

Mad Max, Reaganism and *The Road Warrior*

By J. Emmett Winn

Fall 1997 Issue of KINEMA

IN 1981 THE AUSTRALIAN-MADE FILM *The Road Warrior* drove into the US film market.⁽¹⁾ The film was well received and quickly became, at that time, the most popular Australian movie ever released in the US, and since its debut has played regularly on US cable television.⁽²⁾ Much has been written about the international success of this film and its predecessor, *Mad Max*, and the last in the trilogy *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*.⁽³⁾ Contributing to that body of research, this paper addresses the American success of this Australian film within the cultural/political context of the US at the time of its North American release, and discusses its resonance with Reaganism. The fundamental goal of this examination is to situate the films in the larger context of cultural hegemony. The importance of this study lies in the critique of these films as they aid us in understanding the hegemonic process and the American box office triumph of *The Road Warrior*.

I investigate how the trilogy in general, and *The Road Warrior* specifically, resonates with the social field of its time. These films entered the US during a period of renewed nationalistic interest and conservatism linked with the Reagan/Bush administrations. As Stuart Hall explains, the meanings of cultural products are partially provided by their time. In his article "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'" he states:

The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices which it articulates and is made to resonate. What matters is *not* the intrinsic or historically fixed objects of a culture, but the state of play in cultural relations...(237).

Although the films are futuristic and set in Australia they resonate with US audiences. As Jon Stratton explains, these films are made "within the Hollywood-created conventions of filmic narrative realism" and therefore, viewers may vicariously involve themselves in the narrative world (37). This situation works particularly well for US audiences because they are "raised" on these filmic conventions. The Mad Max films are made in the classic Hollywood narrative form and closely follow the Western genre format,⁽⁴⁾ thus allowing the audience to involve itself "in the discursive play of the structures and icons which form the narrative of the films" (Stratton, 37). Therefore, even though these films are "situated" in a futuristic Australia, their use of classic Hollywood narrative conventions and their similarity to the Western genre help make them appealing to US audiences.⁽⁵⁾

The Road Warrior was very successful in the US at a time when Reaganism touted the need to "right" the social order and build a conservative nationalism that could thwart the supposed threat posed by multiculturalism. Simultaneously, it provided the violent white male hero of Western mythology who would rid the hegemonic "space" of the "deviants" threatening the dominant elite.

Certainly, not all audience members interpreted this film in this manner.⁽⁶⁾ But the "dream" of a return to "simpler" times when men (specifically) took what they wanted in a "free market" can be articulated with the radical right-wing tendencies of Reagan Era conservatism. In the final analysis this film, and the trilogy, perpetuate a hegemonic ideology of dominant Western culture, in general, and the elitist politics of Reaganism specifically. In doing so, they join the ranks of many Hollywood-made films that also fit into a category which Andrew Britton terms "Reaganite Entertainment" (2).

The Road Warrior

The films of the *Mad Max* trilogy share many similarities and much of the story in *The Road Warrior* can be better understood by referring to the other two films. One key visual element in all three of the films is the use of futuristic sets and costumes, which I will discuss within the field of reference of the Western genre.⁽⁷⁾ Westerns may be viewed as having two main ingredients: the hero and the locale. These two elements are often defined, in large part, by their appearance. The stark landscape, six-guns, hats, horses and leather are all part of the iconography that create the style and sense of the Western.

Christopher Sharrett points out that in the *Mad Max* films director George Miller incorporates the use of

fantastique to create the visual style of the movies.⁽⁸⁾ As Sharrett puts it, "Miller uses his film to suggest the immanence of an apocalyptic spirit...[and] uses the *fantastique* to extrapolate and then comment on a contemporary crisis" (82). In all three films Miller uses strange costumes and a punk style to create characters with shocking appearances. This visual *élan* is one element that contributes to breaking down cultural barriers for US audiences. By developing a futuristic setting that could just as easily exist in the American West as in Australia, the US audience is able to involve itself without feeling separated either geographically or culturally from the narrative events. Instead of feeling removed the audience is presented with a place that looks familiar because of their experience with Western cinematic texts.

Therefore, however strange these settings, costumes and characters might first appear, they fit well within the Western genre iconography.⁽⁹⁾ For example, the association with Westerns begins in *Mad Max*, as Miller comments on society's future. There civilization decays because of immorality and a lack of natural resources. A result is that law and order has degenerated into the Main Force Patrol (MFP), a sort of highway police called "the Bronze." They are "at war" with outlaw motorcycle gangs. The Bronze wear tight-fitting leather uniforms and patrol in high performance automobiles. In contrast, the "barbaric" gang members ride motorcycles and dress in a variety of styles ranging from leather to rags. They are led by the Toecutter, who has animal hides on his leather outfit to form a "primitive garb." These conflicting styles distinguish the forces of order, the MFP, from the forces of anarchy, Toecutter's gang (Sharrett, 82-85).

