they will not be terrorizing anyone any longer, and Max does depart civilization to wander, but the context of those actions in *Mad Max* is bleaker than the context of the other

⁷ Jessie Rockatansky is technically alive when she's last seen in the film, but maimed and comatose. She is explicitly referred to as dead in *Mad Max 2*.

series' endings – *Mad Max 2*'s is ambivalent without being as completely bleak as the first's ending, *Beyond Thunderdome*'s is mostly optimistic, and *Fury Road*'s is downright joyous.

The visual aesthetic of *Mad Max* is, like so many other parts of the film, quite different from that of its successors, due to a limited budget and the nature of its setting, but it does establish a trend of design reflecting and commenting upon character. The Toecutter wears animal skins on his biker gear, and has a leonine hairstyle that gels well with his persistent need to establish dominance. Max is given a sleek, powerful custom pursuit car, the V8 Interceptor, as an incentive to stay with the police. He leaves it behind for a family station wagon with a science fiction spacescape printed on the side during his doomed sojourn to civilian life. When his family is killed, he steals the Interceptor to carry out his revenge, and keeps it until its destruction in *Mad Max 2* and/or its capture, reconstruction and then destruction in *Fury Road*.⁸ Cars vary in importance to the individual films in the series (the Interceptor is incredibly important to *Mad Max* and *Mad Max 2*, cars in general are negligible for the majority of *Beyond Thunderdome*, and the Interceptor is succeeded in textual importance and screentime by the titanic War Rig in *Fury Road*), but visual aesthetics are always a key component of a *Mad Max* movie's text.

Where does the comparatively unusual nature of *Mad Max* leave it in relation to the rest of its series? I would argue that while it is not the key film in the series (that would be either *Mad Max 2* or *Fury Road*), it is the bedrock upon which its sequels would build. Beyond the blunt reasoning that if *Mad Max* did not exist, its sequels would not exist in the forms they do, it builds a narrative framework that the rest of the series would follow and in-text establishes the

⁸ *Mad Max*'s timeline has never been the most solid thing, and the series' mythical elements mean that even after the Interceptor gets quite thoroughly blown up in *Mad Max 2*, it can still show up intact in the beginning of *Fury Road*.

mental and emotional state that Max spends the rest of the series growing out of and healing from. On a humanistic level, *Mad Max* establishes a pattern of looking critically at humanity's destructive and self-destructive tendencies and interrogating them through action. The conclusions it draws about human nature are bleak, but they would be deepened and expanded upon in subsequent films. *Mad Max* as a whole is an incredibly rich series to explore, and the one-shot action revenge movie that unintentionally kicked it off does a fair share of the work to make that later richness possible.

To move beyond the onscreen and textual elements of *Mad Max* for a moment, it is important to consider its position in George Miller's career. It was his first feature film, it was made for a very low budget and it was made at a time when the Australian film industry was undergoing a period of expansion and redefinition. Here I turn to one of my key sources for this project, Adrian Martin. Martin, an Australian film critic, wrote a 2003⁹ monograph on the Gibson *Max* trilogy. While he focuses first and foremost upon the filmmaking and composition of the Gibson trilogy, he takes time to explore the series' text and context as well. I frequently disagree with his reading of the trilogy (indeed, this project may be considered a concerted counterpoint to his overall argument about the nature of the series), but this project would not be possible without the work that he has done. In discussing the making of *Mad Max*, which he considers both the strongest Gibson *Max* film and one of the greatest Australian films ever made, Martin says:

Mad Max is Australia's greatest B movie. That it is not often acknowledged as such is due to several extenuating factors, such as its huge box office success and the retroactive gloss cast by its much more expensive

⁹ *Fury Road* was in one of its initial attempts at production during this time, with Gibson set to reprise Max.

sequels... [it] has gained - and also suffered - from other retroactive inflations of its content. Many of the themes that receive fuller, richer treatment in the later installments exist only in a sketchy, nascent form in this debut.¹⁰

Martin's point is important. Miller was not conceiving of *Mad Max* as the inaugural entry in a series that would play out across 36 years while he was making it. He was too busy working to make sure that none of his stunt performers died, that the stunts they were performing actually wound up on camera and that he did not run out of money. And on a purely practical level, even in 1979, \$380,000¹¹ would not have been enough money to successfully realize the Wasteland as it appears in *Mad Max 2*, let alone *Beyond Thunderdome* or *Fury Road*. But while Miller was limited by his budget and the fact that he had not yet conceived of *Mad Max 2* when making *Mad Max*, the attention to detail in his characters and his world is already active and present, and that work in turn lays the groundwork for the series later humanistic content and optimism. Martin says:

It's easy to forget that the inaugural film's discourse on heroism pretty much amounts to a few lines from Max's police boss, Fifi (Roger Ward)... Likewise, it's easy to overlook that the setting, 'a few years from now' according to the opening title, is not in fact post any apocalypse greater than a general breakdown of social order... Any image of society it manages to conjure appears on screen only in the most abstract, skeletal terms.¹²

Martin's overall argument is accurate. *Mad Max* is not as thematically dense as its sequels, and when placed in conversation with them, it does not have the depth which they get

¹⁰ Martin, 14-15.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

¹² Ibid, 15.

from being able to build on the work of prior *Mad Max* films. It also does not take place in Wasteland, which is much more explicitly a mirror to the characters who inhabit it. But I disagree with Martin when he dismisses the near-future of 1979's Australia as simply "a general breakdown of social order" and argues that *Max*'s depiction of society lacks depth.

After *Mad Max*, Australia ceases to exist. The world as we know it experiences a series of conflicts and crises which lead to the fall of 20th century civilization, cities are abandoned, and the Outback becomes the Wasteland. *Mad Max* does not take place before this fall, but in its earliest stages, when Australia is still (barely) a functioning state. Roslyn Weaver says in *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film*:

Many filmmakers set their post-apocalyptic nightmares in the city and depict the urban world at its worst. One can easily transfer such dystopias from one city to another across the world. In the *Mad Max* trilogy, however, the audience rarely sees the city... Instead, these films narrate a future Australia where the outback is the setting for apocalypse - in fact, the outback, the land, is apocalypse... Australian fictions... show a world where nature is hostile towards its inhabitants.¹³

I disagree with Weaver's eventual argument that the *Mad Max* trilogy is fatalistic to the point of precluding optimism, but her positioning of the Outback/Wasteland as not only an apocalyptic setting but actively part of the apocalypse is an incredibly useful tool for considering *Mad Max*'s unique pre-apocalypse. Max's doomed family can still buy ice cream from a stand and live in a comfortable bungalow near the beach, but Miller builds the world primarily from empty, abandoned roads and pockets of civilization which are actively falling apart, particularly

¹³ Weaver, 93.

the massive and almost empty MFP police station where Max and his few colleagues work¹⁴. By the time *Mad Max* ends, we will witness the transformation of Australia into the Wasteland. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that, in the context of the series, *Mad Max*'s final scene, in which a broken, insane Max drives off into oblivion, marks the precise moment of the Wasteland's birth.

But before the Wasteland can be born, the groundwork needs to be laid for its creation. Prior to the murder of Max's family and his subsequent rampage, the Australia Miller builds in *Mad Max* would best be described as "ramshackle." The roads are still in decent shape, but they are littered with wrecks and roadkill. Everything else is falling to pieces. The town of Wee Jerusalem, which is visited by the Toecutter and his biker gang, is all but deserted, and is described by Martin as part of a vision of society which is shown "only in the most abstract, skeletal terms. This is a political exploitation film without a visible polis."¹⁵ Martin goes on to explicitly compare New Jerusalem to a town from the US Old West, with its single, barren main street, train station and empty storefronts. A diner and a nightclub, both seen briefly, are more populated, but the former is established as a regular hang-out for its inhabitants and the latter's cabaret act croons seductive tunes about men with reliable access to gasoline.

The Main Force Patrol, the police force Max works for, operates out of the aforementioned crumbling Hall of Justice. It has a staff of under ten people, the most prominent of whom, outside of Max and his ill-fated partner Goose (Steve Bisley), is an unseen but omnipresent female radio operator who seems more concerned with making sure that the MFP follows proper reporting conduct than their ability to do their jobs. At different points during the

¹⁴ The literally crumbling station is almost always announced with a grand, stentorian theme - an early instance of Miller's consistent and bleak sense of humor.

¹⁵ Martin, 15.

film, she is heard reminding MFP officers not to abuse their privileges when requisitioning food supplies and announcing that hospital vouchers are available again. With the exception of the MFP's cars and single onscreen motorcycle, every vehicle in the movie appears to either be a custom-built machine or a hodgepodge of whatever the driver could throw together. Mechanics are happy to trade for service, or, it is strongly implied, just out and out steal whatever they can get their hands on. The healthiest looking places in *Mad Max*'s Australia are isolated homes, which are still subject to invasion and destruction at the hands of Toecutter and his gang of murderous manchildren. The Australia that Miller and the *Mad Max* team construct is sparsely populated, hanging onto itself by a thread and rapidly heading towards ruin. Weaver writes:

These films reject common science fiction depictions of a future world that is filled with advanced technologies and interstellar travel. Instead, they show an Australia that is hostile, unwelcoming and largely empty - an image that can represent the present or past as much as the future...¹⁶

Weaver interprets the failing Australia and the subsequent Wasteland as a cyclically apocalyptic image, rather than a more straightforward progression from the failure of society to its ruin. She argues that the image of Australia as a place of ruin and punishment recurrent is within the nation's history, and that the *Mad Max* series is a prime example of this. The world of *Mad Max* reflects its inhabitants, particularly when it comes to the patterns of self-destruction and violence that they so often fall into.

It is these corrosive patterns of behavior, and the lack of recognition or will to change on the part of those who enact them that lays the groundwork for *Mad Max*'s tragedy. By the picture's end, Max Rockatansky has burnt up his integrity, his mercy, his sanity and his

¹⁶ Weaver, 92.

humanity in the name of exacting revenge. With that mission fulfilled, the once noble cop is left, to quote *Mad Max 2*'s opening narration, "a shell of a man, a burnt-out, desolate man, a man haunted by the demons of his past."¹⁷ The motley assortment of characters who inhabit *Mad Max* are a roster of people have trapped themselves in destructive patterns that, without fail, leave them demonstrably worse off. And it is here, in the exploration of these characters and their flaws and failings, that *Mad Max*'s greatest strengths as a film and as a humanistic text lie. This is particularly noticeable in the story arcs of *Mad Max*'s lead characters: the Toecutter and Max himself.

The Toecutter and his gang of ultraviolent manchildren are horrible people. They are, to a man, casually violent, sexual predators or both. They are cruel, hateful, borderline feral and consistently refuse to respond to the world with anything other than callousness and cruelty. When presented with a choice between being vicious and not, they choose the vicious route every single time. The Toecutter himself is the best example of this. Wild-haired and dressed in motorcycle leathers decorated with pelts, Keays-Byrne plays him as a leonine figure of pure wrath. He is cunning, he is sadistic, he is prone to preening, and he hates to be upstaged. His movement is mannered, a constant balance between stillness and abrupt movement, calculated to take whomever he is interacting with off-guard and put them under his power. He is just as likely to respond to someone with poisoned politesse as he is a bizarre vocalization somewhere between a hiss and a roar. A prime moment of Toecutter's perpetual need for dominance may be found in the scene where he puts an affectionate arm around Johnny the Boy (Tim Burns), one of his two chief goons, right after telling him not to worry his "pretty little mouth"¹⁸ while shoving a shotgun down his throat.

¹⁷ *The Road Warrior*, directed by George Miller (1981; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), Blu-Ray.

¹⁸ *Mad Max*, directed by George Miller, (1979; Beverly Hills, MGM, 2015), Blu-Ray.

Toecutter is, above all else, driven by the need to dominate others and leave his mark on them. His obsessive need for violent control manifests in every one of his scenes, even when Miller is showing empathy for him. When he arrives in the town of Wee Jerusalem, he has come to wreak havoc and, more unusually for a murderous biker, claim the body of a recently deceased peer. The Nightrider (Vincent Gil) was a well-regarded member of his gang who perished while trying to flee from Max, and Toecutter mourns his loss. He displays his grief as publicly, dramatically and manipulatively as he does everything else, but Miller and Keays-Byrne still treat it as genuine anguish. Consider the following interaction, between the Toecutter, Bubba Zanetti (Geoff Parry) – the brainier of his chief goons and the manager of the train station where the Nightrider’s body has been deposited:

MANAGER: That must be your friend over there. They didn’t leave much of him.

BUBBA: Must’ve cut his heart out, eh?

MANAGER: Yes. That’s what I meant. Poor bastard.

TOECUTTER: The Nightrider. That is his name, the Nightrider.

MANAGER: The Nightrider.

TOECUTTER: Remember him when you look at the night sky!

MANAGER: I will.

TOECUTTER: Take your hat off.

MANAGER: Anything you say.

TOECUTTER: Anything I say. What a wonderful philosophy you have. Take him away.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.

(Toecutter's goons take the manager away.)

Toecutter's grief does not make him sympathetic, it humanizes him. His insistence upon dominating all who cross his path, and lashing out at the world ultimately leaves him with no options other than to keep beating down everyone he can and to run from anyone he cannot. This cycle is one of Toecutter's own making, but Miller, even when focusing more on the immediate concerns of filmmaking than on the text he is building, is acutely aware that Toecutter has trapped himself and does not recognize the extent of his own damage until the instant before his death. He is venal, hateful and responsible for most of the damage to *Mad Max*'s already wounded Australia. He is also human, and Miller never loses sight of this amidst his roar-hisses and wonton acts of carnage. He is capable of affection, albeit affection that is only displayed in twisted and unhealthy ways. He is capable of grief, as seen in his genuine desire for the Nightrider to be remembered and honored. And he is capable of fear, particularly in the last seconds before his death. After his attempt to ambush Max fails, Toecutter flees from the enraged cop. Even badly wounded, Max gets back into his car and relentlessly hounds his foe. With Max closing in, Toecutter gets so caught up in his own fear that he drives straight into an oncoming truck, and is killed. In the instant before impact, Miller zooms in on Toecutter's eyes, which have been overcome with terror. It is an excellent piece of filmmaking on a number of levels. It calls back to a similar shot from the Nightrider's death, linking the Toecutter to his subordinate both in image and in character - even the meanest and most dangerous man fears death when it comes unexpectedly, and the lives the Nightrider and Toecutter lead put them on a path where such a death was a distinct possibility. It contrasts with shots of a blank-faced Max, at this point totally gone emotionally beyond anger and pain, tying together two men defined by the cycles of behavior they have trapped themselves in. And perhaps most importantly for the

argument for *Mad Max* as a humanist text, it has a visual impact. Toecutter's death is not played for triumph, but to unsettle the audience and reinforce that while Toecutter was horrible, he was still a person and that seeking revenge has turned Max into the brutal, dead-eyed killer he explicitly feared becoming. Praising the filmmaking of *Mad Max*, Martin writes:

To slow down and freeze-frame these scenes takes you into the tiniest intervals of film language: fleeting images that create an impression (rather than make any strict, realistic sense) when run together at normal speed... The most extreme action moments in the *Mad Max* movies are marked by... apparition, the after-effect of certain images lingering in the retina or in the mind.²⁰

Life in *Mad Max*, even a life lived as vilely as the Toecutter's has a weight, and its violent end is not something to be casually celebrated. There are moments across *Mad Max* and its sequels where violence is cathartic (Nightrider and Toecutter's deaths are as satisfying as they are unsettling), necessary (repeatedly in *Mad Max 2* and *Fury Road*) and even redemptive (*Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*), but Miller never lets death become casual or something to be brushed aside.

