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Beyond Traditional Herstory: Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015)

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1. Introduction

The Oscar winning blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road* is a 2015 action film directed by George Miller. In the film's post-apocalyptic world the chief of the Citadel, Immortan Joe (Hugh Keats-Byrne), has taken over all of the survival resources and created an army of half-life War Boys who are willing to die for him and ride eternally in Valhalla. Some of the few healthy people in the Citadel are the women that Immortan Joe keeps captive and mainly uses as breeders. The story begins with Joe sending a small group of War Boys led by Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) to Gas Town. Yet, Furiosa suddenly decides to stray off from the route. As soon as Joe notices that she is not going to Gas Town, he sends another group of War Boys to go after her, one of which is Nux (Nicholas Hoult), who has to bring with him his blood bag Max (Tom Hardy) because of his weak health. After an intense chase sequence Nux and Max separate from the group and end up joining Furiosa in her escape plan. It turns out she has tried to escape from the Citadel several times before, but this time is different because she firmly believes she will succeed. Along with Joe's wives, who are hidden inside Furiosa's War Rig, she will try to return to the place she was stolen from as a child: The Green Place of Many Mothers.

Mad Max: Fury Road is the fourth film of the *Mad Max* franchise, which started with *Mad Max* (1979), continuing with *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), all of them set in dystopian Australia. Some critics like Scott A.O., writing for the *New York Times*, see the film as a sequel to the trilogy, while others like Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* argue that "this film does not appear to run sequentially from the previous trilogy; it's more a general reimagining of the first, or overall raddled mood-scape of all three". *Fury Road* keeps the character of Max Rockatansky in the protagonist role, even if, this time, instead of a young Mel

Gibson, we find Tom Hardy in the role. Although it is not necessary to have seen the previous movies to understand the plot of *Fury Road*, the rationale behind Max's attitude can only be found in the previous films. The first film acts as a preface for all the films that come after, delivering the story of how Max the policeman became Mad Max, the lonely and traumatized hero, after losing his wife and child at the very beginning of this new post-apocalyptic era. In *Mad Max 2* we can see that he is not after vengeance: he is just wandering around in search for gasoline, a scarce resource in the film's world. In both *Mad Max* and *Mad Max 2* there is a male villain: in the first film it is Toecutter (Hugh Keats-Byrne), the leader of the motorcycle group that kills Max's wife and child; and in the second film it is Humungus (Kjell Nilsson). Even though in *Mad Max 2* there is a hero and a villain, Max is not looking for revenge, he fights the villain because he wants to help the community that Humungus is attacking. His motivation is that if he helps this community they will give him as much gasoline as he can carry so he can continue his lonely journey. This pattern – Max helping a community and then wandering away – is a narrative trait shared by *Mad Max 2*, *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road*.

In both *Mad Max* and *Mad Max 2*, most of the characters are men. The hostile environment where the films take place does not seem to be one where women can live and survive. In this sense, there is a noticeable change in the third film, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. For the first time there is a woman playing a relevant role for the plot, the chief of Bartertown, played by the famous 1980s singer Tina Turner. In this sense, it could be argued that the third film is a sort of transition between the all-male universe of the first two films and the feature that has been widely commented on in *Fury Road*, where Max is accompanied by Furiosa, a female character played by

Charlize Theron. There have been mixed opinions about Furiosa invading the masculine space that had been previously built in the first and second films:

Certain fans of the original franchise were upset by the political message the film projected in what was meant to be a "traditional" action film, whilst other fans denied that *Fury Road* was a feminist film altogether due to its blatant sexualization of the supermodel sex slaves and the glorification of masculinity throughout (Smith).

This essay will explore how the film in part follows some of the traditional patterns in male action films and at the same time introduces a new element. Even though it is called *Mad Max*, Max will not be the only protagonist, he will be joined by Furiosa – actually he will join Furiosa on *her* journey. This essay starts with a section about the portrayal of women in action films. The analysis of the film starts with a section on the different female roles in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and then concentrates on Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, in sections 2 and 3. As will be argued in the last part of the analysis, Furiosa and Max become a team, showing that there is a place for women (beyond the Amazon archetype) in the action genre.