Although set in the future the look and feel is from Western iconography. Classic conflict exists between civilization, or what is left of it, and the "barbaric savages."⁽¹⁰⁾ In a related reading the MFP is recognizable as the US cavalry and Toecutter's gang are the anarchic "savages."⁽¹¹⁾ The look of Toecutter's tribe even has the trappings of "primitive" peoples, thus linking this group with the mythical "wild savages" of many Westerns who threatened the encroaching white settlers by perpetrating (what is presented as) barbaric, heathen acts and dastardly deeds. The Western iconography is complex and often fluidly shifts from cavalry v. Indians to lone sheriff v. outlaw gangs. Likewise the MFP, and Max in particular, may be seen to resemble the Marshals, sheriffs and deputies of the old west while the bikers parallel the outlaws in this comparison. Both of these Western motifs are applicable to the trilogy and both are traditional opposites constructed in Western films.

Sharrett explains that civilization's degeneration is exemplified by the Bronze. They are not held together by a shared sense of morality but instead by the way the leather uniforms and cars reflect a "cult of style" and "cool" about the macho group.⁽¹²⁾ In this version of our future it is not society's ideals that survive, but the vanity of humankind (Sharrett, 85). This "cool" look is reminiscent of Spaghetti Westerns where the visual style and exaggerated "Western-ness" dominate the narrative.⁽¹³⁾ Cowboy hats, smoking cigars, and six-guns transcend mere costuming to become iconic clues that suggest the mythic stature of the hero. The Western cult of cool is exemplified in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) where Clint Eastwood's silent Man-With-No-Name is visually separated from the others by his clothing. And this cult of cool can be traced to films made before Sergio Leone's Westerns, as often seen in the films of earlier screen cowboy legends (e.g. Roy Rogers) where the dress was cleaner and crisper but equally as important. In these movies and serials how Roy looked was just as crucial as "getting" the outlaw.

The Bronze is neither the confident image of the US cavalry in the classic Western *Stagecoach* nor a polished posse of deputies but rather resembles a forsaken troop in the Western wilderness or an overworked and underfunded urban police precinct in a contemporary US city. This discussion of the Bronze and Toecutter's tribe is important to the analysis of *The Road Warrior* because it is from this environment that our lone, reticent, Western, champion, (Max) will emerge. Max Rokantansky (Mel Gibson) is the young hero and the MFP's best driver. Like his Western counterpart he is able to out-perform average men. He drives the last of the "V-8 Interceptors" high-speed pursuit cars and he and his car are easily compared to Roy and Trigger, and the Lone Ranger and Silver, although he has the trappings of a post-modern anti-hero rather than the clean-cut looks of a Hollywood Golden Age B-serial cowboy.

The American Rugged Individual

Therefore, Max is represented as the next in a long line of hardy individual heroes. However, the myth of the rugged individual is much more American than Australian. As Lewis states in his book *Australian Movies and the American Dream* the idea of American rugged individualism is not reflected in Australia. In

contrast, he believes that "Australia's small population, geographic isolation, and sparseness of cultivatable soil produced an emphasis on mateship...rather than rugged individualism" (3). Rugged individualism is not a pre-requisite to having a lone hero but the character of Max roaming the barren countryside alone with only the company of his dog is typical of the American myth.⁽¹⁴⁾ Max appears as a American legend complete with a sawed-off shotgun on his hip - his resemblance to Eastwood's ghostly protagonist in *High Plains Drifter* (1973) is remarkable. They both stand as lone gunmen highly skilled in their art to the point of pastiche.⁽¹⁵⁾

The changes made from *Mad Max* to *The Road Warrior* lie partially in Miller's desire, as told to Matthews, for *The Road Warrior* to be "more consciously mythological" (243). Likewise, Mortimer points out that Max (as *The Road Warrior*) "is the limping hero of mythology...in the tradition of reluctant, low-verbal, Western heroes" (147). In this point lies one of the most important links between Max and US audiences. For as Rodman explains: "Whatever the facts connected to a specific event may be, it is ultimately their articulation to and organization into mythological formations that renders them culturally significant" (468). It does not matter that Max is the protagonist in a post-apocalyptic Australian narrative because he is the embodiment of an American Western mythology that has been a mainstay for Hollywood cinema from its beginnings and has been prevalent in American popular culture even longer.⁽¹⁶⁾ Max and the conflict in which he is involved fit very well with traditional Hollywood filmic and mythological formations and, therefore, he and the events surrounding him are rendered culturally significant to US audiences.

