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Mad Max – Spare-Parts Heroes, Recycled Narratives, Reused Visualities and Recuperated Histories

ABSTRACT

The main assumption of this paper is that the mechanisms science fiction cinema uses follow three directions in order to create new representations. One is the cinema narratives that develop new worlds by simply mimicking the present day political and cultural contexts. In their critical form, these are negations of present. Another major function is that of future projections using past histories and mythologies. In their negative form, they are often dystopian worlds. This dichotomy between the utopian vs. dystopian representations has been raised and dealt with in art and literature. Yet the divide between utopian (as modern, positive future projection) and dystopian (as postmodernism, defective representation) is described by the author as limited. The method used to move beyond is the negation of negation, practiced as an interpretative principle, which can deal with the issue of retroactive projections. In order to provide some answers to these complex problems, the author uses examples from the cult series “Mad Max”, analyzed as a coherent case study.

KEYWORDS

Mad Max; Utopian and Dystopian Movies; Science Fiction Cinema; Recycled Aesthetics; Political Representation; Reused Cultural Myths; Negation of Negation.

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Re-cycled Realities, Postcards from the Past

In 1963 Pierre Boulle wrote *La planète des singes*, a parable about an intelligent simian race controlling humanity. Soon his story was turned into one of the longest and most enduring myths of popular culture, accompanied by an excess of bi-products like movies, television series and cartoons, all detailing the tragic fate of humanity on a possible “Planet of the Apes”. Remarkably enough, it was in 1959 that Able, the first monkey sent into space by NASA, returned safely to Earth. Then, in 1961, the flight of the NASA “Astrochimp” called Ham proved that normal activities can be performed in space, which lead to the first American human mission on a sub-orbital trajectory, the same year. Thus, in the middle of the space competition between the great powers, there was this unremarkable novel (in terms of its literary qualities), followed by a series of remarkable cinematic representations (in terms of their popularity), dealing with the troublesome consequences of humanity’s unprecedented efforts. It is from here that one of the main lines of questioning in my argument is developed – the relationship between the “traditional” representations of literary utopia and the cinematic dystopia. It



is also here that we can identify the first mechanism of the narrative re-cycling of reality – one in which we can see a direct causal relationship between the story and the immediate reality. The first indicator is the clear connection between the political and the fictitious – the present is the source of a fictitious representation of the future, where the events of the recent present become possible versions of the future.

The second mechanism, more difficult to deal with, is the amalgamation of the past and the present, in order to create a utopian or dystopian representation. The best example is Frank Herbert and his remarkable *Duniverse*. The first *Dune* novel, published in 1965, was followed by five award-winning stories and after 50 years the imagined future Herbert developed expanded to a total of twenty books, followed by TV mini-series, movies, short novels and, of course, video-games. The saga obviously includes several sequels and prequels authorized by the family but the premise, just as in the case of Pierre Boulle's story, shows an immediate connection between the world of Arrakis – and the coveted spice produced there – to the Arab culture and the problems generated by oil extraction. If some of the connections are explicit – there is a sandy planet (Arrakis – Iraq) which produces a substance (spice – oil), coveted by all the powers in the universe – the rest of the narrative is heavily mixed with traces of Biblical messianism, re-mixed with jihadist lingo and amalgamated with Greek and Roman narratives and historical myths from the Norse sagas to the contemporary politics. All of these elements have created one of the most enduring science fiction universes. The assumption here, as indicated by many critics, is that the “melange” that Herbert puts forward can be subscribed to the troublesome decade he was contemporary with, his novels are postcards from a past

when in the 1950s and the 1960s the Middle East was in turmoil, with the Suez Crisis creating a global threat, with and the Arab – Israeli tensions and the fall of the monarchy in Iraq generating world wide fears of an international meltdown.

If in such cases we can link utopian fictions to political realities, as some critics have reasonably argued, the dystopian worlds raise a different problem insofar as their effects are concerned. Sometimes dystopian stories seem to be anticipations of “things to come”, not only a way to deal with the cruel realities of today, but extraordinary premonitions of the future. The most versatile example is that of Jules Verne, who is described as a science fiction mastermind, describing discoveries way before his time. Verne, who never left his home in Nantes, and who also depicted absurd machines and non-sensical inventions, was simply collating information from the journals, science books and travel logs of his time. As pointed out by many researchers¹, Verne's so-called anticipations are often retrograde, outdated, recuperated junk scientific facts, and sometimes even infantile re-engineerings of actual realities. Relevantly enough for our argument here is that the mythological mechanisms built into the genre by the “father of science fiction” remain unchanged. Just like the geographies of the “Verniverse”, the universe of many futuristic anticipations are fantastic elaborations on existing information and subjects.

This direct connection is best illustrated with two of the most exemplary dystopian novels, which only indicate this possible interpretation of sci-fi imagination. George Orwell's *1984* (followed by the respective movie) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* show their readers a universe where the future is projected as a negative utopia (identified by Jameson as dystopia)². In Orwell's case this fictional universe is distinctly identifiable with the critical



version of Stalinism and its effects on human society. The same relation can be proved with the *Animal Farm* (with the cartoon that follows suit). And, as Booker³ properly noted, although *1984* is not merely a criticism of Stalinism, since there are explicit condemnations of Fascism or of the Catholic Inquisition, or more recently McCarthyism⁴, this sophistication of Orwell's works cannot hide the simple fact that they function as anti-Stalinist manifestoes.

This brings us to a mechanism which is probably identifiable in most of the cultural works of the history of humanity – the use of allegorical narratives in order to elaborate a critical view on the political contexts of the present⁵. Political realities which are otherwise impossible to deal with directly, are re-placed into a more manageable past. Although the authors claim that there are no allegorical references in their books – as is the case with Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* (LoTR) – their works often carry a multitude of references, many easily identifiable politically and ideologically. The LoTR saga present us with an excellent illustration. The Western coalition (the fellowship of the four “free peoples” of Middle Earth) is fighting a totalitarian regime (Sauron and his Orcs), in a worldwide conflict (the entire Middle Earth). The transparent reference to WWII does not make this extraordinary fantasy masterpiece less relevant narratively. Yet its mythological representations evolve with manifest connections with a troublesome present, rather than a fearful past or a desirable future. In Tolkien's elaboration of the LoTR universe the transformations of the first novel, *The Hobbit* (1937), intended as a children's tale, end up in the following three volumes (which were written during WWII and the early part of the Cold War) as profoundly dependent on historical realities and characters. Although the author himself adamantly claimed in the “Foreword” of the second edition that LoTR was developed

before the war and that no hidden or allegorical meaning is intended – many critics have pointed out that Hitler's rise to power has an explicit representation in Sauron's progress, between the appeasement strategies of Chamberlain and Frodo's speech, or the obvious representation of the Maginot line war and the depiction of the battle of Minas Tirith and other scenes from the Great War⁶.

The examples could be multiplied with many other fantasy or science fiction literary products. Without simplifying the profound connections and inner strategies of these literary works, they provide an interpretation premise. Any cultural object reflects the historical context and the ideological meanings of its current time, often hidden in plain sight of the narratives. The “fiction” in science fiction should thus be linked to the political contents it carries (knowingly or unknowingly). Without elaborating too much on this particular subject, we must refer also to the contradictory nature of the alleged “anticipatory” nature of the science fiction writings and narratives. As Thomas M. Disch has indicated, the genre itself has evolved as a “double natured” product⁷. On one hand, it satisfies our daydreams and positive projections for our social construct or desires. On the other, the literary/ cinematic utopias and dystopias are reflections on society, “allegories” of the present designed to help us cope with our fears, fantasies and illusions.