2. Women in Action Films

According to Yvonne Tasker “action emerges as a distinct genre during the “New Hollywood” of the 1970s” and it is “associated with narratives of quest and discovery, and spectacular scenes of combat, violence and pursuit” (2). Traditionally this genre of films is addressed to a male audience and stars a male hero who fits certain stereotypical traits of hegemonic masculinity such as having a muscular body, being emotionally resilient in difficult situations or using his physical strength and endurance to overcome obstacles. In this sense, when we think about action cinema, the examples that first come to most people’s mind are films with male heroes such as the *Rambo* and *Rocky* franchises, together with other examples such as *Bloodsport* (Newt Arnold, 1988), *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) and *Kickboxer* (Mark DiSalle and David Worth, 1989), all of which include the stereotypes about male heroes mentioned above.

Apparently, at least at the beginning, there was no room in the action genre for strong female roles. Yet, as Yvonne Tasker argues “the genre shifted to incorporate higher profile female roles. (...) While Hollywood action movies frequently minimized the narrative significance accorded to female characters (...), from the second half of the 1980s the action heroine achieved greater prominence” (66). Tasker justifies this claim with the character Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the film *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), where she is presented as a kind of “Rambolina”, a connection which Schubart elaborates on in her book *Super Bitches and Action Babes*:

Cameron had just written and directed *The Terminator* (1984) and written the screenplay for *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and his take on Ripley was fueled by this high-octane masculinity of these two films. (...) The link between Ripley and Rambo go beyond weapons, victims, and white tops; it is also in their psychological profile and status as misfits. (176)

The behavior of Ripley in *Aliens* is different from the 1979 film *Alien* in the sense that in the first film she is not familiar with the creature that is about to attack the crew. From the first film to the second there is an increase in confidence and authority, as Ripley was the only survivor of the first alien attack and in *Aliens* she has the advantage of her knowledge and her experience from her previous mission.

For Schubart, the character profiles of some female heroes in the 1980s may have been modelled on their male counterparts, which can be seen as one of the ways in which these movies try to promote gender equality since these female characters are as capable of surviving in a hostile environment as the male heroes of action films. In the case of Ripley in *Aliens*, for instance, she is the most qualified person in a group of mostly male characters, and when the danger gets serious everybody listens to what she has to say. She goes from being a “misfit” at the beginning of the film (the rest of the crew thinks that she is exaggerating about how dangerous the aliens are) to becoming a figure of unquestionable authority. Her case evidences a noticeable shift from the usual role of women in action cinema, as “women have often played a supporting role, functioned as a prize or passively awaited rescue” (Tasker 66). This shift regarding female roles in action films can be related to the sociocultural context at the time. As a 1986 article puts it “women seem to be crowding into sectors of the work force traditionally occupied by men. (...) The future apparently promises yet more blurring of traditional sex roles in the work force” (Guilder).

In spite of the fact that there is noticeable progress from the second half of the 80s onwards regarding the representation of women in action films, there was still a key difference between male and female characters. Rikke Schubart mentions that in action films “men don't have to *look* good to be heroes. It's different with women. The first step to qualify as female hero in a man's world is to be young and beautiful” (5).

Schubart's claim is not restricted to film representation, but can be extrapolated to other domains as well. The documentary *Pumping Iron II: The Women* (George Butler, 1985) is about female bodybuilders in the context of the general 1980s trend of women training to have a more toned physique. It revolves around two main protagonists, Bev Francis and Rachel McLish. While Francis had a more masculine physique and did not abide by the beauty standards of the decade, McLish was the personification of the ideal 1980s toned and slim physique (together with a pretty face). Bev Francis won the competition shown in the documentary and got considerable recognition after it, but her fame stayed just within the bodybuilding community. Rachel McLish, on the other hand, won second place at the competition but became famous in the mainstream media, writing her own training books and appearing as a host on a TV aerobics championship as well as on the cover of several fitness magazines. In a sense, she did not win the competition but she won overall because the documentary opened many business opportunities for her.