Max as the mythical lone Western hero provides a beginning for my argument that these films, particularly *The Road Warrior*, allow audiences to articulate them to the ideology of Reaganism. Ross points out that:

the superhero revival was kindled by the desperate attempts, under Reagan, to construct the institution of national heroism, more often than not in the form of white male rogue outlaws for whom the liberal solution of 'soft' state-regulated law enforcement was presented as having failed(33).

Max, like Dirty Harry and Batman, epitomize this. Max realizes that the run-down "liberal" establishment could not stop the marauding "savages" so he takes to the roads to avenge the murder of his family and concomitantly the loss of institutional/social control. The personal link to the Western hero that Reagan had as a Western B-movie actor should be noted. Reagan, throughout his political career, carried on this Western hero-image by wearing cowboy hats and visiting his ranch, thereby attempting to position himself as a Western hero.⁽¹⁷⁾

Further, Ross says that it was the conservatives being placed on "defensive alert by rapid economic decline" that partially fuelled "the Reagan-Bush era's obsession with a nationalistic culture" (42). Max and the Bronze portray a conservative fear of the decline of control in the face of a multicultural United States. The rise in challenges from women, ethnic, and religious groups outside of the traditional dominant elite in domestic issues and the confrontation to US power and authority from several countries in foreign relations matters fuelled the nationalistic trend.

Setting and Characters

In *The Road Warrior* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, Miller continues his visual style. Mortimer explains *The Road Warrior* was influenced by "...Hollywood B grade movies, comic book culture and a whole mixture of genres [and]...from various forms of gay, sadomasochistic subcultures"(147). Similarly Combs observes, Miller's visual style is so radical and visually shocking as to create a look and tone so unreal that it approaches the art of comic books(313). McFarlane points out that the locations used for *The Road Warrior* were in desolate country and were "used to create a hopeless, violent future"(79). In this setting Miller establishes his lone settlement in the West. Never mind that the mythic West portrayed here is in New South Wales because it passes remarkably well for Hollywood "Badlands" and is just as recognizable as "savage territory."

Max, now *The Road Warrior*, is led to a colony of wasteland survivors by the Gyro-Captain. He is Max's prisoner at first but later becomes a comic side-kick. The settlers have salvaged a petroleum processing plant. This group, led by Papagallo, is a "civilized society" and have refined enough gasoline to carry them to their "promised land" two thousand miles away. The connection between this post-apocalyptic situation and the

energy crisis of the film's social times is explicated in the movie and also allows articulation with many fears of US audiences concerning their fate in terms of reliance upon "foreign" (read: Middle Eastern) oil. The goal of the settlement/fort is to "defend the fuel" which will "save" the community by providing them with the gas that they need to escape to their utopia and by doing so preserve their conservative society, and social order, as it is threatened by the anarchy of the "savages."

It may also be viewed as the community upholding the value of technology. In this case the bonds holding the community together are gas and the technology to refine it. Britton suggests technology is tied to the ideology of progress. He states:

the bourgeoisie has sought consistently to rationalize and depoliticise its own technical priorities by reference to the concept of "progress"...The function of the ideology of progress is to describe human history in terms of improvement of techniques and to assert that this improvement brings with it an ever greater degree of material and spiritual well-being...(12).

In this case, Papagallo argues that defence of the fuel is all the matters. In other words, that the community's life depends on its technology. Not everyone agrees until Max offers his expertise in escaping with the fuel. He dramatically states, "You want to get out of here? You talk to me."

The settlers must defend the supply because their plant, looking like an outpost fort, is besieged by attackers led by the "warrior of the wasteland," Humungus, who "represents the evil culmination of civilization" (Sharrett, 88). Even his title, Warrior of the Wasteland, suggests the spatial conflict inherent in this film. Like the tin-horns of the past Papagallo's settlers invaded the "wild" West and must be driven from it by the warriors of the plains and deserts. In a less than subtle alias, Humungus is also known as the Ayatollah of Rock'n'Rolla linking him with a negative stereotype of Middle East terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists even though he looks like neither.

