Driver of the (Post-)Apocalypse:
Mythic Paradigms in the *Mad Max* Trilogy
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In 1999, twenty years after the release of the first *Mad Max* film, it was remarked that the trilogy—*Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max 2/The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985)—written and directed by George Miller still enjoyed popularity. They were regularly included into cable television programs, and earned a cult status among a strong party of fans (Barbour 1999:28).

In 2006 the situation is very similar. The *Mad Max* films still have the power of attracting new followers among people a generation younger than the audience that could still see these films on the big screen. A random test in video libraries—in Australia and a number of other countries—would prove without doubt that the *Mad Max* films are almost continuously on loan, and there is a waiting list of fans and

interested prospective fans, which is a clear indication of the films unfailing popularity.

When first released, *Mad Max* immediately attracted film critics' attention. Review titles such as "Dangerous Pornography of Death" (Adams 1979:38) or "Violent, Lacking Social Value" (DuBose 1979:21) were strong indicatives of the displeasure felt over the then new product of the Australian Cinema, which was shockingly different from the other films of the same era.

Some criticised director George Miller for exporting the American genre of the road movie into the Australian terrain of the cinema or neglecting Australian "cultural specificity" (Cunningham 1985:237), whilst others acknowledged that Miller was a "gifted director of suspense," yet his work was unoriginal, and although *Mad Max* was "technically brilliant," it lacked "both anybody to care about and anything to think about" (Hall 1984:160-161). History, however, proved otherwise.

When the shock of the firs reviewers had faded, a significant amount of more appreciative attention was devoted to various aspects of the trilogy. Stuart Cunningham argues that the *Mad Max* films excelled in technical brilliance and managed to "outdo Hollywood on the grounds it knows best" and the (1985:237). The trilogy's Australian-ness was commented upon in terms of "white panic" (Morris http://pandora.nla.gov.au/), whilst others focused on the family targeted visually and as well as conceptually (Morris 1989:116, Dermody-Jacka 1988:139). In 2003 Adrian Martin's monograph was published as part of the Australian Screen Classics Series by Currency Press and ScreenSound Australia (National Screen and Sound Archive).

The trilogy proved a fertile soil for mythological readings, and that is where my own interest lies too. The trilogy fits into a trend of the late 1970s and early 80s, when the most popular mythographer featuring in the terrain of popular cinema was Joseph Campbell. The relation between Campbell's paradigm of the questing hero and George Lucas' cinematic-history shaping *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) has been widely aired, and George Miller also acknowledged Campbell's influence on his own work. Miller also admitted that the creators of *Mad Max* were "unwitting servants of the collective unconscious" and he was taken by surprise when suddenly was "made aware of the workings of mythology (Matthews 1984:34).

My present enquiry targets the blending of mythic paradigms of creation, fertility, deliverance and the questing hero, all woven into the fabric of the eschatological myth of the apocalypse. My aim is to trace ways in which the *Mad Max* films write a new text over a set of old ones in palimpsest-like manner while erasing, re-organising or patch-working the original.

Before turning to the actual texts, however, it is necessary to briefly comment upon the concepts of myth, and apocalypse, since both are have accumulated a variety of meanings and definitions ranging from simply erroneous knowledge to that of sacred narratives.

The theologian Don Cupit defines myth as

> a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal of universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual; it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time … the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate … it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. (1982:29)

Cupitt's definition circumscribes the group of traditional stories inherited from Egyptian, Greek, Roman, or other ancient mythologies from the dawn of mankind, as well as those of still virile religions whether concerning the doings of Jesus Christ or the Buddha.

Myths preserved by communities untouched by civilization were explored, mapped and catalogued by —among others—twentieth-century mythographers, such as John Frazer, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, who aimed at finding the key to the ancient texts with the help of the ones still at work in the above-mentioned societies. Each of these scholars traced and elaborated one preferred paradigm that they believed would explain the function and/or the meaning of all myths. Frazer presumed to find the key in the fertility myth, whilst Eliade and Campbell in the creation and the hero myths respectively. The diversity of mythic narratives, however, refuses such generalization. The paradigmatic nature of myths cannot be disputed, but their diversity as well as the interrelatedness of the various patterns and myth-systems indicate that there is no "pure paradigm" either (Coupe 1997:5).

