



Recouping masculinity: men's rights activists' responses to Mad Max: Fury Road

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Recouping masculinity: men's rights activists' responses to *Mad Max: Fury Road*

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The oft-cited "crisis of masculinity"—the notion that Western "masculinity is troubled, anxious, fissured, [and] unable to cope with the alienating dynamics of contemporary globalized capitalism" (Brian Baker 2015, 1; see also Roger Horrocks 1994)—was evoked by the recent release of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, ed. Miller). The crisis was provoked not so much by the film itself but, rather, by men's rights activists' (MRA) responses to it.

The "manosphere"¹ erupted in May 2015 just before the film's initial release. At the misogynist website *Return of Kings*, Aaron Clarey (2015) denounced the film as "a feminist piece of propaganda posing as a guy flick." After watching only the trailer, he urged readers to boycott the film. According to Clarey, if *Mad Max: Fury Road* was a box-office success, the "world [would] never be able to see a real action movie ever again that doesn't contain some damn political lecture or moray [sic] about feminism" (Clarey 2015). A number of online news outlets—such as *Time* and *Vice News*—picked up the story, reporting a full-scale boycott by the MR movement, simultaneously lauding the film as a feminist triumph. While there was no official boycott, MRA grievances were nevertheless prevalent among their online communities. At one MRA web forum, for example, a member advised others to "make an informed

choice about if you want to actually fund this particular enterprise" (*A Voice for Men* 2015a). The discussion at this forum ranged from attacks on the film's "gynocentric" (*A Voice for Men* 2015a) plot and Furiosa's centrality to Eve Ensler's involvement as a consultant. However, after seeing the film, a number of MRAs began defending it, downplaying and critiquing its feminist stance. In fact, the forum member mentioned above returned to comment that the film was "very UN-feminist" (*A Voice for Men* 2015b). His observation was echoed in the community, suggesting that the crisis was perhaps overblown.

What many MRAs and news outlets did not discuss, however, was the film's portrayal of a masculinity uncommon in action films. Whilst Max does display some qualities of the "traumatized male subject" prevalent in contemporary Western cinema (Baker 2015, 2), his masculinity is rarely played up in the film, and is hardly in crisis. He exhibits traditional masculinity insofar as he is strong and determined, but so too does Furiosa—arguably the film's real protagonist. In an inversion of the typical male action hero, Max features as a sidekick to the female characters who drive the action. As Dana Stevens (2015) notes, "Hardy's character remains more indistinct, perhaps because he's usually (sometimes comically) placed in positions of extreme passivity."

However, the film does not simply reverse gender stereotypes. Despite its overt attempts at a feminist message—for instance, the chattel wives' refrain, "we are not things"—moments where masculinity is reconfigured are more nuanced. Max is never emasculated, but is also never presented as a typically masculine hero. In one of the film's most compelling scenes, for example, he hands a rifle to Furiosa after missing twice; she then successfully takes the shot. This gesture, whereby a male character acknowledges his female counterpart's superior skill, is fairly novel in a genre where women—even tough ones—are often relegated to the role of sidekick or sex object. Capable male heroes² remain essential to the action; however, their masculinity seldom overshadows the strength and agency of the female characters. The self-conscious repositioning of a masculine hero into a female character assisting other women is progressive in itself, and is reminiscent of Jack Halberstam's notion of "female masculinities" (1998) as an alternative to traditionally male masculinity. Furthermore, this genre reform is bolstered by the repositioning of the male hero into the role of an ally.

Whilst this reimagining of masculinity was overlooked largely in favour of debates around its feminist content, the discussions across a range of online media platforms signal avenues for further research. The reversal of many MRAs' attitudes reveals the ways in which these communities try to recoup Max's masculinity, often by reclaiming the film (and Max's position as ally) as "humanist" instead of feminist. If previous incarnations of *Mad Max* represented a fantasy of masculine power, geared primarily for male consumption, then how do these MRA communities understand contemporary masculinity, in relation to this film and other popular media? And if Max needed to be "reclaimed," what was implicitly lost by decentralising the male hero? Analysis of such debates could reveal much about the current "crisis of masculinity" as it is understood and discussed in online spaces.

Notes

1. This is the collective term for online activities relating to men, masculinity, and men's rights, which are typically anti-feminist. As Sarah McKenzie elaborates, the manosphere is "where

aggressive men's rights groups blame women, and more specifically feminism, for everything wrong with the world—from high unemployment rates and shorter male lifespans, to false rape allegations and poor family court outcomes" (2013, 30).

2. Nux is also an important character in the reconfiguring of masculinity in the film and deserves further study, as well.

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Smooth dudes and fucked up kids: black men in two contemporary South African films

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Despite its impressive heritage of music, visual art, and literature, South Africa does not have a robust indigenous film industry. Most local movies seem doomed to fail locally; they stay in cinemas for a week or two and then quietly disappear back to the international festival circuit, if they're good, or to DVD, if they're less so. (Oddly, this rule doesn't apply to films in Afrikaans, which have a far more consistent cinematic life.)

It is interesting to note that two of the most talked-about films in the country in 2015 were local. One of them was an unexpected box office success, while the other garnered much positive press and won the highest award at the 2015 Durban International Film Festival. What connects them, other than their locality, is their portrayal of black South African men within a context of aspiration, consumption, wealth, and the recognisable signifiers of the global middle class.