Indeed, the work Miller does to bring consequences to his violence is part of the reason why Max Rockatansky's fall into amorality and emotional oblivion is so successful on dramatic and thematic levels. Miller and Gibson create a lead character who begins as a good-hearted, competent, self-aware hero. Max is one of the very few people in the film to express reservations about the increasing brutality of the conflict between the MFP and Toecutter's gang, particularly when it comes to the mental and emotional consequences of living in a state of permanent and total war. As he explains to Fifi Macaffee, his captain (Roger Ward):

²⁰ Martin, 32.

MAX: I'm scared, Fif. You know why? It's that rat circus out there. I'm beginning to enjoy it.

FIFI: What is this, bonny week?

MAX: Look. Any longer out on that road and I'm one of them, you know? A terminal crazy, only I got a bronze badge to say I'm one of the good guys.²¹

Max's uncertainty and anxiety stands in marked contrast to the gleeful viciousness of the Toecutter and his gang, or the sometimes well-intentioned flailing of his few co-workers. In his private life, he's a loving, attentive husband to his wife Jessie (Joanne Samuel) and, as he is at work, self-aware and attentive to the process of maintaining their relationship. Martin argues that *Mad Max's* non-action scenes do not possess the same level of craft or importance to the film's impact:

To my mind, the power and importance of *Mad Max* reside not in any discernible literary-type themes - or even in the overall narrative trajectory, despite Miller's own frequent assertions to the effect that 'the story is king' - but in its remarkable action scenes... not even the firmest *Mad Max* fan could pretend that a scene like Max's sappy backstory about his dear, dead Dad (Jessie has the right idea: she kisses him to shut him up) encapsulates what is best in it.²²

Here I must disagree again with Martin. Part of what makes *Mad Max* so effective a film is its thematic coherence and the attention that is paid to establishing strong, memorable characters. Max, Toecutter and company are certainly archetypal - the cop teetering on the edge, the ruthless and frightening biker, but Miller applies the same care to their characters that he does their fantastic, horrifying final chase. This is particularly true with Max, who, like

²¹ *Mad Max*, directed by George Miller, (1979; Beverly Hills, MGM, 2015), Blu-Ray.

²² Martin, 21.

Toecutter, is caught in a destructive behavioral cycle that leaves him worse off at the film's end than he was at the beginning. But where Toecutter's cycle generates a fairly simple narrative arc (he gets more and more brash and ruthless until he creates someone he cannot crush and is thereby undone), Max's arc is a good deal more complicated and complex.

Max's self-awareness, which is in many ways a strength, is also a crucial weakness. Rather than work through his anxieties and fears, he compartmentalizes his life. He is desperately afraid of becoming a burn-out, and has demonstrable evidence that his work with the MFP is taking a toll on his wellbeing. In his introductory chase, he charges the Nightrider's car head on, remaining completely stoic even as the Nightrider panics and subsequently fatally crashes. When he does allow himself to react, Max is not relieved or glad; he is clearly surprised and unsettled, if not outright alarmed, by what he has done. Work is a source of perpetually increasing anxiety and danger for Max. Thus, he places a tremendous amount of importance on his friendship with his partner Goose and his home life with Jessie and their infant son Sprog (Brendan Heath), so much so that those relationships become a crutch with which to maintain his mental and emotional health. When Goose is burned alive and rendered comatose by Toecutter and his men, Max struggles to accept his friend's fate. He is visibly traumatized by the unseen remnant of his best friend, and admits to Jessie that he cannot make sense of what has happened. When Jessie and Sprog are run down (Sprog is killed and Jessie left maimed and comatose in a similar fashion to Goose), Max's entire support system shatters. His efforts to keep his personal life completely isolated from the stresses and dangers of his professional life backfire, leaving him with no one to turn to, no way to heal, and no other options that he considers viable beyond stealing the powerful V8 Interceptor built specifically for him from the MFP's garage and systematically hunting down and killing every member of Toecutter's gang.

Miller repeatedly focuses on Gibson's face during *Mad Max*'s last act, as he has gone almost completely expressionless. Jessie's doctor explicitly compares him to a zombie, and he goes almost completely mute, save to extract information from a mechanic who works for Toecutter and to inform Johnny the Boy that he might be able to save himself from the soon-to-explode wreck Max has chained him to if he saws through his ankle rather than the chain. The viciousness and sadism of the avenger who sets Johnny's death trap is far removed from the young man trying to process the loss of his best friend or doing a Tarzan yell as he jumps into a lake while on vacation with his wife. Max's rampage is both cinematically thrilling and unsettling. The high-speed chases are mixed in with shots of a dead-eyed Max continuing his hunt for Toecutter. And after Max leaves Johnny to almost certain horrible death, Miller cuts once more to his face, blank and broken behind the wheel of the Interceptor. Max Rockatansky is dead. Long live Mad Max.

The very last shot in *Mad Max* suggests that Max's fall is the end of Australia and the birth of the Wasteland, with everything else due to follow shortly thereafter. Of that shot, Martin writes:

The very last gesture Max makes is to close his eyes at the wheel, before the film passes to its final image, familiar from a dozen arty road movies: an unmoored POV barreling forth on a road to nowhere.²³

Weaver, in discussing the Gibson *Mad Max* films' use of Australia as a setting, notes:

...the camera silhouettes Max on the road or in the desert, and he becomes the dominant feature of the landscape because he is the last left standing after a road battle... Max's exile in the outback reinforces a popular association of

²³ Martin, 20.

desert and judgement. The idea of Australia as a place of punishment reflects the origins of British Australia as a penal colony, where England might forget the nation's criminal inhabitants... The depiction of the Australian landscape as harsh therefore aligns with the location of criminality and lawlessness.²⁴

Though I disagree with Weaver's assessment of the *Mad Max* series as overall fatalistic, I will concede that the first *Mad Max* is easily the bleakest film in the series, and that Miller's humanism is present more in his awareness of his characters' humanity and his insistence upon the weight and consequences of violence rather than a narrative that allows for the possibility that people can overcome the destructive cycles of behavior they so often trap themselves in. Much of this is attributable to the nature of *Mad Max*'s production and Miller's work on it - *Mad Max* was not developed with the goal of making a franchise, and if need be it can stand on its own as a complete text. In that reading, *Mad Max* qualifies more as a cynical observation about then contemporary Australian culture and the international anxiety about oil, gas and international power conflicts, but still one with an attention to and compassion for humanity. *Mad Max* does not condemn its characters for existing, it condemns them for their actions, and it does so with sorrow rather than the outright glee of James Cameron, one of Miller's peers in high-grade cinematic science fiction, whose post-*Terminator* science fiction holds most of humanity in active contempt. Compare the ending of *Mad Max* to *Avatar*. Both films close on characters leaving behind their humanity – Max is dead inside, and *Avatar*'s hero Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) chooses to transfer his consciousness to the body of his alien Avatar. Jake's consciousness-transfer is a moment of rebirth and ascension beyond humanity, whereas Max's fall, and the coming fall of the world are portrayed as a genuine loss.

²⁴ Weaver, 98-99.

But *Mad Max* is not a complete text. It is the first entry in a series that will see Miller take the character work and ideas he introduced and brought into play with this film and builds upon them. The result is a series of films which are increasingly technically and thematically complex, and which will, in text, follow Mad Max on a long journey back towards humanity and heroism. The setting will move from the low-key crumbling dystopian Australia of the first film to the full-blown mythic space of *Fury Road*. None of the later movies would be possible without *Mad Max*, and on its own it has much that is worth of consideration, but in the series itself, it will swiftly become the quieter, sadder prologue to the humanist apocalypse of *Mad Max 2*, *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*.

II - *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*: A Coherent Wasteland in Which Action Becomes Character

Welcome to the Wasteland

If *Mad Max* is the offbeat series pilot that was never meant to be a series pilot, and *Fury Road* is the revision, condensation and ultimate expression of the *Mad Max* series' narrative, thematic content and filmmaking style, then *The Road Warrior* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* are the works through which the series becomes itself, and prior to the release of *Fury Road* in 2015, completes itself. *Mad Max 2* (Also called *The Road Warrior*, which it will be referred to as here for simplicity's sake) is particularly important on this front, since the additions it makes to the series will serve as the building blocks and thematic touchstones for both *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*.

The Road Warrior formally introduces the Wasteland, the desert that grew from the remains of the old world and became a place of tribulation reflecting all who inhabit it, whether they seek to rule, rebuild, escape or just survive. Its villains, the musclebound, eloquent Lord Humungous (Kjell Nilsson), his mowhawked and near-feral second in command Wez (Vernon Wells) and their band of raiders in ramshackle armor and cars, set the template for *Beyond Thunderdome*'s Aunty Entity (Tina Turner), *Fury Road*'s Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne) and their respective armies. After the comparatively dialogue-heavy *Mad Max*, action becomes the primary method of character development and exploration, a storytelling choice that Miller will sustain for the remainder of the series. A significant portion of the minimal dialogue in *The Road Warrior* is dedicated to its new framing as in-text history – the movie opens and closes with the dying leader of the Great Northern Tribe passing on the story of the group's fateful

encounter with Max when he was a child. Through that narration, the *Mad Max* series moves away from the comparative realism of the first movie (which opened with a title card setting it “A Few Years from Now”) and into a more mythical space, one tied to the oral tradition and storytelling. This mythical framing will get stronger in *Beyond Thunderdome*, where a group of feral children who rescue Max take him to be the messiah figure of their own oral tradition, and again at the very end of *Fury Road*, where a closing card offers context for the way the film’s events will be received by the Wasteland’s inhabitants.

The Road Warrior, in other words, is an extremely influential movie within its series, and until the release of *Fury Road*, it was the most acclaimed and best regarded film in the series.²⁵ Martin writes that, while the first *Mad Max* had to face hostility from Australian critics and was comparatively obscure in the United States, “by the time *Mad Max 2* seized the cover of the prestigious US magazine *Film Comment* in July 1982 – a space reserved, until then, for the best of American and European cinema – a radical flip-flop had occurred. Some highly cultured Australians were more than willing to redefine their sensibilities to fit the new, internationalist, postmodern mood announced by the film’s awesome commercial triumph.”²⁶

The Road Warrior’s sequel, *Beyond Thunderdome*, is often regarded as both the most unusual and least successful film in the entire *Mad Max* series. Per Weaver:

Reactions to the third film show the spectrum of varying opinions. Ross Gibson considers it to have “grandeur” (“Yondering” 26) and American film critic Roger Ebert hails it as the finest of the trilogy, “one of the best films of

²⁵ *The Road Warrior* has also been highly influential outside of its own series. Its story and setting have been pillaged, paid homage and riffed upon so often that David J. Moore (sic), the author of *World Gone Wild: A Survivor’s Guide to Post-Apocalyptic Movies* has classified “*The Road Warriors*” as a full-fledged subgenre of post-apocalyptic film.

²⁶ Martin, 3.

1985” and “a movie of great visionary wonders” (n.p.) Martin, on the other hand, calls it a “misstep” (73) accusing it of “pop zaniness” with an imported “rock culture [that] deranges the film” (71). The negative view of *Thunderdome* has tended to predominate.²⁷

Martin’s critique of *Beyond Thunderdome* is frustratingly shallow – he outright says that “...it arouses little excitement of any kind in me. It is up to others to defend it at length...”²⁸ and he spends most of the chapter ostensibly dedicated to it instead discussing the possibilities of the announced but unmade *Mad Max 4*, which would become *Fury Road* twelve years later. But Martin is not alone in disliking the film and considering it out of place. And, to be fair, in the context of the series, *Beyond Thunderdome* is an anomaly, even compared to the first film. It is the only *Mad Max* film that Miller did not direct by himself. Byron Kennedy, his production partner, was killed in a helicopter crash early on in *Beyond Thunderdome*’s production, and the grieving Miller brought in George Ogilvie, a theater director, to co-direct the picture. *Beyond Thunderdome*’s pacing is slower than any of the other *Mad Max* films, and the balance between its action and non-action sequences is not as well-tuned as *The Road Warrior* or *Fury Road*’s. Nevertheless, it is still a *Mad Max* film. Tina Turner’s Aunty Entity, *Beyond Thunderdome*’s antagonist, is the most layered and complex character in the series until *Fury Road*. The Children of the Crack, the semi-feral band of abandoned kids Max finds himself helping during the second half of the picture offer an interesting look at how a post post-apocalyptic society and its legends might grow in the Wasteland. *Beyond Thunderdome* also offers Max’s story a definitive ending that simultaneously holds the door open for further stories. For 30 years, it was the series’

²⁷ Weaver, 90.

²⁸ Martin, 7.

conclusion, and even with the subsequent release of *Fury Road* it still stands as a worthy, thought-provoking ending for both Max and the Wasteland.

A Brief Summary from After the End of the World

Before diving into Miller's role as *Mad Max*'s primary (but not sole) author and the worldbuilding, character work and thematic content of *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*, a brief overview of their stories is in order. *The Road Warrior* begins an indeterminate period of time after the first film, long enough for the world's decay to have accelerated to the point of a full-blown apocalypse. Max, now a scavenger, wanders the Wasteland in his V8 Interceptor, accompanied only by a dog named Dog. He fights, kills and scrounges for whatever he needs to keep moving. During his wanderings, he stumbles across an autogiro and its eccentric pilot, played by Bruce Spence. They fight, and Max gets the upper hand. Pinned down, the Gyrocaptain bargains for his life by promising to lead Max to a massive supply of gasoline. The two travel to a small settlement built around a still-functioning oil refinery. The settlers live under constant siege at the hands of a scantily-clad, muscle-bound warlord calling himself The Lord Humungous and his army of raiders.

The settlers are unable to break the Humungous' blockade without being run down, brutalized and killed by his men. Max initially tries to bargain with the settlers by rescuing a survivor from one of their failed escape attempts, but the man succumbs to his injuries before Max can get his gas, and the angered settlers take him prisoner. When the Humungous offers to trade the settlers safe passage for the refinery and all of their gas, Max seizes his chance and makes a counter-offer: he will bring them a vehicle big enough and powerful enough to haul their tanker in exchange for his freedom and all the gas he can carry. The settlers agree. During

his time at the settlement, Max befriends a feral child, forming the first relationship not based on mutual necessity he has had since the deaths of his family.

