

“Who Killed the World?”: Monstrous Masculinity and *Mad Max*

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Spanning nearly forty years, the *Mad Max* film saga follows Max Rockatansky, a lone warrior struggling against the monstrous manifestations of masculinity that have ripped his family, and society as a whole, to shreds. A post-apocalyptic narrative, “*Mad Max* portrays a society disintegrating into two groups, hunters and hunted” (Morris 92). From rogue motorcycle gangs to violence-based legal systems, the *Mad Max* franchise depicts a world in which the most toxic aspects of masculinity have poisoned civilization, mutating into something far more dangerous: monstrous masculinity.

Examining these forces at work on screen has roots in contemporary studies on violence and masculinity, which focus “on the multiple and complex ways that different masculinities become linked with, constituted by, and expressed through violence” (Arellano 133). This field, called critical studies of men and masculinities, “was designed to consolidate and extend feminism’s critical focus onto the terrain of masculinities by theorizing masculinities as historical, context-dependent, shifting, and multi-faceted identities” (Ashe and Harland 749). Thus, feminist theory can be extended and complicated by interrogating the diverse embodiments of masculinity and the degree to which violence plays a role in these manifestations.

In particular, the idea of analyzing *Mad Max* in this light has gained

ABSTRACT

In a futuristic, dystopian Australia, Max Rockatansky is a lone warrior struggling against the forces that have ripped his family, and society as a whole, to shreds. From rogue motorcycle gangs to violence-based legal systems, the *Mad Max* films depict a world in which the most toxic aspects of masculinity have poisoned society, mutating into something far more dangerous – something monstrous. The series presents a version of monstrosity that has sunk its claws into the very masculinity it usually serves to validate; in light of these subversions, this analysis utilizes monster theory in conjunction with gender studies to examine toxic masculinity in the *Mad Max* franchise.




import since the 2015 release of the fourth installment, *Fury Road*. Since then, scholars have studied reactions to its feminist themes; Alexis de Coning's article, "Recouping Masculinity: Men's Rights Activists' Responses to *Mad Max: Fury Road*," is a prime example. According to de Coning, men's rights activists (MRAs) attempted "a full-scale boycott" of *Fury Road*, while simultaneously "defending it, downplaying and critiquing its feminist stance" (174-175). Aaron Clary of the MRA blog *Return of Kings* called it a movie that "Trojan Horse feminists and Hollywood leftists will use to insist on the trope women are equal to men in all things" (qtd. in Maza).

Melissa Bell and Nichole Bayliss offer a potential explanation of this phenomenon in their article from the *Sex Roles* journal: "when men, particularly White men, experience job insecurity, a perceived loss of control, and a rise of income inequality, they tend to celebrate a nostalgic version of manhood. White men then see themselves as victims of feminists or the advancement of minorities, not of circumstances of society" (567). This could explain why MRAs were primed to respond violently to *Fury Road's* feminist themes, especially as the film goes further than just empowering female characters with its men who embody differing forms of masculinity than the traditional dominant archetype.

While the *Mad Max* franchise displays complex messages about gender, it also pushes against the usual construction of the monster: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, one of the leading scholars in the field of monstrosity, asserts that "[g]iven that the recorders of the history of the West have been mainly European and male, women (*She*) and nonwhites (*Them!*) have found themselves repeatedly transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought" (15, emphasis original). Instead of framing female and minority characters as the monsters, though, *Mad Max* presents a version of monstrosity that has sunk its claws into the very masculinity it usually serves to validate. In light of these subversions, this analysis will utilize monster theory in conjunction with gender studies to examine the monstrous nature of toxic masculinity in the *Mad Max* franchise.

