"Who Killed the World?: Building a Feminist Utopia from the Ashes of Toxic Masculinity in *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Taylor Boulware

University of Washington

Abstract:

The contemporary post-apocalypse film is utopian in its various promises for recovery from the destruction caused by the end of days, and perhaps none more so than George Miller’s 2015 installment of his *Mad Max* saga, *Fury Road*, featuring Tom Hardy as the titular character and Charlize Theron as Imperator Furiosa, the female warrior who goes rogue to save the women held as sex slaves (“prize breeders”) by the monstrous tyrant Immortan Joe. Lauded by audiences, particularly female audiences, for its feminist revisions to the one of the most aggressively masculine popular film genres – and enraging “men’s rights activists,” a sure sign of doing something right – *Fury Road*, and in particular Theron’s Furiosa, have become icons of twenty-first century feminist empowerment. The film is utopian, not in the sense that it presents an ideal world, but that it imagines successful liberatory revolution and the destruction of decrepit systems of oppression, out of which a more perfect, egalitarian world can then emerge. Through the grotesque, parasitic tyranny of Immortan Joe’s monstrous necropolitics that reduces subjects to mere bodies for the deathly reproduction of the decaying corpse of capitalism, the film exposes the inextricable links between traditional masculinity, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation. It reveals how these ideologies work in toxic complicity in order to name, regulate, discipline, and render subjects, in the parlance of the film, ‘half-life’; in the words of political theorist Achille Mbembe, this exercise of power serves to create “death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.” This article explores the film’s utopian response to the dystopian realities of capitalist patriarchy, arguing that *Mad Max: Fury Road* rewrites masculinity for a post-capitalist, post-patriarchal world.

Director George Miller’s 2015 installment of his *Mad Max* saga, *Fury Road*, takes us further into the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the near-future imagined by 1979’s *Mad Max*: a world come undone and thoroughly ravaged by environmental devastation, nuclear disaster, and wars for rapidly diminishing resources. In *Fury Road*, Tom Hardy replaces Mel Gibson as the titular character, and Charlize Theron is Imperator Furiosa, a powerful warrior who goes rogue to save the five women imprisoned as reproductive slaves by the monstrous tyrant Immortan Joe. Lauded by audiences, mainly female audiences, for its feminist revisions to one of the most aggressively masculine genres – the post-apocalyptic action film – *Fury Road*, and in particular Theron’s Furiosa, have become new icons of feminist storytelling and female empowerment.

The film has also garnered significant industry recognition; it was nominated for ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. Although it did not win those categories, it won six Oscars, the most of any film in 2016; significantly, all
of the film’s wins were for its technical and visual achievements: Costume Design, Makeup, Film Editing, Sound Editing, Sound Mixing, and Production Design (Goldstein). This recognition of *Fury Road*’s stylistic excellence speaks to the film’s innovative mise-en-scène that creates nuanced, evocative storytelling. Mise-en-scène “encompasses the most recognizable attributes of a film – the setting and the actors; it includes costumes and make-up, props, and all the other natural and artificial details that characterize the spaces filmed... [The term] describes the stuff in the frame and the way it is shown and arranged” (“Mise-en-scène”). Examining mise-en-scène is a fundamental aspect of film analysis, particularly for *Fury Road*, which features little dialogue and relies heavily on visual narration to articulate its political and social critique – a critique that is accomplished almost completely by its mise-en-scène and character development.

Like its predecessors – *Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max: Road Warrior* (1981), and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) – *Fury Road* begins with a solitary Max Rockatansky, “a shell of a man, hollowed by his loss” (Miller, *Max: Pt. One*) wandering the desert, in search of redemption for his failures to protect others, especially his wife and child. And, like the earlier films, *Fury Road* also ends with a lone Max setting out into the dangerous wilds, still too broken to permanently rejoin a community; but this installment of the franchise has a different ending than its predecessors. The community Max leaves this time is fundamentally changed, a significant departure from both the post-apocalyptic anarchy and the social and ideological structures that produced it. After three bleak films that explore the severity, violence, and destruction of apocalyptic life that endlessly reproduces the very worst of the modern capitalist culture that killed the world, *Mad Max: Fury Road* offers an alternative to this ending: a new beginning.

And it is a decidedly utopian beginning: the liberation of the dispossessed, the destruction of the last vestiges of patriarchy and capitalism, and a matriarchal, socialist coup, complete with the abjected masses taking over the means of production. And while it may seem contradictory, many contemporary post-apocalypse texts are in fact deeply utopian in how they offer eventual solutions to and promises for recovery from the hell from which their hard-won futures are seized, imagining the successful liberations from decrepit systems of oppression and more perfect worlds. *Fury Road*, however, is distinct from other action films due to its explicitly feminist politics, and even more radically, its explicitly socialist solution to the destruction caused by capitalism and its inherent dehumanizations. The film unambiguously denounces capitalism as well as patriarchy, for the fall of civilization and the wretchedness that follows; it exposes the inextricable links between patriarchal masculinity and capitalist exploitation, revealing how these ideologies are co-constitutive and function to objectify, commodify, regulate, and render subjects abject: half-life War Boys, Breeders, Treadmill Rats, Milking Mothers, and Bloodbags.