This is the main premise – that science fictions should be understood in a double connection with the historical and political realities – at a direct level they are fantastic projections into another reality, based on the “materials” of the given situation and on another they are reflections of our own political and social self deception. The “other worlds” of science fiction are “our worlds”, they are fantastic versions of our societies,



imagined versions of our possible and impossible realities. The consequence here is that science fiction imagination (literary, philosophical or otherwise) does not anticipate the future, it rather explores the past in order to make sense of the present.

Political Criticism of Science Fiction Representations

While the phenomenon is well documented in literature, some specific questions arise if and how the cinematic representations deal with the same mechanisms? The situation is even more problematic with science fiction cinema, since the medium itself presents us with a more complex manifestation – practically all films are projections of the past into the future, and while science fiction movies are using the techniques of a book, they are not just made in the past and they represent a future in the present, but they are re-negotiations of their own pre-vised future. How much of the material used in the development of multiple science fiction stories, characters and social structures are ideas from and immediate or hypertrophied reality or they represent a re-written reality, that is a re-writing of the past?

One possible explanation comes from Fredric Jameson, who considered that science fiction film narratives, just like the “classical” utopian discourses of literature, can not be separated from their political meanings, from their “here and now”. So one premise is that any interpretation of science fiction contents should be practiced as an archaeological research for the pieces of the present, collated and reconstructed into our fantastic imagination⁸. If we are to follow this author, who practices an ideological criticism, then the links between the science fiction discourse and the social

fantasies are generated by the dominant modes of production. The best example would be our fascination with “robot stories”, which at this level must be seen as projections of the promise of an impossible liberation of humanity from the burden of labor. The second major hypothesis presented also by Jameson is that we need to understand science fiction fantasies as fulfilling the desires and repressed fears of political propaganda, mostly the ones that are not actually made possible by the dominant social and economic practices. As eloquently demonstrated by the interpretation of *Jaws*, the shark in the movie is only a representation of the internal fears of the capitalist society. At this level, no object of representation is void of ideological referencing.

There is a classical example which is extremely relevant, one which already supports the inherent historicity of science fiction narratives – the Star Wars saga. As it is extremely well documented in the “Star wars and history” volume edited by Nancy R. Reagin and Janice Leidl, the “histories” of all the Star Wars movies are often “reflections or expressions of historical dynamics and individuals” inspired from the history of humanity⁹. There are explicit allegorical representations in the Star Wars universe to Buddhist lore (such as the rules and behaviors of the Jedi order), to the mythologies of the American Revolutionary Wars (the rebellious alliance fighting an evil empire) or, more suggesting, to Cold War conflicts.

Other authors have pointed out an even closer connection with contemporary history and politics, suggesting that science fiction narratives are “sociopolitical” allegories¹⁰. This is the case with the prequels of the Star Wars series, which are deeply rooted in the political dynamics of the end of the Clinton era and the beginning of the Bush administration. Many references are



direct – such is the cynical observation of Senator Amidala that the Republic falls to the sound of “thunderous applause”, with clear hints to the post-911 “hawks” taking over the US politics – while others are symbolically indirect – such as the clone armies and the mechanical droid armies hinting to the military experiments of the 90s. The analogies could go even deeper at the symbolic level where we can see in the attire of Darth Vader and the uniforms of the imperial guards the links to the SS, and with Emperor Palpatine’s rise to power a similarity to that of Hitler’s taking over of German.

I would further suggest that we need to follow a third (and undeveloped) interpretation of such narratives and mythologies, which does not stand apart from Jameson’s argument, it rather provides a necessary extension. We must see science fiction movies as additions to a storytelling function going beyond present or past, one that re-mythologizes and amalgamates elements of the dominant discourses, but where the utopian projections and dystopian discontent are continuously re-shaped. This perspective allows in return the critical discourse to dismantle the mechanisms of imaginary projections and provides us with the necessary tools to interpret the limits of social discourse, since many science fictions are not just processing political realities or some of the most enduring myths of humanity, but they are also self-referential and generate a recycling of their own mythologies.

The main interpretative argument of this line of thought follows another suggestion put forward by Douglas Keller and Michael Ryan, who critically postulated that Hollywood movies are evolving parallel to the political realities, mirroring the ideological transformations and the tribulations of the society. If we are elaborating on this hypothesis, and movies can be seen as

“transcoders” of political discourses, forms of cultural re-codification of the ideological conflicts and representations of the internal dialectics of society, then we need to deal with the more complex issues of what happens when the politics of the present shift in the near future.

For example, in their brief mapping of this process, Kellner and Ryan placed *Easy Rider* as an early representation of the counterculture of the 60s, linked with the first *Star Wars* movie¹¹. The following films can be identified as manifestations of the increased conservatory domination over the 70s, as vehicles of the Reagan era global politics – while *Rambo* and other Vietnam war stories manifested as compensations for the shameful defeat of the American military. In this context, as Gerald Miller argued persuasively, science fiction must be used as a form of critical theory, not only as a form of narrative, or a genre designed to allow us explore the future, but also the a tool to discuss the present limitations of the human nature¹².

The main problem with this type of cultural criticism of science fiction narratives is that, although sometimes the connections are explicit and factual – like seeing Isaac Asimov’s heptalogy about The Foundation as a clear projection of the struggle between a failing Empire (the Soviet Union) and the dynamic and commerce oriented Foundation (the United States) – there are instances where other, non-ideologically driven juxtaposition, are possible. For instance we can also track the influence of Asimov’s work in the galactic and spacial conflicts between the individualistic rebels and the militaristic and autocratic Empire in a movie like *Star Wars*. The problem becomes even more complicated when, as it was the case with president Reagan’s announcement in 1983, a global military project was named “Star Wars” and helped



the United States to protect its interests against the Soviet Union. The transformative nature of science fiction narratives gets extremely intricate when we add the internal transformations that take place in films with multiple episodes, based on sequels and prequels.

How can we make sense of these transfers of symbolic structures from the imagined, science fiction universe, to the everyday politics and social exchanges, then to the re-writing of their own history? The assumption here is that the fundamental two layers of science fiction imaginary (social reality – imagined projections) are commingled and cannot be separated. Therefore we need a third possible answer – one that would describe how science fiction discourses function *retroactively*. Once the social realities change, the narratives are obligated and coerced to follow these changes into fantasies – then through a process of *interpenetration*, that is narratives that operate like a re-writing of their own past (of previous similar story-lines), they are not only as projections of the present or fulfilling the desires of the future, but a negation of both.

The Dialectics of Utopia and Dystopia in Mad Ma(r)x

My presuppositions and the central method here would be centered around the idea that we can describe a series of mythological processes (explicit in the Mad-Max-verse) which are in a negative dialectics with both the present and the past. Using the Mad Max series, we can identify how the negation of negation is at work. And although I am not trying to provide a Marxist interpretation of Mad Max, the method would be based on the philosophy of the negation of negation, seen basically as the “midwife” which allows the extraction of the future from the past. This dialectic concept – as it was explained by Engels – provides us with the tool necessary to explain not only any “mystery of idealism”, but any product of imagination which apparently is impenetrable or even incomprehensible¹³.

