Resisting Dominant Ideologies in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Watermelon Woman*

Cinema is irrevocably tied to the political milieu it inhabits. The manner and extent to which cinematic texts confront and scrutinise the dominant ideology — principles espoused by the majority, the culturally powerful — varies greatly. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, in their essay "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", devise a system to categorise how films engage with these rooted ideologies. In my own paper, I will be examining two films, *Mad Max: Fury Road* [Miller, 2015] and *The Watermelon Woman* [Dunye, 1996], and the degree to which they can be described using these proposed categories. *Fury Road* — ostensibly a genre-bound franchise action movie — is saturated in the imagery of a masculine dominant ideology. Yet it is also able to, in part, defy these tropes by subverting the power and gender paradigms it initially presents. *The Watermelon Woman*, on the other hand, radically departs from conventional ideology in both form and subject matter, employing an idiomatic mixture of metacinematic, documentary, and traditional fictional narrative techniques in order to fill a lacuna in the history of black lesbian film.

Comolli and Narboni propose seven different categories into which films can fall, distinguished by how they interact with the dominant ideology. It will be useful to summarise these categories. Films in the first category are thoroughly, almost subconsciously permeated with the dominant ideology, to the extent where they impart "no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact" [756]. Nothing about these works add new perspectives to cultural discourse or challenge

existing political systems. Instead, they are a "re-hash of the same old ideology", presenting a habituated representation of reality, a self-perpetuating replication of ideals already promoted by the social and cultural supremacy [756]. The second category are films which confront the dominant ideology "on two fronts": content — directly exploring a political subject from several angles, and using it to deconstruct the ideology — and form — deviating from traditional methods of cinematic representation [757]. The third category of films, similarly to the second, attempt to function "against the grain", but especially in terms of form or structure, departing from conventional narrative techniques or classical storytelling paradigms. However, the subject matter is not explicitly political; the film can only be seen from a political angle via "criticism practised on it through its form" [757]. The fourth category concerns films that *do* tackle political substance, but "unquestioningly adopt its language and imagery" [758]. They are too deeply entrenched in the very system they intend to evaluate to be able to successfully critique it. Fifth: films which initially appear to belong to the dominant ideology, but end up disrupting the paradigm they begins themselves entrenched in, essentially "dismantling it from within" [758]. By at once relying on the dominant ideology and endeavouring to obstruct it, these films are infused with an internal ideological tension. The last two categories are defined as two branches of so-called "direct cinema" — documentary films that aim for objective truthfulness and cinematic realism. The first of these classes do not challenge the "ideologically conditioned method of 'depiction'", while the second subverts traditional form in some manner [759]. At its core, Comolli and Narboni's classification system relies upon analysis of the complexities between the "signified" and the "signifier"— in other words, what is depicted, and the style and form in which it is depicted [757].

Mad Max: Fury Road adheres to the action movie genre by depicting patriarchal authoritarianism and violent masculinity, but it also interrogates these ideologies and deconstructs them. The film endeavours to critique the very patriarchy that bore it, thus generating the "internal tension" described by Comolli and Narboni's fifth category. The cinematic framework both relies on and represents the prevailing ideology very thoroughly. In fact, much of the film's maximalist and brutal visual imagery revels in the machismo and glorification of war, where masculinity reigns supreme. Much of the spectacle — the weaponised vehicular technologies of the various tribes, the frequent fiery explosions, the rig of war drums and the iconic flamethrowing guitarist, Immortan Joe's encouragement of suicidal bravado in the name of glory and "Valhalla" — is designed to provoke a primal cinematic viewing pleasure. However, are also moments of worldbuilding that suggest a far more deeply insiduous social mechanism than might at first be evident. Immortan Joe and the societal system under his command are a metaphor for patriarchal dictatorship. As the symbolic figurehead, Joe wears a mask and body armour "moulded to give the appearance of exaggerated musculature" that shields his diseased, almost cancerous body [Gallagher, 54]. A visual representation of a toxic male culture that values overstated, outward displays of strength and aggression. Additionally, commanding the means of production necessary for survival confers Immortan Joe the power to control the post-apocalyptic world of *Fury Road.* He cruelly rations and withholds water from the deprived populace. He also"appropriates the reproductive labour of women" [Gallagher, 54], by securing Wives — his so-called "Breeders" — to bear him children who will

become “warlords”, and attaching mothers to breast-milking machines. As Cavan Gallagher suggests, this is characteristic of “men’s desire to gain control over the continuity of generations,” and is not portrayed as morally neutral. “Who killed the world?” yells The Splendid Angharad. The question is also inscribed by the Wives’ on the wall of their room, with the implication that the perpetrators are Immortan Joe and his clique. Therefore, by association, traditional masculinity and the tyrannical patriarchy are cast as the ideological antagonists.