The film’s linkage of toxic masculinity to capitalist economic structures is fundamental to both its critique and its utopian possibility; through a rejec-
tion of toxic masculinity and an embrace of alternative, feminist masculinities, the capitalist-tyrant is overthrown. The protagonists – Nux, the War Boy who joins the rebellion and eventually sacrifices himself for it, Max, who finally learns to trust others and himself, and Furiosa, who seeks redemption and revenge – embody varying degrees of masculinity, and offer radical complications of and revisions to it that are necessary for the creation of a post-capitalist, post-patriarchal world. Furiosa’s rebellion and her eventual overthrow of Immortan Joe’s regime with the help of Max, The Wives, Nux, and the all-female Vuvalini clan, succeeds because this cadre of revolutionary heroes has rejected and escaped the gender norms that structure capitalism. Thus, *Fury Road* is a condemnation of toxic masculinity and its complicity in capitalist exploitation of both resources and bodies.

Slavoj Žižek remarks that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point,” and that its harbingers include “ecological crisis, …struggles over raw materials…food and water,” and “the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions” (xii). Hardly the first ringing of such warning bells, Žižek’s augury is nonetheless compelling for its incisive, unapologetic denunciation of capitalism and the failure of its corresponding social and political forms to address the catastrophes it creates. This critique is explored by the original *Mad Max* trilogy, which imagines this particular apocalypse: the world as we know it destroyed by environmental degradation and violent battles for rapidly diminishing resources. *Fury Road*, however, is explicit in contextualizing those battles and the devastation they bring as the inevitable result of capitalist patriarchy. It also exposes and rejects one of capitalism’s most brutal and necessary functions: the reduction of certain bodies into commodities for the continual expansion of wealth and hegemony. Fundamental to this is male control of sexual reproduction, and thus sexuality and gender. *Fury Road* co-writer Brendan McCarthy explains that the first film was a biker revenge movie, the second was about the commodity of oil and the third one, humorously, was about everybody fighting over pig manure, another power source. We wanted to take that away and actually make this about the ultimate commodity: the human race itself – about sperm and wombs and women and men. (Bernstein 13)

McCarthy explicitly states the film’s interest in stripping bare the central function of patriarchal capitalism: the commodification and control of human reproduction that leads to all manner of oppression, abjection, and exploitation of both female and male bodies. *Fury Road* exposes how this objectification occurs through the concomitant creation and maintenance of strict gender binaries that exist precisely to regulate sexual and reproductive behaviour for profit and social control.

The film’s political stakes are even more clear in the four-issue series of official comics published by Vertigo in the months after the film’s release; co-written by George Miller, the comics offer more detailed backstories of the characters, cleverly provide summaries of the first three films, and further explain what caused the apocalyptic Fall. Taking place not long after the events of *Fury Road* and narrated...
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by The First History Man, a storyteller who preserves the “stories by which to navigate the future and avoid a repetition of the past” (Miller, *Furiosa*), the comics historicize the stories of Immortan Joe, Furiosa, Nux, and Max. And although the story the History Man tells his class of children is not that distant, it is nonetheless obscure and murky, recorded in tattooed fragments on his skin, because “when the world fell, they burned the books, leaving nothing but a random collection of wordburgers.” But despite this opacity about the past, the cause of the Fall is abundantly clear. The History Man tells the children:

> In a world where commodity and greed ruled and all was powered by the black fuel…where industry chattered and churned to produce baubles to entertain the masses, spilling its wastes into the waters and the sky, poisoning the world as though there was no limit. But the resources _were_ limited. The black fuel ran low. The land turned sour. Even precious water became scarce. Wars were fought to control what little remained. The world went beyond the tipping point. The streets were filled with fire and blood. Anarchy reigned.

The History Man’s tale reinforces the film’s brief explanation of the Fall, told mostly through snippets of voiceovers at the beginning: “thermonuclear skirmish”; “why are you killing each other…it’s the oil, stupid”; “now the water wars”; “mankind has gone rogue, killing each other for guzzoline”; “mankind is terrorizing itself”; “terminal freak out point”; “the earth is sour, our bones are poisoned, we have become half-life” (*Fury Road*). Humanity is a diseased, dying species, reduced to bare life and hovering on the brink of extinction, grasping on to the tattered remains of a dead world – a world killed by capitalism.

This dead world is exemplified by former Marine Colonel Joe Moore, who uses the Fall as an opportunity for pillaging and self-aggrandizement. Afflicted with various illnesses and only able to breathe through the hideous snarling mask designed to instill terror, his grotesque, growth-covered body adorned with relics from pre-Fall car culture that inspires the post-Fall religious fervour for guzzoline and the V8, Immortan Joe is the literal embodiment of toxic masculinity and the inherent violence of capitalism (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The monstrous capitalist, Immortan Joe, in pursuit of The Wives and their unborn children, his “property,” in _Mad Max: Fury Road_.