The story of the road warrior roaming the Wastelands can be used as a case study for documenting how a mechanism of *retroactive interpenetration* operates, that is how utopia and dystopia are dialectically intertwined, generating an imagination framework based on recycling each other by negating each other. We will overview the whole array of mechanisms allowing the future to function as a subversive version of present and how, in the same time, this very present is retroactively changing the past. The process of negative negation borrows forms of expression from past narrations, which are initially negations of a reality, then they are included in the story-lines about the future, which in turn manifest as a total mix-up of characters, visual elements and references.

This concept allows us to move beyond the natural polysemy of any visual object – more so since the problems get bigger when analyzing a movie or a series of movies (like Mad Max or Star Wars). The first



question applied to the case study at hand is if we should describe Mad Max as a *post-apocalyptic story*, or rather as part of a philosophy of *recycled narratives*? The other is to describe the dysfunctional logic of the narratives, built-up by following an apparent nonsensical meaning formation, which then appears to become an intrinsic coherence.

Once again we are faced with the complex issues raised by the dialectics between time frameworks in science fiction narratives, out of which ultimately derive either their utopian or dystopian traits. The classical reference should be once more Fredric Jameson's definition of *Utopia*. For the post-Marxist author *dystopias* are simply *negative cousins* of utopias – that is a dystopian universe is rather a version of an utopia “gone bad”. Thus, in terms of a chronological dialectics, if *Utopia pre-figures* the present needs and desires, then the *Dystopia disfigures* the fears of tomorrow. Thus the anticipation of the first level of projections (utopias) can be counterbalanced by the dissuasion of the second level (the dystopian universe). In this logic, which is clearly useful when *Utopia* and *Dystopia* function “properly”, that is when they are either rewards or warnings for their contemporaries, remains intact only if *Utopia* functions as the promise of a present time desire, and the *Dystopia* remains the disheartenment of the future's fears.

It would be easy then to apply an analysis of science fiction movies which would start with the assumption pointed out by Annette Kuhn that the production expands its meanings beyond the simple narratives, and that any film “expresses, enacts and produces ideology”¹⁴. Yet some films – and many other cultural products of late industrial societies – are no longer simply “mirrors of society”, and the interpretation cannot be limited to identifiable elements from reality turned into aesthetic or political

representations. Here the best examples are Miller's dystopian societies, characters and visualities which are not only built up from innumerable political residues of the present and which, in many instances, function as remnants of their own past meaning.

If at a certain level there are valid explanations providing interpretations of inner dichotomies – for example the clear opposition between anarchy and social order in *Mad Max* – this separation becomes useless when no longer dealing with “classical critical dystopias”. When dystopian representations that are not necessarily exposing “deficiencies of the future”, as some authors claim¹⁵, but rather they are representing convoluted *disfigurements of the present* which *re-cycle the past* in order to *retroactively* make sense of *the future* then the distinction negation (dystopian) versus affirmation (utopia) is not functional.

Other directors (and writers) who were developing stories in a non-sequential way indicate similar traits. One of the most relevant examples is once more George Lucas and the *Star Wars* hexalogy. Lucas was constantly trying to coherently re-arrange his storytelling in order to fit some of his own previous narrative decisions. If CGI technology helped the director to erase, add and improve some of the unfortunate manifestations of oldest episodes – in the edited versions of the original trilogy – narratives are more impervious to transformation. Some of the classical examples of retroactive incoherence include dialogues – the fact that Leia clearly remembers her mother as being “beautiful”, when in fact in the first episode Amidala dies at birth; and characters – like the fact that in the initial trilogy Darth Vader is depicted as secondary, almost obedient to Grand Moff Tarkin. In fact, as many critics pointed out¹⁶, *Star Wars* is a *mix and re-use* universe, including parts and



pieces from other narratives. The Galactic Empire is borrowed from Asimov, the desert planet of Tatooine from Dune, Luke and Han are derived from Flash Gordon and Prince Barin, the Jedi Knights culture is copied from the shaolin monks, not to mention C3PO being a masculine version of the robot in Metropolis¹⁷.

A similar cultural poaching, muddy narrative re-writing and mythological recycling is extremely illustrative in the development the Mad Max saga. One relevant starting point would be the premise of the story itself. As it was documented by Shapiro, there are hardly any references to the causes of the destruction of society in the first movie of the Wastelands saga, and scarcely any in the second¹⁸. Only after the third installment of the series, where a nuclear war is hinted at, does the idea of a catastrophic event take shape. Finally the most recent production opens with an explicit indication of an apocalyptic H-bomb scenario. Thus, even if apparently there is a chronological involution of mankind, the “destruction” is coherently detailed only in the *Max Max. Fury Road* graphic novel. We now know that first there was an anarchic stage, when oil resources were depleted, with limited military conflicts, but no nuclear war; then the world “burned”, and “the waters dried out” and only later did thermonuclear destruction take place. Overall, the Mad Max quadrilogy (1979, 1981, 1985, 2015) seems to be following a linear logic of a gradual decay of the infrastructure of civilization.

At a closer look, the early Mad Max movies were developed under a different projection of present. The politics and fears of the 1970s, with the Cuban missile crisis left behind, have put the nuclear disaster apocalypse at a lower level than the oil crisis¹⁹. As the Australian journalist James McCausland, the co-writer of the MM 1

movie (*Mad Max*, 1979) declared publicly, the storyline was directly inspired by the OPEC crisis in 1973²⁰. The abandoned highways of the Australian deserts were visually shocking representations of the abandoned gas stations in the Western world, when in 1973 the OPEC countries decided to instate an oil embargo on the rest of the globe, as a penalty for the support of the Yom Kippur War²¹. The impact of what was often described as the “first oil shock” was soon to be over, yet it was followed by the “second oil shock”, in 1979 after the Iran crisis. This impacted most of the western world, Australia included, when violence erupted at the pumps, yet it transpired allegorically in MM 2 (*Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, 1981), where sudden references to the “Ayatollah of the rock and rollah” appeared. The third film, MM 3 (*Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, 1985), is visibly an emanation of the Cold War conflicts, with both MM 2 and MM 3 being, as Douglas Kellner pointed out, “conservative nightmares” – they show what would happen if law and order are removed from society²², thus linking the Reaganite conservatism to the anguish of a post-apocalyptic world dominated by anarchy. Populated by Mohawk bikers, Gayboy Beserkers, Road Marauders, the first three movies of the saga appear to be chronologically linked and narratively coherent, yet the first *Mad Max* (1979) has no explicit reference to a postnuclear world, while in *The Road Warrior* (MM 2) the only “apocalyptic” message is that “the vermin had inherited the world” and only the last installment of the early trilogy points to a possible nuclear destruction. Actually George Miller’s “apocalypses” are as uncertain as the societies he presents us with.

Obviously Mad Max future societies are futuristic projections of the present, elaborations on the anxieties of his own time. This is the first level of negation, where “classical” critical narratives are



developed. The problematic nature of these projections comes from the fact that the distance between episodes becomes so great that it generates the need for a second negation, which in turn produces incoherence, which is then filled with invented connections, the negation of negation. Thus the director/ writer is constantly retrofitting his narrations in order to make them compatible, and the storytelling and the story-lines which are developed “as they go” create gaps and confusions. The differences are even bigger between the first *Mad Max* (MM1), which places us in a recent future, where relative forms of state institutions continue to exist (police force, justice system), and MM4, where there is a dystopian society is formed, there is a time gap of almost 40 years. Clearly the societal organization in the movies adapts not only to the external transformations, but also keeps track of the internal logic of the storytelling – the leitmotif of lawlessness which produces tragedies and the lack of authority in society which makes possible any type of monstrosity is not enough to keep the cinematic structure together.

