

SERIES EDITOR: WILLIAM IRWIN
EDITED BY: MATTHEW P. MEYER
AND DAVID KOEPEL

MAD MAX

AND PHILOSOPHY

THINKING THROUGH THE WASTELAND

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

This book has not been approved, licensed, or sponsored by any entity or person involved in creating or producing *Mad Max* products or works.

MAD MAX AND PHILOSOPHY

The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series

Series editor: William Irwin

A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, and a healthy helping of popular culture clears the cobwebs from Kant. Philosophy has had a public relations problem for a few centuries now. This series aims to change that, showing that philosophy is relevant to your life—and not just for answering the big questions like “To be or not to be?” but for answering the little questions: “To watch or not to watch *South Park*?” Thinking deeply about TV, movies, and music doesn’t make you a “complete idiot.” In fact, it might make you a philosopher, someone who believes the unexamined life is not worth living and the unexamined cartoon is not worth watching.

Already published in the series:

Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I Am
Edited by Jeffery A. Ewing and Kevin S. Decker

Avatar: The Last Airbender and Philosophy:
Wisdom from Aang to Zuko
Edited by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt

Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See
Edited by George A. Dunn

The Avengers and Philosophy: Earth’s
Mightiest Thinkers
Edited by Mark D. White

Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of
the Soul
Edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp

BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game,
Rational Book
Edited by Luke Cuddy

Black Panther and Philosophy: What Can
Wakanda Offer the World?
Edited by Eduardo Pérez and Timothy Brown

Dune and Philosophy: Minds, Monads, and
Muad-Dib
Edited by Kevin S. Decker

Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Read
and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks
Edited by Christopher Robichaud

The Expanse and Philosophy: So Far out into
the Darkness
Edited by Jeffery L. Nicholas

Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts
Deeper Than Swords
Edited by Henry Jacoby

Forthcoming

Ted Lasso and Philosophy
Edited by David Baggett and Mary Baggett

Joker and Philosophy
*Edited by Massimiliano L. Cappuccio, George
A. Dunn, and Jason T. Eberl*

The Good Place and Philosophy: Everything
Is Fine!
Edited by Kimberly S. Engels

The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy:
Hogwarts for Muggles
Edited by Gregory Bassham

The Hobbit and Philosophy: For When
You’ve Lost Your Dwarves, Your Wizard, and
Your Way
Edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson

Indiana Jones and Philosophy
Edited by Dean A. Kowalski

Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in
Brain Surgery
Edited by William Irwin

The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy:
Respect My Philosophah!
Edited by Robert Arp and Kevin S. Decker

The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy: The
Search for Socrates
Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back: This
Is the Way
Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go
Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing
*Edited by James B. South and Kimberly S.
Engels*

Wonder Woman and Philosophy: The
Amazonian Mystique
Edited by Jacob M. Held

The Witcher and Philosophy
*Edited by Matthew Brake and Kevin
S. Decker*

For the full list of titles in the series, see www.andphilosophy.com.

**MAD MAX AND
PHILOSOPHY
THINKING
THROUGH THE
WASTELAND**

Edited by

Matthew P. Meyer and David Koepsell

WILEY Blackwell

Copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Meyer, Matthew P., editor. | Koepsell, David R. (David Richard), editor.

Title: Mad Max and philosophy : thinking through the Wasteland / edited by Matthew P. Meyer, David Koepsell.

Description: First edition. | Hoboken : Wiley, 2024. | Series: The Blackwell philosophy and pop culture series | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023021906 (print) | LCCN 2023021907 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119870487 (hardback) | ISBN 9781119870494 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119870500 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Mad Max (Motion picture : 1979) | Motion pictures--Philosophy. | Popular culture--Philosophy.

Classification: LCC PN1997.M2534 M33 2023 (print) | LCC PN1997.M2534 (ebook) | DDC 791.43/72--dc23/eng/20230523

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023021906>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023021907>

Cover images: © James O'Neil/Getty Images; © chaluk/Getty Images

Cover design: Wiley

Set in 10.5/13pt SabonLTStd by Straive, Pondicherry, India

Contents

Notes on Contributors	viii
Introduction: Doing Philosophy in the Wasteland	xiv
Acknowledgments	xvi
Part I Politics after the Pox-Eclipse: Anarchy, State, and Dystopia	1
1 Post-apocalyptic Anarchism in <i>Mad Max</i> <i>Aeon J. Skoble</i>	3
2 Even on the Road, Violence Is Not the Same as Power <i>Anthony Petros Spanakos and Ian J. Drake</i>	11
3 Thomas Hobbes and the State of Nature in the Wasteland <i>Greg Littmann</i>	19
4 The Political Economy of Bartertown: Embeddedness of Markets, Peak Oil, the Tragedy of the Commons, and Lifeboat Ethics <i>Paul Thomas</i>	29
5 From Wee Jerusalem to Fury Road: Does <i>Mad Max</i> Depict a Post-apocalyptic Dystopia? <i>Clint Jones</i>	38
Part II The Man with No Name: Heroes and Finding Oneself Post-apocalypse Style	49
6 “Pray He’s Still out There”: Heroism in the <i>Mad Max</i> Films <i>Karen Joan Kohoutek</i>	51