The vicious, aged despot, a “veteran of the oil wars, hero of the water wars” (*Fury Road*) has not only seized a stranglehold over what few resources
remain in the wasteland; like all tyrants, he is obsessed with maintaining his power and continuing his poisoned legacy. Thus, Joe imprisons the healthiest women he can find as his “wives,” raping them repeatedly in an effort to produce healthy male heirs. With the help of their Handmaid and teacher, Miss Giddy, a History Woman, The Wives – Toast the Knowing, Angharad, Capable, the Dag, and Cheedo the Fragile – conspire to escape with Furiosa and search for the Green Place of Many Mothers (the aforementioned Vuvalini), Furiosa’s matriarchal community from which she was kidnapped by Joe as a child. Before they flee the womb-like vault adorned with sperm and egg imagery where Joe locks his “prize breeders” away, The Wives graffiti the floor and walls with the rallying cries of their rebellion: “OUR BABIES WILL NOT BE WARLORDS” (Fig. 2), “WE ARE NOT THINGS,” and “WHO KILLED THE WORLD?” (Fig. 3). The question, screamed later by Angharad when she and Capable throw Nux out of the War Rig, is definitively not a rhetorical one, and the answer is abundantly obvious: Immortan Joe, and everything he represents.

Immortan Joe embodies capitalist violence and patriarchy, and he controls not only material resources (food, bullets, precious water, and the even more precious, oil) but people, bodies, and humanity itself. Perpetuating myths of his immorality, he calls himself a “redeemer” and tells the masses he oppresses that it is “by [his] hand that [they] will rise from the ashes of this world,” propagating a V8-and-death-worshipping cult with himself at the centre. Joe and his fellows Major Kalishnikov, The Bullet Farmer, the “judge and executioner,” and The People Eater, the “guardian of Gas Town, reckoner and human calculator” – control the “wasteland…across which thousands trekked, hoping to find shelter and succor…only to become commodities in his economy” (Miller, Nux). Joe rules from high atop the heavily-fortified Citadel – a natural rock formation sitting upon a wealth of clean water – with his congenitally deformed sons, rationing water to the disease-stricken, wretched masses below. He calls the able-bodied men to work his war machine, the sickly young men to be his half-life War Boys, and the fertile women to harvest their breast milk – one of the primary forms of nutrition at the Citadel. He calls the water he controls “Aqua-Cola” and promises his War Boys that if they die fighting for him, they will “ride eternal in Valhalla” where they will “McFeast with the heroes of all time” (Fury Road). Joe’s use of two of the most recognizable brand names of capitalist global domination, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, is, of course, quite deliberate. The essential resources he controls and around which he invents his sycophantic religion bear names that are synonymous with expansive market capitalism; even after the apocalypse, water and food, when in the hands of men, remain trademarked, controlled, and used to exploit the weak. The Dag sums it up succinctly and bitterly: “Because he owns it, he owns all of us” (Fury
Road], Every marker of Immortan Joe’s characterization, from costume to cars, his abusive manipulation of his sons, and his commodification of bodies into property, works to illustrate the poisonous ideologies that are deathly holdovers from the world before the Fall – our world. His monstrosity and villainous stylization – his entire aesthetic – functions to instill the terror of patriarchal capitalism, and the violence and death it produces and perpetuates. The oxygen mask that he is never seen without, until Furiosa rips it off, “pumps filtered air into his body...[and] is fashioned in a way that makes him formidable, persuading all who see him that he may be the fierce demigod he purports to be” (Bernstein 9). In addition to the grotesque mask, he wears a transparent, molded-plastic body armor to give to the appearance of muscled hardness to his soft, decaying flesh; like his War Boys, he is covered in white powder giving his skin a stark, ghoulish dullness. The most blatant piece of symbolic costuming, Immortan’s huge codpiece, bears the flaming skull logo that he brands on the necks of those he controls and flaunts long, heavy, ornamental chains that hang down between his bowed legs, suggesting an absurdly over-the-top and aggressively obvious phallic that emphasizes his patriarchal power and sexual domination of women (Fig. 4).

Contrast Joe’s adornments with the Vuvalini, who Furiosa and The Wives find after outrunning Joe’s war parties with Max and Nux’s assistance. The Many Mothers have become nomadic, pushed from the Green Place when the water and earth turned sour; they have little in the way of materiel besides the essentials for survival (clothing, weapons, motorcycles); each woman is at least middle-aged, several of them older, with weathered and wizened faces; they are olive-skinned, gray-haired, wear drab, utilitarian clothing, and waste nothing. When one of their own dies or when they speak of the deceased, their gesture of remembrance is one of sincere spirituality, an open hand to the sky or a closing fist brought to the heart – a clear juxtaposition to the War Boys’ V8 salute and cries of witnessing and mediocrity when one of their own sacrifices his half-life for the Immortan. And their most prized possessions are not their weapons or their motorcycles, but the heirloom seeds for which they hope to once again find fertile soil. The Keeper of the Seeds, the oldest of the Vuvalini, shows these to the Dag, who ultimately becomes the next Keeper upon the older woman’s death at the hands of Joe’s soldiers. When

