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Victim-Warriors and Restorers— Heroines in the Post-Apocalyptic World of *Mad Max: Fury Road*

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the evolving image of female characters in the *Mad Max* saga directed by George Miller, focusing on Furiosa's rebellion in the last film—*Mad Max: Fury Road*. Interestingly, studying Miller's post-apocalyptic action films, we can observe the evolution of this post-apocalyptic vision from the male-dominated world with civilization collapsing into chaotic violence visualized in the previous series to a more hopeful future created by women in the last part of the saga: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). We observe female heroes: the vengeful Furiosa, the protector of oppressed girls and sex slaves, the women of the separatist clan, and the wives of the warlord, who bring down the tyranny and create a new "green place." It is worth emphasizing that the plot casts female solidarity in the central heroic role. In fact, the *Mad Max* saga emerges as a piece of socially engaged cinema preoccupied with the cultural context of gender discourse. Noticeably, media commentators, scholars and activists have suggested that *Fury Road* is a feminist film.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic utopia, *Mad Max* saga, feminism.

Dystopian visions shaped by culture creators referencing undefined futuristic periods (and post-apocalyptic realities) are undoubtedly a reflection of our fears and nightmares rooted in real-world experience. In his works, Northrop Frye clearly indicated that the tendency to create utopias is universal and goes back to the beginnings of the human race. He also suggested that in the near future, there will unquestionably be a revival of utopian imaginations that will no longer pursue the old-style spatial visions: “New utopias would have to derive their form from the shifting and dissolving movement replacing the fixed locations of life” (347). Literature, film, theatre, art are frequently overflowing with images of infernal lands. Umberto Eco in *The Book of Legendary Lands* very clearly establishes why such projections appeal to us so vigorously; what exactly dystopian/utopian concepts reveal about our relationship with surrounding environment; and how they engage our longing to make sense of the world.¹ This connection between the desire for an earthly paradise and the fear of the consequences of achieving that goal, situates utopia not only in the context of literary or film genres, but also in the spectrum of Western cultural discourse from its origins. In his work, Eco looks at literary texts from Homer’s poetry to contemporary science fiction titles. As the author notes, regardless of the time when the legendary fairytale land was created, it is always a reflection of hidden human desires and dreams. And the utopian image created in this way is accompanied by more and more numerous beliefs evolving over the years, focused around these specific projections (Eco 9).

It is debatable whether dystopia as a cultural genre has ever really diverged from visions depicted in literature through the ages since classical antiquity; rather, the readers and audience’s representations of the future are influenced by them. Artists construct powerful visions of the post-apocalyptic lands based on the topos of *locus horridus*—places ruled by an overwhelming fear and violence governed by a nightmarish, although logically justified, internally coherent structure. The new (worse) worlds consist of constant elements: most of them would have as central ingredients outrageous levels of crime—acts of terror and killing, or explicit gender stereotypes set in a highly hierarchical society. Moreover, the acceptance of violence and the desire for survival at any cost develop in scenarios where there might be no future resulting from the lack of vital resources. Scenes of quasi-religious rituals legitimize class and gender domination where religion is used as a tool of oppression. What is worse, dystopia cannot be escaped—it must be fought and defeated.

¹ Krzysztof Maj undermines the traditional triad of utopias, anti-utopias and dystopias, and proposes to replace it with a new category of utopias, or fictional “non-places,” into eutopias (ideal “nonplaces”) and dystopias (bad “non-places”) (153–55).

Original film dystopias have definitely influenced subsequent images of iconic figures of popular culture—Andrew Niccol’s eugenicist nightmare *Gattaca* (1997), Michael Winterbottom’s *Code 46* (2003) and, finally, the survivors in the post-apocalyptic desert in George Miller’s *Mad Max* saga (1979, 1981, 1985, 2015) (Domingo 742). The *Mad Max* tetralogy has been obviously widely reviewed in different contexts. It has been considered a film that initiated and popularized punk aesthetics, “which has become *de rigueur* from MTV to global advertising” (Broderick 614). What is worth emphasizing is that this instalment has been identified as a precursory work incorporating climate change under the theme of famine and drought on the big screen (Svoboda 50). In *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) water is a resource of priceless value. As a result, the cult leader, the dictator—Immortan Joe—exercises his control over the scarce water resource, as a condition to impose his will upon his thirsty subjects. The plot is set in an inhospitable desert landscape—wasteland; the audience is overwhelmed by pictures of dominating sandy colour and dust, where searching for the “Green Place,” an oasis of lush and grassy area, turns out to be a complete failure. The journey has finished in the same place where the main story began.