Each of the movies of the franchise is centered around a different type of social organization – all of which are following the premise of the total collapse of society as we know it. Although Miller describes his films as taking place in a “neo-medieval dark age”²³ every type of society he describes is still keeping some elements of state institutions. In MM1 Max Rockatansky fights some road marauders as part of the so-called MFP (Main Force Patrol). This semi-military force, nick-named The Bronze, represents the last civilized barrier against the psychotic Nightrider and his rapist, sexually deviant gang. As pointed out before this “fuel-injected”, suicidal philosophy of the Nightrider, is a projection of the oil crisis in the 70s. The second film, MM2 is centered around an oil-rig phalanstery, lead

by a former Chief Executive of Seven Sisters Petroleum, confronted like in MM1 with a gang of crazed rapists and killers. In MM3 the city of trade dominated by the a tyrannical Matriarch and in MM4 the reversed version, with the Patriarchal stronghold follow suit.

All the movies indicate the same uncertainty of social structure, which cannot be explained by the first negation – that is the criticism of the existing political order. The second negation is also ineffective also, since in many cases the threat of a dictatorship is manifested simultaneously as a dystopian oppressive femininity and an utopian counter-balanced promise of a feminine liberation. Maybe this is why the main character is confusingly ensnared in impossible political strifes, he is always part of social conflicts over which he has no control, in which he enters accidentally and to which he provides no finality. For example, in MM2 he is involved without wanting it, in MM3 Aunty wants him to change the status quo of Bartertown and he accepts, and in MM4 he is part of the women’s rebellion against the patriarchal rule of Immortan Joe, but does not take part in the rebuilding. Actually, just like Max, we are trapped in this logic of collapse (negation), re-building (negation) followed by another collapse (the negation of negation).

This type of dialectical negation, which is presented as an almost Marxist criticism of classes, is completely void. Just as there is no conscience of class separation in the pig farm from MM3 – which is simultaneously an enslavement enterprise, where people are living in conditions similar to the coal mines of early capitalism, and where methane is produced, from pig dejections, offering Master-Blaster an instrument of control over Aunty’s rule – the liberation in MM4 does not follow an ideological conscience. Although the social structure in



“Fury Road” is based on the division of labor and the dichotomy between the exploiters and exploited, the critical separation between The Citadel, where the acolytes of Immortan Joe are growing plants, pumping “aqua-cola” and producing mother’s milk, and the mobs bellow the mountain, wanting the drops of water to fall from the upper levels, is non-critical. Just like the story in *Beyond Thunderdome*, *Fury Road* projects an apparent interest for exploitation and various forms of slavery, exposing the cruelty of humans exploiting other humans, yet these seemingly forms of social criticism are followed by their own negation. When we understand that it is actually about the demise of the capitalist exploitation which will lead to an even worse form of social violence the mingled mythological representations are transformed simultaneously into negations and negations of the initial negation.

The same is true if we look at the most recent production as promoting the values of pro-environmental movies. There is a first negation at the beginning, when we witness Immortan wasting of water as an indication of his dictatorial nature. At a first look, the environmentalist dystopia created by Miller in MM4 follows the dichotomous logic of his other movies. With the exception of MM1, where there is no sign of environment destruction, the saga Miller developed based on anticipating the consequences of climate change induced by the depletion of natural resources. The social projections are based on the manifest opposition between prosperity and devastation, between order and chaos. If in MM 2 the voice-over narrator describes a conflict between two “mighty warrior tribes” for oil, the degradation is presented in MM 4 as complete, the viewer is told that the earth is “sour” after a nuclear war and that the bones of the people are “poisoned”. Yet just like in

the other films, in the Wastelands of madness and disease, there is always a promise of salvation. In *The Road Warrior* there was the “North”, then in MM 3 it was the Tomorrow-morrow land and in *Fury Road* the promised land is the “Green Place”, a utopian field of Matriarchy, where the Many Mothers cultivate plants, trees and organic food. This green place would prove to be the Citadel the women will take over after the death of Immortan Joe, where in an eco-feminist plot twist the seeds of the Vuvalini tribe will be planted. Another relevant example of the second negation is the mother milk farming at the Citadel, which is a parodic representation of the ecological and feminist principle of breastfeeding.

Although it looks like an environmental film, with one of the Many Mothers, called The Keeper of the Seeds, “initiating” others into the philosophy of preserving nature’s gifts, *Fury Road* is a *negation* of ecological solutions (as it is of feminist promises). Although it mimics an awareness movie about the consequences of environment destruction, or with the issues of exploitation of the resources of the Earth, or the question of human to human exploitation, the film is not meant to bring forward the values of ecology or to improve our sensitivity about the threats to our ecosystem²⁴. It actually digests these elements and recycles them within the typical patriarchal, violence driven, narrative. Once more, it ideologically functions as a negation of negation.

Finally the so-called environmentalist views of the director or the pro-environmental attitude of the film are transformed into negative projection of the negation in the present. Miller’s mimicked ecocriticism, more than explicit in that chant of the war boys, who identify themselves as the “Fukacima Kamakrazee”, is turned into a negation of its previous negation. A brief semiotic interpretation shows that, if the term



kamikrazee is symbolically referring to the suicidal Japanese warriors, the Fukushima is an indirect critical comment on the Fukushima-Daichi incident in March 2011. This adds to the fact that the war boys are “half-life”, most probably suffering from a type of cancer caused by some sort of radiation fallout, yet this is no longer generated by a global thermonuclear confrontation, but by a limited incident.

The Aesthetics of Salvaging and Recycling

In four movies, which generated almost half a billion dollars in revenues, Miller builds a complex narrative, spanning over half a century, with a dozens of characters and social structures which apparently share an internal unity. My hypothesis is that, in fact, the Millerverse is a junkyard bi-product of history and contemporary politics, mixed with heterogeneous elements from external mythologies, all welded together with the evolution of an ambiguous character, Max, which provides us with the illusion of coherence.

The questions raised by the ex-post-facto chronology of destruction, one which was not explicit from the very beginning of the four installments, can be answered with the immediate and simple statement: chronological coherence *did not exist from the beginning*. George Miller retroactively reconstructed a historical timeline of the future as it developed in the past. Just like in other “sci fi sagas” – as it was the case with the Star Wars reversed chronology – the Millerverse is made to look orderly by its own redundancies. But more importantly, the Mad Max universe is not just discontinuous in its historical linearity or due to various social uncertainties. Mad Max provides a relevant example for the incoherent coherence of a cultural projection where

there are no fixed dimensions, where everything is fluid, even the explanations are developed “as it goes”, without an overall vision of the facts or chronology.