Fig. 4: The Immortal's codpiece.
the Dag comments on the Keeper’s rifle and asks if she has killed many people with it, she replies with a no-nonsense, “I’ve killed everyone I ever met out here,” leading the Dag to remark that she “thought you girls were somehow above all that” *(Fury Road)*. By way of explanation, the Keeper then shows the younger woman the bag of seeds and one hopeful plant sprouting from a small animal skull, telling her that she tries to plant something everywhere they go, but that the soil is too sour. Their conversation substantiates what has already been made abundantly clear: the violence and oppression perpetuated by Immortan Joe is responsible for the destruction of the world and its continuing demise. She also offers an expression of the film’s feminist, socialist vision when she says, “back then, everyone had their fill, back then, there was no need to snap [kill] anybody” *(Fury Road)*. The lesson is quite clear: humanity’s salvation lies in the radical and equitable redistribution of resources by women. Notably, the Vuvalini are not pacifists, nor is their community single-sex or anti-male. The Vuvalini are wary of men, but they do not hate them, and they do not seek to excise them from their community; rather, they only welcome men like Nux and Max who have rejected traditional masculinity.

Nux, the War Boy who begins his arc as the most righteous of believers in Immortan Joe and who ends by sacrificing himself for Furiosa and The Wives, is an essential character who ends by sacrificing himself for Furiosa and the most righteous of believers in Immortan Joe and all of the subjects the Immortan controls, are abjected bodies who are exploited in order to maintain his extreme imperialism, wealth accumulation, and sexual domination. Joe’s tyranny, particularly in his exploitation of the War Boys, enacts political theorist Achille Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics. Mbembe argues that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” and that “[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (11-12). Mbembe complicates Foucault’s notion of biopolitics – “the numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (140) – and argues that under certain conditions, “the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (39-40). Mbembe indict[s] “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy, but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (14, original emphasis). Essentially, necropolitics are more extreme forms of biopower wherein the deployment of force, subjugation, and social control is motivated not by a need to organize subjects for life, but for death. Necropolitics are forms of social control and abjection that go beyond determining who has the right to live and how; rather, a necropolitical sovereignty is one in which “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (39-40). In his discussion of those subjects rendered living dead by necropolitics, Mbembe references

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American chattel slavery, the Holocaust, South African apartheid, and the current occupation of Palestine. This form of sovereignty does not organize society for the maintenance of life in order to maintain capitalism, but maximizes the deaths of abjected bodies and peoples for an even more brutal and exploitative mode of capitalist domination.

In a dying world in which humankind is reduced to “a single instinct to survive” (*Fury Road*), the violence Immortan Joe perpetuates is modern necropolitics laid bare, capitalism’s most virulent and violent tendencies exposed as the deathscapes they truly are. The War Boys, marked as “half-life” and plagued with various illnesses resulting from environmental pollution, nuclear fallout, and poor nutrition, are the most obvious iteration of the effects of necropolitical power. Existing somewhere between life and death, Nux and his compatriots live only to die; they devote their painful, sickly, stricken half-lives to fighting and killing on behalf of the Immortan. The War Boys are a fascinating site of the intersections of necropolitical power and toxic masculinity, that “constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Lusher and Robins 398). The violence and thirst for death and destruction – their own and that of others – is a direct result of the masculinity that Immortan Joe cultivates. The War Boys compete over who can achieve the most spectacular death of self-sacrifice so they can ride through the gates of Valhalla and “McFeast with the heroes of old” (*Fury Road*). A War Boy’s death must be witnessed by another who can either validate and acknowledge his sacrifice with the V8 salute, or dismiss it as “mediocre,” and thus, their martyrdom is as much performance as it is an act of devotion or sacrifice. Fundamental to Joe’s control of his army of half-life Boys is this requirement to always perform devotion to the patriarchal despot and aggressively abide by masculine behaviour protocols. Their nearness to death is emphasized by their ghostly, skeletal aesthetic, and is perpetuated so the Immortan can more readily command acts of suicide. His power over the War Boys reduces them to bodies for the reproduction of the decaying corpse of patriarchal capitalism, just as he does to the women he imprisons as milking mothers, and breeders: nothing but “breeding stock, battle fodder,” “with his logo seared on [their] backs” (*Fury Road*).

Nux begins to break free from the Immortan’s control when he is given a chance to kill the traitorous Imperator and fails yet again. Later, when Capable discovers him hiding in the back of the War Rig, distraught over his failure to sacrifice himself successful for the Immortan: “Three times the gates were opened for me, three times I failed” (*Fury Road*). She offers him something he has never had before: compassion, kindness, and a recognition of his individuality and worth as a person, suggesting that his “failures” are really his “manifest destiny” for “something else.” This is Nux’s turning point, his realization that his belief in Joe is misplaced and that he and others, including these “prize breeders,” are more than just commodities in his economy, more than half-life. He becomes an ally to Furiosa, Max, and The Wives, helping them pull the War Rig from the muddy quagmire, repairing it, and fighting on their behalf in the final showdown to kill Joe and take the Citadel, eventually driving the War Rig so an injured Furiosa can crawl to Joe’s Gigahorse and kill him.

