

Mad Max: Fury Road: A “feminist” demolition derby

Kevin Martinez
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Directed by George Miller; written by Miller, Brendan McCarthy and Nick Lathouris

Mad Max: Fury Road is the latest installment in Australian director George Miller’s *Mad Max* series, and the first one in almost 30 years. This reviewer has only seen *Mad Max 2* (1981) starring Mel Gibson, which resembles a work of art in comparison to the new film.

Every summer, audiences worldwide are subjected to the latest bombastic Hollywood fare and *Fury Road* is no exception. When reviewing these films it is all too easy to say the same things over and over again, but they are worth repeating. First, there is the stagnant material to deal with, usually a well established franchise that can guarantee the major studios easy money. In this case, a post-apocalyptic trilogy that resonated with audiences because of the oil shocks of the 1970s and fears of nuclear and ecological disaster.

Then there is the requisite and over-the-top computer-generated spectacle that takes the place of things like plot, believable characters and dialogue. And of course, there are sops to satisfy the more critically inclined audiences that are disturbingly satisfied with so little. In this case, a plot that “criticizes” patriarchy and supports a watered-down and harmless version of modern-day “feminism.” Needless to say, sequels are already in the works.

What little plot there is in *Fury Road* proceeds as follows: Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy) is a lone survivor from a nuclear holocaust that takes place before the film. He is captured by the chalk-covered War Boys who use him as a blood donor when they take him back to their leader Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), who rules over a colony of mutants and subhumans called the Citadel. What little water and gasoline exists is hoarded over by Immortan Joe and his

War Boys who engage in a death cult surrounding cars and guns. Women are kept solely for their milk or as “breeders,” i.e. sex slaves for Immortan Joe.

Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron), the only woman who for some reason is allowed equal status as the War Boys, drives a truck in search of gasoline for Immortan Joe. This in reality is a Trojan horse, with Joe’s five wives inside. Furiosa’s plan is to reach her childhood home which she believes still has water and civilization. The War Boys, with Max as a hood ornament, drive to capture Furiosa and the women. The rest of the film is essentially an hour-and-a-half car ride with circus performers trying to kill each other.

There are no real themes in *Fury Road*, or at least no themes that are seriously explored. This is the sort of movie that prevents or at least slows down thinking. One overwrought action scene leads to the next without allowing the audience any time to consider what just happened. It is a nasty and dehumanizing process. The rare moments when the on-screen characters are not shooting or stabbing one another we are subjected to dialogue like this:

Furiosa: You’re never gonna have a better chance.

Max: At what?

Furiosa: Redemption.

Or in another scene Max muses, “You know, hope is a mistake. If you can’t fix what’s broken, you’ll go insane.”

Perhaps the action and special effects should be commended, yet even here the film strains. The cinematography is straight out of a comic book, with all the characters and action neatly arranged in the frame to drown out any subtlety. The same can be said of the colors, which ironically beautify the wasteland, but the images themselves say nothing and pure action will only keep you on the edge of your seat if you actually

care about the characters.

Director George Miller in an interview explained what he thought the themes of *Fury Road* were, “I guess what I’m trying to say is that some part of me does feel more pessimistic than I did 30 years ago. But I also think that the behavior we see is the repetition of behavior that has gone back across every era of time. The dominant hierarchy. The rise of the tyrant who, in whatever form, controls all the resources. The citadel. The water. The gasoline from gas town. The ammunition from bullet town. He uses all the methods standardly [sic] used by tyrants to dominate his people. He gives them the idea that they can ride with him eternal on the highways in Valhalla. You go to any citadel in any part of the world and look at the history. They never knew each other and yet they have the same structure and architecture.”

This ahistorical and gloomy reading of the last three decades explains much of the weakness of *Fury Road*. Miller, and a whole generation of artists, have reacted to the global crisis of capitalism by arguing that things can give way to something even *worse*. Even after a nuclear war, class society with all its privations and hierarchies will continue since after all this is the essence of humanity.

To those who say this is a modern “Western” or even a “feminist” film, what sheer nonsense. Some have compared *Fury Road* to John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), which would make sense if John Ford hated life and was into S&M bondage. As for the feminist arguments in support of the film ... apparently if women do the majority of killing and maiming that makes it a feminist film, like Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* films. The culture of death and sadism is never questioned, but is taken at face value.

Miller even asked playwright Eve Ensler to be a consultant on the film. She was in her own words, “blown away” by the script and said, “This movie takes those issues [rape and sexual violence] head-on. I think George Miller is a feminist, and he made a feminist action film. It was really amazing of him to know that he needed a woman to come in who had experience with this.”

It is a shame really. Tom Hardy and Charlize Theron are talented actors, and no small number of talented people had to have worked on this and yet what is the end result? Is this really the best Hollywood can come

up with? *Fury Road* leads to nowhere.



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