

George Miller's *Mad Max Fury Road*. Getting off of the highway

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Abstract

In order to study the springs of road cinema this century, the present text analyzes the movie *Mad Max Fury Road*, directed by George Miller, which is exemplary of this particular genre. The baseline question may well be 'How can road cinema be accessed and abandoned by way of poetry associated with speed, turbulence, and (false) nomadism?'. In a movie in which the road vanishes, a genre mutation associated with other sub-genres (futurism, science fiction, action, etc.) is reviewed, in a post-apocalyptic world. It is road sabotage: not the journey, but rather its effect, in, paradoxically, a road movie with no road.

Key words: Cinema; Road movie; Cinematographic analysis; Poetics; Labels.

Road movies, throughout their extended half-century history, have been characterized by giving life to stories in which the road serves as a type of backbone. "The road movie is a genre that exploits the traditional road theme, expresses a search, a desire for space, of discoveries and new encounters" (Pinel, 2000). As Correa (2006) suggests, based on a more dynamic, non-monolithic view, the *road movie* is a complex genre that is difficult to define and study, owing to its hybrid, intertextual, and auto-reflexive character.

Firstly, the road operates as a stage, as the basis for the staging. It places one in a particular geography that, doubtless, implies the strength of a civilization that has domesticated nature. It may also be said that the road acquires symbolic value. It has a functional dimension associated with transit, transport, and semantics, which are characteristic of the myth. According to Laderman, the road functions as:

...a universal symbol for one's lifetime, the movement, desire, and attraction of freedom and travelers' destinations. As such, it is full of utopic connotations among which the idea itself of possibility, as well as notions of direction and purpose are included. These whisper promises to those who decide to set out on the journey. However, the road also bears negative connotations. It exercises power over travelers, and can conceal dangers or become an «extensive detour swarming with hallucinations». This symbolic power of the road and the type of

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journey that this permits holds an important place in the American worldview...
(in Correa, 2006, p. 276).

The road permits the hero's transit, implies the defense of a territory, operates as a space in which to evade society, reminds us of our past as hunter-gatherers, removed from the city. What happens when the road, in physical terms, disappears in *road movies*? Does this step outside the perimeter of the genre? Do the mythical motives disappear? These questions are answered with crystalline clarity and a remodeling of road movies in *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015) directed by George Miller.

This is a magnificent film, that constitutes the return of the director to the genre and mythology that he had woven decades ago, in his trilogy: *Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max 2* (1981), and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), which have the distinct virtue of both being magnificent road movies, and mobilizing the conventions of the genre. Let us enter into evidence the way in which one may access and abandon road movies via the poetry associated with speed, turbulence, and (false) nomadism. In consonance with its mythology, Miller situates the film in a post-apocalyptic future, in which cities have disappeared. The survivors on screen inhabit desert territories. Water is scarce, and becomes the new oil. Gasoline for vehicles is practically a gold mine for those who possess it. In this context, there is a tribal return. There is no longer any type of democratic social contract, but rather in the idea of *societal pathos*, as if Maffesoli's (2004) urban tribes had been corrupted. While part of the way that individuals group together depends on aesthetic-cultural values (tattooed bodies, converted in paintings amplified with mechanical parts), forms of power corrupt the equality desired in the tribe.

Always inclined toward allegorical work, the director tells his story rhetorically, such that it denounces abuses of power and gender discrimination. On screen a form of infra-poverty (expressed in emaciated bodies) is reflected. They live near those who control the water, those who administer life. Women are converted into objects, and serve to reproduce or produce breast milk for the henchmen of the new emperor to consume: Immortan Joe, the villain, has created a neo-religion. He is not only adored, as if he were an immortal deity, but has made his closest followers into a kind of private army, the *War Boys*, an acritical mass, convinced that serving this leader will guarantee them a place in *Valhalla* (the room of honor for those lost in battle, in Nordic mythology). His counterparts are the heroes of the story: Mad Rockatansky, better known as Mad Max, (an ex-police officer who embodies, albeit reluctantly, the heroic role) and Imperator Furiosa (lieutenant in the Immortan Joe army, who rescues five of his girlfriends to take them to the "green place", a type of promised land). Both of them, interestingly, create alliances on the road, although not before nearly killing each other. While the traditional romantic relationship between the two is suggested, this takes a back seat to allegorizing the triumph of social equilibrium at the end of the movie. Both, it could be said, are secular individuals that serve as the murderers of a false god.