One of the most easily identifiable archaic paradigms manifest in the three *Mad Max* films is that of the Apocalypse. Winston Churchill, when commenting on the atomic bomb, warned that "the stone age may return on the gleaming wings of science" (Cowart 1989:83). Churchill's remark seems to coincide with Eliade's concept of the terror of history, which "creates" the periodic reversion to a timeless beginning, an "eternal return" (1954:141-47). The terrible knowledge of the nuclear bomb gives new meaning to the apocalyptic perception of the future of humankind.

The word *apocalypse* derives from Greek and means revelation. For literary scholars an apocalypse is a literary genre or a text within that, for theologians it is a "religious perspective, in which God's eschatological plans are conceived" (Webb 1990:115-6). Probably the most widely known apocalyptic texts in Western-type cultures are "St. John's Book of Revelations," often referred to as "Apocalypse," in *The New Testament* and those of Daniel and Jeremiah of *The Old Testament*. The apocalyptic texts of both books of the *Bible* were written in times of crises. Apart from them there exists a rich body of revelatory literature. Although they do vary on the narrative level, most share a structure that includes a set of revelations, an eschatological culmination to a horrible destruction of the world, and concludes with a prophetic vision of salvation and millennial promise for the true and faithful. The *Mad Max* films display unmistakable parallels with these biblical narratives, which I will attempt to explore to some extent below.

If apocalyptic texts are crisis texts with the pragmatic goals and offering a community in distress a hope of escape or promise for a better future, then we must consider briefly the possibility to read the *Mad Max* trilogy in such terms too. The three *Mad Max* films were created within a time period when the global political climate favoured the kind of apocalyptic interpretation to be met in the trilogy. Following the Korean Airline disaster in 1978 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire Speech" (1982) and the implementation of his "Star Wars" strategy (1983), tensions between the two world-powers of the USA and the then Soviet Union grew to dangerous levels. It was not until the beginning of summit talks in 1985 that the cold war tensions started to ease up.

All these events of daily politics may have affected the contemporary spectators' mind as real worries, and it is tempting to believe that the films were attempted to respond to these political events, or simply to exploit such fears lurking in the audience's mind. The dates of the theatrical release and the level of the eschatological component of the three *Mad Max* films coincide with the anxiety felt over the global political situation outlined above, and thus seems to support this argument. Confirmation, however, is not offered by George Miller. He suggests that the link with reality *Mad Max* was originally meant to comment upon was the recklessness and the high casualty rate on the Australian highways, which he directly experienced in the operating theatre as a doctor (Chute 1982:28).

Despite the director's disclaim, the texts explicitly foreground another direct link between contemporary economic anxieties, namely those felt over the oil crises and the resulting fuel shortage, high rocketing petrol prices in the '70s and early '80s. This strong rooted-in-reality factor renders a sense of credibility and prophetic value to the films. Whilst *Mad Max* only latently bears the attributes of a futuristic dystopian vision, they are foregrounded and redefined retrospectively as a clearly apocalyptic text by the introductory sequence of *The Road Warrior*.

This sequence foreshadows the subsequent mythic treatment of the story. The narrator's voice-over reveals a global political crisis projected into the future which is supported by the visual track, which merges real, archival documentary footage, such as shots of parliamentary violence, dictators, and pseudo-documentary footage, i.e. shots from *Mad Max* in monochrome. Not only do these pseudo-documentary shots evoke crucial climatic ones from part one for the sake of novices to the *Mad Max* films, but with blending moments of 20th-century world history and the fictitious tragic history of Max and his family is elevated to universal significance.

The narrator's identity on the soundtrack is hidden and will not be disclosed until the very end of the film. The language is elevated, the voice could belong either to a sad wise old man or a sad god contemplating about Max's world as "blighted wasteland" referring to the myth of the Fisher King deriving from the Arthurian legend of the Middle-Ages and its new expression in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*

(1922) of high-modernism. In harmony with that the visual track displaying parliamentary violence evokes the image of the "chosen knights" of politics who— just like their medieval predecessors of the Round Table in quest for the Holy Grail—fail to address the find the proper questions or to respond properly. Their failure results in the explosion of the Bomb and brings apocalyptic destruction to the land followed by post-apocalyptic chaos.