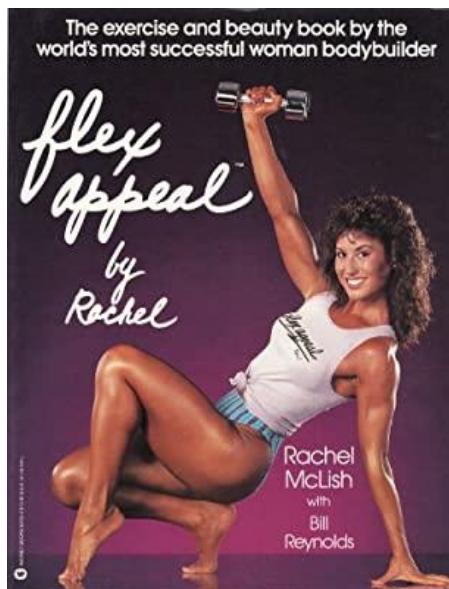


Figure 1: Rachel McLish on the cover of one of her training books

The case of Rachel McLish is an example of the “in-betweenness” of the female heroes described by Schubart: “The term captures the dual nature of the female hero composed of stereotypical feminine traits (beauty, a sexy appearance, empathy) and masculine traits (aggression, stamina, violence)” (2). Rachel

McLish, the body builder, was more successful on mainstream media than Bev Francis because she conformed to specific beauty standards. Her case is

not that different from that of female action heroes at the time when the most iconic

male action films were made: they could only be heroines of this traditionally male genre if they were at the same time aesthetically pleasing for men to look at. This can read in the light the archetype of the Amazon that Rikke Schubart mentions in *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, which she exemplifies with the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (John Schulian and Robert Tapert, 1995-2001). Schubart argues that “like the Amazon, Xena is female, yet masculine in spirit. Her appearance is the Amazon aesthetic: (...) accentuating her long legs and cleavage” (238). As Tasker puts it, there is “the tendency to portray action women in relentlessly sexual terms” (66). The fact that Xena (Lucy Lawless) is sexualized in the series does not take away from how empowering she can be as a heroine, but it certainly helps attract male spectators. In this sense, the archetype of the Amazon can be related



Figure 2: Lucy Lawless as Xena in the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001)

to Laura Mulvey’s views on the male gaze in classical cinema. For Mulvey, female characters are constructed as the object of the male gaze and they provide spectators with the pleasure of scopophilia, “the erotic basis of looking at another person as object” (835).

Yet, the Amazon is not the only type of female hero we find in action films nowadays. The characters of Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) and Ripley from *Aliens*, mentioned earlier, can no longer be accommodated into Schubart’s category of the Amazon. This can be seen at first glance by the way they look, as they are not sexualized in the same way as the Amazons are. For Schubart characters like Connor and Ripley embody the archetype of

the mother, who, as she says, has three phases: “good mother, bad mother and new mother” (32). In the first phase they are the perfect example of a traditional (weak) female figure in any film centered around men. In the case of Sarah Connor she is vulnerable in *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) because she is unable to protect herself from the terminator that came to kill her. As for Ripley, no one listens to her warnings in *Alien* and lots of people end up dead because of this. In the second phase, “Sarah, who was pregnant in *Terminator* and abandoned her son in *Terminator 2* because she was obsessed with saving the world (...) is a bad mother because she wants to be in a man's place” (30), and in *Aliens* “Ripley has accidentally slept for fifty-seven years in her ship lost in space” (29). This phase is characterized by them both abandoning their child in order to be part of a men's world, which for Sarah means going on an adventure to save the world and for Ripley going on a space mission. They finally get to the phase of the new mother, where they reach “a unique combination of masculine and maternal qualities” (Schubart 169). In this phase Sarah protects her son while remaining a strong female character and Ripley is given a second chance on her second mission. After losing her daughter when she went away on her first mission she has the opportunity to save Newt's (Carrie Henn) life and takes care of her as if she was her own daughter. According to Schubart, this new mother, along with adopting the new attitude to “*never* leave a child behind” (181), is again “an ambiguous product of in-betweenness: (...) both a nervous wreck with nightmares and a strong mother defending her family” (182). The evolution and especially the last stage of these two iconic women seems to be the forerunner for what would happen the following years in other action and science-fiction films from the 21st century, as is the case of Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

3. Mad Max: Fury Road

3.1. Women in *Mad Max: Fury Road*: The Prisoners, the Wise and the Survivors

As mentioned in the introduction, the previous *Mad Max* films did not feature any female lead characters. For Luke Buckmaster, this does not have to be misinterpreted, as “George Miller is not the kind of director – even in the name of characterization or setting – to engage in overly sexist imagery or dialogue” (182). His aim was never to create an exclusively male atmosphere, and if it ever seemed to turn out like that, it was because the context of the hostile environment required it, but at any point were there no female characters at all.