But Joe’s death is not the end of the battle, for his war parties are still in pursuit, and they still must block the canyon pass behind them so they can take...
the Citadel, and it is in this effort that Nux is finally successful in sacrificing his life — *his full life* — for a cause actually worth dying for. Nux is not able to jam the throttle and abandon the War Rig as planned; instead, he chooses to intentionally crash the Rig while still driving, knowing the explosion that will block the pass will also kill him. Capable watches as he makes his choice, and in a beautiful moment, Nux reaches a hand towards her and calmly and quietly asks her to witness him — a stark juxtaposition to his previous screaming death cries. And Capable responds in kind: not with the V8 salute meant to honour a tyrant and a false god, but with the spiritual gesture of remembrance made by the Vuvalini to honour a fallen loved one.

This juxtaposition between Nux’s failed attempts at false martyrdom and authentic sacrifice, as well as his entire character arc and development, is facilitated primarily by the emotional/romantic connection he forges with Capable; however, the physical connection he shares with Max in the first half of the film can be read as the beginning of Nux’s recovery from toxic masculinity and evolution towards an alternative, recuperative masculinity. Initially, Nux is representative of a toxic masculinity warped and tarnished by capitalist violence, and Max embodies a different masculinity that no longer has a place in this world: that of the traditional father. As the preceding films and the *Fury Road* comics elaborate, Max is “road warrior in search of a righteous cause,” adrift in the wasteland after failing to protect his wife and child. Max’s arc through the film focuses on his learning to trust and connect with others again after removing himself so thoroughly from any community as punishment for his failure to live up to his masculine responsibilities. If Nux initially personifies the worst of traditional masculinity gone awry, Max personifies a less poisonous but nonetheless antiquated masculinity that, despite its apparent nobility, is still a damaging effect of patriarchal capitalism. Max is the conventional father and husband, charged with protecting his family and becoming increasingly insane and desperate as he fails, time and again — just as Nux continually fails to live up to Joe’s standards of toxic masculinity.

In the film’s opening scenes, Max is captured by a raiding party and dragged back to the Citadel where he is trussed up and readied by The Organic

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*Fig. 5: Max’s organic and mechanic vitals tattooed on his back.*
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Mechanic to be used in the Immortan’s economy. The Organic is what passes for a doctor in this world, and he regards human bodies the way a mechanic does cars: as objects to be used for male power and pleasure. He examines Max and tattoos his vital information on his back, sears Immortan Joe’s brand onto his neck, completing Max’s reduction to livestock. According to the tattoo, Max is a “full-life,” meaning that he does not have the illnesses that afflict the War Boys – “No lumps No bumps;” he has “two good eyes,” “no busted limbs;” “multiple scars” but “heals fast,” and, vitally, has “hi-octane,” O-negative blood, making him a universal donor (Fig. 5). He also has healthy urine and intact genitals, which not only re-emphasizes Max’s dehumanization by using livestock/veterinary language to describe his fertility and genitalia, but also suggests that full-lives like Max can be used for more than bloodbags. The tattoo also notes where Max was found and that he was without guzzoline or supplies, but with a V8 (in his beloved Interceptor), again emphasizing that his value to the Citadel is purely material; whether that material is mechanic or organic is of little concern. Further, the tattoo is meant to be read while Max is hanging upside down, caged and muzzled, demonstrating yet again how Joe’s capitalist patriarchy subjugates and commodifies the male body as well as the female.

When Furiosa’s rebellion is discovered, Nux, anemic and weak, “a War Boy runnin’ on empty” (Fury Road), begins receiving a blood transfusion from the muzzled, hanging, upside down Max. Refusing to sit out the chase once Furiosa’s betrayal is realized, Nux has The Organic hookup his bloodbag to the front of his pursuit vehicle. Max and Nux are chained together, by both metal and blood, and Max becomes an unwilling participant in Joe’s pursuit of Furiosa and Nux’s quest to “die historic on the Fury Road.” This bondage to each other, the physical intimacy they share via blood exchange, and their mutual complicity in the pursuit of Furiosa eventually leads both men to join her fight. Max and Nux are poles of a patriarchal masculinity that cultivates aggression and domination and punishes failures to live up to these standards; their shared blood is a metaphor for their mutual commodification and their shared rejection of Joe’s regime.

While under the control of Joe, Max and Nux lack agency and are powerless, and the reclamation of their bodily autonomy, as they remove themselves from his economy, parallels that of The Wives. Nux’s transition towards the more egalitarian and gender-fluid matriarchal ethos is facilitated via his physical connection with Max and his emotional connection with Capable; Max’s transition, however, develops because of his growing trust of Furiosa, the film’s true protagonist and hero – and the character who represents the most radical challenge to patriarchal gender norms with her embodiment of female masculinity.

Furiosa …represents the most radical challenge to patriarchal gender norms with her embodiment of female masculinity.