Humungus and his tribe resemble current counter-culture members in our contemporary society. Sharrett concludes that their mohawks and punk/sadomasochistic clothing and equipment link their origins to "the gay underworld" (89). Chute agrees as he describes Humungus as sporting "his body-builder physique in a fetching outfit of crisscrossed leather straps and a S-M hockey mask" (28). A significant couple in the horde is Wez and his Gay lover, Golden Boy. Wez is a warrior and sports a pink mohawk, leather straps, football pads, and has a mini-crossbow mounted on his wrist gauntlet. Golden Boy has long blond hair and also dresses in sadomasochistic leather. It is this visual look of the evil horde that raises the question of deviance. Just as the old West "savages" were often portrayed as immoral heathens, so too is the Gay underworld in this film. Ross explains:

...deviance is constructed by the powerful;...deviant categories, especially those with a marked racial component, are the product, and thus the sole responsibility, of those whose interests are further served by portraying themselves and their protectorate as being threatened by deviance (32).

The "savages" of *The Road Warrior* are fabricated as aberrant, dangerous, and threatening to the status quo and the conservative values. This is not surprising given the long tradition of victimization of Gay and Lesbian culture in Hollywood cinema along side that of Native Americans and African-Americans. In looking at *The Road Warrior* as a Western, Gay and Punk counter-culture members replace Native Americans as the group "deserving" annihilation. In this manner the "bad-guys" of all the *Mad Max* films are constructed as the "other."

The absence of clear racial markers creates the impression that racial minorities are excluded from the deviant category in this film. However as Ross points out about *Batman*(1989):

The result, in terms of black representation, is invisibility...deviant's, mutants, delinquents and psychopaths are exclusively white, while their depiction draws freely upon stereotypes about criminal and deviant behaviour that are usually applied to black and other minority subcultures (33-34).

Even the Aborigines of Australia are invisible in *The Road Warrior*, not even allowed to be attackers of the remnants of white society. "Racially" defined minorities are invisible from this conservative construction

of deviance, except that they are depicted in the stereotypes portrayed by white characters. The attack upon the bodies and wealth of the white settlers is indicative of the portrayal of American Indians and African-Americans in Hollywood film history.

The resemblance of the attackers to the "savage Indians" of the classic Western is strong. Humungus, frightening chief, can be compared to the warrior chief Scar in John Ford's *The Searchers*. Also, The Humungus's tribe has no settlement that we ever see. Instead we imagine them as nomadic raiders moving through the wasteland scavenging and killing, riding about in their cars and motorcycles circling the "fort" like silver screen "savages." Many of them appear in various stages of nakedness and some of them even sport feathers, facial "war-paint," mohawks, and bands in their hair. At one point they dance around a bonfire at night in a rhythmic orgy of savage *esprit de corps* as they torture a couple of white settlers captured outside the compound.

This capture itself is a microcosm of the Western genre mythology. A small group of the settlers are chased down by the "savages," the only woman with them is raped and murdered, then two of the survivors are taken back to the camp and tortured. Even though most classic Westerns never showed the events in as graphic detail, the rape and murder of adult white women captured by "savages" was clearly implied (e.g., Ford's *The Searchers*).⁽¹⁸⁾

In contrast, Papagallo's settlers are industrious people. Mortimer refers to them as "sort of post-modern sodbusters. Like their forerunners in Westerns..." (148). They, too, arm themselves with normal bows and arrows, but also defend their fort with high-tech flame throwers visually linking them with the "better" technology. These two contrasting looks clearly delineate the opposing forces of good and evil represented by these characters in the classic Western conflict of civilized versus savage.

Similarly, the view of men as warriors and leaders of society is carried forward. Mortimer posits "In accordance with the hegemonic view of women, [the film] makes them instinctively soft, compromising and ineffectual"(150). Although one woman appears as a warrior, she plays a minor role in the film.

In *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* the wasteland locations continue with the addition of a city, Bartertown, the ultimate in a *fantastique* version of Dodge City or Tombstone. It is a seedy den of apocalypse survivors in a "primitive new community" (Combs, 312). The punk/sadomasochistic look is once again prevalent. Bartertown's leader politically and otherwise is a Black woman, Aunty Entity (Tina Turner). She is the epitome of female self-assertion and dominance over males. She and her entourage mirror Humungus's tribe. She is garbed in a futuristic chain mail tunic that is low cut, with a mini length and exaggerated wire shoulders. Her entourage includes Ton Ton Tattoo, a blind, Asian, jazz saxophone player whose body is adorned with elaborate tattoos. Her "strong arm" is Ironbar who wears a leather outfit with a support on his back for an iron bar that suspends a Kabuki theatre mask with long black hair above his own bald head. The inhabitants of Bartertown are again the conservatively constructed deviants.

