

FEMALE ACTION HERO VS MALE DOMINANCE: THE FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN *MAD MAX: FURY ROAD*

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Abstract

In recent years, female action heroes seem to have conquered the world of cinema, partially satisfying the demand for strong female characters that would elude the voyeurism of what Laura Mulvey famously described as “the male gaze.” However, among feminist theorists there has been a great debate on whether these films actually challenge the patriarchal structures, or just reproduce the same old stereotypes in a more polished and misleading manner. The latest entry of such a female character is Furiosa in George Miller’s Mad Max: Fury Road (2015). My objective is to examine the female representation in the aforementioned film and question whether the film actually achieves to successfully challenge the well-established male dominance or falls in the trap of repetition and reconfirmation. I will show that, although there has been an undeniable progress in action movies regarding gender stereotypes, unfortunately there is still a long way to walk.

Keywords: Action Heroine, Mad Max, Furiosa, Gender, Gaze, Dystopia

Öz

Erkek Egemenliğine Karşı Kadın Aksiyon Kahramanı: Mad Max: Fury Road'da Kadın Temsili

Son yıllarda, Laura Mulvey'nin ünlü makalesinde “eril bakış” olarak tanımladığı röntgencilikten sıyrılacak güçlü kadın karakter talebini kısmen karşılayacak şekilde, kadın aksiyon kahramanları sinema dünyasını ele geçirmiş gibi görünmektedir. Ne var ki, feminist kuramcılar bu filmlerin gerçekten ataerkil yapıları sarsıp sarsmadıklarını ya da yalnızca aynı eski kalıpları daha parlak ve yanıltıcı bir şekilde yeniden üretilip üretilmediğini tartışmaktadırlar. Bu tip kadın karakterlerin son örneklerinden biri George Miller'in yönettiği Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) filmindeki Furiosa karakteridir. Bu makalenin amacı sözü edilen filmdeki kadın temsiliyetini incelemek ve filmin aslında baskın eril hakimiyete başarılı bir şekilde meydan okuyup okumadığını ya da tekrar ve teyit tuzağına düşüp düşmediğini sorgulamaktır. Aksiyon filmlerinde toplumsal cinsiyet kalıpları bakımından varlığı reddedilemeyecek bir ilerleme görülmesine karşın daha katedilmesi gereken uzun bir yol olduğu gösterilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın Aksiyon Kahramanları, Mad Max, Furiosa, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Bakış, Distopya

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1. An Introduction to *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Mad Max: Fury Road is the fourth installment in the Mad Max series, all four directed by Australian director George Miller. George Miller returned to the dystopian and bizarre world of Max thirty years after Mel Gibson impersonated the road warrior for the last time. Tom Hardy replaced Mel Gibson, and the film was released in the U.S.A. on May 15, 2015, after a long period of excessive marketing that raised the public's expectations, not only because it was promoted as a frenetic sci-fi action movie, but also because a female character was introduced in a way that the audience had rarely seen before.

Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, was a dominant figure both in the promotional posters of the film and the various trailers. Her short hair, dirty clothes, mechanical arm, fighting skills, the massive truck that she drove and her determined look indicated that she would be the one that would dominate the audiences' attention. Complex female characters are rare in the film industry and female action heroes are most of the times predictably portrayed following certain behavioral and stylistic patterns, in accordance to the predominantly patriarchal ideology of Hollywood. However, in George Miller's film, one of the objectives was to avoid clichés on femininity. The director, while promoting his film, admitted to a feminist agenda, while Charlize Theron, a well-known advocate of feminism, stated that she was happy to take the role in order "to celebrate everything there is about being a woman" (qtd. in Lorena O'Neil).