Fury Road is already exceptional in its portrayal of a woman warrior who is fighting to save other women as well as herself, particularly in the action film genre and the movie’s own franchise history. Furiosa is not only a fully-realized, complex female character with physical and fighting prowess, but also one who disrupts gender norms by rejecting both traditional femininity and toxic masculinity. Furiosa’s gender performance is an iteration of female
masculinity, where women perform traditionally masculine gender behaviour “that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (Halberstam 9). Echoing many feminist and queer scholars, J. Jack Halberstam articulates traditional masculinity as a gender performance that “conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth… [M]asculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege” (11). Furiosa has gained access to this promise of social privilege in Joe’s world by carving a space for herself as one of Joe’s most trusted military commanders, enacting a traditional masculinity with her female body so effectively that her physical sex is no longer the determining factor in her status. She exemplifies the feminist/queer notion that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (2), and that strategic disruption of these norms allows for more radical, and even utopian possibilities of resistance against hegemonic gender and sex norms.

The Furiosa comic explains that she was once one of Joe’s Wives, although it does not shed light onto how she escaped his sexual slavery; it does, however, explain that Furiosa was originally assigned by Joe to watch over and protect The Wives (particularly from his child-like and violent son Rictus), and that it was her sympathy for their plight that led her to rebel once she was given a War Rig (Fury Road). In a conversation with Max in the film, she tells him that she is seeking redemption for what she has done as Joe’s lieutenant, kidnapping others for his economy, the way she had been taken from the Green Place as a child. Furiosa is at once a victim of patriarchy and complicit in its perpetuation; she has been a trafficked woman and has trafficked other women and committed acts of violence on behalf of Immortal Joe in his obsessive quest to “ensure healthy male heirs…strong children to carry on his vision and justify his tyranny” (Miller, 

Furiosa). Her escape from sexual slavery and her entrance into Joe’s army, a strategic act of survival, is achieved via her performance of “a fully articulated female masculinity [in relation to] a seemingly fortified male masculinity” that “coincides with the excesses of male supremacy” and, and thus “codifies a unique form of social rebellion” (Halberstam 9).

Just as Immortal Joe’s costume is designed to represent his toxic masculinity, Furiosa’s appearance functions precisely to convey both her gender transgression and her history of victimization. Her androgyny is such that, when she is first introduced, her physical sex is ambiguous according to normative markers. While not hairless like War Boys, her hair is shorn almost to the scalp, and her forehead is painted with black grease. In a gesture towards feminist cyborg theory, Furiosa also wears a mechanical prosthesis on her left arm, which has been amputated just below the elbow – a part of her body and history that remains unexplained in both the film and the comics. More important than how she lost part of her arm, however, is that the prosthesis – and how she uses it – facilitates a fundamental challenge to hegemonic gender ideologies and the capitalist exploitation they buttress. In her landmark work, A Cyborg Manifesto, Donna Haraway articulates a revolutionary model of feminist politics that disrupts the ideologi-
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cal dualisms of gender and the nature/technology divide. Inherited by patriarchal capitalism, and fundamental to its continual perpetuation of exploitative dominance, these binaries strive to deny and prohibit the revolutionary potential of their undoing. Essential to Furiosa’s role as an anti-capitalist feminist rebel is her embodiment of Haraway’s cyborg theory. Her prosthetic evidences the abuse she has endured at the hands of Immortan Joe, but it also serves as a visual, aesthetic, and political embodiment of her rejection of his domination. The mechanical arm has been created for her by his regime, likely by The Organic Mechanic, the foul man who manages and modifies the bodies of Joe’s captives and War Boys. Under Joe’s regime, the nature/technology divide that defines the cyborg renders Furiosa’s body, the Treadmill Rats, and the Milking Mothers, as mechanically manipulated and commodified to maintain his war economy and sexual slavery. When Furiosa goes rogue and uses her prosthetic as a key tool and weapon to facilitate the revolution – first saving Max as he falls from the Rig during the final chase back to the Citadel, and then viciously killing Joe by ripping off his face – she is turning his mechanical manipulation of her body against him and his regime. Whereas the Immortan’s blurring of the organic/mechanic divide is used to oppress for the benefit of patriarchal exploitation, Furiosa rejects his mechanical commodification of her body and wields the disruption of the nature/technology dualism to save yet another victim of Joe’s economy in a feminist reclamation of the destruction of this master binary (Fig. 6). Both female and male, organic and mechanical, Furiosa’s power emerges from her deployment of her part-mechanical body in order to transform herself from a commodified mechanical body into a feminist cyborg. Furiosa is a daughter of the Vuvalini, who value nature and female power, who bear deep suspicion towards men, and who look to the land to heal the world; she is also a product of patriarchal capitalism that manipulates the mechanical and the natural in order to maintain necropolitical control. Haraway writes that “the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism…[b]ut illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (293). Furiosa is this illegitimate
offspring, rebelling against her inessential “father,”
turning his creation of her cyborg body against him
and reclaiming the blurring of the distinction be-
tween nature and technology for socialist purposes;
she integrates this rejection with her disruption of
gender binarism, thus facilitating her socialist femi-
nist revolution.