THE WORLD OF MAD MAX

In *Mad Max* (1979), the title character (played by Mel Gibson) is a police officer patrolling the roads where gangs run rampant in a society whose foundation progressively leans toward violence, a predominant trait of toxic masculinity. This first film supplies an introduction to the franchise's harsh landscape; Australia's barren desert, now called The Wasteland, provides an environment conducive to the development of the monstrous: this locale evokes the sublime in that "[a]ll general




privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude* and *Silence*” (Burke 65, emphasis original). Here, “privation” refers to “[t]he condition of being deprived of or lacking an attribute or quality formerly or properly possessed,” or “[t]he state in which food and other essentials for well-being are lacking; . . . an extreme hardship” (“privation”). Devoid of water, vegetation, and fuel, *The Wasteland* chokes the life out of anything that tries to grow there and suffocates the humanity out of its inhabitants.

At first, Max seems to be one of the few to retain his humanity: he protects people and maintains order in what is left of a crumbling society, and he has a loving wife, Jessie (Joanne Samuel), and son, Sprog (Brendan Heath). But, violence tears this family apart when Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne) and his gang brutally murder them: as Jessie tries to escape with Sprog in her arms, the men run them over repeatedly with their motorcycles, leaving Sprog dead on arrival and Jessie in critical condition with no hope of recovery (01:14:00). Now, the once-heroic figure turns from enforcing the law to exacting revenge on everyone who had a hand in his family’s deaths. In a moment when vengeful violence blurs the line dividing Max’s usual characterization from the forces of toxic masculinity, this first film concludes when he handcuffs a gang member to a car set to explode and presents him with a saw and a brutal decision: “The chain in those handcuffs is high-tensile steel. It’d take you ten minutes to hack through it with this. Now, if you’re lucky, you could hack through your ankle in five minutes. Go” (01:29:40). His revenge complete, Max then sets out into *The Wasteland* alone.

The Road Warrior (1981) takes place five years afterwards and follows the broken, empty shell of a man that Max has become. As he wanders *The Wasteland*, Max encounters a small group of people living in a gasoline refinery. In this series, society has fallen in part due to an extreme fuel shortage that brings violence to anyone possessing this treasured resource; here, a gang of motorcyclists “mad with the smell of gasoline” (00:14:40) led by Humungus (Kjell Nilsson) terrorizes the survivors, seeking to drive them away from the refinery.

Usually, monsters lie within the liminal space between the familiar and the other on the outskirts of society, but here we find monsters that more closely match David Punter and Glennis Byron’s definition: that which “is explicitly identified as that society’s logical and inevitable product: society, rather than the individual, becomes a primary site of horror” (266). In *The Road Warrior*, a feral child (Emil Minty), although only around ten years old, displays joy at the sight of violence (01:20:40), and he even participates in it with his razor-sharp boomerang (00:30:55). This boy’s twisted nature demonstrates that society has devolved dramatically since the toddler Sprog’s death, warping the innocence out of childhood. Additionally, as




with Toecutter's gang, Humungus's crew demonstrates an increasing reliance on communities of violence.

Not wanting to play the hero, Max reluctantly agrees to help the group of survivors escape. While monstrous killers produced by their societies "are rarely made accountable" for their crimes (Punter and Byron 266), Max's initial quest for revenge and his subsequent resistance toward establishment inadvertently serve as a method of justice. While he consistently insists that he does not want to be a hero, his existence on the fringes of a society gone wrong and conflict with its violent inhabitants put him in that role, nonetheless, and he becomes integral to the survivors' success over Humungus's gang. But when they set off to join the Northern Tribe, instead of going with them, Max returns to the emptiness of The Wasteland alone.

Fifteen years later, Max finds himself *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985). Despite the time lapse, he is in nearly the same condition as before, isolated in the desert, until he discovers Bartertown. With jobs, food, laws, and leadership, this community could even be called civilized, if not for the Thunderdome (and the fact that its fuel comes from pig manure). A formidable woman named Aunty Entity (played by Tina Turner) rules the town above, and Master Blaster (two characters working as one: The Master, played by Angelo Rossitto; and The Blaster, Paul Larsson) runs the underworld. Now, the series complicates its focus on monstrous men. According to Punter and Byron, societies that produce monsters ask us to turn our "attention . . . as much to the institutions that created such monsters as to the killers themselves" (266); the violence-based communities we saw developing in the earlier films have become better defined, along with their connection to socially produced monstrosity.