Indeed, since Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and the female protagonists in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), few female action heroes of Hollywood have drawn the attention of the critics, spurring discussions on gender stereotypes. *Mad Max: Fury Road* has already sparked a heated debate and numerous film reviews have touched upon issues related to a feminist agenda. Some of them praise the film's gender boldness, while others argue that the film has nothing new to add as far as gender clichés are concerned. Jessica Valenti, for example, suggests that the film is a "call to dismantle patriarchies" and writer Laurie Penny claims that the bottom-line of the film's story is that "the liberation of women is the liberation of everyone." On the other hand, Tracy King argues that although *Fury Road* may be a brilliant action film, it is by no means a feminist masterpiece, and it actually uses "lazy, sexist tropes and clichéd plot devices." This paper's objective is to examine the female representation in George Miller's movie, focusing mostly on the character of Furiosa played by Charlize Theron, and try to give an answer to the following questions: Does Imperator Furiosa disrupt the traditional notions of male and female characters, or is she objectified and subjected to

the omnipotent male gaze? Is *Furiosa* a transgressive character that challenges the concepts of the dominant patriarchal ideology, or does she reconfirm already established patterns? Can *Furiosa* provide us with a new model for female action heroes?

1.1. The Gaze Theory and the Female Action Hero

In 1975 Laura Mulvey published “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” one of the most influential essays on film feminist theory. Drawing her inspiration from feminism, psychoanalysis and the voyeuristic nature of cinematic storytelling, she argues that “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (6). According to Laura Mulvey, female characters are subjected to the dominant male gaze, and there is a certain distinction between active/male and passive/female. In a classic cinematic narrative, male characters are the ones that advance the plot by being active, while female characters function as a passive spectacle that pauses the narrative and offers pleasure both to the male gaze of the protagonist, as well as the patriarchal gaze of the audience. In other words, female characters are treated as an object, thus they are objectified. Female characters are not allowed to gaze, since that would mean that they could also desire. Linda Williams supports Mulvey’s view and says that “to see is to desire” (61) and desire is a male privilege. If a female character desires, then that poses a threat both to the male character and the male spectator, since they sense the symbolic danger of castration. Therefore, whenever a female character attempts to gaze, she is eventually either punished or subjected to the male protagonist. The symbolic patriarchal order must be reaffirmed so that the (male and/or female) audience may feel reassured.

This binary active/passive distinction between male and female characters is more than obvious in classic Hollywood, where the image of the *femme fatale* thrives. Women in film-noir are young and beautiful, satisfying the need of the voyeuristic male gaze. Moreover, they are most of the times powerful, cunning and manipulative, posing an obvious threat to the patriarchal order and therefore are always punished in the end. Punishment, of course, may come in many forms, such as: exclusion, isolation, marginalization, humiliation, defeat or death.

However, there is problem when it comes to applying Mulvey’s active/passive distinction to the action heroine. By default, the action heroine is active and advances the plot; she does not assume the expected passive role and in the end she (usually) triumphs. Then, how is she subjected to the male gaze and how does she not pose a threat to the patriarchal order? If we approach this issue adopting the binary logic, then there are two possible

ways to understand this. The first one is the over eroticization of the female character: Cleavages, tight uniforms, thin waists, impeccable skin and eternal youth. Jane Fonda as Barbarella in Roger Vadim's film (1968) is a prime example of a female action hero who resembles more a male fantasy of a super hot woman than a character who is an active agent of a narrative. More recent examples can be seen in movies such as *Barb Wire* (1996), *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Elektra* (2005), *Æon Flux* (2005), *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2007), *Wanted* (2008) and the *Resident Evil* series (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2012). In the aforementioned films, the skillful female characters are physically strong, but at the same time they are highly eroticized. This eroticization enables the male gaze to objectify them. Furthermore, if the eroticization reaches extreme levels, then the feeling of threat of the male gaze is alleviated, because the exaggeration (and fetishization) of their body undermines the possible impact of their actions.

