

BOOK REVIEW

Furious Feminisms: Alternate Routes on *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Alexis L. Boylan, Anna Mae Duane, Michael Gill, and Barbara Gurr.
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The film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015) depicts a civilization jolted by political and environmental upheaval. With actors Tom Hardy and Charlize Theron in the lead roles, *Fury Road* continues the *Mad Max* series from three earlier films released from 1979 to 1985. The series is said to have been inspired by the 1970s energy crisis and the collapse of the Australian economy in 1973. *Fury Road* in particular received critical and fan acclaim for its stunning visuals and showcasing of director Miller's enormous technical skill. The film was the highest grossing of the series, at \$375.7 million in worldwide box office revenue, but it ended up losing \$20–40 million after costs. These costs included a staggering production budget of \$154–\$185 million. Given recent real-world events and circumstances, the world's proximity to apocalypse is perhaps even more salient now than in the 1970s and 1980s. And given an expected release of the next *Mad Max* installment, *Furiosa*, in May 2024, it appears that neither the series nor the conditions underlying its premise are likely to dissipate soon.

Furious Feminisms is a short book-length examination of *Mad Max: Fury Road* and is included in the “Forerunners: Ideas First” series from University of Minnesota Press. Keeping with the series' description of “short books of thought-in-process scholarship, where intense analysis, questioning, and speculation take the lead,” Alexis Boylan, Anna Mae Duane, Michael Gill, and Barbara Gurr consider *Fury Road* on a variety of fronts, including what the film offers feminists and how it might disappoint them. Methodologically, the authors aim to demonstrate how differing viewpoints can be reasonably held and considered when collaboratively reflecting on the film. Each author assumes responsibility for one chapter of the book, unpacking her/his/their unique position on the film to demonstrate the “messiness” of academic scholarship. The authors propose that their book “offers a collective response to individual and ideological claims on art in this moment of highly contested gender politics” (x). They note that gender politics “have become increasingly attached to fandom” (x). The book proceeds with short descriptions of central terms and characters from *Mad Max: Fury Road* in order to ground the chapters for the nonexpert. Central concepts and the setting for the *Mad Max* series are offered: an apocalyptic wasteland and possible nuclear fallout has led to the end of oil-based civilization, increased cancer rates, and devastating

environmental destruction. The main foci of the chapters, in turn, are White hegemonic masculinity, physical disabilities and disabled bodies, antislavery rhetoric, and the aesthetic qualities and cinematic tropes of beauty in *Fury Road*.

In the first single-authored chapter, Gurr maintains that *Mad Max: Fury Road* clearly answers the question, “who killed the world?” The answer is, “men killed the world,” or more precisely, “hegemonic masculinity” killed the world (1). In the film, hegemonic masculinity is wielded as a weapon. Gurr indicates that in (character) Mad Max’s world, “to be anything other than strong and invulnerable is a death sentence” (1). This is ironic, since hegemonic masculinity has killed the world and continues to inform its postapocalyptic participants and context. Gurr states, “society, like Max, is driven by a masculinity that continues, even in the time of its own death, to assert its dominance” (2). *Fury Road* does offer the idea that women will save the world. Gurr briefly addresses how this premise unleashed backlash and calls for boycotts of the film by men and men’s rights activists, linking the film to its existing fan base and values. Gurr finds this anger ironic, given that she ultimately views the film as regressive vis-à-vis gender and race. That is, despite lending more voice and screen time to female characters than the preceding three *Mad Max* movies, Gurr states, “*Fury Road* does not necessarily present a liberating space, either via gender or race” (4) and is ultimately essentialist in its story. Gurr notes that Furiosa’s character “inhabits the identity that Max has lost” (as Just Warrior), but this institutes “an essentialist binary that has been inverted but not abandoned” (10). With respect to race, the character Immortan Joe clearly demonstrates that the hegemonic masculinity in *Fury Road* is a White hegemonic masculinity. The absence of indigenous bodies and people of color in general in the film reflects “the White supremacist arc of settler colonialism in Australia . . . and elsewhere” (5). Although the film might offer glimmers of feminist potential or “a more complex expression of humanity,” in the final analysis, Gurr maintains, *Fury Road* keeps us in a “dead world.”