Bartertown may seem idyllic amidst its dystopian surroundings; however, it is anything but. What allows the town to flourish is a monstrously inhuman underground manure farm, and aboveground, Aunty maintains order through violence and deadly fights in the Thunderdome. When Max faces Blaster in the ring, though, he breaks the only rule, "[t]wo men enter, one man leaves," by refusing to continue upon discovering that his formidable opponent's mask hides a mental disability (00:37:10). Aunty then enforces another brutal law: "Bust deal, face wheel" (00:37:50), referring to a wheel of (mis)fortune that decides penalties via fate, with outcomes like death, hard labor, life imprisonment, amputation, and Aunty's choice. After being banished, Max wanders yet again through the Wasteland until he encounters an oasis community of children, leads them in a coup that spells the end of Bartertown, and again returns to The Wasteland.

Unlike the other three, *Fury Road* does not follow the same timeline as the




rest of the saga or serve as a sequel to *Beyond Thunderdome*; instead, many interpret it as a reboot of the original. However, film analyst Ryan Matsunaga observes that instead of a series of sequels, it is better to look at these movies “as an anthology of stories centering around a particular character. Both the second and third films are implied to be stories told decades after they happened, long after Max has faded from memory into myth.” He explains that the latest film exemplifies this aspect of the series best as it is not a sequel, prequel, reboot, or remake: “It’s simply one more legend of the ‘Road Warrior,’ and his journey through the wasteland” (Matsunaga). As we follow this myth, it becomes apparent that the monstrous masculinity motif transcends the originals and continues through the entire series.

In this film, Tom Hardy replaces Gibson as Max, a damaged loner haunted by those he could not save, while Keays-Byrne returns as a new villain, the tyrant Immortan Joe. If one film in the series epitomizes monstrous masculinity, it would be *Fury Road*, in which Joe and his War Boys seem to have lost their humanity entirely. The first shot of Joe displays his rotting, boil-covered back, and the face that follows is even less human: with stark white skin and blackened eye sockets, he is only able to breathe with the assistance of a mask made of a real human jaw bone and horse teeth (00:06:55). *Fury Road’s* society literally produces monstrous men in the form of War Boys. These humanoid creatures have a genetic defect that results in shortened lifespans (called half-lives) due to a phenomenon similar to radioactive decay; one way to treat their condition is via blood transfusions from healthy humans, or “blood bags” (Matsunaga).

War Boys look less than human with their pallid complexions and emaciated features, and their behavior at times also seems more akin to that of animals than of men: the first time we see them in action is when Max attempts to break free, and they swarm en masse after him into a sewer, clawing at him, climbing over each other, attacking more like a homogenous herd than an army of individual warriors (00:04:35). This aspect of their appearance evokes the sublime in that their uniformity serves as a “kind of artificial infinity” (Burke 68), making it seem as though they are all part of one collective, limitless whole. According to Cohen, monsters often “refuse . . . easy categorization,” frequently taking the form of “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (6), highlighting their liminal positions between individual and whole, living and dead, human and animal.

Even though most of the monstrous men in *Mad Max* still appear human, their physical form is not as important as the function they serve: a monster, at its very essence is “something that serves to demonstrate (Latin, *monstrare*: to demonstrate) and to warn (Latin, *monere*: to warn)” (Punter and Byron 264,



emphasis original). Cohen observes, “monstrous bod[ies] . . . [are] pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” (4). If we read, then, the bodies of these monstrous men as texts that both demonstrate and warn, we can see the devastating effects of violence, unfettered masculinity, and out-of-control consumption.


Through these monstrous characters and their violent culture, *Fury Road* portrays a society that has finally fallen prey to masculinity’s savage hunger. As a War Boy named Nux (Nicholas Hoult) makes Max his “blood bag,” Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) smuggles Joe’s five captive wives out of the city. While Joe and his men try to recapture the women from Furiosa, Nux and Max become stranded and join Furiosa on a quest for the mythic “green place.” After they defeat Joe and the women gain control of the Citadel, Max once again fades into the landscape, this time losing himself in a crowd instead of the desert’s emptiness.