With the help of the Gyrocaptain, Max is able to retrieve a powerful truck to haul the settlers gas and fight his way through the blockade and back into the compound. The settlers are grateful, accept him as one of their own and want him to drive the truck during their planned breakout. The Gyrocaptain, moved by a combination of attraction to one of the settlers, her refusal to abandon the people she cares about and his own nobility, chooses to stay and help. Max, on the other hand, insists on taking his gas and leaving. Papagallo, the settlers' leader, attempts to convince him to embrace his humanity and fight for their cause, but Max refuses. He also rebuffs the feral child's attempts to come with him, although this is motivated more by his affection for the kid than by cold-heartedness. Max's attempts to break through the blockade on his own goes badly. Wez, the Humungous' brutal second-in-command runs him down, wrecks the Interceptor and has his minions kill Dog. Wez is only stopped from killing Max by the booby trap he had installed in the Interceptor. The resulting explosion completely destroys the car and forces Wez to retreat.

Max is rescued by the Gyrocaptain. Despite his injuries, Max insists on driving the tanker during the breakout. Papagallo reluctantly agrees. Before the escape begins, the feral child stows away aboard the tanker. The settlers launch their plan, fleeing the compound all at once and blowing up the refinery behind them. The Humungous leads his raiders after the tanker, allowing the majority of the settlers to escape unscathed. The battle for the tanker is hard-fought. Although they put up a good fight, one by one the settlers in the convoy fall. The group's warriors and engineer perish at the hands of the raiders. Papagallo is impaled by the Humungous with a trident. The Gyrocaptain is shot down, although he survives the crash. Wez, who has

sworn revenge against the feral child for killing his lover/sex slave and against Max for repeatedly getting in his way, viciously attacks them both. The Humungous, overconfident, activates his vehicle's nitro booster and charges the tanker. The resulting crash kills the Humungous and Wez and flips the tanker, but Max is able to pull the feral child to safety. Upon regaining consciousness and reuniting with the Gyrocaptain, Max and the child realize that the tanker was a gigantic ruse – the settlers had filled it with sand and hidden the gas in their smaller vehicles, allowing them to escape from the Humungous with both their lives and supplies. The Gyrocaptain and the feral child bid farewell to Max, who has developed a grudging respect for the former and genuinely cares for the latter. The Gyrocaptain leads the surviving settlers to the coast, where they become the Great Northern Tribe. In time, the feral child grows to adulthood and becomes the Tribe's second leader. At the end of his life, he tells the story of his encounter with the road warrior Max, now as much a legend as a man.

Beyond Thunderdome picks up an indeterminate amount of time after *The Road Warrior*. Max is a drifter, making his way through the Wasteland with a camel-drawn car and a monkey for company. A father-son duo of robbers operating out of a light plane get the drop on him and steal his vehicle and his gear, but Max is able to track them by following the trail of odds and ends his monkey leaves for him. The trail leads Max to Bartertown, a thriving bastion of ruthless capitalism and civilization in the wasteland. When Max learns that he will need to trade to get his stolen goods back, he offers up his considerable martial skills. This catches the attention of Aunty Entity, Bartertown's leader. Aunty seeks to consolidate her hold on Bartertown, and to do that she needs to break the power of MasterBlaster, who together run the town's pig farm/methane power plant. She strikes a deal Max to assassinate Blaster in exchange for his stolen goods and a

full re-supply, which will leave Master with no option but to submit to Aunty. Ironbar, Aunty's surly right-hand-man, is noticeably unhappy with this bargain.

Max infiltrates MasterBlaster's plant as a worker, where he provokes the duo's enmity by refusing to disarm the booby trap on his vehicle, which they have bought. He learns that Blaster is incredibly vulnerable to sound and befriends a man imprisoned in the plant for killing a pig to feed his family. Later that night in town, Max picks a fight with MasterBlaster over his vehicle. The fight leads to Aunty declaring that Max and Blaster must battle to the death in Thunderdome. Max triumphs over Blaster, but refuses to kill him when he learns of his developmental disability, and subsequently reveals that Aunty hired him for the hit. Master, distraught, swears to shut down the power plant forever. But before he can do so or Max can escape, Ironbar kills Blaster and Aunty is able to regain Bartertown's favor by claiming that Max welched on his deal with her, and by welching on his deal he has broken Bartertown's laws.

Max is punished by being made to spin a gigantic prize wheel to determine his fate, and sentenced to exile. He is cast out into the Wasteland on a horse and made to wear a giant, unsettling papier-mâché face over his head to ensure that even if he somehow gets it off, he will be hopelessly lost in the Wasteland. Max's monkey slips away from Master in the commotion, follows his owner into exile and helps him get the unsettling face off after the horse dies, but the two are swiftly overwhelmed and succumb to exposure.

They are rescued from certain death by Savannah Nix, one of the Children of the Crack, a small civilization that has sprung up in an isolated oasis. The children and their parents fled the apocalypse in a plane, which subsequently crashed by the oasis. The adults, led by one Captain Walker, left to get help but never returned. In the years since, the children have developed a cargo cult around Captain Walker, and they revere him as a messiah who will take them to

“Tomorrow-Morrow Land.” Savannah believes Max to be Captain Walker, so the Children nurse him back to health. When Max reawakens and learns what the children want from him, he is at first uncertain. When the Children “tell the tell” of how they came to the Crack and what they expect him to do, he initially tries to claim that he is not Captain Walker. When the Children’s prophecy about his return resurrecting the actual Walker’s crashed plane fails to come true, Savannah decides that she and those who would follow her will head out into the Wasteland anyway. Max will not have this. He seizes control of the oasis with the Children’s only gun, and vows that they will all stay there and live a long life untouched by the Wasteland. Despite Max tying all of the kids who want to leave up, they escape with the help of one of their peers, a quiet, slightly shamanistic boy. Chagrined, Max sets out after them. When he finally catches up to the kids they are so far into the Wasteland that Max realizes their best hope is to make for Bartertown, rescue Master for his considerable technical expertise and then keep moving.

Max leads the Children into Bartertown, where they rescue Mater from Ironbar with the help of the Pig-Killer. Both men join the group, and Master destroys his power plant by turning the train he had built the plant around into the group’s getaway vehicle. Aunty, enraged, rallies Bartertown’s citizens into an armada to retrieve Master, and vows that they will return and rebuild. A spectacular chase scene ensues, one which puts Max behind the wheels of a vehicle for the first time in *Beyond Thunderdome*. Although the group succeeds in temporarily repelling Aunty’s armada, they soon reach the end of the train’s tracks. In a stroke of good luck, Max is reunited with the thieving father-son duo from the opening of the film, and coerces them into joining the group. They load into the pair’s plane, but Aunty’s armada is closing rapidly, and the plane is both perilously close to its weight limit and does not have enough of a runway to get airborne. Max, in a moment of pure heroism, takes a stolen truck and charges it right into

Aunty's armada in a spectacular crash that finally succeeds in killing the tenacious Ironbar. The plane carrying the Children, Master and the thieves makes a successful getaway, leaving Max alone with Aunty and the remains of her armada. Aunty spares Max's life in a moment of camaraderie and recognition, and departs to rebuild Bartertown. The Children's group travels to the remains of Sydney. There, led by Savannah, they begin transforming the ruins of the old world into a new home for all who wander the Wasteland, in the hope that they can help the wanderers find peace, and that someday Max, the man who saved them, may find it as well. *Beyond Thunderdome* closes with Max continuing to wander, but now with the possibility of someday being able to find peace and a new home.

Both *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* adhere to the *Mad Max* story formula outlined in the previous chapter. In all four of the *Mad Max* films Max is a drifter who gets pulled into a conflict between a warlord and some innocents for selfish reasons, but whose innate decency leads him to fight and win the day for those in need. But while that formula remains a key part of each *Mad Max* story, it is the variations each film brings to the formula that make them interesting to explore. Of all the films in the series, *The Road Warrior* sticks closest to this formula, because it is the movie where the formula coalesced. *Mad Max* may have formulated the story structure, the world and its characters, but *The Road Warrior* takes those elements and productively enhances them. The extended conversations of the first film are replaced by a few careful moments of dialogue between characters defined more by their actions than their words. Max in particular has become downright laconic – he only speaks when he absolutely needs to, and prefers to let his actions speak for him. The action sequences which bookend *Mad Max* have become more evenly spaced out and varied in *The Road Warrior*, in both content and filmmaking. Martin says:

Part of the joy of the *Mad Max* series... is precisely that the special effects *do* look like effects – a heart-racing combination of stunt work (the making-of documentary on *The Road Warrior* details some of the on-set injuries generated) and visual and sonic manipulations. One watches this spectacle on two levels, seeing simultaneously the breathtakingly real movement of actual bodies through the air or on the ground (such as in the brutal image of a runaway bike hitting a rider in the head in *Mad Max*), and also the craft of montage that allows the action to be conjured in a cartoon-like succession of fragments, apparitions and cuts.²⁹

The Road Warrior's chases and fights, which remain memorable, striking filmmaking decades after the film's debut, are also fine examples of how action may be used to build and explore character. And through each character's story arc, Miller continues to explore and expand upon his work's humanism. *The Road Warrior* introduces a society willing to fight for its own survival, villains capable of genuine compassion for one another, an opportunist pushed to become a better man, and sees Max's humanity reawaken. *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* takes this even further, to the point that Aunty Entity and MasterBlaster, while decidedly ruthless antagonists, are arguably not villains.

On the Authorship of *Mad Max*

With the series' continuing thematic evolution, interesting questions arise about the nature of *Mad Max*'s authorship, particularly when it comes to Miller. It is extremely rare for a movie to have only one author; the art form is inherently collaborative. With that said, I am

²⁹ Martin, 36.

going to argue that George Miller is the primary author of the *Mad Max* films. He directed *Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior* and *Fury Road*, and co-directed *Beyond Thunderdome*. He co-wrote all four films alongside a rotating team of collaborators. Perhaps most importantly for my argument, Miller was the one to originally conceive of *Mad Max*, after his experiences with the car culture of Australia and the time he spent as a surgeon in an Australian trauma ward. *Mad Max* is not solely Miller's creation, however. Mel Gibson's portrayal across the first three films is incredibly important to their success, given how much of the film's story is told through his expressions and reactions. Brian May, who scored *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*, created the soundscape for a dying Australia and the Wasteland that succeeded it. David Eggby and Dean Semler, the respective cinematographers for *Mad Max* and both *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*, created the look of the Wasteland, from the way it was filmed to the way it looks in motion. But Miller has been the one dominant creative force throughout, from the series' inception through its maturation and its recent, triumphant resurgence; he is the one who has guided it and shaped it. Just as Miller's fascinations with Australian car culture and his anxieties about the state of the world in the late 70s shaped the first *Mad Max*, his later interests in storytelling, the nature of language and feminism became the bedrock upon which *The Road Warrior*, *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road* were built. But, of all Miller's passions, it is his interest in a collective mythology of humanity that has the greatest impact on the *Mad Max* series as films and humanist works. Martin writes:

Between the first two films in the series, Miller traveled the world extensively, and discovered along the way the books of the mythologist Joseph Campbell, especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *Myths To Live By* – providing a template which has informed all his subsequent work. The idea of a 'universal mythology' took root in

the director's mind, allowing 'access to the totality of human experience' and issuing from a 'collective unconscious' of which he had been the 'unwitting servant' when he dreamt up *Mad Max*. From then on, for better and for worse, Miller would be the *witting* servant of this world vision. Correspondingly, he began to nudge his narratives toward what he regarded as grand, epic, 'high' forms...³⁰

The Road Warrior and *Beyond Thunderdome* are explicitly concerned with the development of an oral history and tradition in the Wasteland. *The Road Warrior*'s dying narrator spends his last moments passing on the story of how Max helped the people who would become the Great Northern Tribe escape from the Lord Humungous and his reign of terror. The colony of lost children in *Beyond Thunderdome* initially mistake Max for "Captain Walker," their downed plane's pilot, whom they have elevated to a messiah figure during his absence. Although Max is hardly the messiah the children want or expect (his reluctance and standoffishness lead to a permanent ideological schism amongst the kids), by *Beyond Thunderdome* he has become immortalized in "the Tell," their oral tradition.

These oral traditions account for both the increasingly mythic nature of Max and the Wasteland across *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*, and the series' ability to maintain thematic and visual coherence across two very different movies. *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* are both recognizably *Mad Max* films. Indeed, with the first *Mad Max*'s status as the series' greatest outlier and the decades-long gap between *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*, the second and third Gibson films are the defining texts of the *Mad Max* series.

The mythical elements of *Mad Max* allow a broken, murderous cop named Max Rockatansky to become a historical figure (Mad Max the Road Warrior) and then a messianic

³⁰ Martin, 39-40.

one (Captain Walker) in the mythologies of the Great Northern Tribe and the lost children of the Crack. He is less a specific man than the image of a hero who becomes something beyond the fairly ragged person who inspired the image. But within the context of the films as a series, Miller and the assorted *Mad Max* creative teams are free to keep building the world created in *Mad Max* one, and with it the people who inhabit it. The people Max meets may only know him as a burned out warrior who lost his family during the world's fall or their perpetually grouchy savior, but he is quite clearly the same man across all four of the films.³¹ During the last act of the first *Mad Max* for instance, Bubba Zanetti kneecaps Max with a shotgun. He spends the remainder of that film with his leg essentially useless. In *The Road Warrior*, he wears a heavy leg brace, is shown in a flashback using a cane and runs with a noticeable limp. In *Beyond Thunderdome*, the brace is still present, but it is noticeably smaller and Max moves more easily. This visual continuity is present beyond Max himself, and permeates the look of both films. His iconic jacket has been modified with a football shoulder pad when he's introduced in *The Road Warrior*'s present, and come *Beyond Thunderdome* it appears to have been stitched back together a countless number of times. Crucially for the success of *Mad Max* as series, Max not only looks like the same character across the first three films, he acts like the same character as well. A sizable portion of the credit for this achievement belongs to Mel Gibson.

Although Gibson's abhorrent off-screen behavior in the early and mid 2000s has tarnished his reputation, his stardom is not entirely attributable to societal privilege and his bigotries being more accepted in the 1980s than they are today. The first *Mad Max* was Gibson's breakout role. *The Road Warrior* made him into an internationally recognized movie star, and

³¹ This holds true for *Fury Road* as well Tom Hardy's Max is explicitly identified as "Max Rockatansky" in the opening credits and hears his full name in an auditory hallucination. He also retains Max's injuries.

Beyond Thunderdome was released during the height of Gibson's mega-stardom. All three of his performances as Max Rockatansky are built on the same core, but each has substantial differences, and each showcases a different strength of Gibson the actor as he builds Max's character.

In *Mad Max*, Gibson's body language gets tenser and tenser as Max's world crumbles, culminating in his decision to embark on the murderous rampage that closes the movie. At that fateful moment, Max squeezes a monster mask he had worn during a lighter moment with Jessie, twisting it and looking at its warped visage. He snaps, and the tension transforms into an unnerving physical calm, one that falters only when Bubba Zanetti blows out his leg and runs over his arm. Conversely, before Max loses everything, Gibson gets to play sweet and romantic with his family, or chummy with Goose, and does both with ease. The resulting dissonance between the grinning young cop and the dead-eyed killer is terrifying, and gives *Mad Max's* final act a significant portion of its power.

