The Green Place: *Mad Max: Fury Road* as George Miller's Feminist Fairytale

George Miller has spent the better part of four decades building the universe of *Mad Max* and the post-apocalyptic adventures that take place in it, all of them surrounding the eponymous Max Rockatansky. The four films set in the George Miller's *Mad* Max universe, *Mad Max* (1980), *The Road Warrior* (1981), *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), are unconventional in more than just their premises and over-the-top vehicular action sequences; the four films are not set on a chronological timeline. There are certainly aspects of the films that lend themselves to a timeline, for example there is some semblance of modern government in the original *Mad Max*, which suggests that it takes place earlier than the other films. However, there is more evidence to support the idea that the films are not actually connected to each other except in their settings and their protagonist. Rather, it is likely that the character of Mad Max is nothing more than a legendary characterization of police officer Max Rockatansky made into a wasteland myth, and each film tells a story of almost fairytale-esque quality. It follows that if the *Mad Max* films are George Miller's attempts at telling legends rather than grounded narratives, then each of the films is imbued with a heightened sense of intention and potential symbolism. Such is the case in Miller's most recent foray into the wasteland: *Mad Max: Fury Road*. With Immortan Joe playing the antagonist with a vast religious following and an iron grip on the people and resources in his territory, he is positioned as the church and state of this particular legend. Standing in opposition to Joe is Imperator Furiosa and the breeders who are being transported by her. When the film opens, none of the women have agency of their own, but they are all searching for the freedom to decide what happens to their bodies, and their children. The stage is set immaculately for a clash between the feministic ideals

of women being able to make the sole and express decisions about what happens to their own bodies and the institutions that would steal the agency of women for their own motives.

At first blush, the *Mad Max* franchise appears to be something of a convoluted mess as far as the chronology and character relationships are concerned, but it is questionable that there is a chronological relationship between the films at all. In fact, Miller's own inability to establish a timeline for *Mad Max* is well-documented; Miller admits that the timeline is "very loose," and that he sees *Fury Road* as a "revisit" to the franchise rather than a sequel or prequel (Miller). Miller's inability, or unwillingness, to cement an official sequence of events lends itself to the idea that Max, however mad he may be, is only a wasteland legend. For instance, there are certain symbols that appear throughout the films, such as the little music box from *Road Warrior* showing up in *Fury Road*, and the gyro captain from *Road Warrior* being seemingly reinvented for *Beyond Thunderdome*, but neither he nor Max acknowledges a previous connection. It would be easy to write these coincidences off as a small easter-egg for the attentive, but Miller even plays with the expectation that Max and the gyro captain know each other from *Road Warrior* by shifting from quick cuts and claustrophobic shots during the final chase sequence to a long pull out in apparent remembrance, only to quickly cut back into the pursuit sequence. The stories told about the character Max are essentially stories of the Wanderer, a legendary figure in many cultures, who can be traced as far back as a ca. 8th century Old English poem, "The Wanderer," who "voices hope of finding comfort after his many tribulations…describing how he must keep his thoughts locked within him while he makes that search" (Introduction to "The Wanderer" 117-118). Much like the Wanderer of yore, Max is always reluctantly dragged into the conflicts of the wasteland through circumstance or coercion, and the stories told around those conflicts form the legend of the character Mad Max. The recurring characters, symbols, and mythical

themes lend themselves to the idea that the films are set up by Miller as retellings of wasteland fairytales about the lone wanderer, Max, and like any good fairytale, Miller's is centered around a strong lesson in morality.

Coincidentally, Immortan Joe, the main antagonist of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, has his own twisted moral code, one of rituals and laws, which has engendered the fanatical support of those around him. Unfortunately, the main tenet of Immortan Joe's code appears to be that people are resources, and resources are his property. The breakdown of government due to the increasing scarcity of resources as seen in the *Mad Max* universe is so prevalent and plausible that ecological economist Robert Costanza has dubbed the most unfavorable and destructive possible vision of the future of the modern world the "*Mad Max* vision," where "the assumption of unlimited resources is wrong" (464). It is no surprise, then, that resources are so highly contested in the *Mad Max* canon, and it is always those who control the resources who are in control and constantly under attack. However, Immortan Joe is different from powerful figures in past films like Master/Blaster and Gas Town in that very way; as the movie opens, Joe's resources are absolutely secure. In the world that George Miller has established where "'red sullen faces [that] sneer and snarl' because of their suspicion that anyone approaching them only wants to steal their life sustenance," it seems almost sacrilegious that the ill and aging Joe is allowed to sit on his mountain throne and enjoy the love and adoration of his children and followers while at peace with the Bullet Farm and Gas Town (Barbour 32). Any of Immortan Joe's war boys, or even his own son, Brutus, could strike him down without a second blow and take the vast reservoir of water that he holds at his fingertips. It is the threads of idolatry, such as praying before the mountain of steering wheels before battle, the use of chrome paint as a bastardized sacrament, and Joe's promise that his war boys will "ride with [him] eternal on the highways of