Looking back on the series, it becomes clear that monstrosity transcends any one installment. Every film depicts different dominant monsters, each worse than the one before: in *Mad Max*, Toecutter; *The Road Warrior*, Humungus; *Beyond Thunderdome*, Aunty Entity and Master Blaster; and *Fury Road*, Immortan Joe and the War Boys. Although they are each defeated by the time the credits roll, a new, more monstrous embodiment of violent masculinity always manifests in the subsequent installment. According to Cohen, “the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else” (4). Although the monsters in *Mad Max* may take on different forms, they all point to an underlying motif of monstrosity that, though it may leave one host, will always find another.

MASCULINITY IN MAD MAX

One of the more subtle thematic through-lines in the *Mad Max* films is the varying forms that masculinity can take. Lisa Arellano, a scholar of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, explores the concept of differing embodiments of masculinity: “the dynamic of multiple masculinities . . . [can] demonstrate how representations of dominant . . . masculinity serves as the ideal in the presence of subordinate (or complicit) forms of masculinity” (134). In the *Mad Max* films, this tension lies between the dominant monstrous masculinity and humane forms of manhood that are going extinct.


One of Max’s primary challenges is to resist succumbing to this dominant, destructive force. Meaghan Morris observes that Max’s struggle is “to *not*-become [sic] another crazy in a violently male, indivisibly anarchic world” (82, emphasis original). *Fury Road* in particular focuses on showing diverse ways of embodying masculinity. De Coning points out that Max’s “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” (175). In one scene, Max recognizes that Furiosa is a better shot than he is and hands over his gun, an act of female empowerment that toxic masculinity would not allow (01:09:30). Although Max participates in the film’s most violent scenes, he takes no pleasure in it, only doing what is necessary to get them through this situation alive; he even apologizes to Furiosa for the pain he has to inflict on her to save her life (01:48:14). Thus, *Fury Road* highlights Max’s recognition that masculinity’s violent domination is the problem, not the solution.

Although men as a collective run this society, many individual males also suffer at the hands of monstrous masculinity. In her article’s footnotes, de Coning states, “Nux is also an important character in the reconfiguring of masculinity in the film and deserves further study” (176); Nux undeniably serves as an integral part of understanding the complexity of monstrous masculinity in *Fury Road*. It is important to look at the hierarchy within this world because “the intersectionality of masculinities results in relationships of power and subordination between groups of men [W]hile men as a group benefit from the social organization of gender, particular groups of men are located in socially subordinated positions due to, for example, their ethnicity or social class” (Ashe and Harland 750). As one of Immortan Joe’s War Boys, Nux belongs to a lower class. He is young and has been brainwashed into dedication to a regime that has exterminated his individual identity and instilled in him a blind willingness to sacrifice his life for Joe. But, after Furiosa and the wives show him sympathy and care, his allegiance quickly shifts and he develops agency to make his own decisions. In his final, self-sacrificing moment, Nux proves himself when he gives his life for them willingly (01:46:00), an inversion of his previous blind desire to die in battle for Joe in order to gain eternal glory.

Earlier when Furiosa locates women from her former clan, they inherently distrust Nux and Max, revealing how toxic masculinity has permeated society so deeply that a trustworthy man is the rare exception, not the rule. While the clanswomen seem to automatically trust the women, upon seeing the men exit the war rig, they look startled and ask Furiosa, “The men—who are they?” She replies, “They’re reliable. They helped us get here.” Still unsure, they look at her skeptically, and she nods (01:21:00). This scene demonstrates how all men are automatically distrusted in a way that female strangers are not since monstrous masculinity has so deeply permeated society. Max and Nux represent the potential for masculinity to




detox into forms that not only resist monstrosity, but also help dismantle it.