In the second single-authored chapter, Gill takes up physical disabilities in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which he views as an extension of the film’s setting. Gill states, “To live without adequate access to water amid warfare creates impairment. When impairment is not accommodated, disability is produced” (18). In Gill’s view, the film highlights the way that disablement is produced when monopolization of resources occurs—and occurs in relation to assumptions of worth. In relation to the film’s message, Gill notes that we can consider what accessible futures might look like in a world dominated by “inequality and domination of people, beings, resources, and the land” (18). Within an ableist vision, moreover, Gill indicates that disability “becomes ‘the sign’ of the world in ruin, yet these same disabled bodies are the ones that will somehow ‘save’ the world, if the world can be saved” (21). Although Furiosa is herself an amputee, Gill chooses to highlight the disabled characters and warriors at the margins of the story. Collectively, all disabled warriors challenge “who is assumed to belong” (22). However, ultimately in *Fury Road*, slow death is “a seemingly foregone conclusion,” and disability signals “the supposed hopelessness for the inhabitants of the world . . .” (25–26).

Duane’s chapter addresses the binary logic within *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In effect, this binary is most pronounced in its distinction between human and thing. Duane suggests that the film is “consciously steeped in antislavery rhetoric” (31). In fact, several scenes in the film show the “horrors that arise when one attempts to turn a person into a thing” (31). With regard to women in *Fury Road*, Duane notes that the film’s overt message is that “women should not be property,” but this message is undermined given that the majority of the film’s women are the bikini-clad Wives. Ultimately,

Duane offers *Fury Road* as positing, “the answer is not to reassert the division between blood and gasoline, milk and machinery, but for us to finally recognize the uncomfortable equivalence between them” (42).

In the final single-authored chapter, Boylan addresses the aesthetic qualities of *Mad Max: Fury Road* with its emphasis on blood, fire, and water, which dominate the landscape through the colors red, yellow, and blue. Boylan also mentions Miller’s 2017 release of *Fury Road* in black and white (“Black & Chrome”), and the director’s initial desire for a black and white release of the film that was rejected by studios. Boylan addresses *Fury Road*’s overall technical and cinematic complexity, stating that the film provides “a very specific aesthetic experience” (47). She conveys that the narrative is “delivered through an aesthetic that calls the nature of, or qualities of, beauty into question” (47). Although “traditional cinematic tropes of beauty” hold the film together, they are “undermined almost at the same moment” (49). Boylan concludes, “This contemporary paradox about the meaning of beauty, the desire to destroy the power of beauty but then to resurrect it as different is being fought out in the most interesting, but also deeply problematic, ways in postapocalyptic narratives” (53).

In the book’s concluding chapter, the four authors discuss some final points, such as feminism, how the film runs adjacent to recent politics in the United States and globally, how the color green is used in the film for the Green Place as an Eden, and how they view the figure of Furiosa, who receives little attention in the main chapters of the book. This chapter proceeds by way of prompts, with the four authors then responding in turn. The collaborative methodology and conversational spirit of this chapter is noted as a positive, but the chapter itself is the least successful in the book. In the main, its set-up leaves the reader standing on the outside listening in on four friends and colleagues discussing elements of the film. This position for the reader undermines the book’s inclusiveness. In addition, several points made here had already been made in the individually authored chapters, and perhaps more strongly there. Clearly, the conclusion is intended as a sort of nonconclusion and as registering continuing disagreement; however, the overall impact is probably less than the authors would have liked.

The short chapters throughout provide insights into *Fury Road*, both for those who have considered it and for those who have not. Perhaps most salient is how the book can move a set of concerns forward for those invested (even with a recognition of the film’s shortcomings), and particularly given the ongoing status of the *Mad Max* series. This would include what is most likely to be a highly anticipated but also variously contested *Furiosa*. Readers for the book would include anyone interested in work at the intersection of feminist/gender studies and recent Hollywood films and franchises. The book’s readability would make it suitable for both lower- and upper-level courses in feminist film and popular culture studies.

Reference

Miller, George, director. 2015. *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Village Roadshow Pictures and Kennedy Miller Productions.

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