Bartertown receives its power from an underground "swine mine"⁽¹⁹⁾ where pig manure is harvested by "chain-gang" prisoners to produce methane gas. The genius behind the technology is a midget named Master who rides piggy-back style on a giant of a man, Blaster. Together they are old world male brains and brawn, Master-Blaster.

Bartertown recreates class distinctions between the workers of underworld and Aunty with her cronies who live in a type of throne-room above the city. In this film the oppressed deviants have positioned themselves in the dominant role, as is exemplified by having an African-American female actor as the political leader.

In contrast to Bartertown is a tribe of children who were flown away from the apocalypse to an oasis in the Outback, and who live in hope that their vanished pilot, and leader, Captain Walker, will return and guide them to their promised land. Therefore they call themselves The Waiting Ones. Combs explains: "The post-apocalypse children who have survived in the desert, with their own language, history, and Messiah expectations, are weird and wonderful..."(313). The children's primitive tribal oasis community presents a striking visual contrast to immoral Bartertown.

Aunty's control of Bartertown may seem to contradict the situation in *The Road Warrior*; however it is in keeping with the feared threat of "deviants" gaining control of the social order. Bartertown is not simply a

new city made in the fashion of current urban areas. It is a vision of a city run by the "underclass" as they are contemporaneously constructed by right-wing conservatism. In this film the punk/sadomasochistic look is the fashion of the rulers. Even the avoidance of Black characters is thrown aside in order to have the ruler of Bartertown be a Black woman. Social order is turned on its head and the result is a hellhole rather than the "correct" society touted by conservatism. Aunty even explains this to Max, "Before, I was nothing;" now she is in charge. The fear that multiculturalism might undo the current power structure is revealed in dramatic terms. The conservative fear of losing power and privilege to minority challenges is played out in this town. Tellingly, it's Max, the white hero, who destroys the Black female governed Bartertown.

Perhaps even more telling is the quest in which Max and the desert children involve themselves. They rescue the technologically-savvy Master from Aunty. Eventually Master and the children escape to set up a new city in the midst of a ruined metropolis, where each night they tell the tale of how they arrived and light torches to lead any wanderers "home" (to the re-establishment of the conservative social order). The promised land envisioned by both groups, Papagallo's tribe and The Waiting Ones represents what Britton explains as the utopian imagination in Reaganite entertainment. In his words:

The utopianism of the new radical right has two dimensions. On the one hand it looks back from a position of geriatric post-imperial decrepitude (Great Britain) or of a recently humiliated and increasingly embattled hegemony (the United States) to a vanished golden age in which the nation was great and the patriarchal family flourished in happy ignorance of the scourges of abortion, and a soaring divorce rate, gay rights and the women's movement. On the other hand, it anticipates a gorgeous reflowering of capitalism in which the good things will be born again...(9).

This describes both promised lands. Papagallo's tribe envision a place by the sea where all there is do is "breed." And The Waiting Ones use old stereograph photos⁽²⁰⁾ and a ritualistic group recital to conjure up the vision of a city they call "Tomorrow-morrow Land."

Violence

Violence is a crucial factor in the narrative style of these films as it is the Western drama. Westerns used violence to highlight the conflict, thus presenting the contest between good and evil rather than relying upon dialogue. In Westerns the conflict is visually resolved as good defeats evil. Likewise, in directing, Miller is concerned with the visual aspects of the film; "emphasizing imagery [and] minimizing dialogue" (Broeske, 482). This is in keeping with the Western where the internationally recognized images tell the story. As Sharrett puts it:

The imagery of random destruction that pervades this film seems to highlight the use of violence in genre cinema overall. An outright criticism of violence is held back, however, substituting instead the conclusion that the destruction of the remains of industrial society is appropriate revenge for the failure of that society (84).

In the next two films, violence is the center of interest. It asserts that the renewal of civilization is clearly in the "primordial chaos" of the violence and not in the "construction of a new society" (Sharrett, 88). As I have mentioned previously, the violence perpetrated by the "deviant savages" is shown as being natural. Britton posits that in Reaganite entertainment it "has become customary to conceive of the monster [in this case the "deviants"] in punitive terms, as the scourge of sexual license, sexual transgression and female self-assertion" (11). Here they are portrayed as naturally violent and callous to the pain and suffering of others. For example one of their own members loses his fingers as he tries to catch a razor-sharp boomerang. His comrades laugh in delight and offer him no assistance. In contrast, the violence used by the settlers is defensive. They do not provoke the horde with violent means and they respond only to protect themselves. However, Max, our lone hero, is skilled in the art of violence. It is his ability to work on the level of the attackers that makes him the one who will be able to deliver the settlers and their gas from the violence that awaits them at the hands of the barbarians. This is reminiscent of formulaic Westerns in which the sobbusters are unable to stand up to the menace they face. A hero is required to ride in and save them.