These varied embodiments of masculinity have the potential to do productive work off-screen as well. Bell and Bayliss's article in *Sex Roles* analyzes the documentary *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture*, observing that this second installment provides less "examples of men who reveal vulnerability or challenge hyper-masculinity" than the first *Tough Guise*, and they emphasize that "we need to see more diversified images of masculinity and male vulnerability" (567). In *Mad Max*, male characters choose to "be a man" in ways other than violent monstrosity; through this contrast, we can recognize the problematic nature of the latter.

WOMEN IN MAD MAX

In addition to the ways that these films portray monstrous masculinity, they also show how it affects women through diverse female characters. The first two films show women in a limited and more traditional light. The first main female, Jessie, is the victim of a violent crime, setting up the prevalence of gendered violence in this series since nearly every installment includes instances of or references to rape. More women appear in *The Road Warrior* where they serve as voices of reason and formidable forces in combat. When Humungus demands that the survivors either abandon the refinery or face death, the women beseech everyone to walk away with their lives (00:35:40), but the men insist on fighting. Although a woman is on the high council and female warriors fight alongside men, they either attempt to erase gender by taking on a masculine demeanor, or they mostly occupy the same positions as in the prior film.

The real shift in the series' portrayal of female characters occurs in *Beyond Thunderdome*, with Aunty Entity in particular. Her name has the phonetic similarity to "anti-entity," inviting a closer reading of what this might say about Aunty and her role in the narrative. In the film, no one ever actually says her full name out loud; in fact, if we were to go solely based on the evidence on screen, her name would just be Aunty. The fact that she has this full name in the credits, though, implies a purposeful removal from one's immediate viewing of the film, which instead invites us to retrospectively look closer at Aunty's part in this story and what her name could possibly mean. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an "entity" is a "[b]eing, existence, as opposed to non-existence; the existence, as distinguished from the qualities or relations, of anything" or "[t]hat which constitutes the being of a thing; essence, essential nature" ("entity, *n.*"). Because the prefix "anti" means "opposed to," this frames Aunty Entity as "against existence/essence." But what is she actually opposing, if not the violent




masculinity she so clearly adopts? One possible answer to this question is reading Aunty as an inversion of other female characters who instead choose to disrupt toxic masculinity; thus, Aunty Entity serves as an antithesis to productive femininity and healthy masculinity, while showing just how pervasive this form of monstrosity has become.

Through her adoption of monstrous masculinity as a source of power, Aunty falls in line with historic examples of monstrous leadership. According to Morris, Aunty “is styled here as ‘Cleopatra-esque,’ and thus is coded . . . as an Oriental woman of beauty, ferocity and power; ruling by public rituals of punishment (‘the Law’) and behind-the-scenes intrigue, Aunty uses a deft combination of forced labour and environmentally sustainable technology to build Bartertown on a Pharaonic scale” (94). Here, Morris’s analysis alludes to the way that a female character can display a complicit form of masculinity; by calling up the image of a monstrously malevolent pharaoh enforcing ritualistic punishment and slave labor, she frames Aunty as an authoritarian ruler with absolute power.

Aunty reinforces this dictatorial image throughout the film by subjecting Max to a violent “audition” (00:13:00), ordering the assassination of her rivals (00:13:40), being the sole voice for law and justice in Bartertown (00:25:40), only following laws she wrote herself (00:37:50), and insisting on a “no mercy” policy (01:22:05). Her revealing attire and hypersexualized portrayal also demonstrate how Aunty functions as an object of the male gaze in this society, one whom men can fantasize about dominating, while she dominates them in reality through her position of power in Bartertown. Though her sexy attire could be read as empowering, the context frames her body as a site of sexualization, objectification, and domination, upon which the ever-ravenous monster of masculinity feeds. Although she is clearly a strong female character, Aunty’s existence in a society so thoroughly permeated with monstrous masculinity has led her to indulge, perpetuate, and participate in that toxicity in order to survive and thrive in it.