The *Mad Max* films draw upon both biblical apocalyptic narratives. The older one, that is "The Book of Daniel" of the *Old Testament* is tough to be a "product" of the Babylonian enslavement, and it focuses on the anxieties of a people in exile, their hope of going home, awaiting the arrival of the redeemer, who will lead them home. These sentiments and expectations are dramatized—rather surprisingly—in the story of the Cave Children in *Beyond Thunderdome*. Surprisingly, because this is the sub-narrative which is the most optimistic, yet it is laden with this kind of anxiety.

More prominent, however, is the paradigm associated with "The Book of Revelations" of *The New Testament*. A series of prophesies urge the community in distress to remain faithful until the day when God brings destruction upon the unfaithful and evil, whilst the faithful will be redeemed, salvation and eternal happiness will be granted after the cosmic battle of Armageddon, which will bring victory for the Good (God) over the Evil (Satan).

The time dimension of apocalyptic popular films is most often future oriented. (One of the rare examples is Frances Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979)—released in the same year as *Mad Max*—which identifies the Vietnam War as the apocalyptic momentum. Some popular apocalyptic narratives set in the future associate the apocalyptic momentum with a fictitious calamity—such as the nuclear bomb (*The Matrix* 1999), or an environmental disaster (*Waterworld* 1995—which is made to have happened. This "past in the future" renders the narrative and the vision projected post-apocalyptic. Based on the large number of popular cinematic and literary texts this kind, it seems reasonable to claim that these popular texts curb the meaning of the Apocalypse to that of immense destruction followed by chaos and characterized by lawlessness, war, human suffering quite in the vein of St. John's prophetic visions. The possibility of the millennial redemption for the just and good is granted not by God, but it is put into the hands of the hero.

The visions of the cosmic battle between Good and Evil are dramatized in the violent clashes between the motorbike gangs and the cops in *Mad Max* and those of between the Tribe of the Well and the Humungus gang in *The Road Warrior*. The "Humungus" name, which is never commented upon, appears a coinage of "human" and "fungus" inferring the gang's parasitical nature. The affiliation with the moral values of the good and evil is visually coded in the light and dark colours of the costumes of the Tribe of the Well and the Humungus gang, respectively.

The two grand scale motorized chase scenes that dominate the latter part of both *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* dramatize the battle of Armageddon. (The

final dual between Max and the Toecutter in *Mad Max* takes after a showdown according to the traditions of the western until it gains cosmic significance through *The Road Warrior*'s eschatological mirror.) Unlike the biblical narrative, none of these scenes are decisive though, the good, that is the hero, does not emerge as ultimately victorious; he is left on the battleground battered and abandoned but at least alive, while some of the villains survive.

If a miracle is to prove the presence of divine power, then Max's miraculous survivals grant him supernatural qualities. He is elevated on the level either as a divine redeemer or an avenging angel travelling not on a pale horse in his high powered V8 Interceptor, which triggers fear similar to its biblical counterpart.

It is possible to interpret the impending chaos in the trilogy in terms of another ancient mythic narrative, or rather as its anti-type, namely that of creation. If creation is imposing order onto chaos as it is dramatized by the first chapter of "Genesis" in *The Old Testament* as well as numerous tales of cosmogony, then its antithesis is descent into chaos, i.e. the disintegration of the results of creation that brought about civilization.

Impending chaos is indicated by the disintegration of civilized institutions, whose physical features expose visible traits of decay, such as the lame letter of "the Hall of Justice" sign. The interior is even more indicative: the blighted walls, rusty equipment, messy disorder of the few pieces of furniture all indicate that the institution of law and order descending into chaos. This visual warning is soon supported on the narrative level by the sequence of the corrupt lawyer insisting on and then ensuring Johnny the Boy's release from jail. Not only does this sequence highlight the inadequateness of official institutions, but it also reduces the cops' efforts to maintain order on the roads to those of Sysyphos.