Obviously, action films have been traditionally and historically considered a man’s genre, in which different means were used to satisfy the male audience’s fantasy. Female characters have definitely been underrepresented in those “male-hero centered” narratives, being marginalized and portrayed as weak or passive figures. This paper examines the issue of feminism in George Miller’s latest production. What makes *Mad Max: Fury Road* so intriguing to study? Firstly, it departs from the male-centred narrative structure of action films. Furthermore, the plot of the film relates to authentic threats and women’s issues, and raises important questions around their fight against the patriarchy. Despite the fact that in many ways the film presents women through the male gaze, *Mad Max: Fury Road* incorporates a feminist agenda. The power of the film comes from taking a brave new leap for the action genre, exposing the underlying feminist foundations to the mass audience.

In his article, Bogusz Malec undertakes an in-depth analysis of the world presented there in the context of the post-apocalyptic issue of the film, clearly pointing to the four levels of construction of the *Mad Max* universe. Firstly, he indicates the negative, antagonistic attitude of an individual towards the social group they are a part of—lack of trust and constant fear for their own existence. The feelings are intensified by the effects of an environmental catastrophe—desertification of the world and radiation-induced diseases. The memory of the old world, irretrievably gone, intensifies the conviction in the necessity of a competitive attitude to life. An individual faces the necessity to rebuild their system of norms

of behaviour and values. Finally, there is the lack of rooting, or grounding, in the community, which is clearly visualized for the viewer in the image of a constant chase—escape in a desert space: unstable, deceptive territory, not leaving any permanent traces of existence (137–39).

As far as the Polish audience is concerned, Marek Haltof's monograph serves as a helpful introduction to understanding the cultural determinants of Australian cinematography, the issues related to stereotypes, or the national mythologization of the Antipodes. When analyzing the directorial achievements of George Miller, the author emphasizes that by setting *Mad Max* in the post-nuclear landscape of a world plagued by chaos, where the engine of all actions is the fight for fuel, the emphasis is put primarily on the universality of the message, while losing the Australian flavour. By using elements of popular culture and road cinema motifs, clearly influenced by Hollywood cinema and Western poetics, *Mad Max* could have been created anywhere (64–67).

Interestingly, studying Miller's dystopian saga, we can observe the evolution of that post-apocalyptic vision (Wiertel 368–70; 405). It is transfigured from the male-dominated world with civilization collapsing into chaotic violence, dealing with pollution and overconsumption, to a more hopeful future created by women. That perspective definitely helps us to understand the film, as well as to value the diversity of feminist perspectives and interpretations of the production.²

Moreover, all the films engage to a certain point with primary concepts of femininity and masculinity—that is why writing about the *Mad Max* series is challenging: mostly due to a variety of intentional inconsistencies, including conflicting signals about gender. The postulated message is simple to recognize: women should not be objectified, and the dehumanizing of their image should finally vanish, just like “the male gaze.” However, I have doubts as to whether the creators themselves managed to keep this assumption with regard to the figures of the wives. These five young women are portrayed in the conventional mode of modern standards following fashion journals—slender, with flawless skin, wearing white clothes that show off their bodies. When we see them for

² For an intriguing analysis of the intersection of feminist theory and Anthropocene dystopia, see, for instance, Joanna Zylinska's *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* or Lynn M. Stearney's “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal” (the article examines the use of the maternal archetype in ecofeminist rhetoric). Moreover, in “Dependence, Independence or Interdependence? Revisiting the Concepts of ‘Care’ and ‘Dependency,’” Michael Fine and Caroline Glendinning briefly review feminist analysis of caregiving and further references—helpful while interpreting the Miss Giddy character: a teacher and mentor for The Five Wives of Immortan Joe who stays in an emotional, caring mother-daughter relationship with them.

the first time in a film setting, the image seems to arise from and satisfy male fantasies. When Max meets the heroines in the desert, they wash themselves using a hose, which is an image evidently identical to a motif frequent in men's magazines (Bampatzimopoulos 209–12). As for the question of the concept behind the creation of the female protagonists of *Mad Max: Fury Road*—it is difficult to say unequivocally whether it was connected with the disturbance and complete negation of the patriarchal order. Although of course this order is being questioned. In accordance with the cultural conditioning that assigns the role of a globetrotter to a man—Max leaves the Citadel to continue his journey, a route into the unknown, taking another adventure. The fearless warrior Furiosa remains where she is, though of course this narrative also gives her a chance to redefine her values and foreshadows the changes to come.