Strong white men have always been the focus of *Mad Max*, though its universe also contains some tenacious female characters. (...) All these characters, however, consumed minimal space in the narrative. They were certainly not driving the story, nor anywhere close to the proverbial wheel. But *Imperator Furiosa* in *Fury Road* is – or perhaps tells – a different story. (Buckmaster 227)

Shortly after the release of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, George Miller was surprised by the reception that it had, as it was described as a feminist action film. In several interviews he comments that, just like the previous *Mad Max* films, this was just how *Fury Road* turned out to be: “Initially, there wasn’t a feminist agenda” (in Gallagher 52). “Their champion can’t be male because that’s a different story, about one male stealing the prize stock from another. So it had to be a female Road Warrior, and the rest followed” (in Buckmaster 266). As Cavan Gallagher from *Metro Magazine* puts it,

[...] women have always featured prominently in the series, as evidenced by *Warrior Woman* (Virginia Hey) from *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Auntie Entity* (Tina Turner) from *Mad Max Beyond*

Thunderdome (1985). Yet, if Miller had dabbled in portraying powerful women in these films, this latest installment sees him take the idea further than ever before. (51)

In order to explain the character of Furiosa, the main female hero in *Fury Road*, she has to be put into context first in relation to the rest of the female characters in the film. Apart from her, the first group of women we see in the film are the ones who live inside Immortan Joe's fortress in the Citadel. When the camera shows what is inside the fortress, we see a group of women who are being milked like cows and their milk is given to the War Boys for extra nourishment. There is not much information about them, but it can be assumed that producing milk is their only function. These women are overweight, which is unusual taking into account that there is a shortage of food and water in the film's diegetic world, so that is a sign of their "privileged" status because they are nurturers. They are dressed in white with their swollen breasts exposed and connected to milking machines.

Another group of women in the citadel is that of Joe's Five Wives, whom he uses as breeders. The Wives are dressed in revealing white gauze outfits that accentuate their bodies as well as set them apart from the dirty lower classes that live below them – literally and figuratively – as the tower of rocks that constitutes their home is situated above everyone else's home. The fact that the Wives and the producers of milk are dressed in white shows that they are confined to the citadel and have plenty of water to wash themselves, which is a luxury. The Wives' beauty and slim and toned bodies also set them apart from the rest, who tend to have some visible birth defect or illness that makes them not so attractive. In contrast with the half-life War Boys – and most of the Citadel's population – the Wives are actually full-life, meaning that they are healthy, which is something rare after the nuclear apocalypse and that is why they are so valuable for Joe. He needs to breed with full-life women in order to have full-life heirs

and “repopulate it (the world) – in his own image” (Sexton et al.). Joe’s Wives are not happy with this situation, in particular with the fact that Joe literally refers to them as his property. The objectification of the Wives is shared by other characters. For instance, when Nux sees them during the chase he describes them with the following words: “Oh look at them. So shiny, so chrome”. Nux is using two words that are normally used for cars, which means, on the one hand, that the Wives are a man’s property, as is the case of cars in the film, but also that Nux was raised in this world of men and machines and that is the only vocabulary he knows to express that something is beautiful.

Although they are trapped, the Wives certainly live very privileged lives. According to the comic book that provides a backstory for the film: “Immortan Joe’ kept them imprisoned (...) in a vault where he gave them filtered air and water (...) To guard against depression and mental illness, he gave the girls and education” (Sexton et al.). Along with those privileges comes the huge burden of Joe having sex with them against their will and knowing that their children’s fate is to be warlords just like their father and promote his dictator-like way of ruling the Citadel. Angharad (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley) is Joe’s favorite wife because he considers her the most beautiful and also because she is going to give birth to a full-life son. Not much is told about her backstory in the film, but Sexton’s comic book reveals that the scar she has on her face was caused by self-harm and also that when she got pregnant she tried to give herself an abortion, but Furiosa stopped her. On the other hand there is Cheedo (Courtney Eaton), who seems to be the only wife who, at some point, regrets having left the Citadel once they have departed on their journey and start having difficulties.