In *The Road Warrior*, Gibson begins with a quieter version of the unsettling stillness that he closed *Mad Max* with, since Max has been wandering the Wasteland for years. He is more expressive in more situations. He allows himself the briefest of smiles when he finds a tiny music box among the ruins of the tanker he will later steal for the settlers. He panics at the thought of Dog being harmed and wraps himself around his companion to shield him from the settlers. In Gibson's showiest moment in *The Road Warrior*, he takes command of the entire compound with a whistle, a smirk and a supremely confident declaration that he can save them from the Humungous' blockade, provided that they are willing to deal. *The Road Warrior* gives Gibson a chance to be graceful, but more important to its success is that Gibson can play beaten down just as convincingly. Max walks and runs with a limp from his injuries in the first film, and

he spends the picture's last act badly beaten and holding on to consciousness and the tanker he is driving through sheer force of will. Gibson's work renders Max recognizably human and relatable even before he begins to come out from the emotional armor he built for himself.

Beyond Thunderdome sees Gibson push his range further still. By this point in the series' overall story, Max is more openly emotional and comfortable interacting with others. Some of the tension he carried through *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior* remains, but for the first time it is joined by befuddlement and bafflement, particularly when Max is subjected to the Children of the Crack and their insistence that he is their messiah. For the first time in the series, Max is allowed to be a comedic figure, and Gibson not only sells his bafflement, he brings it in line with the character's more serious moments. *Beyond Thunderdome's* Max is a man comfortable in the Wasteland and its way of life. He is reconciled to his past if not at peace with it and therefore he gets to exist alongside it, rather than being defined by it as he is in *The Road Warrior*.

Gibson's performances are an essential part of the first three *Mad Max* films' success. Through his work Max gains the texture and presence that bring weight and impact to the series' text. With Miller and his co-writers' work, Max Rockatansky is an interesting character. With Gibson's realization of that work, Max becomes the living and breathing core of his series.

The Wasteland

Beyond Max himself, the Wasteland undergoes constant visual development across the Gibson trilogy. While each film looks visually distinct in both their cinematography and their visual design, there are key aspects of visual and story continuity between each that mark the three as a narratively progressive trilogy. The crumbling Australia of *Mad Max* has become a full-fledged ruin by *The Road Warrior*. The old world is still recognizable. The weathered

highways Max and the Lord Humungous' gang travel, the cars they drive and the oil well that the settlers have fortified are not far removed from their pre-apocalypse selves, but they are more decayed and ramshackle than they would ever have been in the old world. There is not much that is new in *The Road Warrior*, but plenty has been repurposed. Max's Interceptor has become his home, re-built from a sleek tool of vengeance into a self-contained mobile home. The Humungous's auto armada includes a number of repurposed police cars alongside fetish-adorned muscle cars and a few more distinctive vehicles apparently built from salvage. The settlers' small fleet includes an armored school bus that still bears the paint job from its old life, and their daring plan to break the blockade revolves around a Mack truck that they have fortified.

When it comes to clothes, the Humungous' gang have taken sporting gear and fetish outfits and made them into armor and uniforms. His skimpy armor is topped by what is quite recognizably a repurposed hockey goalie mask³². His chief goon, Wez, favors football pads and backless cowboy chaps. The settlers share the gang's taste for football shoulder pads, but beyond that commonality, their look breaks down into more individual and distinct fashions for each of the settlers. An old man wears a military uniform and ineffectually brandishes a katana. His daughter's bright pink and puffy fashions suggest that at least some of 80s mall culture survived the apocalypse intact. Papagallo, the leader of the settlers, favors white clothes with a Middle Eastern influence; he wears flowing robes under his armor, as do many of his direct staff, one of whom wears a headscarf.³³ Per Martin, they were dubbed "Gucci Arabs." by *The Road Warrior*'s crew.³⁴

³² A year before Jason Vorhees would don his own in *Friday the 13th Part III* even.

³³ Although this thesis does not have the space to focus on it extensively, it should be noted that the *Mad Max* series has a consistently morbid sense of humor. Before Papagallo launches his bid to escape, he dons a hockey helmet for protection. He is later murdered by the goalie mask-clad Humungous.

³⁴ Martin, 68.

If *The Road Warrior* is set in a ruined world where people survive by repurposing the remains of the old world, then *Beyond Thunderdome* is set in a time where much of the world before the apocalypse has completely faded, and humanity is beginning to build something new to replace it. The starkest example of this is in the size and scale of *Beyond Thunderdome*'s desert. The highways which defined so much of the land in *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior* are gone, and with them most of the green in the film. *Mad Max* is genuinely lush, and while most *The Road Warrior*'s world is desert, the settlers' compound is ringed by green and scrubby trees and brush are a constant sight. In *Beyond Thunderdome*, the desert has swallowed up almost everything else in the Australian interior. Weaver writes:

The representation of the Australian landscape as flat and empty changes somewhat in parts of the third film, when brilliant colors showcase a more obvious beauty of the landscape. The cinematography contrasts Max's flowing black robes against yellow sand dunes and pale blue horizons with night shots of midnight blue skies and white sand. A green and brown chasm called the "Crack in the Earth," a canyon of emerald rivers and chocolate walls where the lost children live, interrupts the endless yellow sand dunes. The colors, however, become chilling in the last scenes of *Thunderdome*, when spectacular red dusty cliffs turn out to be the empty bowl of Sydney Harbour, and the reddened Harbour Bridge is shown with an enormous gash in its middle, leaving only crumbling edges stretching out into nothingness...³⁵

If the Wasteland of *The Road Warrior* is a pure ruin, one where people must scavenge the remnants of the old world to survive, then the Wasteland of *Beyond Thunderdome* is an even

³⁵ Weaver, 97-98.

more dramatic place – its inhabitants must build something new or perish in the vast nothingness. The primary remnants of the old world are, until the very end of the film, no longer physical objects but ideas. These are ideas about governance and creed that can be built upon in order to rebuild civilization in form, if not in function. They are present both implicitly and explicitly in the two civilizations (Bartertown and the Crack) that Max encounters during *Beyond Thunderdome*, and again in the new civilization formed in the film's closing scene.

Bartertown, where Max spends the first third of *Beyond Thunderdome*, is an attempt to rebuild the world that once was with the most basic and ruthless form of capitalism as its blueprint. Aunty Entity has taken the exchange of goods and services and made it into the basis for everything in her kingdom, so much so that prospective entrants must haggle even to be let past the gates. Once inside Bartertown's huge stone walls, the world becomes a skewed recreation of life before the fall, with Aunty's trade codes serving as absolute law. There is a bar, the Atomic Café, there is electricity, and a power plant (the power comes from the methane in pig feces, and killing a pig nets a life sentence caring for them) to provide it, and, just as in the old world, there is violence. But unlike the Australia of the first *Mad Max*, the violence in Bartertown is, initially, tightly controlled. To prevent quarrels from damaging the town itself, Aunty has created the Thunderdome. Combatants in Thunderdome are suspended from bungee cords and required to fight until one person dies, and it is as much a ritual as it is a method for keeping Bartertown peaceful.

When Max challenges MasterBlaster, a complicated call-and-response begins that leads Aunty formally declaring a match in Thunderdome. Once inside, a master of ceremonies gives a speech that is as much about the necessity of Thunderdome as a means of preserving Bartertown's peace as psyching his crowd up for some carnage. When Max discovers Blaster's

developmental disability and refuses to murder him, a sympathetic Pig Killer is briefly able to turn the crowd against Aunty by invoking Thunderdome's "Two men enter, one man leaves" policy. Aunty in turn counters by invoking another of her laws: "Bust a deal, face the wheel." Taken prisoner, Max is forced to spin a giant prize wheel in order to determine his fate – a concept from an old world game show which she has made into something new and lethal in the Wasteland.

While Bartertown is still built from the artifacts of the old world, the ideas that give it life are more important to its place in *Mad Max's* world than the physical parts that comprise it. Indeed, the artifacts that do appear (Master wears samurai armor and has built Bartertown's engine on a mostly recognizable locomotive engine; Aunty keeps a saxophone player with a pristine sax on her staff) are in better shape than anything in *The Road Warrior*. Their power and importance comes from their symbolism. MasterBlaster and Aunty have successfully built a world that, while ruthless and vicious, can stand against the Wasteland, so much so that they have even been able to recover luxuries from the old world and indulge in them.

The tribe of feral children who inhabit the Crack make up *Beyond Thunderdome's* other major civilization, one that stands in contrast to both the Wasteland and Bartertown. While the Wasteland is a vast nothingness that may yet be given new life, the Crack is a verdant oasis that has become stifling for many of its inhabitants. Where Bartertown takes the ideas of the old world and turns them into a shield against the Wasteland, the children of the Crack have taken their limited experience of the old world and their specific circumstances and used it to found a religion based on the promise of a better tomorrow. Their artifacts (a record, Captain Walker's hat) are sacred icons to them, but more important is their collective story, which they have made into both a creed and a promise. They work to be good so that they won't disappoint Captain

Walker when he returns. When Max dispels their beliefs that he is the Captain and that Tomorrow-Morrow Land exist, half of the children refuse to follow Max's advice to stay in the oasis, instead setting out to find the city their parents came from. The children who stay are last seen lost in an uncertain and self-imposed stasis, one that they will have to break out of or to which they will succumb. The children who leave are adamant that they can in fact reach Tomorrow-Morrow Land, even though they will have to endure hardship. They would not have survived without the Crack, but they cannot continue to exist in a place that they have always viewed as transitional; their oasis was never meant to be a permanent home. Everything about the world they have built there is designed to help them prepare for their eventual departure. A boy who serves as a shamanic figure of sorts has a kite to track the wind. The walls are painted with their story, alongside the message the actual Captain Walker left for the children when he and the other adults either abandoned them or went on a doomed quest to get help. Their artifacts (primarily a record and a talking Bugs Bunny toy) are easily transportable. Their world is built on movement, and once the children who choose to leave gain momentum, nothing can stop them. Max, who set out to bring them back, winds up quite willingly helping them move into the world. Together, they rescue Master and the Pig Killer from Bartertown, and both become allies to the children. Even the mercenary father and son duo whose theft of Max's vehicle sets *Beyond Thunderdome* in motion end up more or less willingly helping the kids settle in the ruins of Sydney.

It is this unusual band that forms the third and final civilization in *Beyond Thunderdome*, one built in the ruins of Sydney and combining the oral tradition and desire for a better world of the Children with Master's knowledge. They choose to work to restore Sydney not to bring back the old world (on a purely practical level, even with Master, there simply are not enough of

them) but to create a new home for the many people lost in the Wasteland, including Max himself. Until *Fury Road*, this new civilization is the most unambiguously positive depiction of society in the *Mad Max* series, since it is built on the desire to create rather than to rule, and the people who have built it care for one another rather than try to dominate each other.

The Wastelanders

Just as *Mad Max*'s filmmaking and worldbuilding both grow more complex from film to film, so too does its character development. The first *Mad Max* understands that even its most despicable villains are human and mourns Max's reduction to a murderous shell of himself. *The Road Warrior* begins the process of Max's redemption and rehabilitation, features a gang of villains who have genuine humanity beyond their fear of death and a band of settlers who, while swiftly sketched, prove to be far more than the cardboard cutouts they could have been. *Beyond Thunderdome* brings Max's moral rehabilitation further still, and climaxes with an act of genuine selfless sacrifice that he would not have been capable of in *The Road Warrior* or even at his best moments in the first film. Its villains are so complex and their morality is so nuanced that they do not merit the moniker of villain at all. Simultaneously, The Children of the Crack, perhaps the most purely innocent group in the entire series, are not simply a gang of adorable moppets. They are a full-fledged society, complete with tensions and divisions which end up permanently splitting them in half. The result of the work that Miller, the cast and his co-writers do in building characters in *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* is an increasingly complex and moral humanism. In the first film, death and violence are accorded a weight and consequence rarely seen in action cinema (or in cinema at large), and in the sequels this weight expands to include the lives and actions of every character beyond life or death situations

(prominent though those are). To put it more simply, the *Mad Max* series succeeds both as films and as a collective humanist text in large part because life and the way a person chooses to live it matter to Miller.

The Road Warrior makes this weight an explicit part of its text in a key scene. Max is preparing to leave the settlers behind after delivering a powerful truck which they hope to use to escape from the Humungous' blockade with their gas. Papagallo wants him to stay, and begins probing into why Max is so cold and so stoic. Max says nothing, and in response Papagallo gets angrier and angrier until he hits on the truth of Max's situation and verbally condemns him for his cowardice. Although lengthy, Papagallo's dialogue is worth reproducing here in full:

What is it with you, huh? What are you looking for? C'mon, Max, everybody's looking for something. You're happy out there, are you? Eh? Wandering? One day blurring into another? You're a scavenger, Max. You're a maggot. Did you know that? You're living off the corpse of the old world. Tell me your story, Max. C'mon. Tell me your story. What burned you out, huh? Kill one man too many? See too many people die? Lose some family? Oh, so that's it, you lost your family? That makes you something special, does it? Do you think you're the only one that's suffered? We've all been through it in here. But we haven't given up. We're still human beings, with dignity. But you? You're out there with the garbage. You're nothing.³⁶

Though he would deny it, Max is not the complete loss Papagallo paints him as in their fight. His long-dormant empathy and compassion gradually return to him throughout *The Road Warrior*. The film introduces Max as a burned-out wreck of a person, albeit one in slightly better

³⁶ *The Road Warrior*, directed by George Miller (1981; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), Blu-ray.

mental and emotional shape than he was at the end of *Mad Max*. He keeps and cares for a dog named Dog as both a survival asset and a friend. He allows himself a brief smile when he finds a small music box amongst the dead, and has enough empathy to be visibly disturbed by the Humungous' goons' proclivity for torture, rape and murder. When he is brought to the settlers' compound, he forms a genuine bond with the feral child who will grow up to become the picture's narrator, to the point of gifting him the same music box he found earlier. He cares enough to be stung by Papagallo's words, cares enough to mourn the murder of his dog at the hands of Wez's goons. There is enough humanity left in Max that he ultimately volunteers to drive the gas rig out of the settlers' compound. When the rig is revealed to have been a gigantic distraction, Max is, in his own way gracious. He shares a moment of camaraderie with Spence's Gyrocaptain, one built on the battle they have survived together, and allows the settlers to go on their way, immortalizing himself in their histories as "the Road Warrior." He is last seen fading into the distance, wounded and smirking. Compare this to the end of *Mad Max*, where Miller and company leave him a shell of himself with nothing but the open road.

In *Beyond Thunderdome*, Max seems to be in much better shape mentally and emotionally. While he has lost his Interceptor and Dog, he has picked up a small monkey and generally seems more social and less prone to using violence as a solution. He fights when he is threatened, or when Aunty sics her goons on him to test if he could potentially be a match for Blaster. He is willing to battle Blaster to the death in Thunderdome, but only until he realizes that his opponent is developmentally disabled. When he realizes exactly who he is fighting, he immediately backs down, furious with Aunty for withholding that information.