The idea of women healing the world becomes another subtext of the plot. However, the director shapes multi-faceted characters to focus on empowering women and men alike to reject gender stereotypes. In the interactions between the main characters (Max Rockatansky and Emperor Furiosa), we can easily recognize mutual regard. Both Max and Furiosa prove their ability to cooperate in their struggle for survival in the post-apocalyptic world in which the fertility of the earth and human bodies, as well as the access to water sources have become scarce. Furiosa functions as the moral centre of the narrative, while Max supports her efforts, assisting her in the mission to destroy Immortan Joe's tyranny.

Some scholars (Michelle Yates, Taylor Boulware, Keridwen N. Luis), as well as media commentators, have suggested that *Mad Max: Fury Road* can be viewed from a feminist perspective due to its emphasis on the liberation of women from a patriarchal society. In addition, Charlize Theron's Emperor Furiosa is to many viewers the real hero in the fourth part of Miller's saga. Aaron Clarey, writing for a website titled *Return of Kings*, a site known for its anti-feminist coverage, even called for a boycott of the film:

This is the vehicle by which they [Hollywood and the director of *Mad Max: Fury Road*] are guaranteed to force a lecture on feminism down your throat. This is the Trojan Horse feminists and Hollywood leftists will use to (vainly) insist on the trope women are equal to men in all things, including physique, strength, and logic. And this is the subterfuge they will use to blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, further ruining women for men, and men for women.

As Alexis de Coning details, the outrage expressed by the so-called men's rights activists (MRA) after seeing the whole film (not just the film trailer)

began reducing. Having not discussed or even mentioned the uniqueness of the film's portrayal of a masculinity, they tried to downplay the aspect of feminist topics (174–75).³

Moreover, the director George Miller involved women off screen, beginning with the editor Margaret Sixel. In 2016, winning the Academy Award for Best Editing for *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Sixel became the first South African-born editor to win Oscar (Rochlin). Also, Eve Ensler, the feminist author of *The Vagina Monologues*, was invited to work on the film as a consultant. She enthusiastically admitted:

I read the script and was blown away. 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. . . . George was looking to create empowered women, not victims, and I think he accomplished that. I don't remember seeing so many women of all different ages in any movie before. I was really blown away by the older women in the film who were just as good fighters as the men. I'd never seen that before. (Dockterman)

The film elicited much praise, as well as criticism, provoking very different interpretations. Martínez Jiménez, Gálvez Muñoz and Solano Caballero in their article “Neoliberalism Goes Pop and Purple: Postfeminist Empowerment from Beyoncé to *Mad Max*” argue with the thesis about its genuine feminist message. As they observe, behind its success stands the call for ecological awareness and expressing female power, but this call is “channelled through violence, masculinity, and shrillness for the sake of survival in a highly phallic world” (414–16). The article also clearly indicates the social message of the film that legitimizes the neo-liberal social order. In the writers' opinion, Furiosa's strength is based on the construct of displacing stereotypically understood female attributes, and even more, her successes can be attributed to the typically masculine features that she has adopted, and any failures are the result of her inability to break away from what is left of her female nature. The compassion and empathy of Furiosa, an androgynous woman with a cyborg arm, started the events of the film, and her determination allowed for a dangerous escape. However, it is worth paying more attention to the interventional role of Max who, as

³ While characterizing the discourse on martyrdom in Hollywood cinema, Laura Copier studies the representations of gender and the body in female action heroes. The author emphasizes that the debate about *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s feminism is to “expose the sensitivity regarding the role female characters can fulfil in a popular culture that is predominantly targeted at a male, adolescent audience” (286–87).

a hero, appears to be only seemingly overshadowed by such an expressive role of the Empress—after all, it is he who suggests a plan to return and take over the Citadel. Thus, the film seems to carry a simple message—Immortan Joe “killed the world,” but there are still men like Max, who can ensure the survival of the entire community. Furiosa’s ability to be violent and cruel (resulting from the long process of oppression to which she was subjected) is justified by her thirst for revenge, and with the elimination of the torturer (Immortan Joe), it fades away. In the final scenes, Furiosa, the conqueror of the Citadel, regains her composure and is ready to take on the next challenge of healing the society. Here, the creation of her image is radically different from the opening scenes of the film—Furiosa, devoid of the lust for revenge and thus devoid of the apparatus of violence (usually considered an attribute of masculinity), finds redemption in the space of the home—the private sphere, traditionally identified as a woman’s place. She returns in the completely new role of a victorious rebel who brings hope for a better tomorrow into this space.