Miss Giddy (Jennifer Hagan) is the History Woman and the Wives’ teacher. Even though she is only featured in one scene, George Miller has a backstory for this

character which is also collected in the comic book named after the film. She is one of the elders who saw the decline of the world from the very beginning. She can be identified because, as all keepers of history, she has text tattooed all over her body. At the end of the film there is actually a quote that says the following: “Where must we go...we who wander this Wasteland in search of our better selves?.” The quotation is attributed to someone called The First History Man, whose identity “cannot be found in the film itself, but rather an official comic book published after *Fury Road*’s release (...)”. It explains how “when the world fell – and the books were burnt – it became up to men and women such as he to preserve the stories of humankind by communicating them orally” (Buckmaster 159). This man is the narrator of the backstories in the comic book. In the illustrations that appear of him he looks just like Miss Giddy with all the tattoos and they both look about the same age.

The Vuvalini are a community of mostly older women, although in the film there is also a woman of about Furiosa’s age. They are not from the Citadel but from Furiosa’s birth place: The Green Place of Many Mothers. The eldest ones do not look as old as Miss Giddy, but they seem old enough to also have seen the decline of the world. In fact, there is a scene where they see the rests of a satellite in the sky and mention that they were used to broadcast (TV) shows, so they were certainly around before the fall of humanity. The Green Place used to be a thriving a matriarchal community and, from the information that is given in the film, we know that their soil used to be fertile and they planted many fruits and vegetables. As they say to Furiosa, there came a moment when the water got poisoned and the soil went sour, so they could no longer live there. The big community was cut down to just a few women wandering the Wasteland on their motorbikes. Taylor Boulware points out that “the Vuvalini are not pacifists, nor is their community single-sex or anti-male. The Vuvalini are wary of men, but they do not hate

them” (7), so when they see that Furiosa has brought Max and Nux with her they ask her who they are, but after checking that they are good people they accept them.

3.2. Furiosa: The One who Puts the Fury in Fury Road

Furiosa is the most important female character in the film and the one who starts the conflict when Immortan Joe sends her to Gas Town and she deviates from her path.

The plot kicks off when one of the dictator’s high-ranking officials (called ‘emperors’), Furiosa – with her grease-smeared forehead and a mechanical prosthetic in place of her left forearm – attempts to liberate the Five Wives. She hides them in her hulking truck, the War Rig, and journeys to somewhere she remembers as a child (called the Green Place). A certain Max Rockatansky joins early and tags along for the ride. (Buckmaster 219)

She is different from the rest of the female characters because she was kidnapped from the Green Place as a child and has lived in the Citadel ever since, so she has been part of two different communities. There is no information about how she became Immortan Joe’s Emperor or why she was taken away from the Green Place. What we do know is that she is unhappy in the Citadel and has tried to escape many times without any success. This time, as she says to the Wives in the War Rig, is her best chance and she is not willing to waste it. She is mainly doing this for herself, but the Wives have decided to join her on her journey in order to escape from their captor. This character is very knowledgeable about the global situation because she has both seen the situation of the “plebeians” living below and the Wives living above everyone else in their isolated bubble. In fact she shows a bit of resentment towards Angharad when the latter complains about her wound. Furiosa’s answer “out here everything hurts” implies that the Wives have no idea of how hard the journey to the Green Place is

going to be. “Furiosa is part of a longstanding tradition of female action heroes that can kick butt just as hard as any man, but are able to show raw emotion where more traditional male heroes may just grunt stoically” (Gallagher 51).



Figure 3: Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Moving on to her looks, this character is far from Schubart’s archetype of the Amazon. She has quite a masculine appearance with the buzz cut, the military pants, the boots and her belt with Immortan Joe’s symbol with chains dangling between her legs – not to mention her prosthetic arm. Also her shoulder pad could be reminiscent of Max’s look in *The Road Warrior*, which may act as a link between the original trilogy and the new sequel/reboot. “Furiosa is at once terse and deadpan, motherly and capable of grisly violence, fearful of a world that calls for her extinction and hopeful that perhaps there’s still a future to be saved from the hellscape in which she exists” (Suzanne-Mayer and Roffman).

In spite of her power, she is not someone who is looking to become a leader, but it just turns out that she occupies that position when she decides to turn around and take over the Citadel while it is unprotected. For this last part of the chase, the Vuvalini join Furiosa, the Wives, Max and Nux and they get ready for battle. In order to rule the Citadel not only would they have to get there alive before Joe and his army, but they would have to kill the leader in order for his minions to surrender. It is Furiosa who ends up killing Immortan Joe on their way back to the Citadel, and when she is about to tear his breathing mask off his face she says to him: “Remember me”. Her words resonate with several meanings. She is asking to be remembered for being the first

person in the Citadel to oppose to the man who has all the power. The second meaning would be a rhetoric “Remember me?”, as if she was saying to Joe “Remember when you took me away from my people? Well, now I am doing the same to you in return”. In this sense killing Joe would be an act of revenge more than one of rebellion.