A brief example of the violence in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* will suffice. Disputes in Bartertown are settled by the "law" of Thunderdome: "two men enter; one man leaves." Thunderdome is a huge dome-

shaped, caged arena where a no-rules, fight-to-the-death battle is staged between the quarrelling parties. The combatants are attached by harnesses to elastic straps that allow them to bound into the air during combat. Various weapons ranging from a war-hammer to a chain-saw are randomly hung around the dome for their use. The master of ceremonies is Dr. Dealgood, a post-apocalyptic game show host, with waist length hair, oversized cloak and a long staff. It is interesting to note here that justice has become a mockery. It is now a carnival show, perhaps like the public executions of the Middle Ages, only here, judge, jury, and executioner have been eliminated and two men settle their own disputes regardless of fault. The referee of contemporary professional boxing and wrestling matches has been replaced with a game show/propagandist who warns about the wrongs of the past and praises the new social order. The audience is left to wonder if this is what happens when the present day oppressed peoples are allowed to rule.

It is this violence in the films that addresses a second difference that Lewis cites between US and Australian culture. He explains an important cultural difference between the US and Australia concerns attitudes toward violence. The movies have traditionally reflected this violent aspect of US culture. It is important to point out, as Lewis does in his treatment, that in Hollywood the movies often offer audiences violence as a legitimate way of solving a problem, while Australian films, "displaced these fears of violence into fantasy-futuristic worlds...or into the fear of domestic violence" (Lewis, 16). As he shows, the *Mad Max* trilogy can fit into the first of these two categories for Australian audiences, however, that distinction is not required for US audiences. The violence in *The Road Warrior* is in keeping with the Hollywood understanding that violence is a legitimate means of problem solving, maybe even the preferred means. Therefore Max is not the exception to the rule but, as I have previously noted, the next in a long line of violence wielding good guys. In this way Mel Gibson continues in the long tradition of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson and others.

This super-hero violence is at the heart of Reaganism, which asserts that the threat from Communism, Socialists, tyrannical Ayatollahs, and conservatively constructed "deviants" are best confronted by violence. Reaganism supported and expanded the build up of US military might in a hyper-flexing of super-power muscle. In fact, the Hollywood good guy cowboy image, of which Reagan himself was a part, is at the center of the cultural politics of Reaganism. The powerful, violent, white hero is the protector and saviour of the social order which is continually challenged by social/political/cultural and or sexual "deviants" that are themselves constructed, and reproduced, by Reaganism's conservative power elite. As Jackson Katz observes these violent:

cultural heroes rose to prominence in an era, the mid-to-late 1970s into the 1980s, in which working class White males had to contend with increasing economic instability and dislocation, the perception of gains by people of colour at the expense of the White working class, and a women's movement that overtly challenged male hegemony. In the face of these pressures, then, it is not surprising that White men (especially but not exclusively working-class) would latch onto big, muscular, violent men as cinematic heroes (134-5).

In this way *The Road Warrior* is an artifact of Western conservatism and nationalism that articulates the hero of the classic Western and the construction of violent white masculinity with the polemics of cinematic Reaganism to support the prevailing conservative sentiment of the time. In fact, Reagan himself paid tribute to the violent white hero when he said, "Boy, I'm glad I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I'll know what to do next time" (Warner, 672).

The "American" Dream

Finally, Lewis presents a third way in which Australian and US culture differs, the belief in the American Dream. He states that the American Dream does not have an equal in Australia, primarily because of different social philosophies "many Australians don't believe in the American Dream, though most are aware of it..." (16). Therefore for a reference to the American Dream to appear would be unexpected, however, all we must do is look past the protagonist to the benefactors of Max's justice to find a Horatio Alger theme. For the mythology of the lone hero does not allow him to join into the society that he has set straight. He must move on, or always be left in the wasteland alone. However, it is Papagallo's settlers and The Waiting Ones that remind us that members of the elite group will succeed, even if it requires the aid of Max to clear the teleological pathway.

This speaks to the emphasis on patriarchy in Reaganite entertainment. As Britton explains, "patriarchy is very much the term to describe what gets reaffirmed in Reaganite entertainment: with unremitting insistence and stridency..." (24). The patriarchy is reaffirmed in *The Road Warrior*. It is Papagallo's traditional family-structured society that escapes with their technology to go on their way. And in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* it is Aunty's Bartertown that is destroyed and denied the power of technology.