Jessica Valenti duplicates this objection, pointing out that Furiosa (Theron’s character) expresses as much violence as any other action hero, but in the context of the horror of sexism and the necessity of freedom from patriarchy. She adds: “That is what’s truly terrifying to some men—not that Theron has more lines than actor Tom Hardy” (Valenti). Michael W. Pesses in his essay on the ideology of ecomobility, which demands a hybrid of human and machine, asks an intriguing question: “Can anyone sincerely argue that the vehicles of *Fury Road* are less important to the film than the women?” (43). However, for a certain type of audience, *Mad Max: Fury Road* remains a feminist action film—formulating a critique of society from the feminist perspective, challenging traditional beauty standards and presenting characters with features not determined by their gender, addressing female problems in a male genre. The film’s advocates, among whom I would definitely place myself, highlight the active contribution and participation of female characters in the creation of their own stories. In addition to the feminist context, the scholars of disability studies have also praised the positive impact of *Mad Max: Fury Road* due to its non-stigmatizing and nuanced representations of disabled bodies (Fletcher and Primack 344–57).

In the apocalyptic narrative of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, female characters are symbolically linked to a better past and they carry the promise of a better future. Images of Miss Giddy, Valkyrie, Keeper of the Seeds and the motorcycle-riding Vuvalini stand in opposition to the sick, passive and repressed post-apocalyptic society. The film does not simply reverse gender stereotypes—Max Rockatansky has never been emasculated, but is also never represented as a typically masculine hero type. The

plot presents gender issues in line with ecofeminist concerns. Mainly, it offers the indication that any kind of unjust treatment or control is interrelated—so the liberation of women and environmentalism have a common goal (Sierakowska). According to essentialist accounts, women have been frequently associated with nature as birth-givers and nurturers, or relegated to the private sphere (Ortner). Yates, in her study, clearly addresses the concern of ecofeminist scholars connected with the nature and culture dichotomy. That duality corresponds with the view of women being passive like nature, with men (representing culture) as the ones who situate themselves as subjects of events. However, we can witness how that dichotomic pattern is challenged in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Yates 357–59).

As Cenk Tan highlights, Furiosa's rebellion is symbolic of nature's rebellion against patriarchy to survive. Men's destructive nature has caused wars and brought the world and the whole human population into chaos. Women and "Mother Nature" stand side by side. Finally, Furiosa was able to release the water in the Citadel—to green the desert hold, and to humanize its inhabitants (Tan 41–42). Furiosa in her quest for the Green Place hopes to find redemption referring to being saved from evil and reclaiming one's freedom. What has also been studied is the lesbian subtext in the film: whether coded in the plot, without the overtly inevitable heterosexual love story for any of the female characters, or in the film language. After all, Furiosa introduces herself as the daughter of "many mothers"; within the harem the wives refer to each other as "sisters" (Luis 43–45).

In a broader perspective, the action film genre was until this episode dominated by men alongside rather trivial female personalities, or rather a complete lack of them: *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Soylent Green* (1973), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Road* (2009), *World War Z* (2013). The presence of female characters in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is significant compared to the minimal and diminished roles of women in the previous parts of Miller's saga. These characters are not infantilized, marginalized or demonized (as in the example of Auntie Entity, the ruthless ruler from *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, played by Tina Turner), but, importantly, neither are they idolized. Miller breaks away from the conventional male narrative action formula, as well as the perennial feminized fairy-tale visions. *Mad Max: Fury Road* breaks the rules by creating a rebellious heroine—Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron—the vengeful protector of oppressed girls, a female amputee soldier with a bionic arm, compassionate but also violent and fearsome, definitely a multi-faceted character. She exhibits masculine stereotype traits: a tendency towards violence, reticence, determination and the capacity for radical leadership.

Next to Furiosa stands the group of five fleeing slave-wives, breeders, a biker gang of older women, the Vuvalini, the last survivors of a matriarchal Waste Land tribe. On the margins of this discourse, we can point to a “secondary harem” (breast-milked women) who are featured in an initial scene of the film depicting women hooked up like cows to milking machines. Right from the beginning, Furiosa is portrayed in deep contrast to the wives displaying stereotypical female characteristics. Her beauty is not sexualized in any way. Seemingly, the wives are physically and mentally fragile and desperately in need of protection (Du Plooy 422–26). Of course, they have been victimized by a patriarchal dictator but they also dared to escape, leaving the question on walls of his empty harem “Who killed the world?”