The second one is the masculinization or defeminization of the action heroine. Such is the case of a great number of films that feature a female action hero, with the most notable example being that of Ripley played by Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*. Ripley was a breakthrough character at its time, and unlike Barbarella, she didn't flaunt her curves. She wore the same uniform as the rest of the crew, and avoided to stress her sexuality. Being one of them, and without expressing any kind of erotic desire, she managed to be the lone survivor of the story, and to exterminate the phallic alien. As Jeffrey Brown writes, "Ripley's heroism seemed to place her in the realm of the overtly masculine" (28). A few years later, Sarah O'Connor played by Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* (1991) is transformed into a female Rambo, and Jordan O'Neill played by Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane* (1997) undergoes an obvious process of masculinization that, among other things, involves shaving her head and talking like a... man in order to become the ultimate action heroine. Therefore, the victories of the female action hero don't pose a threat to the male gaze, because she is masculinized and deprived of the culturally established feminine traits. This process of masculinization takes place in a patriarchal cultural context in which, as Hilary Neroni explains, "one cannot separate ideas of masculinity from violence [...]—which is why, for example, a woman committing violence is inevitably at some point referred to as masculine" (45).

Although adopting the binary passive/active logic when treating the female action hero may be tempting, as many scholars have observed, such an approach is insufficient when it comes to examining the complexities of the action heroine in contemporary cinematic narratives. Yvonne Tasker, for

example, argues that the “images of the active heroine disrupt the conventional notion [...] that women either are, or should be, represented exclusively through the codes of femininity” and adds that trying to explain the action heroine in terms of masculinity and femininity is “an attempt to secure the logic of a gendered binary” (132). On the same line, Elizabeth Hills agrees that the binary logic is problematic and stresses the need for a new methodological tool. In her article “From ‘Figurative Males’ to Action Heroines” she concludes that “action heroines [...] are transgressive and transformative characters who can be conceived outside the negative terms of gender binaries and can be read as alternative images of female subjectivity” (49). On the other hand, Jeffrey Brown, although he agrees that the binary logic may be insufficient, he argues that the “tough action heroine is a transgressive character not because she operates outside of gender restrictions but because she straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object” (47).

2. Gender Consciousness in the Bizarre World of Max

In the fourth installment of the series, Max introduces himself with the following words: “My name is Max. My world is fire and blood. Once, I was a cop. A road warrior searching for a righteous cause. As the world fell, each of us in our own way was broken. It was hard to know who was more crazy... me... or everyone else”. So here we are, in a near dystopian future, in this bizarre world of Max, where the sole purpose of life is survival. Contamination and the lack of water have turned the world into an endless desert, in which the two most valuable goods are water and gasoline. People live in citadels and in one of them the absolute ruler is Joe, a powerful man who controls the water supply. In this citadel, Joe is adored by the desperate and crippled multitude as a godlike figure and he ensures his dominance by controlling an army of mindless fanatics. The role of women in this post-apocalyptic society is clear and definite: breeding. Women who have already given birth are treated like cows; they are well fed and constantly milked. Younger women are chosen for reproduction. They are practically imprisoned, wear chastity belts and wait for their turn to mate with the father-of-all figure of Joe. Imperator Furiosa is a fierce and well-respected warrior who under the orders of Joe drives a huge truck and is supposed to lead a plunder expedition to the gas town in order to obtain gasoline. However, Furiosa’s real plan is to escape and save Joe’s five young brides who are hiding in the truck. While trying to do so, she will meet Max, a lone drifter, who unwillingly at first, but willingly later on, will help her. Obviously, the road to salvation will be paved with tons of violence, buckets of blood, inexhaustible fury and revenge.

Few are the cases of films with action heroines that attempt to explore issues of gender. What is impressive about *Fury Road* is the consciousness that it demonstrates regarding such issues. The symbolisms in the mise-en-scène of the film and the allegory of the plot are all too obvious. Science-fiction has always provided a space for experimentations, and in the dystopian space of *Fury Road*, the patriarchal dominance has crossed all possible limits. Women are graphically treated as mere breeders and men have complete control over their sexuality. However, one woman managed somehow to become a fearsome warrior who leads war expeditions and is feared by her male counterparts. Her name is Imperator Furiosa and her objective in the film couldn't be less subtle: the liberation of women and the defeat of the patriarchal structure. She wants to take the five girls to her green homeland from where she was kidnapped by Joe many years ago, only to find out that the land has turned into toxic mud and the only survivors are a handful of old good-hearted women, the "free women," who carry guns and defend themselves at any cost. The message of the film is too clear and obvious. It is actually written on the wall of the young women's cell for those in the audience who have not already understood: "We are not things." This is the ultimate claim; women should not be treated as objects, the objectification and dehumanization of women should stop, the male gaze should die.

