

Sandpiercer

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"Who would have thought, twenty years ago, that people would one day be nostalgic for the apocalypse?"

— George Miller

Revisiting the original *Mad Max* of 1979 today, one thing is strikingly obvious: almost every guy in it — except, of course, our hero Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) — is pretty queer. And on both sides of the law, too: bare-chested 'Fifi' (Roger Ward) as police chief behaves almost as outrageously with his officers as The Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne) with his gang. It's a largely male, homoerotic world, with (as one critic observed at the time) 'women and children targeted as victims'. And it's the traumatic loss of those heterosexual loved ones that turns Max mad — and eternally celibate, it seems.

By *Mad Max 2* (aka *The Road Warrior*, 1981), Miller and his collaborators had developed a theory to rationalise this all-pervasive queerness: in the world shown, "people wouldn't have time for recreational sex. There's no time for a woman to have a baby, to nurse infants, etc. It's very unlikely that a pregnant woman with a child could survive". He did add, however, that in both *Mad Max 2* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), men and women could easily switch roles, because they are "simply interchangeable".

How different is the world-view offered by *Mad Max: Fury Road*! Now, having babies — preferably male, from a harem of carefully groomed supermodels — is the main thing on the mind of Immortan Joe (Keays-Byrne back with a vengeance). This classical dream of life-giving fertility and patriarchal lineage is contrasted, with grotesque splendour, to every kind of physical deformity and morbid death-fanaticism in the movie — including a spectacularly gruesome scene of Caesarean still-birth.

In the eyes of many *Mad Max* fans, the second in the series remains the classic, with *Fury Road* already fast claiming its status very near to the top. (Myself, I believe this fourth may be the best, with the first its prime competition — but remember, we are now comparing a little B-film made for 380 thousand dollars with a super-blockbuster costing an estimated 150 million.) *Fury Road* certainly returns us, as co-writer Brendan McCarthy promised, to the goldmine of an extended chase, a world locked in conflict, and the "raw, kinetic assault" of "manic Mad Max mayhem". But, unexpectedly, *Fury Road* also obliges to look back, with more sympathetic attention, to *Beyond Thunderdome*, the most maligned of the pack. If Miller's latest triumph fulfils everything he originally wanted to do in *Mad Max 2* — now with the help of the most advanced digital technologies, which he integrates and coheres with awesome skill — it also revisits the loftier ambitions of *Thunderdome*. For that was (in Ross Gibson's words) an "incontrovertibly mythic" project — a folly, to many — which was about the grand theme of Civilisation: its tyrannical rise, bloody fall, and hopeful reform.

Fury Road is brilliantly calculated. It avoids almost any 'hot', contentious contemporary political references, while returning to what Miller considers the timeless 'medieval' fantasy-drama of corrupt power, resistance, hope and redemption — this time, concentrated mainly in strong female characters. It eschews any reflective dialogue or contemplative symbolism, and channels everything into its thrilling journey away from, then back to, the Citadel. It achieves what Miller has long dreamed of: to make a film set nowhere, only in the cinema-land of our dreams, for circulation in the world's globalised 'hyperculture'. (And how many 'event films' these days so successfully launch themselves in so many countries — plus Cannes — on virtually the same day everywhere?) Even Miller's homeland of Australia seems a distant memory along this *Fury Road*.

Yet, like Bong Joon-ho's underrated *Snowpiercer* (another film closely allied with comic-book style), *Mad Max: Fury Road* is a movie that shakes us not only with its shocks and speed and cinematic inventiveness, but also with its grand, *Metropolis*-like vision of an entire society teetering on the edge of an abyss. It's a therapeutic apocalypse.

Adrian Martin