7	Bloodbags and Artificial Arms: Bodily Parthood in <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> <i>Joshua L. Tepley</i>	60
8	The Meaning of Life According to <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> <i>Kiki Berk</i>	71
Part III Building a Better Tomorrow! Ethics in <i>Mad Max</i>		83
9	What Saves the World? Care and Ecofeminism <i>Leigh Kellmann Kolb</i>	85
10	Seeking the Good Life in the Wasteland <i>Andrew Kuzma</i>	95
11	“We’re Not to Blame!” Responsibility in the Wasteland <i>Justin Kitchen</i>	106
12	“Look, Any Longer out on That Road and I’m One of Them, You Know?”: Madness in <i>Mad Max</i> <i>Matthew P. Meyer</i>	116
13	Justice, Reason, and the Road Warrior: A Mechanic Reads Plato <i>David H. Gordon</i>	126
Part IV Mother’s Milk: Gender and Intersectionality		135
14	Homecoming as Homemaking: The Rise of the Matriarchy in <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> <i>Daniel Conway</i>	137
15	Liberating Mother’s Milk: Imperator Furiosa’s Ecofeminist Revolution <i>Jacob Quick</i>	148
16	Demarginalizing Aunty Entity and Dismantling Thunderdome <i>Edwardo Pérez and Thanayi Jackson</i>	159
17	Gayboy Berserkers at the Gate: Sex and Gender in the Wasteland <i>Jacob M. Held</i>	170

Part V Wasteland Aesthetics: Music, Fashion, Australia, and Nature	181
18 Driving Insanity, Chaos, and Emotion: The Music of <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> <i>Lance Belluomini</i>	183
19 Carapaces and Prosthetics: What Humans Wear in <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> <i>Laura T. Di Summa</i>	195
20 Does It Matter How Australian the Apocalypse Is? <i>Greg Littmann</i>	203
21 The Moral Aesthetics of Nature: Bioconservativism in <i>Mad Max</i> <i>David Koepsell</i>	215
Index	226

Notes on Contributors

Lance Belluomini did his graduate work in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley; San Francisco State University; and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He's recently published essays on *Tenet* and *The Mandalorian* in *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy*. He's also contributed chapters to a variety of Wiley-Blackwell volumes such as *Inception*, *The Ultimate Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back*. Clearly, the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* has had an influence on Lance. For instance, when rushing to get somewhere, he exclaims, "Fang it!" When unimpressed, he shouts, "Mediocre!"

Kiki Berk is an associate professor of philosophy at Southern New Hampshire University. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy from the VU University Amsterdam in 2010. Her research focuses on the philosophy of death and the philosophy of the meaning in life, especially in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. In her free time, she wanders the Wasteland in search of her better self.

Daniel Conway is a professor of philosophy and humanities, an affiliate professor of film studies and religious studies, and a courtesy professor in the School of Law and the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. He has lectured and published widely on topics in post-Kantian European philosophy, political theory, aesthetics (especially literature and film), American philosophy, and genocide studies. He hopes that he is awaited, shiny and chrome, in Valhalla.

Laura T. Di Summa is an assistant professor of philosophy at William Paterson University. She has published extensively on film, visual arts, and criticism. She is the co-editor with Noël Carroll and Shawn Loht

of *The Palgrave Handbook for the Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* and the author of *A Philosophy of Fashion Through Film*. After modeling her biking style on *Mad Max* and further refining it while pushing her son's stroller, she is now considering investing in a War Rig.

Ian J. Drake teaches in the Political Science and Law Department at Montclair State University. He obtained his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maryland and his law degree from the University of Richmond. His teaching interests include the American judiciary and legal system; the U.S. Supreme Court and constitutional history; the history and contemporary study of law and society, broadly construed; and political theory.

David H. Gordon is an assistant teaching professor of philosophy at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, where he specializes in the history of philosophy, environmental philosophy, and the interdisciplinary study of science and religion. He has toiled long and hard in Socratic poverty, working as a mechanic and carpenter, as well as on fishing boats in Alaska. He can also turn a mean baseball bat on his lathe. When he's not asking why there is something rather than nothing, he wonders why Johnny the Boy didn't just throw the hacksaw at the cigarette lighter.