In fact, feminist writer Eve Ensler was asked to provide her experience in order to help with the representation of the five women. Unfortunately, especially as far as the cinematic depiction of the five young women is concerned, it is hard to claim that the objectification has been avoided. Not only that, but they could actually be used as a case study scenario of what objectification really is; all of them are young and beautiful according to contemporary standards of fashion magazines: very slim with an impeccable and smooth skin. All of them are dressed in white revealing sexy clothes (again according to how sexy is commonly described by fashion magazines) and there is one shot of them that seems to have come right out of a male fantasy: When Max first encounters them, they are washing themselves using a hose that is connected to the truck, an image that resembles those that appear in men's magazines. The camera takes a voyeuristic position from a safe distance in order to establish their beauty. Later on, after a gun is fired, a shot of a girl's leg with a drop of blood adds to the visual sexiness, and satisfies the male gaze who traditionally enjoys the spectacle of a wounded/tortured/punished female body.

One of the most interesting moments in the film is when Furiosa and Max arrive at the land of the "free women." It used to be a prosperous land

that now suffers from drought and lack of fuel. As already stated, in this land a group of old women defend themselves with guns. One of them carries a small bag with seeds, the most valuable resource and the only hope for a future that will not be linked with death and disaster, but with birth and creation. The intention of the narrative is to make a clear statement: the old capitalistic patriarchy is fully responsible for ruining the world. The greed and the excessive abuse of the environment turned the green lands into an endless wasteland. In *Mad Max's* dystopian present the old patriarchy has not transformed into a more democratic and accepting society, but instead has become even more extreme and oppressive. In this context, the only characters who seem to maintain their humanity are the free women. They are not contaminated by greed, they are not destructive, and they are not submitted to any male authority. They carry the seeds; the hope, the future. However, their representation is also problematic. They are portrayed superficially as caricatures, grannies with guns, and with the conventional oversimplification that men are tied to civilization (and therefore the ones to blame for every malfunction) and women are tied to nature. What is more, their survival has an expiration date; reproduction without males, even in this near-future world, is impossible, so they are doomed to go extinct. Nevertheless, their presence in the film is not exhausted in this brief analysis; that would require an extensive ecological reading that unfortunately goes beyond the purpose of this paper.

2.1. Examining Imperator Furiosa

By far the most interesting and complex character, not only for the purpose of this paper but also for the film, is Imperator Furiosa. Unlike Charlize Theron's *Æon Flux*, a perfect and highly sexualized action heroine, Imperator Furiosa doesn't fit in the conventional stereotypes of the *genre*. Charlize Theron is arguably one of the best contemporary female actresses in Hollywood. She is also included in many lists with the most beautiful or sexiest women in Hollywood, a fact that makes it difficult for her to avoid objectification and participate in a narrative actively with her performance, and not passively as a spectacle. In 2003, she had to gain weight and to completely transform herself in order to convincingly portray serial-killer Aileen Wuornos in the film *Monster* (2003). Her performance was critically appraised and Charlize Theron won a well-deserved Oscar for her interpretation. Twelve years later her transformation into Imperator Furiosa may not have been equally impressive, but her persona has been carefully constructed in order to propose a contemporary and humane action heroine model.

