

## **Fury Road**

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Australian film-maker George Miller is a master of the horizontal in cinema, of a certain kind of movement-image, where the landscape sliding away across the screen is a double of the movement of the frames of celluloid through the projector. At his best, Miller makes a cinema of pure kinetics, where the action is the exposition. This is not a literary or cerebral cinema. It is a cinema of the arts and crafts, of beautifully made things of metal and wood and fiberglass and fabric and light – all primed to crash and blow, spectacularly.

Miller's latest, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, has its problems. It suffers from a sort of white desire to be indigenous. It might have upset the men's rights activists, but it isn't feminist cinema. Charlize Theron is a degendered hero, and most of the other female characters turn out to be expendable.

The way disability figures is more interesting. The good and the bad guys are crippled, if in slight different ways. The bad guys tend to a sort of fleshy excess; Charlize Theron appears missing a forearm. All are cyborg characters, mixtures of flesh and tech, dependent on systems and apparatus. It's a clue to what this film is really about.

If at first glance it seems like a horizontal film, about trucks and cars going fast over flat expanses of mythic Hollywood-western landscape, perhaps it is actually a vertical film. I'll have to spoil the plot here to explain this, so if you have not seen it, look away.

We get a hint of this in the opening scenes, where Max is captured and trapped in some sort of dungeon. He tries to escape by climbing up, but fails. We get a bit of a tour of a vast infrastructure which will turn out to run on four fluids: fuel, blood, water and milk – human breast milk.

It turns out this is the inside of a massive, vertical city within a mountain. Miller borrows the inside from the cod-Marxist base and superstructure architecture of *Metropolis*, with labor and machines below, controlled by a ruling class who sit up on top. What makes it more modern is firstly how 'crippled' this ruling class are, and the addition of a class of the excluded, who gather outside at the base, waiting for the rulers to turn on the water.

The ruler is the one who controls all this vast apparatus, this infrastructure of four flows. He controls the raiding parties that steal the fuel. He controls the water that secures the obedience of the excluded class without. He controls reproduction, and we see women strapped to apparatus that extracts breast milk. He also controls the flow of blood. Max, as a 'universal donor,' has to provide blood for the anemic

warriors who go out to steal the fuel.

The short first act of the film shows us this apparatus, starting at the base and moving up to the superstructure that controls it. Part of this control is coercive, figured as control of water. Part of it is ideological, and we get hints of a complicated mythology centered on the power of the ruler to control the flows, and including a death cult for the warriors to speed them on their fuel-stealing missions with the requisite 'thanaticism'.

The action of the film involves the escape of Furiosa (Charlize Theron) with the ruler's harem, in a truck that will turn out to be equipped with all four of the vital liquids, starting with fuel and water, but it will turn out also to have milk, and when Max joins the party – blood.

Furiosa thinks she is taking the harem women to the 'green land', which from the start we suspect may be mythic rather than real. This is the sense in which the movie is 'vertical' rather than horizontal. It is a journey not so much across the land from one place to another, as a journey up from the base of the machinic control of the four flows, up towards a superstructure that might better organize this base. Furiosa will turn out to be from a matriarchal clan with a whole other worldview, although of course the green world will turn out not to exist any more, if it ever really did.

And so the journey must be reversed. Max is the agent who breaks Furiosa's belief in the myth of the green world and the Goddess cult. He shows her that her quest is practical. The old crones, the few left from her matriarchal clan, are revealed to be practical women. They have a Gladstone bag (once the mark of a doctor who makes housecalls, as Dr George Miller himself may once have even possessed). The bag is full, not of ideology, but of actual seeds.

As Max points out, the green world, is not, or not just, ideological. It is the actual city from which they have come and to which they must return. The task is not escape to the green world of fantasy. This is not a romantic story in any sense. The task is to remake the relation between superstructure and infrastructure. They have to return and take control of the apparatus of the four flows, bringing back the milk and (by metaphoric link) the seeds. Actually, all four liquids each have powerful symbolic properties.

Fuel – called guzzoline – is about power, violence and death. It is what the city's war parties fight and die for. It is also the only object that features in a (failed) exchange. It is the fuel of acceleration, of a world that can only keep going as it goes, as machine of violence and exchange value.