Max's near-death experience when he is exiled from Bartertown brings his more ruthless side to the forefront. The Crack is a rare chance to settle down and hide from the world amongst

rarely abundant plant life and comparative plenty, regardless of what the children who live there want. He is all too happy to keep them exactly where they are and preserve their status quo even as they long for him to disrupt it, mainly because it offers him the first chance to truly rest that he has had in years. The children who flee swiftly disabuse him of the notion that this is possible with as much of a conscience as he has, since he immediately sets out after them when they flee into the Wasteland.

Max's goal is initially to retrieve the wayward kids and bring them back to the Crack to live out their lives in peace. But practical necessity, the children's own deep-seated need to go back into the world they were only briefly a part of, and Max's own inherent decency leads him to commit to their cause wholeheartedly. In Bartertown he leads them to rescue Master, so that they will have a teacher who can ensure their survival. When the group has a brief moment of peace in between breaking out of Bartertown and Aunty catching up with them, he shows the children how to use the record they hold as a sacred fetish with Master's record player, and gets to enjoy a brief moment as a teacher. He coerces the cheerfully mercenary father-son duo who robbed him at the start of *Beyond Thunderdome* into helping the group escape, and ultimately sacrifices himself so that the Children, Master and the pilots can escape.

Within *Beyond Thunderdome*, Max's sacrifice is notable as one of his primary moments of agency. He spends much of the film passively chafing under the expectations of others, who expect him to be everything from a compliant employee (in MasterBlaster's power plant) to a remorseless assassin (for Aunty Entity) to the messiah (for the children). Compared to the first two movies, in which his decisions to go on a murderous rampage and retrieve the tanker for Papagallo drive the action of each film, Max in *Beyond Thunderdome* is almost totally reactive. This fits with his character as established at the start of the film; he is still a wanderer, but more

out of simple necessity than the relentless drive to run from himself that defined him in the last act of the first movie and most of the second. The Children of the Crack's desire to build a better world is the first cause that he has fought for simply because it is just since his days as a cop, and when he puts his desire to survive aside and works to ensure that they get away, his redemption is complete. He will never be the good-hearted family man terrified of losing himself to violence that he was at the start of *Mad Max*, but he is no longer the shell Papagallo condemned him as either. He has survived the world's fall, and through his encounters with other people been able to heal from the immense mental and emotional wounds that started with Australia coming unraveled and climaxed with his family's slaughter.

Indeed, the most consistent and coherent aspect of the *Mad Max* series' humanism is its continued argument that humanity can in fact change for the better. Its heroes are those who can see beyond the immediate moment, accept that the world has fallen and then work to build a better world. When they fail or fall, they can work to understand why, and then work to change themselves for the better. *Mad Max*'s villains, on the other hand, are those who take the fall of the world as a chance to do whatever they want with no consequences, those who live only for themselves and either cannot or choose not to see beyond their most immediate desires.

Consider the Gyrocaptain in *The Road Warrior*. He begins even more venal than Max, a scavenger who preys on other scavengers with a deep-seated love of the past ("Remember lingerie?" he hectors Max during their trek from the settlers' compound to his autogiro) and a need for self-preservation that verges on outright cowardice. When the settlers hail him and Max as heroes for retrieving the rig, he seizes on the chance to leave early alongside the old general's pretty, sweet-hearted daughter. But his cowardice and desire to be with a woman are not the whole of who he is. When the young woman, despite her attraction to the captain, refuses to

abandon her friends and family and steps up to help prepare for the evacuation, the captain finds himself stepping up alongside her. He even tries to persuade Max to stay with the settlers before his disastrous attempt at running the Humungous' blockade himself. When Wez runs Max down and the Interceptor is destroyed, the captain goes out of his way to rescue the man he's declared a business partner of sorts. The two then fight alongside one another during the breakout, and part ways with a certain degree of respect. The once mercenary captain goes on to lead the settlers into becoming the Great Northern Tribe, and adopts the feral child who befriended Max, raising him to become in turn *The Road Warrior's* eloquent, insightful narrator.

Consider also MasterBlaster and Aunty Entity, all three of whom of whom are ruthless antagonists to Max, but none of whom qualifies as an outright villain. Master is supremely arrogant about MasterBlaster's role in keeping Bartertown active, and cheerfully humiliates Aunty Entity over Bartertown's PA system to keep the balance of power between them tilted firmly in his favor. Even considering his developmental disability, Blaster is comfortable killing in Thunderdome, and he is a ruthless fighter, one of the very few people in any of the films to give Max a serious challenge one on one. But their mutual ruthlessness is built on their deep bond. Together two men who would not have survived the Wasteland alone have become a great power capable of protecting each other. When Max beats Blaster and realizes his foe's disability, Master rushes to his side and tearfully apologizes to his friend for making him fight.

Aunty Entity may have built Bartertown on ruthless capitalism and put herself at the literal top of it (she lives in an elevated tower overlooking the town), but her desire to rebuild civilization is sincere. When Max and company blow up Bartertown in their escape, both her charisma and her ideals enable Aunty to rally the panicking citizenry into marshalling their auto armada and giving chase. She vows to return and rebuild, and her followers believe her. More

negatively, she is convinced that she alone has the strength to rule over humanity, and that anything she does is for the best. But out of all *Mad Max*'s central antagonists, she alone has created a society where there seems to be stability and the potential for advancement. She is also the most empathetic of *Mad Max*'s antagonists. She is not lying when she tells Max that she considers MasterBlaster all but family, and she is visibly stricken when Ironbar executes Blaster. She needed Blaster dead, but did not want him to die as horribly as he does. During the final chase, she briefly captures Master and tells him not to worry, because they are going home. Although she ignores Master's panicked distress at the prospect of returning to Bartertown, Aunty definitely cares about him. Unlike any other *Mad Max* villain, she lives. This is because she has enough perspective to realize when she has been beaten, and enough empathy to realize how similar she and Max are. They were both reborn in the end of the world, and the events of *Beyond Thunderdome* have permanently shaken up the status quos they had held to until their paths crossed. She and Max do not part as friends, or even as peers, but there is a certain respect between them, one built on empathy with and understanding for each other.

The only character to qualify as outright evil in *Beyond Thunderdome* is Ironbar, Aunty's hate-filled right-hand man. He lacks his boss' desire to build a better world, and Master and Blaster's affection for each other. In their place is contempt, rage and envy. They lead him to continuously try to kill Max even after he repeatedly proves more than a match for Ironbar, and he repeatedly makes a fool of himself in the process. His inability to see anything other than his absolute hatred for Max gets him killed when Max charges against Aunty's armada to give his group's plane enough space to take off. He dies as ridiculous and venal as he lived, his last act a literal middle finger to the world at large. *Beyond Thunderdome* has empathy for his repeated humiliations, but never paints him as anything other than the hate-filled brute he is.

Miller's unforgiving empathy for Ironbar is a continuation of the trend established with the Toecutter's gang in the first *Mad Max*. He always treats his villains as human and gives their deaths weight, but he never excuses their actions or treats them as misunderstood in their villainy. This is very much the case for the Lord Humungous and Wez in *The Road Warrior*, bad men with more dimension than Ironbar but none of Aunty's high-minded ideals or ability to admit defeat. The Humungous has some degree of compassion, as shown when he sincerely comforts Wez after the other man's lover/sex slave is killed. But that compassion has very strict limits. When Wez's need for vengeance gets in the way of Humungous' desire to take the settlers' refinery and use it to rule uncontested over the Wasteland, he has Wez put in chains and literally unleashes him during the final battle as an attack dog.

The Humungous imagines himself to be a refined, elegant power in the Wasteland – his personal weapon is an antique revolver which he keeps in a case with an heirloom photo (possibly of his relatives), but his true character is revealed when Max breaks through his blockade to return the rig. The Humungous snaps and orders the captives he had taken earlier in the movie to be tortured to death where the other settlers can see them, all the while raving about how no one will get out alive. His death is both thrilling and unceremonious. His arrogance leads him to believe that he can charge straight into the tanker Max is driving and come out on top, despite the fact that the truck is easily several hundred pounds heavier and more durable than his own vehicle. While he does succeed in flipping the tanker, he is killed on impact, and the few members of his gang who remain are so disheartened by his death (and the revelation that the rig was a decoy) that they drive off into the sunset, their morale permanently shattered. For all of his speeches and all the power of his armada, the Humungous is just a man, one who has gotten caught up in the image he built of himself as the Wasteland's conqueror.

Wez, the Humungous' chief goon, is treated with slightly more sympathy by Miller. When the feral child kills his lover/sex slave, he breaks down into a rage that lasts for the entire rest of *The Road Warrior*. Everything he does from then on is motivated by his need for revenge, from a daring and nearly single-handed attack on the compound when Max breaks through the blockade with the tanker, to an unauthorized attack on Max when he tries to flee in the Interceptor, where Wez very nearly succeeds in killing him. Wez's tenacity is impressive, and his desire for revenge understandable, but once again Miller refuses to let his villains off the hook for their actions even though he insists on their humanity. Wez may grieve his lover/sex slave's loss, but he was still keeping the younger man on a leash. He does not spare a thought for the humanity of those he kills and wants to kill, and is ultimately so in love with the idea of violent revenge that, during the final chase, he is still trying to kill Max and the feral child when the Humungous crashes his vehicle into the rig. Wez dies afraid and screaming, his blinkered perception of the world betraying him to the very violence he so gleefully took part in.

Wrapping Up and Moving On

The Road Warrior and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* are the key texts in the series. Though built on the story framework established in the first film, they dramatically expand on and more deeply explore the ideas and themes present in the series. They do this by moving away from a dystopian, pre-apocalyptic image of Australian and into the mythical space of the Wasteland, which is still built heavily on the landscape of Australia but is by design a stranger, more specific setting, one which reflects and comments on the characters who inhabit it across both films. Those characters, both individually and in their interactions, manifest the humanist nature of the *Mad Max* series as a whole. Those who accept humanity's failings and seek to

rebuild are capable of moving beyond the end of the world and creating something better than what came before, both within themselves and in the world at large. The Gyrocaptain finds his nobility. The children of the crack who choose to leave prove capable of facing the end of the world and enduring it, so much so that they successfully create the potential of a better tomorrow in a world where such an idea had previously all but gone extinct. Those who revel in the world's end may obtain power, but will always be undone by their own shortsightedness and selfishness, whether by relying on brute force so completely that it blinds them to reality (as happens to the Humungous) or by being so certain that the way of life they have created is the only way forward that they cannot recognize other possibilities (as happens to Aunty).

And then there is Max. At the end of *Mad Max*, he succumbed to hatred and rage, and become someone more terrifying than the men who destroyed his life for spite. Max, who cannot ignore his own innate decency and compassion, as much as he might insist that he just wants to go about his business and go on his own way. His arc across the first three films and the first two thirds of the Wasteland trilogy is one of gradual redemption, as he recovers his humanity and regains his ability to see beyond himself.

Taken as a whole, the *Mad Max* films that star Gibson coherently argue that humanity's capacity for brutality and self-destruction is very real, and could very well lead to the species unmaking itself. But simultaneously, they also argue humanity can recognize and learn from its failings, and rise above brutality to heal and build something better than the ruthless systems it currently relies upon. This argument marks the series as a deeply humanistic one, and it is present in multiple aspects of the films, from the weight they give to their violence to the quiet moments they take to focus on humanity in the midst of conflict and co-existence. It is an incredibly impressive cinematic achievement. Thirty years, a new lead actor, several false starts

and four family movies about talking animals later, George Miller would top it with his return to the franchise. The first three *Mad Max* films created a coherent, humanistic, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic story. *Fury Road* takes that story and takes it to another level.

III - The World Does Not Have to Stay Dead:

Mad Max: Fury Road, the Resurgence of George Miller and the Resurrection and Refining of Mad Max.

Fury Road's Challenges

When *Mad Max: Fury Road* was released in May of 2015, it had been thirty years since the last *Mad Max* film, 1985's *Beyond Thunderdome*. Miller had not been idle during that time. Even before the decade plus he spent first trying to get *Fury Road* made and then actually making it, he had remained active as a producer and a director. His projects included the Hollywood-backed *Witches of Eastwick*, the medical drama *Lorenzo's Oil*, a documentary on Australian film called *40,000 Years of Dreaming*, and two two-movie series of family films; *Babe* and *Happy Feet*³⁷. Although he had been working consistently, neither Miller nor the *Mad Max* series were well-known outside of genre cinema circles at the time of *Fury Road's* release. Even with positive buzz out of Comic-Con in 2014, *Fury Road* would face an uphill battle to gain critical recognition and an audience.

Mel Gibson, the star of and arguably the most recognizable part of the first three films, was not reprising Max Rockatansky. Even if Gibson had come back, he was no longer the mega-star he had been in 1985. During the mid-2000s, while *Fury Road* was in development hell and Miller was making the *Happy Feet* movies, Gibson had single-handedly destroyed his reputation with repeated anti-Semitic, racist, sexist and otherwise generally deplorable outbursts. Tom Hardy, the new Max, was a critically acclaimed actor who had appeared in several well-regarded genre-based

³⁷ Miller co-wrote and produced the first *Babe* and co-wrote, produced and directed its sequel, *Pig in the City*. He directed and co-wrote both of the *Happy Feet* films.

blockbusters (in particular Christopher Nolan's *Inception* and *The Dark Knight Rises*), but whose leading work was primarily in smaller films. Charlize Theron, co-lead with Hardy, was an Oscar winner who had also appeared in blockbuster ensembles (Ridley Scott's *Alien* semi-prequel *Prometheus* for instance), but she was not known as an action star. Hardy and Theron's co-stars, Nicholas Hoult and Hugh Keays-Byrne (the Toecutter in the first *Mad Max*, 36 years and a face-covering mask later) were similarly well-regarded actors who were not gigantic box office draws on their own. The remainder of *Fury Road*'s ensemble was comprised of a group of women who were then known primarily as models (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, Riley Keough, Zoë Kravitz, Abbey Lee and Courtney Eaton), Australian actors (Megan Gale, Nathan Jones, Melissa Jaffer) and stuntpeople. In terms of pure talent, *Fury Road* had a strong ensemble, but none of its players was the box office draw that Gibson became in *The Road Warrior* or was in *Beyond Thunderdome*.

In addition to *Fury Road*'s comparative lack of star power, the film would have to face two opposing but interrelated factors in its battle for reception. On the one hand, it was the revival of a long dormant franchise, a tactic that had produced mixed results at best in the past (Disney's *TRON: Legacy* had received a major marketing push and a prime holiday release from the studio and been at best moderately successful) and would go on to produce mixed results during *Fury Road*'s summer (*Jurassic World* would make piles of money, but *Terminator: Genisys* would fall flat on its face even when marketed as July 4th's biggest movie).