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In the first appearance of the Wives surprised by Max’s presence (while drinking from a hose in the middle of a desert, immediately after surviving a deadly chase), they boldly declare: “We are not coming back.” As has already been mentioned—their bold declaration and feminist perspective contrast with the “the male gaze” of their depiction. As the film progresses, they develop into complex, expressive characters. We witness the evolving image of female characters—from victims to warriors. A maternal figure to the Wives (especially to The Dag) becomes The Keeper of the Seeds, the most vocal member of the Vuvalini. The Keeper of the Seeds is literally carrying civilization strapped to her motorcycle alongside her rifle. After her death the seeds of a new life are taken by the Wives to ensure that the Keeper and the Green Place will endure.

Surprisingly, *Mad Max: Fury Road* emerges as a work of socially engaged cinema preoccupied with the cultural context of gender discourse in the way in which it appeals to the old archetype of a female warrior, expressed through the figure of Amazons, as a figure that has been marginalized. The other films of this genre typically showed the actions of individuals, and their narratives were built around fearless heroines acting alone or alongside the main male characters: Wonder Woman, Lara Croft, Sarah Connor or Ellen Ripley. In these characterizations, we can speak of a kind of duplication of the superhero model of male characters in Hollywood stories. Gradually, from the traditional film roles of ladies and guardians of the hearth, women entered the roles of femme fatales, warriors and vengeful avengers, but their commitment to community building or team cooperation in the spirit of sisterhood was not exhibited.

On the whole, the film’s dystopian narrative is a mesmerizing text, in which one can study the aspect of gender, particularly concerned with questions of social power and oppression. Significantly, the 88th Academy Awards honoured *Mad Max: Fury Road* with six awards out of ten. Although the film was not awarded in either of the two

most important categories—Best Picture and Best Director—the result is still impressive. The mere presence, and above all the form in which the cast of the film presented themselves at the gala, undoubtedly broke the cultural code repeated every year by the artistic and media circles of Hollywood. As Jenny Beavan, *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s costume designer, mounted the Oscar podium wearing a vegan leather jacket with the Immortan Joe symbol on the back, striped scarf, pants and boots, she definitely decided for her outfit to have a positive effect on how women feel about themselves and how they perceive themselves. She seems to have emphasized that being successful does not have to go hand in hand with projecting an idealized image.

Undoubtedly, apocalyptic visions in film are not new. However, we can clearly read *Mad Max: Fury Road* as a commentary on the climate catastrophe and its political and social background. To some extent, the film's manifesto is exposed even too explicitly—it is visualized very literally in the scene depicting the wall of the young women's cell with the slogan that reads "We are not things." Interestingly, it was this slogan that accompanied the social protests of the feminist social movement—the All-Poland Women's Strike.⁴ What makes *Mad Max: Fury Road* additionally intriguing is not only the fact that it is a successful update of the classic version of the film. First of all, it has the potential to discuss the feminist message, which is surprising for this type of genre. I am inclined to argue that, in a sense, the interpretation of this Hollywood production hides a certain "feminist loophole." Surely, the film has an overarching message that a world without women has no *raison d'être*, since they are life givers and their participation is needed if a new world is to be built. The objectification of women also clearly correlates with climate change and thus the creators succeed as *Mad Max: Fury Road* undoubtedly remains a peculiar example of this genre.

⁴ In this context, I would like to quote the fragment of *Furious Feminisms*, a collective academic feedback of Alexis L. Boylan, Anna Mae Duane, Michael Gill and Barbara Gurr, representing such research areas as American literature, art history, sociology and disability studies, who commented on the feminist credentials of this film in the following way: "Looking back at this popular movie released the year before a U.S. presidential election with a plot that features a decrepit and lecherous old man surrounded by sycophants literally blowing white smoke, it all seems terrifyingly prophetic . . . In short, *Mad Max: Fury Road* exemplifies the experience of twenty-first-century popular culture in which something that is *supposed* to be fun and even comfortingly nostalgic—like a long-running summer movie fantasy franchise—instead elicits a hysterical response to evolving gender politics that have become increasingly attached to fandom. The film initiated a cultural moment in which fans insisted that art provide a set of ideological deliverables. In this era, offering divergent readings of the same text places one on threatening, enemy territory; a text refusing to give the viewer what they want generates rage, retrenchment, and recrimination" (8).

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