Jacob M. Held is a burnt out, desolate man. He wanders the Wasteland of academia, this blighted place, learning to live again. In the meantime, he is a professor of philosophy and assistant provost for academic assessment and general education at the University of Central Arkansas. He specializes in political and legal philosophy and nineteenth-century German philosophy, and he dabbles in medieval philosophy and the philosophy of religion. He has written many essays at the intersection of philosophy and popular culture and edited several volumes, including *Wonder Woman and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), *Stephen King and Philosophy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), and *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

Thanayi Jackson is an American historian. Born and raised in San José, California, she spent most of her days trying to escape capitalism as a disciple of Rock before a Griot banished her to History where, after a great odyssey through the University of Maryland, she assumed

the identity of semi-mild-mannered professor. Jackson is a contributing author to *Black Panther and Philosophy* and has held positions at San José State University, Berea College, and, currently, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. A fangirl of the Reconstruction period, her work examines transitions from slavery to freedom and all things Black Power. Jackson is a lifelong student of punx, drunx, freaks, geeks, revolutionary jocks and hippies, hip hop intellectuals, and heavy metal queens. As a result, she abides by a punk rock pedagogy whereby anything can be learned, everything can be deconstructed, and nothing can be lost.

Clint Jones earned his Ph.D. in social and political philosophy from the University of Kentucky and currently teaches full-time at Capital University in Ohio. In addition to numerous contributions to pop culture and philosophy titles, he has published articles and book chapters on utopianism, environmental philosophy, and critical theory. His recent published books include *Apocalyptic Ecology in the Graphic Novel* (McFarland); *Stranger, Creature, Thing, Other* (Cornerstone Press); and a forthcoming edited volume, *Contemporary Cowboys: Reimagining an American Archetype in Popular Culture* from Lexington Books. Though it is a mistake to hope, Clint nevertheless hopes his work will help you enjoy your *Mad Max* experience more fully—but he’s just a doctor, not a fortuneteller.

Justin Kitchen teaches philosophy at San Francisco State University and California State University, Northridge. His work centers around virtue ethics and virtue epistemology; it draws often from Stoic philosophy and Indian Buddhism. As a fallback career, he has also been considering joining a zealous adrenaline-fueled war party in search of guzzolene.

David Koepsell has been teaching philosophy for 28 years at such places as the University at Buffalo, the Technical University of Delft, and now Texas A&M. He has authored and edited a dozen books and over 50 journal articles, chapters, and reports and has lectured around the world. Long a fan, he has used pop culture in his courses and research for as long as he has been teaching. Recently, he started the CinePhils podcast with fellow philosopher Rob Luzecky, which is about films and philosophy. He thinks his life would be complete if only he had the last of the V8 Interceptors, with Phase 4 heads, 600 horsepower through the wheels!

Karen Joan Kohoutek is an independent scholar who has published about weird fiction and cult films in various journals and literary websites, with recent works on *Black Panther* and Robert E. Howard and Doris Wishman's film oddity *Nude on the Moon*. She has also published a novella, *The Jack-o-Lantern Box*, and the reference book *Ici Repose: A Guide to St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, Square 3*, about the historic New Orleans cemetery, through Skull and Book Press. In her personal life, she is an Auntie and, at the same time, just a raggedy woman.

Leigh Kellmann Kolb is an associate professor of English at East Central College in Missouri. Her writing has appeared in publications including *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, *Philosophy and Breaking Bad*, *Twin Peaks and Philosophy*, *Amy Schumer and Philosophy*, *The Handmaid's Tale and Philosophy*, *The Women of David Lynch: A Collection of Essays*, and *Better Living Through TV*. She's also written for *Vulture* and *Bitch Magazine* and serves as a screener and juror for film festivals. She shows *Mad Max: Fury Road* to her Composition II students at the end of each semester so they can take with them the pleasure of critically analyzing pop culture in hopes that they will help save—not kill—the world.

Andrew Kuzma is a bioethicist at Advocate Aurora Health Care in Milwaukee. He earned his Ph.D. at Marquette University. His research interests include moral distress, narrative ethics, the role of community in cultivating virtue, and Citadel-era conceptions of shiny and chrome. With his feral child, Madeleine, and the Emperor Lisa, he wanders the Wasteland as a man reduced to a single instinct: write.