Just like the boomerang of the Feral Boy, Miller’s ideas return to the same places and the same tropes of his vision, and often he salvages and recycles his own inconsistencies. Although, as seen before, the social and political settings of each of the Mad Max movies is different, one key element seems to remain unchanged – the external struggle between a psychotic futuristic leaders and the heroic but troubled Protagonist and the internal conflicts of Max himself. At a closer look, we realize that the image of Max is a symbolic mixture of multiple elements in itself. As Gilles Miller²⁵ (quoted by McGregor) pointed out, the Road Warrior is simultaneously a rock star (Elvis), a cinema icon (James Dean, Marlon Brando) and a revolutionary. The image of the dystopian road cowboy, re-mixed with the traits of a rocker and superimposed on a phantasy of liberation, coalesces the entire Mad Max universe around a “Jesus in black leather”²⁶. In reality he is a manifestation of the superficial nature of representations in our culture. Not only does Max mix cultural images that do not belong together, but he is at the same time a repetitive manifestation of his own past into the present, then projected over the future. As a quintessential negation of negation, he is an integral part of a mythology-making based on *recycling* and *re-usage*. The main argument here is that Max is a redundant version of himself (the first negation), since each episode casts him in the same type of narrative, which allows him to behave as a superficial representation of his own image, which in turn was copied from other archetypes (the second negation). Each time a new episode is made, Max starts behaving like a Savior, only to retire from the scene into anonymity



(the negation of negation). This is monotonously re-enacted with every new story line, which makes the main character behave not only as a “wanderer haunted by his past” (as stated in *Road Warrior*), but as a character haunted by his previous traits.

Not only Max is constructed of salvaged materials and reclaimed symbolic structures. Discarded elements from previous episodes and other similar movies are reprocessed into the construction of all symbolic artifacts in these movies, which see to be reclaimed from wasted pieces themselves. Miller as a writer never takes time to explain the interstices between the episodes – for example it is never clear what happens with Max from one installment to the other (his relationship with Aunt Entity after he is captured is illustrative), or what is the future of the lost children or what will happen with the Citadel after his departure).

The *re-processing, re-using and re-claiming* of *cultural waste* products and elements becomes essential for the development of all the positive or negative characters. All the Antagonists also follow this logic of re-mixing. In MM2, Lord Humungus, who is built up from chaotic pieces – he behaves like a punk “secutor”, a gladiator of the wastelands with strange elements put together, an absurd “Ayatollah of the rock and rollah” who is wearing ridiculous leather shorts and a metal cervical collar, behaving like a parodic BDSM figure – is later recuperated in the figure of Immortan Joe. In turn Humungus, who is dressed in a harness costume inspired by BDSM movies, shares many traits with the son of Immortan, Rictus. All three of them are represented through the motif of the mask, which is also recurrent in almost all the movies – if Humungus wears a hockey mask, in MM 4 Max carries a metal muzzle on his face the entire half of the movie. Once again, the director is retrofitting the

images of past to converge with a future which could not have been anticipated.

The same is true for the gayboy beserkers of Humungus, who looks as if they were part of the Accolites, the mad bikers of MM1, which in turn reappear as the Rock Riders in MM 4. Or the “Fukacima Kamakrazee” warriors in MM 4 who are deliriously connected with the “smegma crazee” beserkers in MM 2, or the fact that they unexplicably share similar characteristics with the Lost Tribe of children from MM3. These retroactive links that Miller put in place are sometimes over-explicit – as for example Furiosa in MM4, who is wearing a metallic prosthesis for her left arm, which is a self referencing to the leg gear of Max in MM3.

Even the apparently dichotomized characters, constructed on series of binary oppositions (like Master-Blaster) are recuperated later into their own re-used versions. This dual symbol - which is actually a first negation, an expression of a natural division in capitalist societies – is then reproduced in a series of other binomial creatures (following the logic Master/ Blaster), but as negations. This repetitively referenced visual tropes appears in MM4 with the double progenies of Immortan Joe – Rictus Erectus and Corpus Colossus. Just like Master, Corpus is the brain, the administrator of the Citadel. Corpus shows intellectual prowess, while Rictus is a mindless brute, driven by sheer force. The same dual typologies of commander – second in command are also repetitive, with multiple similarities between all the evil lieutenants of the Mad Leader in the Millerverse. If in MM 1 Bubba plays the ruthless adjunct, in MM 2 this role is played by Wez, the homosexual punk-mohawk marauder. Wez, the right hand of Humungus, is accompanied by a young lover in the middle of the battle and the explicit sexual couple between him and the Golden Youth would later be reflected in



the lieutenant of Aunty, Ironbar. Just as Wez is anticipated by Bubba, Ironbar is a return to the traits of the psychotically inaffectionate killer. This intentional linkage of unreasonable connexions is illustrated by the retroactive connectedness between Toecutter in MM1 and Immortan Joe in MM4. The otherwise unremarkable actor Hugh Keays-Bryne plays both The Toecutter and Immortan Joe – linking the first and the last of the Mad Max movies with a superficial tie-in, which is just another manifestation of its forced cohesion.

Just as the apparent richness of Miller's characters is in fact repetitive, the entire Mad Max universe can be depicted as composed of *interchangeable* parts which lack *interconnectedness*. Every new form which appears in this mythology is following the explicit logic of the *visual melange* and the rule of the *repetitive representation*. In the Mad Max universe elements appear and re-appear without any natural justification. The baby heads in MM1 are referenced to the bodies of dolls and mannequins in MM2, which in turn reappear in MM3 and MM 4. In another relevant scene from MM2, Lord Humungus has his victims strapped in front of his muscle car – this is happening almost identically with Max in MM 4, when the hero is strapped to a pole in front of the war vehicle of Nux, as a “blood bag”.

Often in the Mad Max universe this *visual melange* is trans-mediated, from the films to the comic books²⁷ and the video games – for example the gladiators of the Thunderdome arena are re-invented in the “Fury Road Part One” story from 2015, and the readers see the fights taking place in a Gastown depicted as a overdeveloped version of Bartertown. Yet this is a reprocessed reality since the Thunderdome in MM3 is a direct reference to the Superdome, the 163 million dollars stadium opened in 1975, where all the Super Bowls and the political

conventions of American political parties take place. The Tunderdome is more than just a combination of politics, entertainment and testosterone filled symbolic place. The re-mixing shows at the narrative level, since just like Sugar Ray Leonard defeated Roberto Durán in the famous “No Mas” fight in 1980, Miller has Max to defeats his Master-Blaster opponent by confusing him.

Even the vehicles provide cues for the improbable links within the visual field of all the Mad Max movies. The motorbikes are one of the common places of the narratives, providing innumerable combinations, which allow us to describe the Mad Max movies as carriers of a *spare parts* philosophy. This is a cultural predisposition to use the same tools and pieces only in different contexts, one explicit in many instances of the four installments. The very fact that the “early Max” is fighting a motorbike gang – as a counter-reference to movies like *Easy Rider*, where the projections of a positive, freedom connoted biker culture is exalted – represents the first negation. The bikers in first Mad Max are rapists, killers, barbarian torturers so they represent a negative image of contemporary society. Yet the bikers are negatively reversed several time, with the women of the Vuvalini the final negation of negation.