On the other hand, *Fury Road* was an iconic piece of science fiction from the 70s and 80s whose identity was closely tied to its status as a work primarily driven by Miller. Many of Miller's peers from that era of filmmaking had tarnished their reputations in the decades between *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*, and in several prominent cases this failure had been directly tied to those filmmakers' efforts to return to their earlier successes. John Carpenter's career declined in

the mid-1990s, and after the critical and commercial failure of *Ghosts of Mars* in 2001 he essentially retired from filmmaking, resurfacing for two episodes of the *Masters of Horror* TV movie series and the swiftly forgotten *The Ward* in 2010. Although he remains creatively active as a musician, Carpenter's days as a filmmaker seem to be over. George Lucas' long-gestating *Star Wars* prequels (1999-2003) were financially successful but almost universally maligned by critics, fans and more casual filmgoers alike. Indeed, the prequels' reputation eventually became so toxic that when Lucas sold the franchise to Disney and publically stepped back from a creative role in the franchise, it was regarded as the best creative decision he had made in years. Lucas and Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) was similarly a financial success controversial enough with audiences to dent the beloved series' reputation. Although Spielberg rebounded from that failure more easily than Lucas due to the range and breadth of his work during the 2000s, most of his projects since have been on a comparatively smaller scale. Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*, which was marketed as being a continuation of the smart science fiction he had made with *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, made money but was regarded as a very pretty, very well acted movie with an utter disastrous script, and further proof that Scott's films lived and died by the quality of their writing. James Cameron spent almost as long developing *Avatar* as Miller did *Fury Road* (from conception to release *Avatar* took about 14 years while *Fury Road* took 18). While *Avatar* was not a direct continuation of any of his past projects, it was, like his two iconic *Terminator* movies, a science fiction story that he developed himself and served as the primary creative voice on. He released it to critical and commercial success in 2009, but its setting and characters proved to have none of the staying power of Sarah Connor or the Terminator, and it seems to have eaten Cameron's career. At the time of this paper's writing in 2016 Cameron's only film projects are a set of *Avatar* sequels.

Fury Road was a franchise revival directed by that franchise's chief creative voice whose stars were not known to be gigantic box office draws. In an age of streamlined, producer-driven franchises built as much on star power as anything else (the *Fast and Furious* series and the Marvel Cinematic Universe are prime examples), *Fury Road* needed to win whatever audience it would have quickly, or it would fail. It needed to work as both a continuation of the first three films and as something that could stand on its own. It needed to reestablish Max and the Wasteland for returning *Mad Max* fans and introduce them to a new audience as well. It needed to demonstrate that after 30 years away, more of it spent with a talking pig and a dancing penguin than with Max Rockatansky, George Miller still had a story to tell with this character and this setting.

The Opening Scene

Fury Road's opening sequence ably answers all of the concerns that the movie faced in the time leading up to its release. It definitively ties itself to the previous *Mad Max* films while simultaneously introducing the character and the world to a new audience. In so doing it also establishes that Miller is the film's primary creative voice and that he will be exploring both new ideas and new dimensions of the series' recurrent themes. A revving engine plays over rusted images of the Warner Brothers, Village Roadshow Pictures and Kennedy Miller Mitchell logos, then Hardy and Theron's credits, cutting to black between each. After the engine revving, Max begins to speak, his narration intercut with fragments of audio detailing the end of the world. An angry, unidentified voice asks someone else "Why are you hurting these people?"³⁸ and the audience hears of the oil wars, the water wars, the escalation to nuclear conflict and the devastation of both the earth and humanity. A brief clip of trees being buffeted by an atomic blast is shown,

³⁸ *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2015), Blu-ray.

and the sounds of a Geiger counter are mixed into the soundtrack. Max's narration remains a constant throughout the audio montage:

My name is Max. My world is fire and blood. Once, I was a cop. A road warrior searching for a righteous cause. As the world fell, each of us in our own way was broken. It was hard to know who was more crazy. Me, or everyone else.³⁹

As Max ends his soliloquy, *Fury Road* cuts to its first image. Max, a wanderer, stands by his Interceptor (back from being blown up in *The Road Warrior*) on a hill in the Wasteland. He wears his trademark leather jacket and his left leg is still in a brace from when Bubba Zanetti shot it in the first film. Even with a different actor playing him, this is clearly the same man. It is an iconography-heavy introduction/reintroduction for Max, but even in a scene heavily tied to the past films in the series visually and thematically, adds new dimensions to both Max and the Wasteland. As Max stands, he begins to hear voices in his head. They wonder where he was, and remind him that he promised to help them. As Max squishes and eats a two-headed lizard, his narration continues, "I tell myself they cannot touch me. They are long dead." Just as he finishes the lizard, Max hears something. Alarmed, he packs his gear into the Interceptor and speeds off. Moments later, a band of raiders on bikes and in cars gives chase, whooping and cheering. The raiders quickly overtake the Interceptor and flip it with an explosive lance. As Max climbs from the Interceptor's wreck, and suffering from a vision of a young girl being run down by an ominous fleet of cars, he is swiftly captured. The raiders ride into the dust with the Interceptor's wreck a prize and Max a prisoner. All the while, his narration continues:

³⁹ Ibid.

I am the one who runs from both the living and the dead. Hunted by scavengers. Haunted by those I could not protect. So I exist in this Wasteland. A man, reduced to a single instinct. Survive.

Miller then cuts to the interior of the Citadel, the mountain fortress of the raiders. They are soon revealed to be a cult of cheerfully murderous manchildren called the War Boys. They worship the dictatorial, egomaniacal warlord Immortan Joe and seek to give their brief, radiation-poisoned lives meaning by dying a glorious death in battle. Max is shaved and tattooed with biological information – because he is radiation free and a universal blood donor, the War Boys can use him as a living blood bag to keep themselves healthy and functional long enough to find the hero's death they all seek. When the War Boys prepare to brand Max with the Immortan's flaming steering wheel/skull logo he seizes the moment and mounts an escape. As he flees through the Citadel, Max continues to suffer from hallucinations, now visual as well as auditory – the people he has failed appear before him and blame him for their deaths, their faces twisting into grisly deaths' heads. Although Max makes a valiant effort, he is ultimately recaptured, and as the War Boys knock him out, *Fury Road* cuts to its title card. Immediately after the title card, Miller introduces Furiosa, Immortan Joe's greatest Imperator (a general in the new slang version of Australian English that he has created) as she silently prepares her great War Rig tanker truck for what Joe believes is a supply run to his allies at Gastown and the Bullet Farm.⁴⁰ In reality, Furiosa has decided that she will no longer be an instrument of Joe's evil will. She seeks to earn redemption for her service to him by helping the five young women he enslaved as Wives and breeding stock escape to the Green Place, a haven untouched by the world's end.

⁴⁰ Immortan Joe's slang is built on Norse myth, machismo and old world capitalism. During a vulnerable moment, Nicholas Hoult's Nux will bemoan the fact that he cannot join in "McFeasting" with the heroes of Valhalla.

Fury Road's opening sequence not only reintroduces/introduces Max and the Wasteland, it lays out the nature of *Fury Road* as a film. Miller and his creative team are not disavowing or deconstructing the stories told in the first three *Mad Max* films, but they are telling a new kind of Wasteland story, and telling that story in a different way. On a purely textual level, Max's iconography is introduced and then swiftly demolished when the Interceptor is wrecked, he is captured and all of his gear is taken. But their removal allows Max to either reclaim them and augment them as he recovers from the state of total devastation he begins the film in or just outright replace them. Over the course of *Fury Road*, Max reclaims his jacket and then acquires a combat vest for it once he commits fully to Furiosa's cause. He never recovers the Interceptor, which to his great anger is repaired and twisted into part of Joe's gaudy, fetish-adorned fleet. But he is able to move past its corruption and eventual destruction⁴¹ because of the bond he has formed with the crew of the War Rig, particularly Furiosa.

There has never been a character in *Mad Max* quite like Furiosa. Women have always been present in *Mad Max*, and in *Beyond Thunderdome* Aunty Entity and Savannah are arguably the most important characters besides Max himself, but Furiosa is the first woman in *Mad Max* to qualify as a full-blown protagonist/hero. Indeed, she is the one who drives the story, rather than Max. She is the one who answered the Wives' call when they sought to escape from Joe. She is the one who came up with the plan to make for the Green Place. She is the one who persuades a desperate Max to help her rather than turn the wives over to Joe. She gets *Fury Road*'s big hero moment when, despite being severely wounded, she kills Joe in thrilling, ironic, cathartic fashion. It is Furiosa's quest for redemption from which *Fury Road*'s story derives its drive and impact.

⁴¹ The Interceptor is, if not the most destroyed car in fiction, certainly in the running. It's blown up in *The Road Warrior*, wrecked in the 2015 *Mad Max* video game, wrecked in *Fury Road*'s opening scene and then finally crushed and blown up *again* during *Fury Road*'s final chase.

The Creative Collective Behind *Fury Road*

George Miller has always been the primary creative voice behind *Mad Max*, but filmmaking is rarely if ever a solo endeavor. Miller faced considerable challenges across *Fury Road*'s production and up to its release, but he did not face them alone. Part of what makes the *Mad Max* series noteworthy as films is the coherence of their look, their content and their action, even as each film stands on its own as a distinct entity. This is noticeable in looking at the evolution of the series across the first three films, and critical when considering *Fury Road*'s success as a text. It not only revives *Mad Max*'s established formulas for character building, world building and the development of thematic context, it deepens each and brings something new to the table. On a purely mechanical level, some of this may be attributed to how long *Fury Road* took to get made. According to Abbie Bernstein's *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*, the fourth *Mad Max* film was conceived of long before it finally filmed in 2012. She explores the film's genesis in an interview with Brendan McCarthy, a British comics artist who storyboarded and co-wrote the first drafts of *Fury Road*:

McCarthy's first encounters with George Miller came when he was a production designer on... *ReBoot*. This allowed him to make an episode that parodied *Road Warrior*, which he then sent off on VHS cassette to Miller circa 1997, along with a simple note asking, "Whatever happened to *Mad Max*?" ...a few months later, Miller's producing partner, Doug Mitchell, phoned McCarthy and invited him to a meeting.

"I asked George a million questions," McCarthy recalls. "We just hit it off and had a great conversation." The topics included, of course, *Mad Max*. "We talked

about where would he be now, what happened to him, and whether there was another story to be told.”⁴²

Miller’s conversation with McCarthy lead to a creative spark, and a few months later McCarthy was formally invited to work on the fourth *Mad Max* film. Production work began in 1999, and the film was in active development until the September 11th 2001 attacks cratered the economy. The first iteration of *Fury Road* collapsed in 2002. Had this version of *Fury Road* been filmed, Mel Gibson would likely have reprised Max. Some of the earlier production art in Bernstein’s book even has Max drawn with Gibson’s face and features. The possibility of a Gibson-led *Fury Road* is an interesting one for a number of reasons, particularly when compared to Hardy’s take on the character, and it offers a chance to discuss both their performances as Max and Charlize Theron’s as Furiosa.

Gibson and Hardy’s takes on Max differ beyond one visibly aging from film to film and the other beginning after a series of off-screen incidents. Even at his most destructive and violent, Gibson’s Max seems to have a grip on reality. His insanity manifests first in acts of extreme brutality and then near total apathy. Gibson’s Max holds himself in reserve, only speaking when he needs to and rarely changing his expression save for private moments or when he can no longer deny his own humanity. Gibson plays Max’s gradual return to stability across the first three films as a subtle recovery. He is still reserved and guarded, but by *Beyond Thunderdome* he is visibly calmer and more comfortable interacting with others than he is at the end of *Mad Max* and across most of *The Road Warrior*.

Hardy, on the other hand, manifests Max’s trauma much more overtly. Beyond suffering from hallucinations of the many people he could not protect, he is twitchy, panicky, nervous and

⁴² Abbie Bernstein, *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*, (London: Titan Books, 2015), 13.

extremely uncomfortable with human interaction. Gibson's Max did not like to talk. Hardy's Max is, initially, almost incapable of speaking. When he first comes across Furiosa and the Wives, he keeps as far away from them as possible and communicates with grunts, gestures and the occasional word. Even as he bonds with Furiosa and her party, becomes calmer and starts to regain his sense of self, Hardy plays Max as someone afraid of intimacy and human contact. The first time he willingly touches someone outside of combat comes late in the film, when he convinces Furiosa that his plan to take Immortan Joe's fortress can work, and that together they can earn the redemption they both seek. He offers his hand in solidarity, a gesture of extreme trust and intimacy for someone as closed off as he is. Both Gibson and Hardy play Max as a fundamentally good man who has shut himself off from the world, but they play him very differently. Gibson is so stoic that his calm becomes unnerving, while Hardy is constantly ill at ease and moments away from panicking.

Although Hardy's take on Max is a bundle of raw nerves, the stoicism Gibson brought to the role is still present in *Fury Road*. Theron's Furiosa is, in temperament and behavior, closer to Gibson's Max circa *Road Warrior*. She is almost always stoic, save for when she is fighting, and she is not comfortable expressing emotion openly, except in moments of comparative safety and privacy. It's a very strong performance, and one that stands as an interesting foil to both Hardy's performance as Max and Max's arc overall, since Furiosa is able to find enough inner peace and purpose to stop moving while Max, though in a better place than he was, continues to wander.

Miller spent most of the 2000s with *Fury Road* on the back burner, but he and his team continued to work on its world when time and finances allowed. *Fury Road's* art team included several longtime collaborators from Kennedy Miller Mitchell, Miller's production company, artists Peter Pound and Mark Sexton, and production designer Colin Gibson. *Fury Road's* early

drafts were almost completely visual – a massive series of storyboards that Miller, McCarthy, Pound and Sexton all developed together. Talking to Bernstein, Sexton credits this starting point with the success of *Fury Road* as a piece of filmmaking and a piece of storytelling:

“I think that it has informed the filmmaking process at every level. If we didn’t have those storyboards in the first place, we wouldn’t have had a script. It’s incredibly hard to write action interestingly within a script, because it’s so hard to get the kinetic qualities of action within words without going into vast amounts of detail, and you don’t have that room within a script.”⁴³

In addition to the storyboard drafts, *Fury Road*’s art team worked on designing the fleet of vehicles and a menagerie of costumes, items that would fill the Wasteland and give it history. According to Miller, the governing concept for the design of *Fury Road*’s incarnation of the Wasteland was that:

‘Even in the Wasteland, people make beautiful things.’ No matter how impoverished the circumstances there are always, among us, artisans and artists who are able to create a strong, utilitarian aesthetic. The impulses which drove our Paleolithic ancestors to make exquisite cave paintings persist in the post-apocalyptic ‘Black Fingers’ (motor mechanics) restoring a War Rig and in the War Boys scarifying themselves with sacramental body art. The Immortan Joe’s Mask not only pumps filtered air into his diseased body but is fashioned in a way that makes him formidable, persuading all who see him that he may be the fierce demigod he purports to be. Art in the cause of a tyrant.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 8.