Fury Road’s accomplishes its political resistance by not only presenting the dominant ideology in the villainous form of Immortan Joe, but also “throw[ing] up obstacles in the way of the ideology, causing it to swerve and get off course” [Comolli, Narboni, 758] — especially in terms of gender. The film’s primary narrative arc concerns a group of women struggling to flee an oppressive male institution, who eventually realise that the only way to truly escape is to overthrow that system. A repeated refrain of “we are not things,” first scrawled by the Wives on their prison wall, later verbalised, decries the horror of sexism. Miller’s cinematographic eye resists the typical male gaze. This is evident in the sequence where Max first encounters the Five Wives. Yet tighter, tracking shots of the Wives’ bodies are only used to highlight the removal of Joe’s chastity belt, and The Splendid Angharad’s pregnant belly. The message is clear: women in this story are no longer objects to be exploited and subjugated. “You cannot own a human being,” the Matron shouts at Joe, while pointing a gun at him, “sooner or later someone pushes back.” And push back they do. *Fury Road* flouts genre-typical gender conventions by placing women and their solidarity — Furiosa, the Five Wives, and the Vuvalini tribe — front and centre

of the narrative, “repositioning the male hero into the role of an ally” [de Coning, 175]. Max, despite being the titular character, is the witness and enabler of the narrative rather than its true leading role — that title goes to Furiosa, who is the “closest the film comes to a conventional hero” [Gallagher, 51]. At the climax of the film, it is Furiosa who kills Joe by tearing off his mask, his symbolic façade of aggression — fighting brutality with brutality. The women’s return to the site of their former torment marks their triumph over and reclamation of an ideological system that had once tyrannised and traumatised them.

According to Comolli and Narboni’s definition, films which fall into their second category must “deal with” ingrained political ideology on two fronts: content and form [Comolli, Narboni, 757] *The Watermelon Woman* resists the predominantly white male heterosexual cinematic tradition in precisely this manner, displaying frustration regarding the erasure of the black lesbian from cinematic history and making efforts to remedy this absence. Dunye’s work was “the first feature-length narrative film written and directed by an out black lesbian about black lesbians” — a fact which, in itself, renders the film’s content as sociopolitically significant [Richardson, 100]. The film relentlessly frames the failure of the dominant culture to represent or accommodate the black female queer experience. In the opening sequence, Cheryl and Tamara are hired to film a wedding, complicit in their own absence from the screen. We are introduced to Cheryl through her voice from her position behind the camera; at the outset she does not appear in the image her camera produces. Cheryl and Tamara work in a video rental store — a physical archive of films — but are forced to surreptitiously order “obscure films” because they are missing from the shelves. Even when Cheryl obtains one such film, *Plantation Memories,* its

white director Martha Page is credited by name, while black actress Fae Richards is merely listed as the eponymous "Watermelon Woman" — a moniker based on an African-American stereotype. Recognition of Fae Richards is deficient from cultural memory. Questioning strangers on the street, Cheryl receives responses varying from confusion to comic misidentification. Even Lee, who possesses a wealth of resources on black film history, is oblivious to Fae's existence. The official archives of the establishment are similarly unwelcoming. In the library, Cheryl predictably finds no mention of the "Watermelon Woman", and is treated with condescension and hostility by the librarian. It is only through Shirley Hamilton's oral history, and contacting June Walker, Fae's lover, that Cheryl is able to piece together the fragments of Fae's life and lesbian identity. All this emulates a real-world dearth of scholarship addressing female black queer film culture. As Matt Richardson points out, "popular books at the time about lesbians in the mainstream film industry…gave a history of the lesbian experience that was entirely white" [Richardson, 101]. "I know it has to be about black women," Cheryl says of her project, "because our story has never been told," — a statement that forms the central thesis of both Cheryl's documentary and Dunye's film.

The Watermelon Woman's close engagement with these real-life social issues is reflected in its transgression of traditional form, through metacinematically blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. According to Catherine Zimmer, the film "suggests what a deeply reflexive position might offer for one who is trying to gain…a foothold in cinematic discourse" [Zimmer, 46]. Dunye uses an amalgamation of conventional narrative perspective and documentary film

style. In some sequences, such as scenes in the video store, at the bar, those between Cheryl and Diana, and other interactions between characters where they are not conscious of the camera, the film's constructed nature is evident. These are intercut with sections of Cheryl's documentary. Dunye employes the talking-head format in which Cheryl and her interviewees — whose names and titles are captioned alongside their segments — speak directly to the camera, conveying a sense of a unadulterated realism. Additionally, the still photographs and aged archival footage were "especially designed…to look as if they were from the 1930s and 1940s" [Zimmer, 106]. The intention behind these techniques is encapsulated by a directorial statement which appears at the end of the film: "Sometimes you have to create your own history." This is followed by a caveat that "*The Watermelon Woman* is fiction." Repositioning such crucial information at the conclusion, rather than before the film commences (as would be expected), serves to bolster the first-viewing impression that Cheryl's research could be based on true history, and that Fae Richards could plausibly exist. This reflexivity is further conflated by the fact that Dunye herself plays Cheryl. A recurring shot where Cheryl mouths along to Fae's voice in *Plantation Memories* positions Dunye/Cheryl in firm solidarity with Fae — who, according to June, "paved the way for kids like [Cheryl] to run around making movies about the past" — as black lesbians in the film industry. By crafting an onscreen version of herself as an "aspiring filmmaker", Cheryl the character, armed with a video camera, creates her own visual exploration into her black lesbian roots, just as Dunye the director has done, redirecting the focus of cinematic gaze and the cultural canon towards her own previously erased community.

If Miller looks forward in time to speculatively imagine an post-apocalyptic world that has been ruined by permeation of the dominant ideology, then Dunye looks backward into a past where the black lesbian experience has been overwhelmingly erased by prevailing culture. What political radicalism *Fury Road* accomplishes with the toppling of a symbolic dictator, *The Watermelon Woman* compensates for with creation of cultural narratives that have been silenced by the dominant ideology.

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