Another example of rehashed visuality is the reversed punk imaginary and the integration of punk rock culture into the later Millerverse. Often this type of remixing leads to ridiculous projections – what is initially a brash punk-rock brutality (as it is in the early films) later becomes the almost caricature-like characters in MM4. Like the pajama heavy metal character, called the Doof Warrior, is propelling the war party while bungee jumping, using his fire throwing guitar to emotionally stimulate his fellows. This self parodic transformations of



a movie which symbolically opens on Anarchie Road and ends up on Fury Road is amplified by the numerous simplistic onomastics of the Wastelands, where monikers and bynames are repetitively oversimplified. People have names like Max, Nux, Nix, or redundant metaphorical descriptions like People eater, Pig Killer, The Peacemaker, The Nightrider, Rictus Erectus or even Scabrous Scrotus (the name of the third of the first sons of Immortan from the video game).

This nonsensical amalgamation is even more explicit in the linguistic mumbo-jumbo used by Miller – very far from the coherently built artificial languages of Tolkien, later mimicked in movies like *Star Trek* or *Avatar*. If the Nightrider in MM 1 uses an anti-prophetic language – “I am the chosen one, the hand of vengeance sent down to strike the unroadworthy” – the children in MM 3 tell the story of “Tomorrow-morrow land” in a primitive language transcoding present day realities – Pox-Eclipse, Planet Erf. Just like the references to the present, the allegorical meanings of Miller’s dystopias are often transparently historical. Living in the Crack of the Earth, the children in MM 3 have to “member” “The Tell”, an oral version of a biblically influenced story, centered around a Moses figure, the airplane pilot Walker who left without returning to save his tribe. The mixture of elements, languages and mythologies is omnipresent – in MM4 it reaches awful highs with elements of the Norse mythology (Valhalla, the Valkyrie) coupled with Welsh names (Angharad) and pseudo-environmentalist references.

Even in his most effective *dystopian* criticism, Miller is practicing forms of amalgamations, where media consumerist elements are mixed with a pseudo-apocalyptic discourse. This is explicit in MM 3, where the trope of the Wheel of Fortune is

transformed into a penal code, with the Justice system of Bartertown revolving around aleatory decisions that finally send the condemned to the “Gulag”. The same remixing of consumerist ideology with political fantasies of the past takes place when the war boys are making the “sign of V” as a fascist sign, only to go on a suicidal war party where everybody is ready to be “Mcfeasting in Valhalla”. Or the same War Boys described as kamakrazee, suggesting both a link to the militaristic suicide of the Japanese soldiers during WWII, and the chrome spraying of their mouths in a ridiculous drug induced frenzy, similar to that of the warring parties of the Vikings. This pastiche of commodification, coupled with an ideological criticism and a nonsensical historical reference begets derisory in manifestations in *Fury Road*, where they haul Aqua Cola, they trade mother’s milk (harvested from mothers coupled to silly looking, over-explicit, sucking machines).

Yet the most visible mode of how the recycling mythology operates in Mad Max is represented by the muscle cars in the entire Millerverse. If the characters, the stories and the social references are most often built by bits and pieces, using recuperated joints and parts that grow into a kitsch-like structure, this is not visible immediately. However, when we look at the Mad Max cars, we see that everything is built like a *monster-truck mythology*, one unsightly incoherent, just like the forms of the mega-cars that appear in every episode, one which gets more and more absurd each time. The *aesthetics of salvaging* that we are discussing is best exemplified by the evolution of the vehicles used in the Wastelands. Semiotically, I consider them to be suggestive for the overall *aesthetics of melange* in the entire saga. Not only do all the narratives appear to be nothing more than a constant re-imagined car chase (since this is a trope repeated in all the films), but the car-



modification expresses the ultimate negative commodification in the dialectics of the Mad Max imaginary. On one hand, having a car in a society lacking gasoline is a first level negation. This is followed by entire productions based on “car mod” technologies, with tuned up, over-modified monster machines. This second negation is accentuated by the pseudo-mythology of the V8 cult in the MM 4 movie, which retroactively recuperates the V8 driven fantasy of the MM 1 chases, with everything functioning according to the principle of the fusion of confusions, the coalescence of the inadequate joining together.

The Mad Max movies are put together like the sections and pieces of the modified cars, where elements of limousines are matched with turbine engines, where Tatra trucks are mixed with Chevy Fleetmaster parts, in a madness of machineries. We can even see an evolution of the monstrously kitsch vehicles, which takes us from the modified version of the Ford Interceptor, beefed up with an impossible engine, to the Gigahorse driven by Immortan Joe. The links are multiple and the combinations are limited. Just as Furiosa’s War Rig is almost identical with the escape fuel tank in MM2, while themilitarized autos like the Beetle of the People Eater are linked to the war party in MM 3, the Cadillac stack-up driven by Immortan is equipped with a Chevy engine, mounted on monster-truck structure, with one carcass overlapping another, supported by a chassis from muscle cars races²⁸. Not just the machines in the Millerverse follow the philosophy of maxing out by mixing in, as seen before that characters, the story-lines and the social contexts function as if they were welded one on top of the another, frames attached to unlikely parts and supported by an unbelievable structure.

In this sense, the Mad Max universe is a ragbag mixture of the fantasies of mass culture today, simultaneously expressing the

anxieties and the desires of the social consciousness, but also carrying structures empty of meaning, where everything can be substituted with anything else.

Interchangeable Apocalyptic Sexualities

Between MM 3, the 1985 movie which was displaying a woman as the Antagonist (where Tina Turner did her best), and MM 4, the 2015 version of the story where women are clearly empowered (with Charlize Theron at her best), Miller’s representation of women has radically changed. What happened during the 30 years that passed between the two films? And, again, if the Mad Max universe is coherent in its natural dichotomy, if it functions without any outside references, how were these extreme transformations of aesthetic and narrative cohesion made possible? What makes them even acceptable for the viewers? One more time, the negation of negation principle provides us with the best explanations for these apparently incomprehensible transformations of women. In fact the reversal of roles from Aunty Entity to Imperator Furiosa indicates the same laws of negative dialectic evolution.

Some conservative online journalists, like Kit Daniels, saw in this huge ideological gap between the two films the explicit manifestation of a “feminist infestation” of Hollywood²⁹. The movie industry is imposing strong female characters on the audiences, due to a purposeful trend in society, orchestrated by some occult political interests. Others, like Kate McDonough from Salon.com, called the movie “Mad Maxine”³⁰, yet contested the fact that it has anything to do with the feminist discourse, rather describing it as a continuation of masculine discourses of previous episodes.

I would argue that once more we see at work the dialectic contradiction between



utopian (women as powerful warriors) and dystopian (women as evil dictators) representations, one which simultaneously negates its assumption only to negate again the negation of the previous elaboration. Such contradictory story-lines include, of course, the neurotic nature of the Mad Max universe (one which would better be developed by a psychoanalytical approach) that we need to take into consideration. Yet the logic of recycling is visible in the nature of mythology re-making of women identity in Mad Max. If in the 1985 movie, Miller placed Aunty Entity, the all-controlling Mother-figure of Thunderdome, in the center of a political dictatorship, now the same director has Imperator Furiosa as the leader of a anti-dictatorship rebellion. In a typical negation of negation, female identities, like most of the representations of the Millerverse described before, are simultaneously undecided, problematic and amalgamated, while being contradictions of their own negative projection.