Valhalla" that have elevated him to the level of perceived godhood, and therefore safety (*Fury*). Immortan Joe is allowed to retain his power only because he is positioned as the god-king of his domain, and acts as a symbol for the institutions of both government and religion in Miller's tale.

The privileges that Immortan Joe is afforded do not end at adoration, but rather extend to the point of enslavement. "Do not, my friends, become addicted to water. It will take hold of you, and you will resent its absence," preaches Immortan Joe at the film's ten minute mark (*Fury*). However, it is the resentment, the addiction, that is precisely what Joe counts on to keep his herd in line as he positions himself not as a withholder, but as a provider. In exchange for Joe's oh-so gracious support, his followers have entered into an extreme version of a Lockean social contract, relinquishing all agency "to unite for the mutual *preservation* of their lives, liberties, and estates," however meager those estates and liberties may be (Locke 75). With the entirety of their power invested in Immortan Joe as their god-king, the people become subhuman and incapable of divesting their power back from him, essentially becoming property, or even worse: resources. The main form of sustenance and the glorified trade good of Joe's legion is "Mother's Milk," which is pumped from well-fed, bejeweled women who are farmed like cattle and are only worth what they can produce, while prisoners like Max are tattooed with details of their blood type, organ donation viability, and more before being kept in cages until their veins have dried up (*Fury*). This relationship between Immortan Joe and those he rules over exhibits an interesting corruption of the social contract, wherein, the governmental agent is allowed so much power that he is able to break the contract to the same end that it was created for, taking the natural rights of the people for itself. It is only Joe's kin like Brutus and his most trusted warriors, the Imperators, who are allowed any sort of agency, and even then, only a scarce amount, but the dynamic is reminiscent of a bourgeoisie class with privilege over the

disenfranchised chattel-class that has developed. The expansion of the empire's power is paramount, and the only way of expanding Immortan Joe's cadre of killers and warlords is to take full advantage of the women that he rules over.

Accordingly, every woman in the film who is not part of the subhuman ground-dwellers is shown to be a possession of Immortan Joe, having no agency over their own bodies. The main point of contention in *Fury Road* is the escape, or as Immortan Joe believes, theft, of his "prized breeders." The breeders are kept under lock and key, behind a gigantic vault door reserved in the modern world for only the most valuable treasures and possessions. The interior of the vault itself, however, is revealed by a sweeping shot up along the domed ceiling, looking down at a piano in front of the massive window and a flowing well of fresh water; all of the luxuries that one could possibly desire in a post-apocalyptic wasteland are present behind the huge steel door. None of this, however, changes the fact that Joe keeps both the Mother's Milk producers and his breeders as livestock, which is evidenced by the madam who is severely tattooed, not entirely unlike Max, and proclaims, "You cannot own a human being" (*Fury*). The main conflict of the movie revolves around this declaration, as the only fertile women in Joe's irradiated, barren kingdom, having been entirely disenfranchised, escape in an attempt to regain agency over their bodies and ensure that their "children will not be warlords" (*Fury*). However, the journey that the breeders embark on does not mark a sudden snatching back of their agency. Certainly, acquiring Imperator Furiosa's aid had to require a modicum of ingenuity, and leaving Joe's fortress divested their agency from the tyrant, but it is immediately reinvested in Imperator Furiosa, whose expertise and altruism they rely upon for most of the film.