More than any other *Mad Max* film, *Fury Road*'s costume and car work is tied directly to the histories and ideologies of its characters. Furiosa's War Rig is powerful and practical, a black tanker armored and armed with enough firepower and horsepower to break through anything in her way. Her prosthetic arm is simple and functional; it's built from whatever she has been able to scrounge together. The Interceptor, though seen intact only briefly, appears to be just as much Max's home as it was in *The Road Warrior*; after its conversion into a War Boy ride it becomes a grotesque parody of itself, buffed to chrome, pumped up on giant tires, its V8 swapped out for a triple-decker engine adorned with a skull. Max himself still has his trademark jacket, but over the course of *Fury Road* he swaps out pieces of his gear when he gets a chance to replace them with better options. He literally becomes better equipped to survive as he heals and regains his sense of self. Immortan Joe's personal vehicle, the Gigahorse, is built from two Cadillacs mounted to look like they are having sex with each other, as befits an old man violently obsessed with proving his own virility. And since Joe styles himself as the pinnacle of masculinity even though a long life in the Wasteland has taken a severe toll on his body, he dons a transparent plastic muscle suit so that he can at least pretend to be what he wants his followers to think he is.

In 2009 Miller was able to revive *Fury Road*, and by 2010 he had assembled most of the cast, including Hardy and Theron. Production was ready to begin in Broken Hill, Australia in 2011 for a 2012 release, but, per Colin Gibson, "it rained and it rained, forty days and nights, and we were surrounded by carpets of flowers. It was all very pretty and there was nothing but flapping pelicans and camels in *flagrante delicto*."⁴⁵ With Broken Hill out of the picture, *Fury Road* shut down for a year so that the production, including its fleet of custom built vehicles, could be moved

⁴⁵ Ibid, 18.

to Namibia, where it would finally film in 2012. After spending three years in post-production and reshoots, the finished film would be released in May of 2015.

Miller convinced cinematographer John Seale, with whom he had worked on *Lorenzo's Oil* in 1992, and who had also shot *Witness*, *The English Patient*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and the blockbusters *The Perfect Storm* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, to come out of retirement for *Fury Road*. Through Seale's cameras, the Wasteland's look developed into something entirely new. The previous *Mad Max* films (shot by David Eggby [*Mad Max*] and Dean Semler [*The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*]) are strikingly composed movies, but none do what *Fury Road* does with color. Seale pushes the gold and orange of the Wasteland's sand and the blue of its skies past realism into the realm of the fantastic. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Fury Road's* night scenes. Seale shot day for night, and then cracked the color down to a beautiful dark blue that looks unlike any of the night shots in the previous *Max* films. This also allows for the creation of pockets of regular light amidst the blue of night. These beautifully impossible pockets of light are associated with the comparatively innocent Wives and, once he formally joins Furiosa's group, Nux. Max and Furiosa meanwhile, remain in the dark. It is not realistic at all, but it is striking and beautifully reflects the Wasteland's status as a mythical place that reflects those who inhabit it. "Mythical" would be the best word for the look Seale creates. The Wasteland is not a realistic space, particularly in *Fury Road* with its monster cars, white painted War Boys and evil flamethrower guitar wielding mutant warriors in red thermal pajamas. But it is a space where deep truth may be found, and Seale's cinematography, which is tied very strongly to the emotional state of *Fury Road's* characters, beautifully reflects that.

For editing, Miller turned to his wife Margaret Sixel, with whom he had also collaborated on *Happy Feet* and *Babe*. Sixel would ultimately win an Oscar for her work on *Fury Road*. Talking

to NPR, she discussed what sets her apart from her peers as an editor and why *Fury Road* is the success it is:

I had a lot of terrific guys in the cutting room and a few of them would say, “Maggie, it’s great that you’re doing it because, you know, we would have stopped ages ago with the explosions, and that would have been cool, and we would have been happy.” But you know, it wasn’t enough for me. I really had to feel that it was an emotional content to a lot of the stunts and try to keep the characters in there... Because, you know, when you’ve got a whole lot of stunts, you can just get caught up in the action of that stunt and forget about where all of your main characters are. So I would deliberately go through the film and try to keep them alive... Everybody took this film so seriously – the production designer, the visual effects people, the sound people, music – you know, it was art for a lot of people. So in hindsight now I think that must be evident when people watch the film – that everyone tried to push the envelope a little. So when I look back now I think, “Yeah, you know, we did all try to make something unique and different, and we didn’t copy anybody.”⁴⁶

Sixel’s argument illustrates Miller’s strengths as a filmmaker and as a collaborator, particularly when it comes to the *Mad Max* films. He has a specific, unique story that he wants to tell, but he does not steamroll others to tell it. Instead, he reaches out to others and brings in fellow film professionals with distinctive voices, from a comic artist with a knack for the surreal, to an editor who keeps an eye on humanity in the midst of chaos, to a cinematographer who can push

⁴⁶ NPR, ‘You Bite Off a Little Bit’: ‘Mad Max’ Editor On How to Shape a Film, February 15, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/15/466832925/you-bite-off-a-little-bit-mad-max-editor-on-how-to-shape-a-film>.

the image of the land to match the intensity of the story being told there. As Miller himself puts it, *Fury Road* is “the product of a shared vision... That’s what we’ve been striving so long to achieve... a ‘movie’ movie. It is my cautious hope, that the result of our labors will follow you long after you’ve left the cinema.”⁴⁷ As Sixel puts it, the labor put into *Fury Road* shows on screen – in its worldbuilding, in its character work, and in the way it digs into humanity in search of understanding. Miller and his collaborators were rewarded for their labor with modest box office success and unprecedented critical acclaim. The first *Mad Max*’s reputation grew with time, but its initial Australian reception was quite hostile. *The Road Warrior* was well-received, inspired an entire style of post-apocalyptic storytelling and launched Mel Gibson to stardom, but it has had to contend with genre snobbery and Gibson’s self-destruction. *Beyond Thunderdome* was divisive at the time of its release and it remains divisive today. *Fury Road* was nominated for ten Oscars and won six, an astonishing achievement for an Australian science fiction blockbuster. Beyond the extremely positive critical notices and industry recognition, *Fury Road* has sparked a revival of interest in *Mad Max* and, when combined with the largely positive reception of Miller’s other works, raised Miller out of the comparative obscurity he had worked in since the late 1980s.

Ideology and Character in *Fury Road*

As discussed earlier, Furiosa’s heroism marks her as a new kind of character in the *Mad Max* series. It also builds a powerful specificity into *Fury Road*’s thematic content. While the *Mad Max* series as a whole is a humanist text concerned with the species’ condition, its capacity for both destruction and redemption and the value of life, *Fury Road* is explicitly feminist in its themes and content. Immortan Joe, in deed and ideology, is patriarchy given a rotting, hate-filled human

⁴⁷ Bernstein, 8.

form. He is evil in a way unlike any other *Mad Max* villain. The Toecutter was sincere in his belief that it was his gang against the world, and mourned a dead friend. The Humungous had genuine compassion for Wez when the latter was grieving. Aunty Entity and MasterBlaster, for all their ruthlessness, had genuinely noble goals. Aunty wanted to rebuild society. Master and Blaster wanted to look out for each other. Joe lives only to glorify himself. Consider this exchange between the Wives (Huntington-Whiteley as Angharad, Keough as Capable, Lee as the Dag) and the War Boy Nux (Hoult) before they toss him from the War Rig:

NUX: It's over. You can't defy him.

THE DAG: Just watch us, mate!

NUX: He is the one who grabbed the sun!

ANGHARAD: Look how slick he's fooled you, War Boy.

CAPABLE: He's a lying old man.

NUX: By his hand we'll be lifted up!

ANGHARAD: That's why we have his log seared on our backs! "Breeding stock!" "Battle fodder!"

NUX: No, I am awaited!

CAPABLE: You're an old man's battle fodder!

ANGHARAD: Killing everyone and everything.

NUX: We're not to blame!

ANGHARAD: Then who killed the world?⁴⁸

Joe does not see others as people, but things. He will spin yarns about Valhalla to keep the War Boys willing to die, teach them that his Wives and the children he would have them bear him

⁴⁸ *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2015), Blu-ray.

are not people but treasures. Everything he says that isn't an explicit fact or a question is a lie. The world and everyone in it exists solely so that he may profit from them and reaffirm his glory, and if he cannot profit or have his self-worth reaffirmed, they become less than nothing to him. Joe is patriarchy. When Nux, who so eagerly proclaims Joe a god, who would happily die for him, fumbles an attempt to assassinate Furiosa, Joe smugly dismisses him as "mediocre" and proceeds to forget he exists.

In Miller's eyes, to borrow a phrase coined by the legendary comic book creator Jack Kirby, patriarchy is fundamentally anti-life. It destroys people on a systemic and individual level, it preserves and idealizes a status quo that prevents any meaningful social change, and it even injures those who enforce it. The War Boys are Joe's muscle, and they have been duped into throwing away their lives for him. Joe himself is driven entirely by fear. He is afraid that he will not have an heir when the Wives escape. He is afraid to be seen as weak despite being an old, visibly sick man. He is afraid that everything he has built could come crumbling down in an instant. But rather than question his actions or his ideology, Joe clings to the image of himself as a perfect god. When he dispenses water to the masses huddled at the base of the Citadel, he insists upon receiving their adoration before he offers them a brief moment of sustenance, and when he learns of the Wives' flight, he assumes that Furiosa took them from him, rather than listening to their tutor when she tells him that they begged Furiosa to help them escape.

Miller and his creative team built every aspect of *Fury Road's* story and thematic content in direct opposition to Joe's warped ideology. In order to make sure that his cast was comfortable working with heavy material, and that he was handing that material properly, Miller turned to Eve Ensler. Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, worked with the cast, primarily the women playing the Wives in order to help them understand the ideology of patriarchy and the

ways it manifests in *Fury Road*'s story. The most prominent case of this is Joe's repeated rape of the Wives in the hopes of producing an heir he will be able to mold in his image. In an interview with *Time*, Ensler said:

One out of three women on the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime – it's a central issue of our time, and that violence against women relates to racial and economic injustice. This movie takes those issues head-on. I think George Miller is a feminist, and he made a feminist action film. It was really amazing of him to know that he needed a woman to come in who had experience with this.⁴⁹

If Joe's ideology is built entirely around dominance and an obscene manifestation of self-interest, then Furiosa and her party's counter-ideology is built on reaching out to other people and making connections. In an interview with Bernstein, Nico Lathouris, Miller's *Fury Road* co-writer⁵⁰ digs into *Fury Road*'s story and says that:

“It's about a man running away from his better self, and his better self catches up to him. It's about a man that is ‘apart from,’ at the beginning; he becomes a part *of* only at the end. The premise of it was that what's broken is healed by love only... Max has a very slow burn. He comes up very, very reluctantly into this engagement with the girls and this Warrior Woman (Furiosa), until the point where he's committed... we had this idea of, ‘Rather than running away, why not change where you're at?’ ...we had a little slogan

⁴⁹ Eliana Dockterman, “*Vagina Monologues* Writer Eve Ensler: How *Mad Max: Fury Road* Became a ‘Feminist Action Film,’ *Time*, May 7, 2015, <http://time.com/3850323/mad-max-fury-road-eve-ensler-feminist/>.

⁵⁰ Lathouris is, like Hugh Keays-Byrne, an alumni of the first *Mad Max*. He plays the unfortunate mechanic Max tortures for information on the Toecutter's gang.

written above the Electro-board, which said, 'Engage to heal,' which means, as you become engaged, healing can happen, emotionally and spiritually."⁵¹

Fury Road's assorted characters and factions break down into two camps. Immortan Joe's forces, including his fellow warlords the People Eater (John Howard) and the Bullet Farmer (Richard Carter) and the War Boys fight to preserve the status quo. Their ideology is uniformly cruel, and their methodology differs only in the degree of its viciousness. The Warlords value themselves and themselves alone. When Furiosa blinds the Bullet Farmer, he immediately ignores Joe's request that the Wives be brought back alive and goes on a vengeful rampage that gets him killed by Max. During the final chase, when Max boards the People Eater's War Rig, Joe unceremoniously shoots through his ostensible ally in order to try and hit Max. The War Boys, while victims of Joe's manipulations, are all too happy to throw themselves into violence and carnage. Nux's former right-hand man, Slit (Josh Helman), stands out as particularly unpleasant. He is so desperate to win glory for himself that he attempts to steal the kill of another War Boy as the latter is in the process of dying heroically and mocks him as "mediocre" even as his peers celebrate their comrade's ascension into Valhalla.

By contrast, Furiosa's party begins as herself and the Wives, and grows to include Max, the reformed Nux and the Vulvalini, the remnants of the tribe from which she was stolen. While they are all opposed to Joe's brutality, they come to that opposition in different ways and for different reasons. They are all victims of Joe in one way or another. Furiosa worked for him, and had to claw her way back to humanity because of it. The Wives, Nux and Max were his slaves, denied agency and personhood until they seized a chance to take back their freedom. The Vulvalini were robbed of Furiosa and her mother, and chose to move from scavenging on the edge of the

⁵¹ Bernstein, 17.

world to fighting for the ideals they instilled in Furiosa, and by extension the Wives. Ultimately the group decides to destroy the very system that enabled Joe to brutalize them in the first place.

Beyond their shared grievance with Joe, Furiosa's group repeatedly demonstrates the ability to look beyond themselves and reach out to each other to try and help. The Vulvalini immediately accept the Wives and begin to teach them the ways of the old world, while the Wives push the Vulvalini to become active in fighting for a better world after years of scavenging and gradual decay.

The Wives look out for each other and the rest of the party, and grow stronger as individuals because of it. Angharad (Huntington-Whitely), their leader, is the only wife not to survive the journey. But before her death she instills her ideals for a better world free of Joe in Furiosa and her fellow Wives, and she insists on sparing Nux's life, starting the chain of events that will lead to his switching sides. Cheedo (Eaton), the youngest and most sheltered of the Wives, struggles with the journey and, after Angharad's death, makes a desperate attempt to return to Joe. Her peers stop her and comfort her as desperation becomes grief for her friend. The others looking out for her give Cheedo the strength to fight through her desire to go back to the poisoned "safety" of Joe. She later proves to be cunning and courageous – during the final chase she dupes Joe's strong but dumb son Rictus (Jones) into taking her onto his car so that she can help Furiosa get into position to strike at Joe.

The Dag (Lee), the most eccentric and sarcastic of the Wives, forms a bond with the Keeper of the Seeds (Jaffer), a member of the Vulvalini who carries a rare supply of viable seeds and who plants one wherever she can in the hopes that something might grow. The Keeper counsels the Dag to let go of her certainty that the child she is carrying will be a "Little Joe" – it might even be a girl. The Dag in turn confronts the Keeper about how easily she kills, inspiring the latter to back

Max's plan to take the Citadel. Toast (Kravitz), the most cynical of the Wives and the one most certain that the escape plan will fail, is quietly moved by Max's transformation from threatening outsider to self-sacrificing ally, enough so that she is the first to realize that not only is Max's plan to take the Citadel better than biking off into oblivion, it can actually work. When she is captured during the final chase, she refuses to accept defeat as inevitable and attacks Joe at a key moment, giving Furiosa the opening she needs to kill him.