Physically, she seems to have passed through a process of masculinization, but the result of this process is not excessive. Her short hair

and her clothes signify an inclination to masculinity, but her body lacks the muscles of Sarah O'Connor from *Terminator*. She is strong and capable, but she is not excessively muscular. Her face and body are constantly dirty, covered in mud, dust and paint, unlike other heroines who no matter how many times they kick and punch, they shine as if they came out of a shampoo advertisement. The dirt on her body adds a humane dimension to her character; she is more convincing and therefore potentially more capable of disrupting the binary concepts of gender. She defends herself, but she is not invincible. Mentally she is determined, but also vulnerable. She is brave, but she is also afraid that she will fail. The many close ups on her face offer a proximity and a chance for identification and not distance. The emphasis is on her face, but apparently this is not enough to de-objectify her. That is why she is missing an arm and she has a prosthetic one instead. This element is consistent with the technological wackiness of Mad Max's world, but is also a crucial characteristic of Furiosa's persona. It is something that inevitably grabs the attention of the audience's gaze and something to comment on. It can be read as an attempt to take away the sex appeal of the character, but on the other hand, it showcases the lengths to which the male gaze manipulates the storytelling. The female body has to be mutilated so as to lose its wholeness and be less threatening. It is essential that the fear of castration is tamed if we want a character as complex, strong, vulnerable and humane as Furiosa to exist. This is the price that the character has to pay. However, her disfigured body is not weakened by this lack. She is a strong, independent fighter, a leader. Furiosa is not only fighting against the hundreds of bloodthirsty white males that hunt her, but she is also fighting against the manipulation of the male gaze.

Furiosa, as the name suggests ("furiosa" in Spanish is the female adjective of "furious") is furious and her actions are driven by fury. As most of the male action heroes, she seeks redemption and her redemption involves saving the five brides. But *Fury Road* is also a movie about revenge; revenge against the oppressive system, revenge against the phallus and revenge against Joe, the ultimate patriarch of the movie. Furiosa is unstoppable when it comes to seeking revenge, and she is the one (and not Max) who combats against the film's antagonist and eliminates him. Unlike the usual narrative concept, according to which a male saviour protects the weak female, in this case the female hero, although she is accompanied by a very strong male, deals with the antagonist on her own. What makes the battle between Furiosa and Joe even more interesting is the latter's symbolic death. Furiosa gets a close look at him before she chains Joe's mask with the wheel of the car, and Joe's face is literally ripped off. So, not only does she obtain the right to look straight at the monster's face, but also deprives the ultimate patriarch of the film from his privileged gaze.

However, no matter how transgressive this concept might seem at first, considering that violence in Hollywood is generally regarded as a male trait and is closely linked with the construction of the male identity, it is actually a concept that has been repeatedly observed in the so called “rape-revenge” films. In these films, such as *Ms. 45* (1981) and *I Spit on your Grave* (1978 and 2010), a woman becomes empowered and seeks revenge after she has been sexually abused or raped. Her violence is explained by her traumatic experience and when her revenge is accomplished, then her violence is exhausted, because the only purpose of her violence was vengeance. Likewise in horror films the “final girl,” as she has been thoroughly described by Clover, after she has been bullied and stalked by a psychotic killer/rapist/monster, manages to kill the male antagonist. It is one justified act of violence by a female character who has remained sexually intact during the narrative and who has avoided any expression of desire, apart from the obvious desire to take revenge. The bottom line is that their violence is circumstantial and well-explained, so that the patriarchal order is not disrupted. Female characters are allowed to appropriate violence, as long as it is established that their violence has a specific target and is not a permanent violence that could possibly threaten the symbolic male dominance.