The first image that follows the fast and furious opening sequence of *Fury Road* is a close shot of the back of an even more closely shaved neck, focused on the brand denoting that this

person is the property of Immortan Joe. The fierce and trusted warrior in the shot is none other than Imperator Furiosa, the same woman who the breeders rely upon to take them to "the green place," a sort of idealized paradise away from the influence of Immortan Joe (*Fury*). It may seem problematic that the breeders would invest what agency they claw away from Joe in someone who is owned in much the same way, but Furiosa is given command of the trade mission and the keys to Joe's war rig, meaning that she has not been entirely disenfranchised by Joe's lust for power. Even with so little opportunity and resources at her disposal, Imperator Furiosa represents another of Locke's principles: the right to revolution if the government does not fulfill their end of the social contract (67). Furiosa uses that right to revolution in order to quite literally break from the road that Joe has laid out for her, and is the only female character in the film to regain her agency as soon as the pursuit begins. Even though there is a period of distrust and hostage-taking between Furiosa and Max, she is never reduced to one of the roles which so many female characters inhabit in history and Hollywood productions of "helpmeets and confidantes to great male[s]," and it is often a point of contention as to whether or not "we ought to attribute to these women any influence on the key philosophical themes of these men" (Broad 494). Rather than acting as a foil or sounding board to Max's brooding, Wanderer nature, Furiosa is a strong woman who takes the small opportunity that she is presented to regain her agency and control her fate. While the path is never easy and leads to a close brush with death, the path is Furiosa's alone, and Max is merely along for the ride, acting as the audience's lens as the women of *Fury Road* battle for their right to choose.

Of course, all of the characters are on the same Fury Road, but none of their paths to regaining their agency are the same. For Furiosa, it can be argued that as soon as she breaks away from the caravan's route she reaches the idealized state, wherein she has regained her

agency and assumes responsibility for her actions and fate. The breeders, on the other hand, begin the pursuit with a belief that reaching the idealized green place will give them freedom and control over their lives. At different points in the pursuit each breeder finds themselves taking control of their fates, including the fickle Cheedo, who had previously considered going back to the comfortable oppression of Joe, offers herself to Joe, which puts her in harm's way in an effort to distract Brutus from Furiosa's assault on Joe. But it is The Splendid Angharad who, through her actions, makes the biggest statement of the film. Too often, the modern abortion debate relies heavily on political rhetoric, but those who perform genuine research on the subject hope to engender the idea that women should be "the subjects, not the objects, of the abortion debate" (Crawley et. al 228). Angharad is the only visibly pregnant breeder and the most enfeebled of the group, which is why it is such an unexpected act of selflessness, though certainly not altruism, when Angharad throws open the door of the war rig and puts herself between Joe's gun and Furiosa's head. In that moment, Angharad is counting on the fact that Joe's political and religious agendas will not harm her, and effectively takes the decision about what happens to her body and her baby out of Joe's hands. While Angharad survives the collision with the rocky outcropping, her subsequent slip off of the war rig, even though it is incidental, is a result of her taking charge of her body and putting herself in harm's way. It would be a misconception to construe the quest for agency and equality for women as the quest for a sort of green place idealism, where nothing bad can happen and equality is a rule. Rather, Miller's vision of feminism puts women in the driver's seat, allowing them equal *opportunity* to experience the good or the bad, and take care of their bodies and their potential children without the interference of religious or political powers. For these reasons, it seems apparent that George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* is not just a relentless pursuit across the hostile wasteland.

The importance of establishing not only *Fury Road*, but the entire *Mad Max* universe as loosely construed stories told about a legendary figure cannot be understated, as this imbues the films with a sense of intention and importance behind even the smallest interaction or symbol. Immortan Joe's role in the film is just such an occasion, where the audience is presented a bloodthirsty warlord with an underdeveloped moral compass, but his role as the ruler and agent of church and state allows him to transcend the stereotypes of film villainy and act as an instrument of Miller's commentary on feminism and oppression. Joe's grip on the exploitable women in his territory is tighter than his grip on the vast reserves of water that he holds under lock and key, and the importance of resources in this dystopian vision of the future means that all of the stops are pulled out in order to retrieve his breeders. In reality, though, the breeders are women, not objects to be possessed, and their struggle to take control of their bodies and enjoy their natural human rights, is echoed by the modern feminist movement. While the goal of the journey may end up being unachievable, Miller's tale does not call for lamenting the lack of a green place, but for wresting change from the same establishment that would prevent it. Miller makes the succinct point that women are fully capable of making their own decisions about their bodies and their fates, but also makes it clear that there is no use in looking for a green place where the world is perfect; a green place should be the vision of here and now.

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