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Local to Global Film Series

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Mad Max Fury Road Introduction

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Transcript--Introduction to *Mad Max: Fury Road*
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Thank you all for coming! I'm Lynne Stahl, the Humanities Librarian, and I'm excited to see so many people here because film studies seems to happen in sort of isolated pockets at WVU. I'm not an event planner, so I've been a bit stressed out until I realized that even if no one showed up I'd still get to watch *Mad Max* on a big screen.

It's hard to speak insightfully about a film without spoiling the plot, but it seems selfish to spoil the plot solely to make my intro comprehensible, so as a compromise I'll just give a very brief outline and then tell you way more than you ever wanted to know about the film's production history. We tend to view films as discrete units of consumption and self-contained narratives that stop at the edge of the screen after 90 minutes--but often the many tipping points and variables and iterations that make up the negative spaces around the movies we watch are just as illuminating, if not more so.

Mad Max: Fury Road takes place in a post-apocalyptic desert world in which oil and water are scarce and tightly controlled by tyrannical private groups and individuals. Humans are treated as extractable natural resources as well as laborers--Furiosa drives a gas rig under appalling conditions, and Max has been living in prison, repeatedly mined as a universal blood donor. (if anyone else has seen those ads encouraging students to donate plasma for money to buy their textbooks, you know that *Fury Road* is verging dangerously from "allegory" into "documentary").

Fury Road is a powerful story about climate change and about the ways existing social hierarchies might unfold as resource scarcity intensifies. But the path to existence for this story is itself scaffolded by existing political and material inequities--not to mention telling discrepancies between the contexts of the film's production and those of its consumption.

Given that we named this film series "Local to Global," it seems a bit misleading to start with an Australian production filmed in Namibia that features English and South African co-stars. But I think it actually makes a fitting transition from last year's Art in the Libraries theme of Water, much of which was locally focused.

Water continues to be an Appalachian issue as well as an international one. As many of you know, the 2014 Elk River chemical spill left 300,000 WV residents without water. In 2016, Air National Guard equipment leaked toxic chemicals into Martinsburg's water supply, forcing the city to spend millions of dollars on filtration. And in July of 2017, the Huntington Sanitary Board shut off water to the homes of more than 1,000 residents who were more than 30 days late on their water bills. So water scarcity is very local and very much bound up with existing social stratifications.

Development on *Fury Road* started in 1997, with filming set to begin in 2003 and Mel Gibson reprising the title role. However, the economic aftershocks of the 9/11 attacks and various trade and security issues related to the US invasion of Iraq made filming in the planned African location impossible. So director George Miller moved onto his next project, *Happy Feet*, a delightful animated comedy about a tap-dancing penguin. And after a series of public displays of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, Mel Gibson fell out of the lead role, to be replaced theoretically by Heath Ledger and ultimately by Tom Hardy after Ledger's death in 2008. Gibson found work elsewhere, starring in Jodie Foster's *The Beaver* as an executive who has a meltdown and starts communicating through a beaver hand puppet with a Cockney accent. So now he has to live with that on top of everything else.

In 2011, the second attempt to film was slated for Broken Hill, Australia, where *Mad Max 2* had been filmed. Broken Hill is a frontier mining town with a desert climate--but 2011 saw record-breaking rainfall, resulting in what the *Daily Telegraph* described as "a sea of blooming flowers"; hardly suitable scenery for post-energy crisis desolation.

So the shoot returned to Namibia. The Republic of Namibia is home to 2.5 million people, with one of the lowest population densities in the world its vast desert coverage. It was colonized by both Portugal and Germany and later came under South African, all the while being exploited for its mineral, agricultural, and marine resources. It achieved independence in 1990 and currently boasts a relatively stable economy.

The incredible scenery of the Namib Desert has made it a hot spot (!) for big budget productions, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* to the weird JLo vehicle *The Cell* to Angelina Jolie's *Beyond Borders*. But virtually no funding is available to local filmmakers, so Namibian productions are limited in means and reach. Meanwhile, local labor is readily available and cheap for Hollywood crews to hire, and no unions exist to ensure suitable conditions for Namibian workers. And the costs of such productions aren't just human: in 2013, a leaked report revealed claims that *Fury Road* shoots had damaged substantial portions of the world's oldest desert, jeopardizing its reptile populations, rare cacti, and fragile topography. These claims are of course part of a rapidly intensifying atmosphere.

Since preproduction on *Fury Road* started in 1997, we've seen 20 of the 22 warmest years on record. The top 10 years for acreage burned in wildfires have all occurred in that span as well, and Antarctica's mass has been shrinking at an average rate of 127 gigatons per year since 2002. Last October, a UN report warned that we're only 12 years from the point of no return with regard to carbon emissions.

But also last year, a Swedish teen who hadn't even been conceived in 1997 began skipping school in order to protest outside of parliament following Sweden's hottest summer on record. Greta Thunberg has gained international prominence for her grim outlook and insistence upon immediate, radical action.

In a 2019 speech, she said: “I often talk to people who say, ‘No, we have to be hopeful and to inspire each other, and we can’t tell [people] too many negative things’ ... But, no — we have to tell it like it is. Because if there are no positive things to tell, then what should we do, should we spread false hope? We can’t do that, we have to tell the truth.” And in December, “We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. [...] And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, then maybe we should change the system itself?” In other words, instead of sitting here discussing film and conducting business as usual, we should start blowing things up *yesterday*.

So now that I’ve painted this horribly bleak picture, have fun watching the movie!...no, I wanted to provide this context not to undermine the story *Fury Road* tells but precisely because it IS an amazingly executed story, and because those are things part and parcel: it wouldn’t be imaginable without the current dire situation, yet it’s also a vehicle to help us imagine ourselves out of the situation. We have to tell the truth, as Thunberg says, and often we tell it through stories. *Fury Road* is an effective allegory, I think, because it portrays so many ongoing crises that we tend to see merely as “issues” in terms of actual crisis: the logical extremes of organ extraction, water hoarding, violent misogyny, the prison-industrial complex.

It presents a horrifying but not-too-distant future, yet it also shows a way out through localized collective action. Thunberg is on a global stage, but we’ve seen incredible things at a national level from the likes of Emma Gonzalez and Stacey Abrams and the Standing Rock protestors. And they’re also present at the local level: public school teachers, the people organizing around the recent ICE raids, and groups such as the Appalachian Prison Book Project and Morgantown NOW.

I agree with Thunberg that our best shot lies in pessimism and panic. So while I sincerely hope that you enjoy the movie, I also hope it leaves you deeply anxious and unsettled--and I hope you let that anxiety drive you toward local action, for which you will find many needs and many opportunities here. Thank you!