According to Suzanne-Mayer, to “compare her to Ripley or any of the great action heroines is to oversimplify Theron’s radical (in every sense) vision of a new kind of savior”. As will be argued in the next section, Furiosa has some similarities with other action heroines but, the fact that she is played by Charlize Theron, adds new connotations to the role.

3.3. She’s a Bitch, a Lover, a Child and a Mother

As will be argued in this section, the character of Furiosa cannot be analyzed without taking into account the star persona of Charlize Theron. The South African actor, who became a fashion model at the age of fourteen, has her outstanding physical beauty as one of the defining features of her star persona. Yet, her looks do not stop her from playing a variety of roles, some of which imply a radical physical transformation.

As Buckmaster mentions, one important landmark of Theron’s career is her winning of the “Academy Award in 2004 for her virtually unrecognizable performance as real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos in the crime drama *Monster* [Patty Jenkins, 2004]” (228). As Christopher Orr from *The Atlantic* comments, before she appeared in *Monster*, “she had shown little sign that she was destined for anything more than eye-candydom”. She was known for films such as *The Devil’s Advocate* (Taylor Hackford, 1997) and *Celebrity* (Woody Allen, 1998), where she played the wife of Keanu Reeves’ ambitious lawyer in the former and an unnamed supermodel in the latter. Her role in

Monster less than a decade later involved a shift in her acting career and made her gain recognition, not only for her performance but also for her willingness to undergo such an extreme physical transformation. She had to gain weight for the role and look unattractive on screen, which not every good-looking actress would agree to do. Yet, that does not mean that she would say no to showing her stunning looks onscreen: she has been the face of Dior's scent J'adore since 2004, the same year that *Monster* was released (Schueneman).

From the late 2000s and throughout 2010s her screen roles have oscillated between the two ends of the spectrum of her star persona. In this period of time she would interpret a wider range of characters than before, appearing in dramas such as *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggins, 2007), comedies such as *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011) and even action films, as is the case of Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Even if none of these films implied the radical transformation of *Monster*, these were roles that did not rely on the actor's physical beauty. Among her more recent roles we find the action film *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), where she plays a sexy undercover agent who is beautiful and at the same time gets involved in quite brutal fights with men and beats them. In *Tully* (Jason Reitman, 2018) she also had to gain some weight for her role and look unattractive on screen. She goes from saving the milking women and the Wives in *Fury Road* to being trapped in her motherly routine in Jason Reitman's film. The last role that I would like to mention is the one in *Bombshell* (Jay Roach, 2019), where she plays one of the Fox News reporters who denounced the sexual harassment that they have been getting from their boss.

There is an underlying common theme in the roles that Theron has played from *Fury Road* onwards, which is that they have feminist connotations. In one way or another, the characters that she plays in these films have to be brave and take control of

their life in order to succeed in a predominantly male world. In this sense, the star persona of Charlize Theron cannot be separated from the meanings of female empowerment of her later roles. Because of the sense of female empowerment that is part of Theron's star persona, it is argued that in *Mad Max: Fury Road* Furiosa overpowers Max, the character whose name appears in the title of the whole franchise and who in the eyes of the fans of the original trilogy should be the only focus of the sequel/ reboot.

3.4. “A true leader does not need others to make him strong. A true leader gives others the strength to stand alone.”

If the film is called *Mad Max: Fury Road*, where is Max? As Gallagher puts it, “the film opens with Max getting captured by the War Boys, losing his V8 interceptor (...) and, after an unsuccessful escape attempt, getting strapped to Nux's car as a mobile blood bag” (54). At the beginning Nux and his blood bag are part of Immortan Joe's entourage, but shortly after Max finds himself sitting alongside Furiosa in her War Rig. He decides to help her on her journey back to the Green Place and they complement each other during the long chase at the heart of the film. Buckmaster raises the following questions: “is the protagonist of *Fury Road* Max Rockatansky? Or could it be that Emperor Furiosa, the similarly hard-bitten hero who escapes with Immortan Joe's Five Wives, and thus whose undoubtedly matters most to the story, has superseded Max as the most important character?” (227-8). My answer to this question would be that they act as a team most of the time, as Furiosa is his “female counterpoint” (Buckmaster

228). As the plot develops they learn to rely on one another and that is how they become a team.