Blood is the liquid that embodies one of the things that might halt that acceleration. Max tries to oppose and negate the guzzoline-fueled world. But it can't be done, and another strategy is called for. Blood is also the remnant sign of a kind of masculine

science of life. In a scene worthy of Bogdanov, Max keeps another hero alive with his own blood, this time voluntarily.

Water has feminine associations. We see the harem hose each other down in a sort of post-apocalyptic wet t-shirt moment. It is a slow scene, as Furiosa cannot yet mediate between madman Max and the female harem. Later water will bog the whole party down. The green world will turn out to be swamped by an excess, by poisonous water. Water is the liquid of inertia and slowness but not quite of death. It is the liquid perhaps of a nonhuman life, but also of culture, of the myth of the green world.

Milk is also coded feminine, of course. But it is the liquid of a more human life. It is the promise of the new, of fresh starts, even of the aesthetic. Its control back in the city is the mark of that city's sinister character. That Furiosa and the harem actually have some with them on their escape truck is troubling to Max, however. Of all the fluids, it's the most difficult. That the lactating women turn on the water for the excluded class when Furiosa and Max retake the city is the sign more of the problem it poses than a solution.

This is a film then about the vertical, of a climb out of the base by labor, towards the superstructures, the desire to dwell in the utopian forms promised by a different kind of ideology, but the need to bring that vision back to the city, to use it to redesign the relation between the four liquids, the four flows. Even if the four flows (and their genders, masculine fuel and blood; feminine water and milk) do not quite come back together in equilibrium. It is not quite clear balance can ever be restored or ever existed, even in the green world.

It is a film about history, then. One that refuses the option of acceleration. We can't keep fueling this machine forward forever expecting some green world to be at the end. It is a film that refuses the option of negation, too. It can't be fought with blood. Blood for blood just reproduces, not its speed but its violence. And it is not as if speed and change were the only aspect of history. Maybe it is more that we are bogged down in history, that our machines don't obey our will that we can't get traction. The hardest thing of all might be to imagine rebirth and carry it out. To not accelerate or negate or succumb to inertia, but to extrapolate from what we know and do toward a remaking of the city of history itself.

There's no Eden, then, no green world. The goddess is dead and even the crones know it. Their wisdom is practical. Even Max knows it. On approach to the crones of the matriarchal cult, Max and Furiosa see a siren – a naked woman up high in a steel-frame tower – a beacon of ideology. Max knows at once it is a trap: Avoid the siren song of ideology as end in itself. Take the seeds that the crones have saved and return to the world.

The actual precedes the virtual, even when it seems it is the other way around (as in *Virno*). Furiosa is driven by the virtual image of the green land. But it turns out there really was an actual one. In seeking after her childhood memory of it, she drove

straight past the real one, which has turned into a poisoned swamp. What we take to be a world of potential is nothing but extensions from worlds we know and from the qualities of our interactions with them, as **Bogdanov**, contra the Spinozists, would insist.

Once Furiosa and her comrades return to the city, Max fades away. The universal hero has no role there. But he was not even that. He was the universal donor. He is a fantasy about a kind of male nurturer who gets the heroine home. He is analogous to the George Clooney character in *Gravity* or the Matthew McConaughey character in *Intersellar*. This is not feminist cinema but a new kind of masculinist cinema — as far as it is prepared to compromise. Women (often ‘middle aged’) can figure things out for themselves, but with a little help from the universal donor, giving blood, not milk.

Some of the best critical writing from Australia has been about the Mad Max films. **Adrian Martin** wrote an excellent book on the first two. He did not much like the third, about which **Ross Gibson** wrote a magnificent essay, which is in his book *South of the West*. **Meaghan Morris** wrote about ‘white panic’ through the prism of Mad Max. I have not read those pieces for years but at the time they struck me as models of critical writing. So it is a bit intimidating writing on the subject in the shadow of three of the giants of Australian cultural studies. But if anything it is a tribute to the craftsmanship of George Miller that he made such an enduring myth. **All cinema is anthropocene cinema**, but not all cinema knows it. George Miller, it turns out, knew all along.