The patriarchy is also supported at the end of *The Road Warrior* when we learn that "the Feral Kid" of Papagallo's miners is the narrator of the film and that in time he grows to manhood and becomes the leader of the clan. While they are together the boy and Max share a strange bond of rugged individualism that resembles a father/son relationship. In narration the adult Feral Kid tells us that he does not know what became of the Road Warrior, as he states, "He lives now only in my memories."

Max lives in his memories like so many American myths live in cinema. Obviously it is not a prerequisite of success that a film use these myths. Neither is it, as Hall points out in the article "Reflections Upon The Encoding/Decoding Model," certain that an audience will read a film in terms of any desired dominant culture ideology (254-5). However, it is important to search for those instances in which a cultural artifact resonates with its social times in an effort to better understand the possible political meanings in popular films.

Conclusion

The story of the Western is also one of capitalistic freedom. The taming of the West is actually the taking of territory by force. These stories suggest that the economic hardships of the late 1970s and 1980s that forced American white male workers out of traditional jobs would not be a problem if these men, like their mythic heroes, could take what they wanted through violent means. Indeed, Jon Stratton concludes that for Australian audiences, "What they [*Mad Max* and its sequel] achieve for the male positioned viewer is a hedonistic celebration of the culture built on Australian capitalism. This is the foundations of their popular success" (Stratton, 56).

Also, the inherent racism in many Westerns cannot be overlooked. Racism and brutality are often prevalent in Western drama. Moving West was about whites conquering the land and the people who inhabited it. The near genocide that resulted is the testament to this condition. The fear of the "other" is exemplified in the "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" mentality of many Western-film heroes. The theme of racial hatred is extrapolated in *The Searchers* where the fear of interracial sexuality drives Ethan Edwards to search for his niece, Debbie, so that he can kill her rather than rescue her from the "savages" who have kidnapped and raped her.⁽²¹⁾ That dreaded fear of interracial sexuality born of racial hatred is linked in *The Road Warrior* with the conservative hatred and fear of homosexuality.

The *Mad Max* films, particularly *The Road Warrior*, struck a cord with US audiences similar to the *Rambo* movies. However, the differences between them and the *Rambo* films are made obvious in that Rambo is a US warrior and is dealing with the issues surrounding Vietnam that were prevalent at that time. However, as Lipstitz suggests:

By circulating the stories of particular communities and cultures to a mass audience the culture industry invites comparison, interpretation, and elaboration. Cultural consumers find profound meanings in stories fashioned outside their own communities and they inevitably re-examine their own traditions in light of what they discover about other cultures (234).

US audiences can easily break through the often superficial differences between Australian and Hollywood films; as can Australian audiences. The narrative structure and iconography of *The Road Warrior* is familiar, as I have demonstrated in this analysis, and so the film invites comparison, interpretation and elaboration by US audiences to their social times, and to see the film in the context of the long history of lone hero mythology and as a further possibility for that mythology. The Western drama is at its heart a morality tale and that morality is constructed by those in power. The success of this film was tied to the growing nationalism of Reaganism as it fostered a fear of "the other," while also providing the violent white male hero, whose ilk would soon fill the movie screens.