The ultimate metaphor for the descent of civilisation into chaos is the disintegration of the family. At the end of the first sequence of the chase scene in *Mad Max* a small boy just escapes being overrun by the Nightrider while his parents are having an argument about a possibility of infidelity on the mother's side. Max's son and wife too do find their death under the wheels of the Toecutter and his gang. There are no families in *The Road Warrior*, no children as promise for the future except the inarticulate Feral Kid. There are no children in Bartertown of *Beyond Thunderdome*. Hope for survival and a re-creation of a promising future returns only with the Tribe of the Cave Children in their Eden-like environment.

The creation myth surfaces in the two sub-narratives of Bartertown and the Cave Children in *Beyond Thunderdome*. In both cases the linear conception of history is replaced by a cyclical one: history can be cancelled (as are result of the Bomb), but it can also be redeemed, if society is re-organised and elevated to a higher state. This concept of eternal return is acted out following two possible scenarios.

The Bartertown sequences present a society re-creating an earlier stage of civilization, which is far from being innocent. It is perceived in images of ancient

Rome with an arena and gladiator-like fights, blood and violence. Bartertown's self-appointed mistress of life, death and fortune is the properly named Auntie Entity. She blindly and obsessively believes that civilization equals trade. Her world surrounded by vast deserts harbours the seeds of committing the same mistakes (abuse of power, exploitation of humans and the meagre natural sources) that generated the present calamity.

The Stone Age civilization of the Cave Children embraces the mythic model of history (Eliade 1954:139-162) set in an Eden-like environment. Whilst its members are painfully aware of the existence of an earlier more advanced world, these sequences represent a possible evolution of an archaic society living in primordial innocence. They invent and ritualize their own myths of cosmogony and genesis. Ironically these myths and legends evoke not the doings of gods and goddesses, but rely and (mis)interpret the debris they inherited from the earlier civilization before the "pocky-clyps" (apocalypse) Their future is devoted to the discovery and waiting for Captain Walker, their redeemer, whom they hope to find in Max.

In an article Dennis H. Barbour commented on George Miller's concerns similar to those expressed in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which is known to have been informed by *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance* by Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston, respectively (1999:30).

Direct references to *The Wasteland* are unmistakable in *The Road Warrior* either in the narrator's voice-over or the Humungus lord's oratory directed to the Tribe of the Well.

In harmony with traditions of representing the landscape in the New Australian Cinema, the Mad Max films infuse the landscape with meaning. As the narrative advances from one film to the next, the landscape becomes more and more wasteland-like, increasingly barren and inhospitable, more and more void of vegetation, more and more desert-like, then straightforward desert. This linear arrangement of the landscape is in harmony with the paradigms of growing chaos, infertility, whilst it becomes the visual externalization of the hero's psyche.

Mad Max offers a variety of landscapes: Max and Jessie's seaside home is situated next to the road and surrounded tall green grass and trees. The roads are still in good condition. The land is still under some cultivation, it is not yet a completely deserted. In *The Road Warrior* the narrative takes place in a more inhospitable desert landscape which displays hardly any trees, and the vegetation is reduced to lifeless dry grass. As far as the (camera-)eye can see, the land is empty, and apart from some clouds of dust void of life. These images connote the idea of the blighted, infertile wasteland.

Beyond Thunderdome displays a kind of landscape, which does not identify readily with Australia, but could be any of the great sand deserts of the world. It is the Sahara that immediately crosses the mind, since Miller carefully ushers the spectator towards establishing that mental link between the undefinable sea of sand, the Arab-

like figure, the camel driven wagon on the screen and the formidable desert of three world religions. As soon as the landscape is not readily identifiable exclusively with that of Australia, but with one heavily leaden with mythic connotations, the narrative is elevated from local to a universal level.

When representing the desert Miller draws on a rich reservoir of culturally charged meanings. There have been two traditional approaches to the "wilderness" defined by the Oxford English dictionary as "wild, uncultivated land; desert."