In *Fury Road* Furiosa’s violence is justified by revenge, and indeed her violence seems to be consumed by the end of the film. Violence in the case of Furiosa is not inherited, but is the result of a long process of oppression, and her violence will finish once the antagonist is eliminated. In the last scene, Furiosa returns wounded but victorious to the citadel, having saved four out of the five girls, and is welcomed as a hero. Her expression implies serenity, a characteristic that is usually attributed to femininity, unlike violence which is considered an expression of masculinity. Moreover, Furiosa has found peace and possibly redemption by returning home, back to the private sphere, the traditionally common place of women. It is true, however, that this time her place in the private sphere will be upgraded. She is not the breeding slave, nor the tamed warrior, but the victorious rebel who comes back with the hope of reconstructing the society and curing its diseases. Of course, this is not the case for Max who leaves the citadel, because as a male hero, his natural place is the unknown world of endless adventure. In other words the patriarchal order is indeed questioned, but it is hard to say whether it is actually disrupted; On the one hand Furiosa’s violence is exhausted and she assumes her domesticated role (although she is a fearless warrior), while Max remains an eternal explorer/adventurer. On the other hand, the narrative gives Furiosa the opportunity to redefine herself in the private sphere and be a carrier of hopeful change.

One last element that deserves our attention is the turbulent relationship between Furiosa and Max. The first time they meet, it is in the middle of the desert, while Furiosa and the five brides are running away from the citadel. Survival is the priority both for Furiosa and Max, so they engage in physical combat, a perfect opportunity to measure themselves and demonstrate their abilities. Furiosa seems to have the upper hand, but the fact that Max is chained with another man and his mobility is limited, takes away a big part from her credit. In the end, as it would be presumed, the order is restored, Max immobilizes Furiosa and wins. Subsequently he wants to steal the truck and leave, but it is impossible, because the only one who knows how to start the engine and can properly drive the truck is Furiosa. The truth is that it is hard to think of another example of a female action hero driving a truck, a vehicle traditionally linked to masculinity. Motorcycles are much more common and as Brown explains, “symbolically the image of action heroines on motorcycles can be interpreted as a carefully orchestrated sign of liberation and empowerment” (11), because the vehicle is “also an obvious phallic symbol, suggesting that whoever has mastered the machine, male or female, has also mastered power, privilege, and individuality” (12). Well, if size matters (and it does matter in the patriarchal symbolism) then the truck is even more phallic than the motorcycle and the feeling of Furiosa’s empowerment is exaggerated.

So is this empowerment enough for her to survive? Can she alone achieve her goals? Would that pose a threat to the symbolic order of the patriarchy? To answer the last question, yes, probably it would. However, no matter how strong and determined Furiosa is, no matter how big her truck is and no matter how well she delivers kicks and punches, the truth is that she still needs male assistance in order to survive. Although her enemy in reality is the whole structure of male dominance, she still needs a strong male by her side to protect her. There are moments in the film, when Furiosa and Max seem to be two equally qualified heroes who need each other in order to survive, especially when fighting against Joe’s army, and actually Furiosa even saves Max’s life twice in the battlefield. However, Max is the one who saves her last, when everything seems to have come to an end. The enemy is annihilated, Max and Furiosa are going back to the citadel, but Furiosa is severely wounded and bleeding to death. Max knows what he has to do; he offers her his own blood. He transfuses blood to her through a tube and she regains her senses. If it weren’t for Max, Furiosa would have never lived to return to the citadel.

Their strength is a key factor when it comes to comparing the two characters. After all, this is an action film and action is based on kicking and shooting. Nevertheless, there is one more crucial element to discuss, an

element that is linked not only to any action film but also to any narrative, and that is the decision making ability. There is one scene in the film that summarises what we already know about gender and decision making in films. Furiosa has realised that her hometown, the place she was hoping to find when she ran away from the citadel with the five brides, is nothing more than a lost paradise. Along with the small community of old women that she met, and fuelled by unreasonable hopes, she decides that her best bet is to fill the tanks of the motorcycles and drive into the vast desert until they either find some green land, or die of dehydration. Her decision is impulsive and almost sure to lead to unwilling suicide. This is the moment for Max to intervene and suggest another solution. After explaining that the only thing they will find in the desert is more desert, he claims that the only way to survive is to go back to citadel. Joe and the army are chasing them so the citadel is unprotected and if they can reach the citadel avoiding their enemies, then they will have a good chance to make a new start. His thinking is bold but also logical, based on reason, arguments and facts. Furiosa acknowledges that this is the only viable plan and that her escaping into the desert would be a disaster. Thus, the gender stereotype of an impulsive female who can't make reasonable decisions and of a logical male who can think properly is reconfirmed.