The focus of the present text is to consider *road movie* mutations as a genre, as, in the strictest sense, the film has no road. Of course, there are paths in the sand to connect certain geographical points to each other, but as the story is based on Furiosa's escape with the rebel wives, they literally abandon the road to transit beyond any possible path. This gesture is a

form of sabotage of a general genre characteristic. This movie is not far removed from the *road movie*. On the contrary, the genre is amplified, as the road is presented as an effect of the trip. Instead of assuming a previous, civilizing layout that determines vehicle mobility, which offers partial freedom, it is the effect of the layout, the result of the journey made simultaneously when the land feels the weight of the body in motion. The road neither predates nor precedes. It is both made and destroyed in transit. It has the virtue of not operating substantially. It is a pure event that does not seek to linger in time, or to keep the traveler alive, but rather be an ephemeral.

It is a road movie without a road. This permits a comprehension of a space that is completely different in the genre. For this film, the layout is preferred to the territory, whether real or imaginary. It is that which must pull our heroes together in their escape, in their journey in search of the promised land. The journey supposes an ominous destination. The “green place” territory promises a paradise that, literally, has been lost. In fact, our travelers pass through the area and fail to recognize it, as it has been destroyed. As if it were a cemetery, it is portrayed as a swamp at midnight, a place of horror: dead trees, crows, and strange man-beasts walking on stilts without touching the ground, as if it were poisoned (Which recalls Dali’s *La tentación de San Antonio*, 1946, and the bodies with long extremities). This will require a decision. They must either continue with the endless errancy or follow their footsteps back to return to where they began. This generates the *road movie* disassembly, not because the genre lacks return trips, updates of Ulysses progress in his return to Ithaca. This is because, at the end of the day, there is no journey. Despite sounding paradoxical, this is the best journey of all. There is none, because, literally the starting point and destination are one and the same. However, the errancy and failure to achieve the goal constitutes a substantial modification of the characters’ destinies. This is a clear expression of the way in which the journey changes the travelers. Had they reached their destination, the journey would have been an excuse. Failure considered a sort of roaming characteristic of the genre, which implies making new decisions for this story’s heroes.

On review of the nature of the story, it is an exercise in narrative purity. Literally, the story is plotted with our heroes’ harrowing escape and the bloody persecution of Immortan Joe’s entire army. After robbing the *war rig*, the portentous vehicle in which the rebel wives are camouflaged, as if they were contraband, the villain himself comes after the protagonists. We see gory combat that emulates multiple characteristics of other genres. The different vehicles, all survivors of a distant past, are modified, war-chariot style. Machines are turned to beasts, metal monsters that operate by defying gravity and permitting their occupants to walk on their rooves, and move from one vehicle to another (including fugitive transport) at high speed. It is an operatic dance, a work of acrobacy characteristic of technically perfected bodies in a shifting landscape, converted into air, thanks to high-octane motors.

The road movie, with its constant oscillation between bodies in movement and at rest could be compared to a «complete domination of the physical», whose interpretation and analysis is possible only owing to the vocabulary of the «periodic table» or «discussion of thermodynamics», provided by the road movie (Schaber en Correa, 1997, p. 293).

In this game of shapes, that which makes the journey's turbulence into the poetry of movement is exacerbated by Miller's narrative style. The camera fractalizes their points of view. It appears, panoramic, descends from the heights, in a flyover, until it situates itself near the characters. At ground level, it is aberrant, making vehicles into titans. It changes position at the speed of the vehicles, defying the audience's eye. All of this is additionally hyperbolized with writing in time-space compressed images. The short, interspersed takes defy the proportions of space, enable the ode to speed, speak of the journey as the movement leading to its ultimate consequences.