In order to make things more clear, we should take MM 3 as an indicator for how Miller's re-construction of reality operates. The 1985 film was created during the global impact of Thatcherism, with the obvious consequence that an African American woman, wearing an "Iron Lady" wardrobe and a blonde haircut similar to that of the British prime-minister, has taken over a barter empire. The similarities are even more striking, since the newly elected British prime minister, after winning the Falklands war, was confronted with a year long national miners' strike. Not very far from Thunderdome, a mercantile society based on class separation, where a dominant woman is confronted by an "energy strike" imposed by her working class below. The entire economy of the authoritarian regime of Aunty Entity is dependent on the production of methane, controlled by a

proletarian monster, a dual entity, Master-Blaster who are able to boycott the entire upper level with their blockade. And it is not difficult to see how Aunty's political manifesto – Where there was desert, now there's a town; where there was robbery there's trade; where there was despair, now there's hope – is a conservatory political statement. As pointed out before, at the first level of negation the movie shows how, without the restraints of the capitalist order, the entire humanity is threatened to degrade and to return to a chaotic and irrational stage.

Returning to the representation of women in MM 4, we can apply the interpretation mechanism of the second negation with Imperator Furiosa and her anti-patriarchal revolution. Like many environmental collapse movies before (*Soylent Green*, *Logan's Run*), often described as critical towards capitalism and its destructive forces, there is an apparent feminist, anti-exploitation, ecologist message the most recent representation of the Millerverse.

It would seem that a male-centric industry is gradually opening towards audiences that are no longer driven by misogyny or patriarchal values. As the MM4 story unfolds, the viewers discover that Furiosa is a revolutionary feminist rebel – dreaming of a dystopian all-female cooperative. This gender based commune (one that is strangely similar to works like Joan Slonczewski's environmentalist feminist novel) is a feminist Promise Land. After the first level of negation, where a group of five ecofeminists oppose the patriarchal dominance of the tyrannical Immortan Joe, the group lead by Furiosa lead that their dreams about living on a fertile and green land is nothing but an illusion, so they all return to their initial starting point. At one level Miller's story-line has agglutinated some explicit eco-feminist discourses, yet this is nothing more than the dominant narrative devouring the marginal speeches, which in turn is



transformed into cinematic representations that confirm the domination. The best example comes from the character of Splendid, one of the sex-slaves of Immortan, his favorite actually, who is a pacifist, a non-violent feminist leader, condemning all killing and encouraging her “sisters” to denounce oppression. Relevantly enough, it is Splendid who dies and her child is extracted dead out of her body.

This is true for the film industry – although some critics see that there is an increased opening in Hollywood to strong women, arguing that powerful female characters are more present on screen (with movies like *The Hunger Games* or Bigelow’s win of the Oscar in 2010 with *The Hurt Locker*), there is no equality between genders in the industry³¹. Although 50% of the movie tickets in the US are bought by women, this is an enterprise that remains gender biased – the data indicates that out of the top 250 films³² from 2007 to 2012 only 9% of the directors are women, and 2% are cinematographers. Even the best paid female actors receive less than half of their male counterparts. The negation of negation actually shows that our visual culture remains a “man’s world”. A report from 2014 shows that women represent only 12% of the protagonists in the top 100 movies (Lauzen 2015) with female characters personified most often as young, sexually attractive and powerless, since films with female protagonists have shorter viewing time in theaters and have access to less screens.

I would argue that the pseudo-feminist revolution in MM 4 follows the path of double negation. If some critics saw in the movie a lecturing about “feminism” and “socialism”, with the bloviator Aaron Clarey calling for a boycott of the movie as a piece of feminist propaganda trying to erase the differences between men and women³³, it is impossible not to see in this recent narrative a criticism of the most controversial

political histories of today. MM 4 operates as a typical dystopian discourse, it is an indirect criticism of the ISIS fundamentalists, kidnapping young women in the Middle East and using them as sex slaves. In a transparent way, the entire mythology of Immortan Joe is based on this reference. Angharad (also called Splendid), Cheedo the Fragile, The Dag, Toast the Knowing and Capable serve as “breeders” for Immortan Joe, locked up in a vault like precious treasures. Equipped with chastity belts, the women are presumably forced to have intercourse with the Leader in his effort to obtain healthy offspring. The first negation comes when, supported by Furiosa (probably a former sex slave, as the Furiosa comic book recounts, she used to be one of the wives), the five women escape, leaving behind the message “We are not things”, to the dismay of Immortan, finding his sexual vault empty. At this level there is more than just a plot decision – the direct consequence is that it generates a social transformation of dystopia (the monstrous rule of the killer patriarch) into utopia (a future society organized by women).

Of course, such a move allowed some other critics to see Furiosa as the representation of a female liberator. When Miller conscientiously used Eve Ensler, the author of famous *Vagina Monologues*, as a consultant for better developing the dynamics between the abused women and their captor, this led to a narrative transformation. For the fans of the classical films, Mad Max appears to be “turned upside down”, the story transformed into a “feminist flick”, with Max only used as a shoulder support for Furiosa’s master marksmanship. Consequently it appears that the film tells the story of how masculinity destroyed the world, while women will regenerate it.

In reality Furiosa is distinctly created as a substitute for Max – actually as a



negation of the negation of Max. The best indications for this argument are the early sequences of the movie introducing her immediately after Max was about to be marked with the sign of the Lord Immortan. The frames are edited in such a way that initially the viewer would believe that the male hero enters the stage. Furiosa's head is shaven as if she is the "anima" of the Wasteland warrior and she appears wearing a similar shoulder protection like Max. Miller, who acknowledged that Furiosa was developed as an equal to Max and that he purposefully created the character in order to follow-up with more episodes centered on a "gladiatrix", fully geared with the famous galerus arm guard and a shocking prosthetic metal arm. One simple explanation would be that the franchise opens towards new audiences, with a marketing strategy better driven by a female hero. This might prove the argument drawn by authors like Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, that Hollywood and our popular culture can transform under the efforts of the socially conscious, awareness-raising groups, promoting balanced gender representations³⁴.

This is why the most recent *Mad Max* is not what some have called a "feminist action movie"³⁵, where the members of the Vuvalini tribe (symbolically referring to the female genitals) are presented as warrior matriarchs, remnants of the former Many Mothers colony, positive shooter-heroes, who kill men mercilessly and might just save the world. The Vuvalini may look like Amazons on bikes, warriors descending symbolically from the "a-mazos", the breastless creatures of ancient mythology. We must point out a disregarded aspect – that almost all the Vuvalini (with the exception of *The Valkyrie*) are nameless. This is a universe where men carry caricature-like names and are granted eponyms, while *The Matriarchs* are without identity. More so,

they are not portrayed as a positive social group – they use the nudity of their own young women to catch unsuspecting prey, they are cold-blooded killers and behave in a masculinized manner. It is here that the second negation comes into place – the Many Mothers are linked to the gangs of bikers in the other episodes and point to a negation of female identity. Last but not least, Furiosa's masculinity and aggressive behavior, her dominance on the other women and her subsequent taking over of the Citadel are negations of negation towards femininity.

The character of *Imperator Furiosa* becomes more explicit if she is carrying these negative traits of feminine identity – she is a desexualized woman, she leads a war party like a mercenary and is even depicted in a misogynistic way, as a dominatrix with a potentially dictatorial behavior. She portrays another stereotype of womanhood, the female hysteric manifestation. On one hand, Furiosa and the other fugitive women are identifiably with the Furies of Ancient Mythology. Although there is no specific number of existing furies, we have an account of at least three (Aeschylus in *Eumenides* names them as Alecto, Megara and Tisiphone), with four major mythical traits as Arai (curse), Poinai (revenge), Praxidikai (justice seeking) and Maniai (loss of reason). In the Greek mythology these creatures, who are also known as Erinyes, are linked to the death and revenge of the loved ones. This typology becomes explicit in the traits of the five fugitives – the female characters, often hysterical or upholders of moral integrity, are agents of anger, carriers of guilt, mobilized by a frenzy of soul. In fact the movie is called *Fury Road*, referring to Furiosa and her companion's travel to extoll revenge.