Furiosa’s stature and demeanor imbue her with
traditionally masculine power; when she is intro-
duced without an immediate recognition of her gen-
der, the camera focuses on Immortan’s brand on the
back of her neck, signaling her role as a commodity
in this brutal economy. Her clot
ching is utilitarian and
pragmatic, perfectly suited to her work as a warrior;
hers is made from layers of thin white fabric
pieced together. Later, when The Wives are intro-
duced, they are swathed in white linen wrapped in
various skin-baring styles,
and it becomes quite clear
where exactly Furiosa ob-
tained her clothing. This
costuming choice explicitly
links her to The Wives and
their plight, and further em-
phazies her history as one of Joe’s sex slaves; it also
provides a fascinating juxtaposition to one of the
other key pieces of her uniform, the codpiece she
wears, which is a smaller replica of the Immortan’s.
Like his, Furiosa’s bears the flaming skull logo with
long chains that hang between her thighs, a symbol
of phallic power that she is both reproducing and
challenging by wearing the codpiece on her female
body and deploying the masculine power it grants
her for a radical, feminist revolt.

Furiosa wields the male privilege of driving the
War Rig, the biggest ship in the Immortan’s armada;
but even more significant is her skill with guns. Guns
are a, if not the, dominant symbol and weapon of
toxic masculinity and patriarchal power that deploys
and actualizes the violence of patriarchal capitalism.

The Dag and Cheedo, following Angharad’s death,
remark that she called bullets “anti-seeds, plant one
and watch something die” (Fury Road). Her naming
of bullets as “anti-seeds” resonates further when we
read guns as phallic objects and a tool of male vio-
ence and power. The female body’s ability to carry
and nurture offspring is at the root of misogyny and
patriarchy, and patriarchal capitalism is deeply de-
pendent on the control of women’s reproductive ca-
pacity. If a gun is the phallus, then a bullet is semen,
the anti-seed. Plant one and watch something die: a
woman’s bodily autonomy, her independence, her
identity, and often, her life.

But to argue that Fury Road’s clear condemna-
tion of patriarchal control of women’s bodies makes
the film anti-male is not just reductive, but also a
misreading of the movie’s narrative and character
arcs. Furiosa’s rebellion is
assisted in crucial ways by
Nux and Max, two men
who are recovering from
and rejecting the violence of
capitalist patriarchy. Both
men actively reject the toxic
masculinity placed upon them, and they forge alter-
native models of male masculinity that work in har-
monious concert with Furiosa’s female masculinity.
This is best demonstrated by the evolution of Max
and Furiosa’s relationship, which happens largely via
their shared use of guns, another blurring and de-
construction of traditional gender norms. After Max
and Nux manage to survive the violence following
Furiosa’s initial escape, Max awakens in the wreck-
age of Nux’s car to find that they are still chained
together. Hauling the unconscious War Boy on his
shoulders, he approaches the nearby War Rig and fi-
nally meets Furiosa and The Wives. Still muzzled, he
comes upon them as The Wives are washing them-
selefts and using bolt cutters to remove claw-toothed
chastity belts; with just an expression of shock and a
grunt of recognition, Max realizes and acknowledges

“Who Killed the World?”

If a gun is the phallus,
then a bullet is semen,
the anti-seed.
the sexual slavery they are running from. But despite this recognition and apparent sympathy, Max does not immediately trust the women, and Furiosa most certainly does not trust him.

Max first tries to shoot himself free of Nux with his sawed-off shotgun, but the phallic weapon misfires and fails to liberate him. He then approaches the War Rig, bluffing with the empty shotgun, relying on the weapon’s symbolic power to intimidate them. With some clever distraction from the Dag and Angharad, Furiosa tackles Max and makes quick work of overpowering him. She takes the shotgun from him, puts it under his chin, and pulls the trigger, only to be further enraged when she realizes it is empty. She then goes for a pistol she has hidden on the War Rig, and manages to press the magazine release, leaving only one round in the chamber; again she puts a gun to his head and pulls the trigger, and again Max is able to avoid the bullet. Max and Nux, still chained, work together to reload the pistol – Nux thinking that Max will kill Furiosa, but Max again chooses to use the weapon to intimidate only, this time with warning shots, first at Furiosa to subdue her, and then at Angharad when she tries to return to the Rig, accidently wounding her leg in the process. Twice Furiosa tries to kill Max using guns – one aspect of the traditionally masculine power she has been able to wield in order to survive Joe’s tyranny – and twice she fails. Significantly, these two moments are the only instances that Furiosa is not devastatingly lethal with guns. Max may physically embody traditional masculinity, but he abides by an alternative masculinity that prevents him committing the violence that toxic masculinity demands and celebrates. Despite Furiosa’s masterful deployment of masculine power, the symbolic failure of her guns against Max confirms that he is not her enemy; thus traditionally masculine forms of power become useless and unnecessary when gender norms are dismantled. Max embodies a masculinity that she does not need to struggle against, but can, in fact, trust to complement her own rebellious gender embodiment.

