Mad Max: between apocalypse and utopia

Dan Hassler-Forest

'What a lovely day!' The cynical exuberance with which George Miller's iconic *Mad Max* finally returned to movie screens typifies a contradiction that lies at the heart of this slippery storyworld. Simultaneously a joyous celebration of the beloved film series' long-delayed resurrection and an ironic expression of the film's toxic death cult, the phrase lingers in the mind because it combines the franchise's critical attitude with the visceral thrills it provides. This contradiction – between *Mad Max* as a work of cultural criticism and *Mad Max* as an audiovisual spectacle – manifested itself equally in the reception of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller US 2015): the deluge of excitable reviews, editorials, thinkpieces and memes it generated tended to focus either on the film's political agenda, or on its formalist ingenuity as an action film.

While the four films in the *Mad Max* series (and the occasional transmedia expansion) run the gamut from micro-budgeted Ozsploitation to pre-packaged summer blockbuster, this fundamental tension has defined the franchise and its cultural history. Influential to the point that the term '*Mad Max* future' instantly brings to mind a harsh landscape of ecological devastation, resource scarcity and the total breakdown of institutions, its post-apocalyptic future is both existentially terrifying and fundamentally exciting – if only because of the sheer virtuosity of production design, stunt work and world-building. No other film series has made the post-apocalyptic, warlord-ravaged hellscape that seems like the inevitable end game of global capitalism so much *fun*.

Even *Mad Max* (Miller Australia 1979), an outlier in the franchise in more ways than one, exhibits this characteristic structure of feeling. Set just 'a few years in the future' – as the opening caption indicates – the first film plays like a slightly more futuristic variation on the 1970s Hollywood trend of cynical cop/vigilante action films, such as *Dirty Harry* (Siegel US 1971) and *Death Wish* (Winner US 1974), adding in more spectacular chases and more obviously batshit-crazy stunts. Considering the vaguely punk 'rags 'n leather' aesthetic that has flourished in the sequels, it is always surprising to find how the breakout Aussie hit that started the franchise is only minimally

Promotional poster. Warner Bros. Pictures.

science-fictional: for US grindhouse audiences – viewing the film in a rather hilariously dubbed American release version – it was surely the spectacle of lawless motorcycle gangs ruling over backwater towns surrounded by the unfathomable emptiness of outback roads that made it seem futuristic.

But even more than its depiction of its near-future dystopian landscape, *Mad Max* established a genuinely nasty worldview, and a politics of absolute nihilism. It depicts a Western society on the brink of collapse, the very first shot in the film unsubtly depicting a dilapidated and falling-apart Halls of Justice sign[1] as Max Rockatansky (an implausibly young Mel Gibson) fights an obviously losing battle with irredeemably evil motorcycle gangs. Explicitly identified as the last remaining embodiment of law enforcement, Max initially represents the implacable last vestige of social order, combining his legal status as police officer with his symbolic authority as head of an idealised nuclear family. But of course the gratuitous murder of his wife and infant child transforms Max from stoic cop to vindictive vigilante, hunting down and sadistically killing the individual gang members who conveniently combine societal collapse and Max's personal loss.

Where this first film thus gives a revved-up depiction of the more general sense of fragmentation and social decay so prevalent in 1970s genre cinema,

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1. A location for which an abandoned sewage plant stood in with perfectly appropriate symbolism.

Mad Max. Warner Home Video, 2013.

the sequels would move into a more explicitly post-apocalyptic future where the collapse has become total. In this context, the subsequent films repeatedly attempt to reverse the first film's dynamic. Beginning with *Mad Max 2* (Miller Australia 1981),[2] the narratives are organised around redemptive arcs, as 'that broken, hollow shell of a man' finds ways of reconnecting to various communities as a reluctant but obvious saviour figure. While the second film's memorable opening montage does combine stock footage of societal collapse with footage from *Mad Max* (1979) to loosely establish the character's background, the film functions very well as a self-contained narrative, and contains remarkably few similarities with its predecessor.

With a budget over ten times that of the first film, *Mad Max 2* fully established the post-apocalyptic wasteland that would swiftly define the brand. Greatly intensifying the first film's collapse of the social order, the sequel's wasteland no longer contains any lingering vestiges of civilisation. And if it thereby also comes closer to the tradition of the American Western, it clearly does so as part of an increasingly transnational form of genre cinema that has as much in common with Sergio Leone as it does with John Ford. It is the point where Max as a character graduates from generic cop-turned-vigilante to mythical hero archetype, inspired at least in part by Joseph Campbell's suddenly fashionable concept of the monomyth. By deliberately playing up supposedly universal narrative tropes, *Mad Max 2* moved away from the first

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2. The second film was released in North America under the alternative title *The Road Warrior* because the first film had only played in limited release, and audiences were less likely to recognise it as a sequel.

Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome. Warner Home Video, 2013.

film's grindhouse vibe to take up a position closer to *Star Wars* (Lucas US 1977) and its similar use of archetype through genre pastiche.

The sequel's striking costumes and production design sparked a seemingly ubiquitous trend in American and European genre filmmaking and music video production. A sprawling desert populated by tribal gangs decked out in leather, S&M gear and punk-rock hairstyles soon became visual shorthand for 1980s depictions of the post-apocalypse. But in spite of its sometimes-uncomfortable homophobia and the striking erasure of native Australians, the franchise-defining sequels also rid themselves largely of the 1979 *Mad Max*'s deeply reactionary sensibility: rather than depicting a dystopian world spiraling off into worsening degrees of chaos and lawlessness, the later films delight in the creative mayhem that results from the absence of a single hegemonic set of social relations.

Thus, while the nihilistic original film gives us a thoroughly nasty dystopia of uncontrollable social decay, its three successors (thus far) combine dystopian nightmares with a variety of stubborn and remarkably resilient utopian imaginaries. From the occupants of the beleaguered oil refinery in *Mad Max 2* to the precarious communities of Bartertown and the children's oasis in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Miller and Ogilvie Australia 1985) and, ultimately, to the increasingly complex utopian imaginaries in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Beyond these films' striking visual design, they have increasingly used the franchise's post-apocalyptic storyworld to explore critical ways of thinking about a postcapitalist future.

In this special issue, these utopian aspects of the *Mad Max* franchise unite the various approaches to films in the series. In a way that mirrors both the

Mad Max: Fury Road. Warner Home Video, 2015.

reception and the history of scholarly interest in *Mad Max*, the first film is once again the odd one out – bereft as it is of utopian impulses beyond its fully apocalyptic politics. The four essays in this collection focus instead on the interplay between the three sequels in relation to each other, to their complex and powerful intertextual dynamics, and to the ways in which the franchise opens up possibilities beyond the stifling contours of global capitalism. In John Hay's article 'The American Mad Max: the Road Warrior versus the Postman', the first two sequels' phenomenal influence on the genre is brought into dialogue David Brin's 1985 novel *The Postman* and its film adaptation of the same name (Costner USA 1997). Hay examines the different and seemingly incompatible ideas about statehood, citizenship and utopia that underlie these two different texts, reflecting critically on the overbearing ways in which the *Mad Max* franchise's success in America came to monopolise cultural expressions of mainstream post-apocalyptic fiction.

In the issue's second article, Claire Corbett – drawing in part on her own memories of having been an extra on the Thunderdome set – focuses on the third film in the franchise, which she relates back to Peter Carey's short story 'Crabs' (1972) and its film adaptation *Dead-End Drive-In* (Trenchard-Smith Australia 1986). Combining Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion with Foucault's definition of the heterotopia, she foregrounds the film's double movement of both foregrounding and erasing Australia's history of genocide

and racism. By adopting the literary effect of the 'irreal', the films in the *Mad Max* franchise offer provocative and productive responses to colonialism's brutal history, with the films' specifically Australian backdrop a deeply meaningful element within their contradictory negotiation of these tensions.

The last two essays in this issue both focus specifically on the much-discussed franchise reboot *Mad Max: Fury Road*, each relating the film's representation of gender to contemporary social and political debates. In 'Re-casting nature as feminist space in *Mad Max: Fury Road*', Michelle Yates foregrounds the innovative ways in which a progressive ecofeminism is expressed in this film. *Fury Road* is contrasted here not only with the much more traditionally gendered *Max Max 2*, but with the stubborn tendency throughout sf cinema to equate nature with essentialist notions of femininity. And finally, in her essay '"Who killed the world?" Religious paradox in *Mad Max: Fury Road*', Bonnie McLean navigates the slippery relationship between gender and religion in the film's post-apocalyptic society, focusing on the productive ways in which it offers productive alternatives while also condemning its corrosive patriarchal hierarchies.

Thus, without denying or 'misunderestimating' the franchise's ambivalent politics or its many internal contradictions, this quartet of essays reads *Mad Max*'s barbaric post-apocalypse against the grain as a powerful expression of hope. Beyond the wasteland, beyond the brutal biker gangs and beyond the constantly-resurrected White Messiah complex lies a resilient utopian imaginary that grows all the more powerful for how it keeps altering its own refracted legacy. With each film finding startling new ways to combine the vocabulary of exploitation cinema with often progressive but always subversive social and cultural forms, we may look to the *Mad Max* franchise not only as a vivid dramatisation of our worst fears, but also as an expression of our most fearfully optimistic dreams. In other words: this special issue offers evidence that, even within the cynical and ostentatiously ironic phrase 'What a lovely day!', we may yet find a resilient kernel of utopian sincerity.