All the same, by the end of the movie there is a final reversal of roles. If at the beginning (the first negation) Furiosa is a feminine replacement for Max, she operates



as the true Mad Max of this latest production, Max himself is downgraded, muted and reduced to a non-articulated supportive character. Yet this sexual transformation is followed by a second reversal of roles, when Max's blood transfusion saves Furiosa and puts her back on her revolutionary track. Which finally generates a feminist message supported from behind by a male hero – which is not at all a the story of women empowerment. The ultimate negation of negations of sexual roles and identities.

Dystopias of Dysfunctional Masculinity

This line of arguments becomes more clear if we connect it with the so-called criticism of male aggression in Miller's dystopias – which are crowded with homosexual fascists, perverse rapists and psychopathic leaders³⁶. And although the first three movies of the series were often criticized as extolments of violent masculinity, the reality is that every film is indicating a defective manifestation of masculinity. In fact all the Mad Max movies are *dystopias of dysfunctional masculinity*. The apocalypse Miller seems to make us afraid of is that of the transformation of "standard" male identity. It is as if the director presents us with an answer to the question what would the world look like if Toecutter, Humungus, Master/ Blaster or Immortan Joe would be able to take over society?

In Mad Max the political degeneration of society is accompanied by a private degeneration of individuals – it is as if normalcy is possible only in a conservative political and social environment. The false assumption is that a non-technological world can only create primitive human beings, with the immediate consequence (which is difficult to demonstrate) that any collapse of capitalism will be followed by the deterioration of

the essences of humanity. In this sense, the degradation of masculinity is a negative projection of the possible effects of social revolutions against the existing order.

There is another clear pattern of deviance in the Mad Max representations of genre, a negation of negation in the construction of all the dominant male figures, not just of the Antagonists. The monstrous males that populate the future imagined by Miller are often homoerotic or perverted creatures, genital perverts or sexually monstrous. The masculine and feminine identities in the Wastelands are not just troubled, they are profoundly *mixed-up*. As Miller acknowledged, post-apocalyptic *sexualities are interchangeable*³⁷ and this *interchangeability* is not a negative illustration of the discontent towards capitalist societies, instead it is a manifestation of its anxieties. These anguishes are exaggerated in a process where aggressive behavior is escalating to paroxysm, where violence engenders atrocious violence. One of the most suggestive episodes in the gratuitous male rape in MM1, ending up with a man running across the field naked and sullied in blood, points out a political allegory.

In MM 1 the Nightrider gang is carrying all these negative traits – homosexuality, sadist-masochism – since they are radically opposed to those of Max Rockatansky, who remains the "good white guy", the family man, the law imposing, self-centered male. This monstrous sexuality continues to have ideological functions in the following movies. From the homoerotic relationship between The Toecutter and Johnny the Boy in MM1, to the ridiculously sadist-masochist costume of "The Humungus" in MM 2 who rules over his "gayboy beserkers" in an indefinite sexual identity, then to the indefinite sexuality of the characters in MM3 and the total monstrosity in MM4, sexuality is always ambivalent in the Millerverse for a



negative reason. Compliance with state violence becomes acceptable when faced with the improbable option of accepting the mindless violence of these social beasts. Even if the sexual predators from 1975 become the social predators of 1981 and end up as the political autocrats of the 2015 films, the message is similar. In the *Wastelands* the authorities are degraded and the only hope is individualistic strength.

This process is self explanatory when we analyze the development of the “positive” characters. All the male leaders are degraded and show an incapacity to provide solutions for their subordinates. The head of the police force in MM 1 is called Fifi, and spends his free time watering his plant, walking around half naked, never capable to protect Max or the other policemen. Then there is the leader of the refinery community, called Pappagallo – a combination of father and parrot – unable to provide his community the necessary leadership. If we link these representations with the global competition for oil in the 70s, which became more acute during the 1980s, we see how the criticism in MM 2 is a political reference to Carterism. In the opposition between the leader of a democratic oasis of people dressed in white and self-governed by a humane Aryan (Papagallo typecast as a benign autocrat) and the mad gang of Lord Humungus, driven by sadist impulses, hungry for “guzzoline” there is a double negation of the current political leadership. Yet even if the political “non dominant males”, who were supposed to take care of the liberal oasis of the West have failed, on the other hand their possible replacements are decadent and heinous.

This mechanism of several negations is even more explicit in “*Fury Road*” where a seemingly patriarchal society is negatively described as a final manifestation of the process that began with the attacks of the

biker gangs of Nightrider in MM1. At first there is the positive negation – once again in MM 4 the story seems to carry an anti-militaristic, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist undertones. Again a post-apocalyptic society is dominated by a triumvirate of powerful and discretionary males. Immortan Joe, a former military now self-appointed prophet, the “People Eater”, who is an accountant administering the Gas Town, and Major Kalashnikov leading the Bullet Farm are controlling all possible resources of the Wasteland. The allegory of the military-economic-religious control over society is explicit. It is as if the aggression of dominant males against their fellow humans has reached its paroxysmal outcome.

In fact the description of all these men, just like the other male figures in the Millerverse, is ambiguously monstrous. The traits of the Mayor of Gas Town, a gouty overweighted, metal nosed cannibal, and those of the Bullet Farm leader, who wears a head band made of bullets, has bullet teeth and drives a bullet like machine are caricature-like representations of the defects of contemporary society. This is even more explicit with Immortan Joe – who is as monstrous as all the other males driven to destroy capitalist social order. He is a reversed father figure, called Daddy by all his followers, he is an egoistic Father, wanting only to perpetuate his own offsprings. Wanting to obtain a “healthy male heir”, he is unable to procreate anything else but monsters. Hiding his pestilent and rotting body behind a plastic body armor, with his face beyond a horse teeth mask, connected to a bladder on his back, he is, just like the Berkshire boar from *Animal Farm*, a militaristic tyrant, a hoggish creature driven by animalistic compulsions.

As further detailed in the comic book “*Nux & Immortan Joe*”, this supreme leader of the Citadel was an ex-military, a colonel, Joe Moor, a veteran of the “*Oil Wars*” and



hero of the “Water Wars”. A self-appointed leader of his own cult of personality, Immortan’s plexiglass armor makes him look a lot like the uniform of a Soviet general. This image is re-mixed, through his long white hair and ritualized manner in which he interacts with the others, with a parodic religious figure. Adding to these elements the image of a chieftain who has his own religion by taking over a desert aquifer, the references to the wars in the Middle East are complete.

Apparently Immortan is the representation of the destruction of society brought out by the political worts in humanity or, as the voice-over of Max in MM4 states it, in the total corruption of humanity, everyone is “broken”, and there is no distinction between the individual forms madness takes. Yet at a profound ideological level, Miller’s movies represent a mirroring of a socialist political slogan. Just like the Soviet Power plus electrification equaled communism for Lenin, for Miller Capitalism without guzzoline equals anarchy and madness.

Notes

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