While the desert may be imagined as an empty landscape, as a flat geography, this could not be further from the truth shown in the film. Miller uses multiple resources to make it turbulent. There is the heroes' journey in the midst of a massive sand storm that recalls of the experience of the sublime that Turner painted so well. We cannot stop thinking about his marvelous *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) made into a moving image in film. The interior of this beastly phenomenon, the yellows and reds open the gates to Hell on wheels. The symbology of this transit announces the beginning of the descent to the underworld on the surface of the earth. On the other hand, small mountains lend form to a canyon, in which vultures from the road await, like hyenas, for the travelers. They become the scene for a road full of obstacles that defy the vehicles, almost to their destruction. For the enemy's defeat, the characters must return to the citadel. The death of Immortan Joe, which, literally, implies the destruction of his decrepit body (because of radiation) makes his vehicle his coffin. This defeat is possible thanks to Nux, a War Boys deserter, who forms an alliance with the heroes. After crafting the death of this deity-father, he is able to definitively cut ties with the false religion he had followed. As mentioned, between the poetic spaces of the film is the "green place", the promised land described as if it were a space of afterlife, a place for ghosts that would necessitate a change in the heroes' movement. In this place, their bodies slow. The sluggishness of transit recalls the stealth essential for survival. The road hero knows that their life depends on their ability to vary their body's speed.

It has been insisted that the *road movie*, especially in what has elapsed of this century, has operated with certain capital variations. Among these is familial fracture. Part of the journey shows the need to escape from a marital crisis, difficulties between parents and children. In this specific case, it is the family chosen that results in errancy, a type of (false) nomadism, because the goal is always a stable home. The family is cohesive, which signifies the road trip. The genre has further broken with the centrality of the masculine role. In this case, while we have a female character such as *Furiosa*, this indicates movement toward gender equality. Miller, in the bloodiest exercise of difference defends only the human right to live free from enslavement. One may lose sight that the film, in allegorical terms, underscores the role of women and their emancipation, as shown on the journey:

...it has its own poetry that is defined by the narrative structure in terms of the journey on the road, the job of several concrete technical resources (such as the *camera car*), the traditionally male protagonism or the metaphorical meaning of the journey. From the time of its creation, coinciding with New Hollywood

(1967-1975) to the present day, the genre has experienced a series of significant changes, such as the incorporation of collectives that are not traditionally represented (women, the sickly, homosexuals, the aged, the family) (García, 2018, p. 419).

Note, however that our two heroes operate complementarily. We cannot forget that they serve as wild forces of nature. Both given labels characteristic of madness, they are able to escape the perverse societal power of the tribe to operate as neo-animals that make rage the detonator for survival. Both bodies, sabotaged, mistreated, destroyed by the time in which they live, constitute a new speed (extension of machines, with an artificial hand, in the case of Furiosa, with a body that operates as a blood bag to give life to others, in that of Max), show us what a body will do to stay alive.

At the end of our journey, their return to the starting point is triumphant. Furiosa is portrayed as the redeemer of an enslaved people. A woman kills the false god. She becomes a kind of prophet. Water is made available for all, the cadaverous people, alienated henchmen, together before the dawn of a new day. Max retires, disappears in the multitude. He assumes his vocation as a renegade. We imagine him returning to the road, recuperating the old patrol that was taken from him at the beginning of the film. This singular *road movie* (as mentioned, the road movie without a road) mobilizes the genre and announces that our form of understanding the road, the backbone, remains intact, although it would seem that today, there are no new territories left to conquer, on this concrete route. In a post-apocalyptic future, or in a society that virtualizes the journey, forced or desired nomadism, there is another way to understand the road. High-speed errancy may also modify identities. The lesson is none other than the death of any safety associated with urban space. The traveler that follows their own tracks back does not define the territory by their transit. The territory traversed on the road does not officiate as a *dictum* for the wayfarer that pushes their limits in unexpected ways.

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