Notes

1. The film was originally released as *Mad Max 2* except in North America.
2. Glen Lewis points out in his book *Australian Movies and the American Dream* that for triennial periods each film is in the top seven of the most popular Australian movies (1978-80, *Mad Max* is ranked fifth; 1981-83, *Mad Max II* is ranked seventh; and 1984-86, *Mad Max III* is ranked fourth). Certainly since the that time other Australian films have done very well, and even better, in the US with *Crocodile Dundee* as a well known example.
3. Released as *Mad Max 3* everywhere but the US *The Mad Max* trilogy of films are a very important part of the Australian New Wave movement. They brought considerable recognition to Australia's films, directors and actors by becoming internationally known and popular.
4. Thomas Schatz in his book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* lays out a comprehensive look at genre films. My work with genre theory and Westerns in this research draws heavily from his book. Genres can be classified according to whether they are of determinate space or indeterminate space. Those of determinate space include the ones which must take place within a specific locale (e.g. Westerns). Generally they have a strong, individual hero, who enters the space, acts to resolve some conflict over the space, then leaves. Because of this genres of determinate space are said to uphold the values of social order.
5. The two film industries have much in common in that many Australian directors chose to adapt their films to the genres created by Hollywood. In *Australian Movies and the American Dream* Lewis argues that because they grew up watching these genre films and were influenced by them and also because Hollywood conventions are expected by the viewers so variations "risk rejection"(8).
6. As Lewis states in *Australian Movies and the American Dream*, one of the reasons that Australian films of the New Wave period were able to easily cross over to American audiences lies in the fact that Australian film was influenced by English ancestry and American popular cinema (23).
7. The particular narrative components of each genre constitute its field of reference that may be examined in terms of three fundamental narrative components: setting, characters and story. 8. Fantastique is the use of mise-en-scene, characters, and plots that will suggest an exaggerated divide between contemporary times and those represented in the film. 9. Iconography is the process of narrative and visual coding that results from repetition thus becoming familiar.
10. Westerns are popular internationally. As Schatz explains their themes and values often center around simple binary opposites, like civilization vs. savagery, which can accommodate most good/evil dichotomies. The history of the Western is the history of legends. It is not a recounting of the what the "real" West was like but is a mythical creation of Hollywood based on the popular culture that preceded it.
11. For the purposes of this analysis I will use many of the terms that were commonly used in Westerns when referring to Native American peoples. The purpose of this is to show the discriminatory use of these terms in the films and to make the point that the mythical "savage" is being reformed in these films as a new "deviant" threat to the status quo. 12. Sharrett demonstrates the similarity to the Western genre.
13. As the title *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, satirically implies.
14. Of course, I am arguing that despite their Australian roots, there are prominent US specific themes in these movies. Self-reflexively I realize this can be, at least partially, contributed to my position as a US critic. This unavoidably ethnocentric perspective colors my reading of the films. However, I believe there is also strong textual and historical support for my arguments.
15. I draw heavily on Sharrett's article "The Hero as Pastiche: Myth, Male Fantasy, and Simulacra in *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*" for this insight.
16. The Western genre has a long history beginning with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) which is generally

considered to be the first American Western.

17. See Warner and Katz for excellent treatments of this point. 18. In Ford's film the rape and murder of a white woman by Scar's warriors is not shown but is suggested. Wayne's character, Ethan, finds her body and when questioned about her he says, "What do I have to do? Spell it out for you?" 19. A term I first heard used by historian M. Charles Smith in a personal interview. 20. I believe it is a Viewmaster brand.

21. Of course in the end Ethan does not kill Debbie but instead rescues and reconciles with her in the final moments of the film.

References

Britton, Andrew. "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment." *Movie* 31/32 (1986): 1-42.

Broeske, Pat. "George Miller." *Films in Review* 8 (October 1982) 480-2, 491.

Chute, David. "The Ayatollah of Moviola." *Film Comment*. July-August 1982: 28-31.

Combs, Richard. "Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome." *Monthly Film Bulletin* 52 (October 1985) 312-13.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'." In *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

Hall, Stuart. "Reflections Upon the Encoding/Decoding Model." In *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Critical Reception*, eds. Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis. Boulder: Westview, 1994.

Katz, Jackson. "Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity." In *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, eds. Gail Dines & Jean Humez. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995.

Lewis, Glen. *Australian Movies and the American Dream*. New York: Praeger Publications, 1987.

Lipstiz, George. "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans." In *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Matthews, Sue. *35mm Dreams: Conversations with Five Directors About the Australian Film Revival*. Sydney: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1984.

McFarlane, Brian. *Australian Cinema 1970-1985*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1987.

Mortimer, Lorraine. "The Soldier, the Shearer and the Mad Man." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21(2), (1993):139-156.

Ross, Andrew. "Ballots, Bullets, or Batman: Can Cultural Studies Do The Right Thing?." *Screen* 31(1), (1990): 26-44.

Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1981.

Sharrett, Christopher. "The Hero as Pastiche: Myth, Male Fantasy, and Simulacra in Mad Max and The Road Warrior." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. 13 (Summer 1985): 80-91.

Stratton, Jon. "What Made Mad Max Popular? The Mythology of a Conservative Fantasy." *Art and Text* 9 (Autumn 1983): 37-56.

Warner, William. "Spectacular Action: Rambo and the Pleasures of Pain." In *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula A. Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Author Information

J. Emmett WINN is Professor in the School of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University (Alabama). He is the author of *Documenting Racism: African Americans in US Department of Agriculture Documentaries, 1921-42*, *The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, and co-editor of *Transmitting the Past: Historical and Cultural Perspectives on Broadcasting*. His scholarly articles have appeared in *Critical Studies of Media Communication*, *The Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *Film and History*, among others.