Above the strong work done by the Wives in general and the Vulvalini as a group are two relationships that stand out as the key examples of Lathouris' conception of the movie being about engaging to heal. These are the relationships between Capable (Keough) and Nux (Hoult) and between Furiosa and Max. Shortly after Angharad's death, Capable volunteers to watch the road for anyone who may be pursuing the War Rig. At the back of the Rig, she discovers Nux, stranded and distraught after his failed attempt to kill Furiosa and Angharad's death. Their conversation follows:

CAPABLE: What are you doing here?

NUX: He saw it. He saw it all. My own blood bag driving the rig that killed her.

(Nux begins to beat his head on the War Rig's floor.)

CAPABLE: Stop doing that. (She places her hand on Nux's head.) Shh shh sssh.

Stop.

NUX: Three times the gates were open to me.

CAPABLE: What gates?

NUX: I was awaited in Valhalla. They were calling my name. I should be walking with the Immorta. McFeasting with the heroes of all time.

(Capable lies down next to Nux.)

CAPABLE: I'd say it was your manifest destiny not to.

NUX: I thought I was being spared for something great. I got to drive a pursuit vehicle. For a while even Larry and Barry stopped chewing on my windpipe.

CAPABLE: Who are Larry and Barry?

NUX: My mates. (He gestures to two large tumors on his throat, which he has drawn smiley faces on.) If they don't get me, then the night fevers will.

(CAPABLE reaches out a hand and gently touches Nux's face. Nux is visibly surprised and moved.)

Capable's compassion towards Nux moves him to officially throw in with Furiosa's party. His skill behind the wheel saves the group when they come under attack by the Bullet Farmer, and after Capable vouches for him, the others accept him as one of their own. From that point on, Capable and Nux form the most openly romantic relationship in the series outside of Max and Jessie. They are constantly physically affectionate with each other, and in a series and a film in which physical interactions involve people trying to kill each other, it stands out. Keough and Holt were interviewed for *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*, and both discussed Capable and Nux's relationship. Keough says:

Because the Wives spend so much time around the Immortan, they see him when he's not being this godlike thing. So they know he's full of shit, and he's fooling all these boys, and of course they feel compassion towards that. When she meets Nux, they really care for each other. She wants him to realize that there's a whole other way things could be. She wants to save him.⁵²

Holt says:

⁵² Bernstein, 110.

Nux is at a point where he's lost everything... It literally couldn't get any worse for him. And then he meets Capable. She looks after him and makes him realize that the things he was trying to die for and believing in weren't necessarily all there is in the world. Nux has never had this sort of affection from anyone. And he falls head over heels in love with her instantly.⁵³

Capable and Nux's relationship is a refutation of both Joe's commodification of the Wives and the War Boys and his deranged conception of marriage. In Nux, Capable finds a partner, rather than an abuser, and she is able honor the late Angharad's ideals as both a leader and the unofficial first among equals for the surviving Wives. In Capable, Nux forms a bond that is based on respect for each other as people, rather than respect for his ability to out macho the other party, as well as an ideal to live for rather than a lie to kill himself for. When Nux does die at the end of *Fury Road*, sacrificing himself to flip the War Rig and destroy the remainder of Joe's armada, he invokes the War Boy religion a final time, but in a radically different context. Traditionally, when a War Boy is about to die a heroic death, they ask others to "witness" them, since they are about to ascend into Valhalla for a glorious death. Nux does ask Capable to witness him, but not because he wants his death to be a glorious moment. Instead, he wants the woman he loves to remember him and keep living. Capable responds with a Vulvalini gesture of mourning and honors his request.

Fury Road's other key relationship, the one between Furiosa and Max, is decidedly less romantic and physically affectionate than the one between Capable and Nux. This is not to say that Furiosa and Max do not care for one another, but their mutual baggage and shared issues with contact mean that a romantic relationship is not what they need from each other. Instead, through fighting alongside one another and realizing the depths of each other's decency, they become peers

⁵³ Ibid, 112.

in a way that neither has had for a long time. In the case of Furiosa, this is more implicit than explicit (Joe was her superior, the War Boys who served with her were her subordinates, the Wives respect her and care for her, but their pacifism and idealism keeps a degree of separation between them and Furiosa, the Vulvalini would be her peers but for their years of separation), but in the case of Max it is part of the text. Since his family's murder, Max has never had a close relationship with anyone. There are certainly people he comes to respect and/or care for, but the only real point of reference for his relationship with Furiosa is his brief moment of recognition with Aunty Entity before they part ways, and even then that moment followed a long stretch in which the two were enemies.

If Max and Furiosa begin at odds with one another, they do not stay that way for long. Despite Max's initial attempt to steal the War Rig and a later threat to turn Furiosa's party over to Joe, Furiosa is able to convince him to help her, first through pragmatism (only she knows the sequence for the War Rig's kill switches) and then in a rough, if empathetic appeal to his humanity (she offers to help him remove the muzzle the War Boys had forced him to wear). From then on, circumstances require Furiosa and Max to become comrades in arms. This is despite Max's attempts to keep his distance – in particular he refuses to tell Furiosa his name. They work well together in combat, backing each other up and saving each other's lives repeatedly. When Max temporarily leaves the group to hunt down the blind, crazed Bullet Farmer and tells them to leave without him if he takes too long, Furiosa is fully convinced of his decency. From that point on she trusts him as a confidante, whether regarding her own desire for redemption, or her initial doomed plan to take the others and ride as far as she can once the group reunites with the Vulvalini and learns that the Green Place has fallen into ruin. Moreover, she does not take his coming as a given, and gives him a motorcycle fully loaded with supplies along with an invitation to join the group if

he so chooses. Furiosa's arc sees her heal more completely than Max does in *Road Warrior* or *Fury Road*, and as the narrative progresses, Theron shifts her performance. Furiosa becomes more expressive, particularly when she reunites with the warrior clan she was stolen from as a child and as her bond with Max deepens. She never becomes as warm as the Wives or Max at his most vulnerable, but she does become more consistently open and at peace with herself.

Max initially refuses Furiosa's invitation, driven by his pathological need to keep moving and a deep-seated fear of losing yet more people he has come to care about and adding to his collection of ghosts. But he cares for Furiosa and her group enough to fight past his relentless survival instinct, catch up with them, and offer his plan to cut through Joe's armada and take the Citadel as an alternative to riding into oblivion. He does not want to lead, but at the same time he does not want to see Furiosa destroy herself, so he steps up to back her with an idea that, while dangerous, could offer a path to the redemption for which she has been searching. In turn, by choosing to fight alongside someone he respects instead of running, Max seeks redemption of his own.

The culmination of Max and Furiosa's relationship comes just before *Fury Road's* coda. Joe is dead. The surviving members of Furiosa's party are heading for the citadel. But Furiosa herself has been badly wounded, and is on the verge of dying. Max, though jittery as ever, overcomes all of his issues with intimacy and fears of connection in order to save her. He performs emergency surgery on her, and pulls her in for a hug when she revives. When Furiosa begins to fall unconscious from blood loss, Max saves her again in a spectacular inversion of his initial capture. Joe and the War Boys harvested his blood for their own needs. Max willingly gives his blood to Furiosa to ensure her survival. This both makes Lathouris' "engage to heal" concept beautifully literal and sees Max allow himself to be vulnerable for the sake of the person he cares

most for. As the Wives work to keep Furiosa awake, Max joins in by at last telling her, and by extension everyone else in the party, his name. It is perhaps the single most decent and heroic action Max takes in *Fury Road*, and the culmination of his character arc.

Coda

Mad Max: Fury Road and by extension the *Mad Max* series on a moment of unambiguous triumph. The few survivors of Joe's army (mostly children he was raising to be a new generation of War Boys), his slaves and the struggling hordes encamped at the base of the Citadel are stunned to see his car return alone. Max reveals Joe's corpse to the assembled onlookers and tosses it to the masses, who swiftly tear it to pieces. Furiosa is able to reveal herself and stand with the help of Max and the Wives, leading to the masses demanding that the remnants of Joe's forces let them up into the Citadel and accept her as their leader. A scrawny former slave, helped by the young would-be War Boys all free to be more than the pawns Joe demanded they become, happily lower the auto platform. The women Joe had imprisoned to harvest breast milk from free themselves and begin to release the water Joe had hoarded to the masses. As the Wives help the masses onto the platform, Max makes sure Furiosa is in good hands and quietly takes his leave. Furiosa realizes that he has gone, and catches his eye as he begins to make his way into the crowd. They share a nod of respect and understanding, and then part ways. Max vanishes into the crowd. Furiosa, the Wives, the Vulvalini and the masses ascend to the Citadel to begin building a better tomorrow.

Miller closes the coda with a quote from "The First History Man," "Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland in search of our better selves?" That quote, which to date concludes both *Fury Road* and the series, serves as a fitting summation for the concerns of the

entire series. If *Mad Max* is the series pilot that was never meant to be a series pilot, and much of its humanism comes from its ambivalence and discomfort with Max's murderous rampage, the subsequent three films, which might be called the Wasteland trilogy, have all been fundamentally humanist films. *Fury Road's* feminism and deconstruction of patriarchy make the value of life and the destructive and regenerative capabilities of humanity an explicit part of its text, especially given that so much of the film can be read as an answer to that first, cryptic bit of radio chatter in *Fury Road's* crucial opening scene.

“Why are you hurting these people?” someone asked as the world started to fall. The *Mad Max* series has always sought an answer to that question. If the circumstances of the answer are different, the answer itself always boils down to “because people confuse the ability to do harm, the ability to dominate with strength, and they are willing to cast aside compassion and empathy in order to achieve what they believe is strength.” To extrapolate from Miller's introduction in *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*, it would not take some sort of great external evil to break the world or cast judgment upon humanity, a la *The Terminator's* monstrous, righteous SkyNet. No, according to George Miller, this is how the end of the world would begin:

...it starts next Wednesday... when the bad stuff we see in the news comes to pass all at once. A catastrophic cascade of economic crises, power grids collapsing, Oil Wars, Water Wars, failed states, a random nuclear ‘skirmish.’ Humanity terrorizing itself, an earth gone sour, plus pitfalls none could foresee.⁵⁴

Humanity has a unique talent for brutality and cruelty, and Miller's anxieties about that have informed the series back to the first *Mad Max*, which was built in part on the gas shortage

⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

in Australia during the late 1970s and the brutality that it provoked. It is telling that the most reprehensible person in the series, Immortan Joe, is driven by recognizably human anxieties – the desire to be considered worthwhile in old age, the desire to have an heir, that have been warped into monstrosity by his own belief in and dependence upon patriarchy.

But Miller has never embraced fatalism. He has been sharply critical of humanity's destructive tendencies across the entire *Mad Max* series, from the Toecutter's careless rampage to the Humungous and Wez's relentless brutality to Aunty Entity's ruthless insistence upon capitalism as the bedrock upon which society should be rebuilt. But he has never lost sight of humanity's ability to regenerate, to heal, to be more than its worst self. Consider the Gyrocaptain's redemption and transformation in *The Road Warrior* or Savannah's decision to step up and move into the world even when her faith lets her down in *Beyond Thunderdome*. Consider the Wives and Furiosa, who do not just kill Joe and demolish his system on multiple levels. Capable shows Nux another way to live beyond Joe's death cult. The Wives as a collective refuse to complacently bear Joe children that he can warp into Warlords, and choose instead to assert their agency and escape. Furiosa is able to move past her dream of the Green Place's impossible utopia in order to seize a real chance to annihilate Joe's patriarchy and build something new, and she does not ascend alone, as Joe claims in his messianic nonsense, but alongside a group of peers who bring perspectives and experiences she does not have.

And then of course there is Max. Max, who descends into barbarism, brutality and madness at the end of *Mad Max* and gradually moves back towards humanity across the Wasteland trilogy. He goes from a burnt-out shell to a reluctant hero capable of once more caring for others in *The Road Warrior*. *Beyond Thunderdome* moves him from gun for hire to fake messiah to one of the many who the Children of the Crack might one day be able to offer a

home. *Fury Road* takes him the furthest. On a purely mechanical level, this is due to the extreme length of time between *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*, necessitating the re-introduction and redefinition of Max. But on a purely textual level, *Fury Road* is the first *Mad Max* film to end with Max as a man. He is not a hero, not a savior, but he is a good man who stepped up to help where he could, and the success he wins in *Fury Road* is, for once, completely unqualified. Still, he chooses to leave Furiosa despite their bond, because the damage the world's end did to him and that he did to himself may never fully heal. He will continue to wander, continue to search for redemption. In Lathouris' words:

“It's a condition with an unresolved trauma, where you create or choose situations in your life that recreate that same trauma as an attempt to resolve it. In *Mad Max I*, Max loses his wife and child and responded in an inappropriate way to their deaths. Instead of grieving, it's too painful to acknowledge that loss, so you turn and you blame somebody for it and then you kill them. And that cycle of revenge goes on and on and on. That's why I think *Mad Max* might be such an important story to tell, and that's why what's broken is healed by love only. So that's the lesson Max has to learn. At the end of *Fury Road*, he's not ready yet to love. I think Furiosa is.”⁵⁵

Max's journey may never completely end, nor will the Wasteland ever become contemporary Australia again. But the *Mad Max* series, the Wasteland trilogy in particular, argue that the apocalypse, that devastation, does not have to be the end. When humanity marshals its best instincts, when people come together, step up and work to be more than thoughtless, selfish destroyers, then regeneration and redemption are possible. The answer to the First History Man's

⁵⁵ Ibid. 172.

question might well be the Citadel under the rule of Furiosa and the Wives. But the search, the effort to be good, that journey is what the *Mad Max* series as a whole is built on, and that attention to humanity is what makes the *Mad Max* series singular in post-apocalyptic cinema and in cinema itself.

Works Cited:

- “Humanist Manifesto III.” *American Humanist Association*.
http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/humanist_manifesto_iii. 2003.
- Bernstein, Abbie. *The Art of Mad Max: Fury Road*. London: Titan Books, 2015.
- Dockterman, Eliana. “*Vagina Monologues* Writer Eve Ensler: How *Mad Max: Fury Road* Became a ‘Feminist Action Film’.” *Time*. May 7, 2015. <http://time.com/3850323/mad-max-fury-road-eve-ensler-feminist/>.
- Martin, Adrian. *The Mad Max Movies*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2003.
- Mad Max*. Directed by George Miller. 1979. Beverly Hills, CA. MGM, 2015. Blu-Ray.
- Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. Directed by George Miller. 1985. Burbank, CA. Warner Home Video, 2013. Blu-Ray.
- Mad Max: Fury Road*. Directed by George Miller. 2015. Burbank, CA. Warner Home Video, 2015. Blu-ray.
- The Road Warrior*. Directed by George Miller. 1981. Burbank, CA. Warner Home Video, 2013. Blu-Ray.
- “‘You Bite Off a Little Bit’: ‘Mad Max’ Editor On How to Shape a Film.” *NPR*. February 15, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/15/466832925/you-bite-off-a-little-bit-mad-max-editor-on-how-to-shape-a-film>.
- Weaver, Roslyn. *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011.