Unlike the previous three films, *Fury Road* highlights strong female characters who do not need to display a masculine demeanor to be taken seriously. From the beginning, it is apparent that this male-dominated society thoroughly abuses and uses women: one of the first scenes to include females shows them hooked up to milking machines like cattle (00:12:50). In such a world where women are valued only for their reproductive and sexual potential, Furiosa stands out as an independent, resilient character who uses her position as a commander in Joe’s military to fight the power instead of to perpetuate it or to submit to it. Despite her shaven head, androgynous clothing, and mechanical know-how, Furiosa also exhibits many more traditionally “feminine” traits, like compassion for



the wives, sentimentality toward her long-lost “green place” home (01:21:00), and democratic decision-making: instead of dictating the group’s actions, Furiosa and the women make decisions as a community in which everyone gives their input (01:27:30).

Women pay the price for masculinity’s rampant hunger as Joe enslaves five beautiful females as his “Breeders.” The “Breeders” are a cadre of women Joe sets apart and locks up for his own sexual and reproductive gratification: Toast the Knowing (played by Zoë Kravitz), The Splendid Angharad (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley), Capable (Riley Keough), The Dag (Abbey Lee), and Cheedo the Fragile (Courtney Eaton). The first introduction we receive to these characters is when Max stumbles upon them as they bathe from a hose: all of them wear thin, revealing white clothing, and one is clearly pregnant (00:33:05).

Still wearing the metal facemask the War Boys had affixed to his skull, Max threatens them with a gun, demanding that they bring him water and sever the chain binding him to Nux. However, his first impression that they fulfill the classic “damsel in distress” motif is anything but the truth. When combat breaks out, these women—even the one who is the most far along in her pregnancy—fight hard alongside Furiosa to subdue Max (00:35:50), volunteer for dangerous responsibilities, and turn their objectification back on their captors. The women know that Joe views them as property, and they use this fact to their advantage: because Joe wants his “treasures” back in one piece, he and his war boys are reluctant to risk damaging them, which offers the women some measure of protection while they fight to escape.

As the film works to dismantle the image of the fragile female, a group of elderly women, who often get grouped with pregnant woman in stereotypes of feminine weakness, prove to be skilled with guns, and their fierce determination to survive is equaled only by Furiosa herself. Yet, even in a world poisoned by toxic masculinity, these groups of women still maintain respect for life: one of the women is known as Keeper of the Seeds (played by Melissa Jaffer) because she holds onto countless seeds that she saved from before the earth turned into The Wasteland, planting them every chance she gets in hopes that one will take root (01:23:00). When the wives find Nux aboard the rig, they make it clear that they don’t support unnecessary killing (00:45:40). This inherent respect for life stands in direct opposition with the monstrous masculine destruction that is so pervasive in The Wasteland.



CONCLUSION

Anti-violence educator Jackson Katz states that “senseless violence will continue until we challenge and change these cultural belief systems—that men must be hyper masculine and that aggression and violence are the only methods to handle bullying, marital issues, employment disputes, and other forms of conflict” (qtd. in Bell 567). This aligns directly with Cohen’s thesis that monsters always come back; however, with the return of the monster comes the reemergence of the hero, even if that hero comes in an unexpected form.

Arellano observes, “Within a representational world where dominant masculinity is synonymous with violence (and particularly violence toward women), this opens a space for . . . unusual heroism” (143). In analyzing *Mad Max*, we can see how this same concept applies to its protagonist. Although Max might at first seem to be an unlikely hero due to his isolationist nature and the fact that he repeatedly pushes against the dominant forces that define his society, it is actually because of these characteristics that he is able to make a difference in *The Wasteland*. By portraying Max as the antithesis to monstrous masculinity, the *Mad Max* franchise identifies the havoc that such a toxic force can take on society.

In the final moments of *Fury Road*, Max demonstrates his defiance of the monstrous masculinity that created this dystopia. After Max and the women successfully kill Joe and take the Citadel, the people would have readily accepted Max as their savior and new leader—the next reincarnation of *The Wasteland*’s ever-present monstrous masculine force. However, this is neither the way to heal the society, nor is it what Max even wants. Instead of joining the celebration, Max disappears into the crowd, only looking back to acknowledge Furiosa as the Citadel’s rightful leader, the one person with the potential to bring this broken world back to life.

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