Max is an example of a man who does not discriminate women on the basis of their gender, as he trusts Furiosa. There is a night scene when the War Rig gets stuck in the sand and they are being chased by the Bullet Farmer (Richard Carter). They have a weapon that only has three shots left and Max wastes the first two by shooting at the Bullet Farmer and missing. Without showing any kind of ego, he passes the weapon to Furiosa, who is a great shooter, and she manages to blind the Bullet Farmer, which allows them to escape from Immortan Joe's retinue: "Max and Furiosa quickly develop a synergy in battle, a kind that neither seems able to muster alone – a genuine partnership" (Gallagher 55).

The original *Mad Max* trilogy was "inspired by the writing of mythologist Joseph Campbell, in particular a book called *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*", which explains the pattern of most heroic journeys: "the hero setting out on a journey, the challenging journey ahead of them (often to save a community) and the need for the hero to find inner strength" (Buckmaster 104-5). Buckmaster also comments that it "resembles a western" and that it carries "philosophical and socio-political undertones" (xv). This pattern of the Campbellian hero's journey can still be seen in the sequel/reboot. The film starts with Max wandering around the wasteland alone on his metal horse, the V8 interceptor, until he gets captured by Joe's army to be used as a blood bag. Then he joins the community formed by Furiosa, the Five Wives and later on the Vuvalini. While he is with them he undergoes a transformation, as he goes from being a mad savage who communicates mostly through grunts to adopting some of the women's sensitivity and compassion. The scene that marks the height of his transformation is when Furiosa has just killed Immortan Joe and they are about to take

over the Citadel. She is injured and unconscious and is losing a lot of blood, so he pulls out his needles and his blood tube and gives her a blood transfusion to save her life. This is a moment in which they are literally bonded, and it is actually the first time that Max tells his name to Furiosa. The fact that he finally tells his name may represent that, thanks to being in contact with Furiosa and the rest of the women, he “regains not only his strength but also a link to his own humanity” (Gallagher 55) after years of being by himself and having forgotten how to communicate with people. “It’s a movie about how men and women can be not just ‘allies’ to one another (...) but real comrades, who must overthrow a common enemy and share a common fate” (Gallagher 55). At the same time, the ending is not what one would expect from this particular film, where the audience might expect that Max and Furiosa end up as a couple. It is just like the endings of the original trilogy, in which the hero, after having helped the community, returns to his initial state of lonely Road Warrior.

Just as some critics and spectators may wonder about Max’s role in a film where Furiosa’s centrality seems to relegate him to the background, others may question the feminism of a film that includes moments in which Max becomes the hero who saves the female character (as happens for instance in the blood transfusion scene mentioned above). Tracy King from *New Statesman* points out, for instance, that “a feminist masterpiece would have its female lead, not its male lead, emerge triumphant and reveal the body of her enslaver with a rousing speech”. She is referring to the end of the film, when they finally arrive to the Citadel driving Immortan Joe’s gigahorse with the dead body on the hood of the car. At this moment Furiosa is still recovering from being unconscious and that is why it is Max who faces Joe’s sons and subjects. Nevertheless, it is Furiosa – not Max – who rises on the platform to become the new leader of the Citadel. From my point of view, Max’s presence and role in the film do not diminish

Furiosa's worth as an independent woman. Just as in a (male) buddy film the two characters act as sidekicks and the strong points of each of them compensate for the weak points of the other, it is possible to see the relationship between Max and Furiosa in a similar light. If Furiosa has to be accompanied by a man, it is not because she is not a strong enough character, it is because the movie emphasizes collaboration and not individualistic heroism. Max knows that Furiosa is a better shooter than he is, which is why he gives her the weapon with the last shot. In a sense, it could be argued that the relationship between Max and Furiosa transcends gender roles, making them almost irrelevant. As Miller claimed in relation to the second film, "the women and men and their sexual roles are not as defined in this primitive world as they are in our society. Men and women are simply interchangeable" (in Buckmaster 108).