Once Max steals the War Rig and allows Furiosa and The Wives back on, he joins their flight from the Citadel, but he immediately collects her guns, clearly not trusting her yet. Despite this, Furiosa still asks for his help when they approach the mountain pass and the warrior tribe with whom she has made a deal; she tells Max that she needs his help driving
if the deal does not go as planned, and in a sign of extraordinary trust, she tells him the ignition sequence for the War Rig. The deal goes bad, and three of the Immortan’s war parties pursue them. Furiosa returns to the Rig and Max drives them out of the canyon; he also immediately returns her guns, finally returning the trust she has shown him (Fig. 7). This wordless exchange relies completely on visual narration and mise-en-scène, again using the symbolic power of guns to convey their evolving relationship and recognition of equal power. Now united with Max in the same righteous cause, Furiosa is able to wield the phallic power at which she is so skilled, and she and Max perform an elegant choreography of driving and shooting.

These two figures of alternative masculinities, initially untrusting of each other, bridge the gap of suspicion by acknowledging their mutual oppression under patriarchy, and then unite in their shared strategic skills of using patriarchy’s most potent weapons against it. Later, in a radical reversal of traditional gender norms, particularly in the action film genre, Max further acknowledges Furiosa’s skill with firearms/phallic power when the War Rig is bogged down in the mud, and they only have three bullets for their most effective weapon, a long-range rifle.

The Bullet Farmer (the anti-seed farmer) is racing towards them with a spray of machine-gun fire, and Max makes two attempts to shoot him but misses twice. With only one bullet left, Furiosa approaches him and silently reaches for the weapon, which he wordlessly hands over. Using his shoulder as a rifle stand and ordering him not to breathe, Furiosa calmly makes a perfect shot that blinds the Bullet Farmer, giving them the crucial extra minutes they need to winch the War Rig out of the bog (Fig. 8). Max’s recognition of Furiosa’s superior firearm skill is a result of his acceptance of her ability to better wield traditional masculine power than he, something that his own alternative masculinity makes possible, just as Nux’s transforming masculinity inspires him to join their cause.

These three characters, each subjected to differing levels of violence, abjection, and exploitation under patriarchal capitalism, have developed alternatives to toxic masculinity that embrace a rejection of normative gender performances and hierarchies, which thus allow them to defeat their captor. During the climactic race back to the Citadel, with Joe still in pursuit, Furiosa is near-lethally stabbed in the abdomen while driving, yet she is still able to stop Max from falling to his death by catching him with her
cybernetic hand. And later, even closer to death, she asks Nux to drive and fights her way over to the Immortal’s Gigahorse, with Cheedo’s help. After fighting off another Imperator, complete with a swift kick to the groin and a vicious scream of rage, Furiosa is victorious: face bloodied and broken, with a snarling, “Remember me?” (Fury Road) she grips Joe’s grotesque mask with her mechanical fingers and brutally rips off his face, which also tears off her prosthesis, and she begins to fall to a certain death – but Max, who has been fighting his way towards her since the moment he saw her crawl out of the War Rig – is there to catch her, just as she had caught him moments before. Furiosa’s mechanical arm, a sophisticated piece of technology made by the same mechanics that keep Joe’s armada of war vehicles, is yet another iteration of the film’s aesthetic hybridization between nature and technology, the organic and inorganic, the mechanical and the natural, the traditionally masculine and the traditionally feminine; it further blurs the gender binaries that are fundamental to the film’s utopian promise. It is no surprise then, that this arm, weighted with the symbolism of her female masculinity and the embodiment of her disruption of the patriarchal commodification of organic bodies with the mechanical, is the weapon Furiosa uses to kill the embodiment of capitalist patriarchy. She does not kill the tyrant with her bare hands – she does one better by killing him with the hand he made for her so she could better do his brutal bidding (Fig. 9).

Max saves Furiosa from the fall, but she is still at risk of bleeding to death from the stab wound. In Joe’s captured Gigahorse, now driven by one of the Vuvalini as they race to take the defenceless Citadel, Max saves her once again, this time with his universal blood. Equipped with new medical supplies that he stole from The Bullet Farmer, he gives Furiosa a blood transfusion. Previously, Max’s blood was taken from him by force to sustain half-lives destined for violent deaths; now, allied with the Many Mothers and the liberated Wives, he chooses to give his blood willingly to save Furiosa’s life in both a demonstration of their bond and a reclamation of his own bodily agency. As Max transfuses his blood to Furiosa, the cinematography emphasizes the needles penetrating both of their arms, signifying a rescripting of the role of the male body in relation to the female body. The male act of penetrating the female body for reproduction – the crux of Joe’s obsessive quest to maintain patriarchal power – is rewritten as a reclamation of female control over life. Whereas penetration and the male seed has been coded as a
bearer of death throughout the film, Max’s symbolic penetration of Furiosa is a life-affirming act of physical intimacy that saves her life. This salvation and recuperative act allows her to finally claim her place as liberator of the oppressed and founder of the utopian socialist matriarchy, thus reaffirming the film’s radical assertion that the socialist revolution must first and foremost be a gender revolution (Fig. 10).

Works Cited


Mad Max: Fury Road. Directed by George Miller, performances by Charlize Theron, Tom Hardy, Nicholas Hoult, and Hugh Keays-Byrne, Warner Brothers, 2015.