The classical view sees the wilderness as a place to be feared because it is full of evil spirits, it is haunted by beasts, it is peopled by the marginalized elements of society, for example savages; it may be a proper and/or possible scene for witchcraft, the wilderness has or may have an unfavourable impact on the individual. To eliminate or at least minimize the negative values attached to the wilderness, the classicists strive for transforming it, converting it into a humanized landscape through the process called progress.

The romantic approach adores the wilderness as a source of innocence and contrasts it with the corruption of civilization. The wilderness acquires the additional meaning of the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The wilderness dwellers also shed the pejorative overtone of savage in the classical view and become "noble savages" (Short 1991:6-13)

The desert is a Janus-faced term, which combines the connotations deriving from both approaches. To convert the desert into a garden is a significant human achievement that pleases God, yet, the desert is the birth-place of various religions, prophets and the Messiah. The desert is a sacred place, it is God's creation, yet its conversion into the garden is a god-guided work. So from deserts the prophets, the heroes, and the redeemers come.

The three *Mad Max* films dramatize three stages of the title hero's life. The Max character has been compared to western heroes, such as Shane (Lewis 1984:144), or the Dirty Harry type of vigilantes (Morphett 1984:41). Although all these characters share the quality of being a loner and a gunman, but to see them as spiritual brethren is mistaken as their response to the call to perform their mission is basically different. The former two (Shane and Dirty Harry) offer help voluntarily, which is a common denominator of many the American heroes of popular genres. Max shares the attributes of the reluctant hero with Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars* (1977). Both characters are constructed according to the archetype outlined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

The Campbellian hero follows a certain path in his quest: Campbell identifies the stages as: the hero in his ordinary world; the call (to adventure), the refusal of the call, the hero is encouraged by a wise old man or woman, the first threshold, faces tests and finds helpers, the belly of the whale and/or supreme ordeal, the reward, the

return, the resurrection, return with the elixir. This is basically the skeleton, which has to receive muscle to make an individual hero.

According to the demands of the narrative, however, some of the stages are more elaborated, others may be skipped altogether. If we take the three *Mad Max* films as three individual stories then the three films share the stages of the call to adventure and the refusal of the call: In *Mad Max* the police chief urges Max to carry on with his job on the roads, he refuses, quits and goes on a holiday with his family (which turns out to be fatal).

In *The Road Warrior* the Tribe of the Well ask him to be their leader, he refuses, in *Beyond Tunderdome* the Cave Children ask him to be their redeemer and take them home, he refuses. In the first two cases he eventually responds to the call either because he is wronged by the villains, or because his better self conquers over his darker side. In *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* he is even ready for self-sacrifice. In each of the episodes he sinks to the whale of the belly, which is to be interpreted as the lowest and darkest point of the adventure, which harbours the possibility of death. Max resurrects from this state of near death. His reward is that the community he is to protect leaves to find a new life somewhere else, in the supposed Eden of some undefined north, or among the ruins of the once great Sydney. His personal redemption is not complete enough to permit him to join a community. He returns with no elixir for the land, which, in turn, remains infertile.

This fact makes the heroic attempt abortive, or mock-heroic. At the end of *The Road Warrior* the hero is to realize that he was fooled. The tanker, in which he carried the precious fuel—he thought—was filled with sand. The heroic act is deprived from heroism. In *Beyond Thunderdome* his life is preserved by the appreciation of the enemy. The hero, Max challenged Auntie's position in Bartertown, and "stole" away Master, who is the kernel of economic progress in Bartertown. In other words, he has plucked the golden bough, but he does not wish to—or he is not in the position of replacing the priest—priestess in this case—thus his heroic journey will not bring healing and fertility to the land. Max's character unites elements of the Campbell's hero myth and Frazer's fertility myth, while the task of (re-)creation of civilization is allocated to the communities he helped to save. Each of the three films depart with the lone hero in the desert indicating that the modern prophet/hero/redeemer may come from the desert, but he will stay in the desert too.

The popularity the Mad Max trilogy has enjoyed ever since its first release in a number of countries of the world, lies—at least partly—in the way it combines a modern story set in the distant future, which is based on patterns inherited from a distant past. The trilogy is one of those successful attempts that "reject the Great Divide" (Huyssen viii) and successfully blend various mythic paradigms favoured by high art and traditions of popular narratives.

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