Yet, it could also be argued that, this presumed blindness towards gender roles is a coveted way of supporting an unequal status quo (instead of trying to change it). In any case, the image of Furiosa at the end of the film, as the leader of the Citadel, while Max goes away (probably in search of another adventure) should not be underestimated. As many have claimed, feminism, which after all promotes and fights for equality between men and women, will never be achieved without men. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has argued that in the same way as men have contributed to the secondary role played by women throughout history, they can (and should) undo the damage by supporting them. This is exactly what Max does in this film: he is part of the women's team, which makes him a feminist ally. Even though he may never say this out loud (which is not surprising in a movie with so little dialogue), the film's visual language shows that he feels that way. The film could have ended with both of them going up on the platform (either as a team or a couple) but it does not. After having shared with her the intimate moment of the blood transfusion and finally telling his name to her, when

they arrive to the Citadel, he helps her get out of the gigahorse to declare herself as the new ruler. When they get onto the platform there is a close-up of both characters where she is looking at the inhabitants of the Citadel, probably thinking of the future of this community. Then a close-up leaves Furiosa offscreen to show Max and his contemplative gaze. After cutting to three different shots of the Citadel's population finally getting all the water they want, the film cuts to a low angle shot that shows the platform, which keeps going up. This is followed by a close-up of Furiosa realizing that Max is no longer standing behind her at the platform. She finds him in the crowd below and a sequence of shot/reverse shots shows, by means of internal focalization, that Furiosa is grateful for Max's collaboration and that Max is happy for Furiosa's achievements and wishes her well, which means that he wholeheartedly supports the idea of Furiosa being the first female ruler of the Citadel. After their "conversation" Max makes a gesture to say goodbye and there is a cut to a high angle of Furiosa turning her back to the camera and looking at how Max disappears in the crowd. The shot that closes the film is one where Furiosa is in the same position as in the previous one, looking down and watching Max go away, but this time the camera is shooting from a low angle showing her face. The camera remains still and Furiosa gradually disappears from the frame as the platform continues to rise. The film ends with a quotation from the first *History Man*: "Where must we go...we who wander this Wasteland in search of our better selves?". In the light of this analysis, this quotation can be related to the fact that there is room for improvement in society, particularly in the gender equality department. As a ruler, Furiosa will try to transform the Citadel into a place where men and women will be equals and both will have the choice to be whoever they want to be.

4. Conclusion

This essay has explored the role of Furiosa in the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* in the context of the growing emergence of strong female action heroines, highlighting the fact that Furiosa and Max become a team as the main stars of the film. It starts with a contextualization of the female-led action films that were made at the same time when their male-led counterparts were at their height of popularity. Sarah Connor from *Terminator* and Ripley from *Alien* were especially interesting for the analysis even if other female heroines, such as the protagonist from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, are also mentioned.

The analysis of the film starts with an exploration of the most relevant female roles in the film. From the oppressed yet privileged Immortan Joe's Five Wives, to Miss Giddy, who has witnessed the decline of the world and has pieces of history tattooed on her skin, to the matriarchal community of the Vuvalini. The second part of the analysis concentrates on Furiosa, who in a way encompasses all the experiences of the other female characters in the sense that she has belonged to different communities. She was born in The Green Place of Many Mothers, where the Vuvalini originally lived, but was stolen from there as a child by Immortan Joe and has lived in the Citadel ever since. Even living in the Citadel, thanks to her Emperor rank, she was not limited to just one place but she had the opportunity to interact with everybody, from the most privileged ones living on the top of the rock to the lower classes that lived below. This is how she met the Wives, with whom she would escape at the beginning of the film with the hope of returning to her original home, the Green Place.

The well-rounded feminist character of Furiosa has a strong resemblance with the journey of the acting career and star persona of Charlize Theron, who at the time she

made *Fury Road* had already surprised the audience with other roles in which she separated from the hyper feminine roles she played at the very beginning of her career. Furiosa became an embodiment of female empowerment and became a key one to define the star persona of Charlize Theron.

The last part of the analysis reads the relationship between Max and Furiosa in a feminist light. It highlights the similarities between the two characters and argues that one of the reasons why their partnership works is because both share the view that men and women should treat each other as equals. The fact that Max does not stand next to Furiosa when she goes on the platform at the end of the film seems to be advocating for the collaboration of men in the fight for equality between genders, which makes it, from my point of view, a feminist film.

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