Yet there is one last scene that I would like to mention. It is a scene that I consider very interesting, because it showcases that the relationship between Furiosa and Max is also dynamic. It is a moment that disrupts the binary logic of gender and indicates the momentary possibility of a relationship between two equals, where gender is of little importance. It is night and they are being chased by Joe's allies. The truck is stuck in the mud, the darkness hinders their vision, they are running out of ammunition and the enemy is speeding towards them in a jeep. They only have one rifle and Max has to eliminate the target. He misses the first shot and there are two more bullets left. He misses the next shot and there is one last chance. Furiosa is standing behind Max and with her body language asks for the last shot. Max acknowledges Furiosa's superiority and decides to pass her the rifle. Furiosa stabilizes the rifle on Max's shoulder, calmly aims, orders Max to stop breathing, shoots and hits the target.

3. Conclusion

Science-fiction offers a space of safety, in the sense that the audience can see images of alternative worlds without fearing that their own world is shaken. As Lisa Purse explains, "placing the women into alternative and future realities [...], the films distance the protagonists from the spectator's own real-world reality, in which their actions might seem unduly threatening

to dominant social hierarchies and behavioural norms” (187). That is not to say that Furiosa’s character hasn’t (at least partially) challenged gender grounds, but that it is easier to imagine a character like Furiosa breathing the toxic air of a dystopian nightmare, than put her in the context of a conventional every-day narrative. Having said that, *Fury Road*’s vision of a revolution against a caricature-like totalitarian patriarchal structure may be problematic, but Furiosa’s character has indeed some unique qualities. She is active and she takes decisions that advance the plot (although when the moment comes, the right decision is taken by Max, the wise male, who suggests that the only way to survive is not to run away into the unknown but to attack the citadel), she is brave and courageous, but also sensitive and emotional, she is not eroticized, but on the other hand she also seems to lack sexual desire, she is strong but not muscular, she drives a truck but she is not fully masculinized. Nevertheless, she also suffers two major losses in order to be an active female action heroine. The first one is that her body is disfigured and she has a prosthetic arm. The second one is that she is ultimately saved by Max. As Tracy King comments, “a feminist masterpiece would not immobilise its female lead at the end and leave her to be rescued by a man.” In the end she is welcomed victoriously in the citadel, but in reality her triumph is to return where she conventionally and traditionally belongs, the domestic sphere.

The problem with the binary logic of masculinity/femininity and the gaze, is that if the spectator adopts this logic, then everything can be seen and analyzed in terms of femininity and masculinity and this distinction is the basis of the dominant structure. The challenge is not only to have a female hero who will not be saved by the male hero one way or another, but also to be able to read a film without falling in the binary trap of active/passive gender characteristics. The narrative gives hints and clues but the gaze of the spectator is the one that ultimately defines the narrative. Mulvey knew this when forty years ago she acknowledged that the change will not come out of the blue. Tasker, Hills, Neroni and Brown agree, each one in their own way, that since Ripley in *Alien*, the female action hero seems to challenge the well-established notions of masculinity/femininity, and that there is a need for a new framework that will understand the mechanisms of this new model of female action hero. The evolution of the action heroine is slow and comes with turbulence. *Fury Road* may not seem to have the repercussion of *Thelma and Louise* but those were other times, and *Thelma and Louise* was arguably the first Hollywood film featuring women of action while challenging (seemingly at least) at the same time certain gender patterns. However, my guess is that *Fury Road* has already

won a place in future essays that will treat gender and action films. *Fury Road* is not a breakthrough narrative that deconstructs the patriarchal world; nevertheless, *Furiosa* seems to be the culmination and the most challenging version of a female action hero so far, but this is definitely not the end of the patriarchal tunnel. There is still a long way to walk, a way full of conflicts, setbacks, renegotiations, frustrations, contradictions and, hopefully, changes.

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