Greg Littmann roared down the scorching asphalt in his battered white Toyota, with Wasteland bandits in close pursuit. He was tortured by the memories of the world that had been and was gone forever, a world in which he had been an associate professor of philosophy at SIUE. Once he had published on evolutionary epistemology, the philosophy of logic, and the philosophy of professional philosophy, among other subjects. He also had written numerous chapters for books relating philosophy to popular culture for the general public, including volumes on *Big Bang Theory*, *Black Mirror*, *Doctor Who*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. But now there was only the road, and the eternal hunt for food and fuel, and the human predators. He could see in the rear-view mirror that they were closing in,

howling. The 18-wheeler loomed out of the red dust dead ahead, coming right at him. It was covered in metal spikes and leather-clad warriors. Screaming, Greg instinctively threw up his arms to protect his face. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates believed that the only genuine harm that can befall a person is for them to become morally worse. If that's true, Greg was just fine.

Matthew P. Meyer is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. His main areas of study are existentialism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. He has written a study entitled *Archery and the Human Condition in Lacan, the Greeks, and Nietzsche: The Bow with the Greatest Tension* (Lexington, 2019) and has published articles and chapters on Nietzsche and film. He has also published in several Blackwell *Philosophy and Pop Culture* series books, on Sartre (and *The Office*), Nietzsche (and *House of Cards*), aesthetics (and *Westworld*), and Beauvoir (and *The Good Place*). Like Max, he's afraid he's beginning to enjoy that rat circus out there.

Edwardo Pérez, after being a pianist accompanying Ton Ton's saxophone, escaped Bartertown, seeking refuge with The Tribe Who Left. Years later, Edwardo found himself teaching rhetoric and critical theory as a professor of English at Tarrant County College in Hurst, Texas—where Edwardo also writes speculative fiction and contributes awesome chapters on popular culture and philosophy. Inspired by Savannah Nix, Edwardo continues to search for knowledge of the pre-apocalyptic world, when “those what had gone before had the knowing and the doing of things beyond our reckoning ... even beyond our dreaming.”

Jacob Quick is a lecturer and Ph.D. candidate in the Institute of Philosophy at KU Leuven. His doctoral research focuses on Simone Weil, Jacques Derrida, and animal ethics. When he's not reading, writing, or teaching philosophy, you can find him McFeasting in the halls of Valhalla.

Aeon J. Skoble is the Bruce and Patricia Bartlett Chair in Free Speech and Expression at Bridgewater State University, where he is also a professor of philosophy and co-coordinator of the program in philosophy, politics, and economics. He is the author of *Deleting the State: An Argument About Government* (Open Court, 2008) and

The Essential Robert Nozick (Fraser Institute, 2020); the editor of *Reading Rasmussen and Den Uyl: Critical Essays on Norms of Liberty* (Lexington Books, 2008); and co-editor of *Political Philosophy: Essential Selections* (Prentice-Hall, 1999) and *Reality, Reason, and Rights* (Lexington Books, 2011). In addition, he writes widely on the intersection of philosophy and popular culture, having co-editing *The Simpsons and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2000), *Woody Allen and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2004), *The Philosophy of TV Noir* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008), and *The Philosophy of Michael Mann* (University Press of Kentucky, 2014), and he has been a contributor to 14 other books on film and television. He would like to thank Lord Humungus for Helpful contributions to this essay.

Anthony Petros Spanakos is a professor of political science and law at Montclair State University. He is the co-editor of the *Conceptualising Comparative Politics* book series (Routledge) and has written extensively on Latin American politics, foreign policy, and popular culture and political theory. He was recently in a very changed Australia where quarantine rules suggested new possible directions for future *Mad Max* movies!

Joshua L. Tepley is a Professor of Philosophy at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. He has a B.A. in Philosophy from Bucknell University and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Notre Dame. His current research interests include free will, personal identity, ontology (the study of being), and the intersection between philosophy and science fiction. He really hopes that he never needs, or becomes, a Bloodbag.

Paul Thomas is a project associate in the Inequality and Human Development Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, India. He loves dissecting movies to bring out philosophical understandings from them. Being a first-time contributor to Wiley's *Philosophy and Pop Culture* series, he thoroughly enjoyed writing the essay just like how Max finds happiness in dealing with his unexpected encounters in the Wasteland.

Introduction: Doing Philosophy in the Wasteland

The *Mad Max* movies put the audience on the edge: on the edge of apocalypse, on the edge of social breakdown, on the edge of morality, on the edge of our seats. Throughout the franchise, we see Max, and many other characters, lose ties to what could be considered a “normal” life. All of this begins “just a few years from now.” But despite Max’s insistence that he has been reduced to the instinct to survive, deep down he is still attracted to “righteous causes.”

As Max himself says in the opening dialogue of *Fury Road*: “I am the one who runs from the living and the dead.” In some ways Max’s journeys across the Wasteland are like doing philosophy: frustrating, difficult, often painful, but eventually enlightening. Both “hunted” and “haunted,” Max is driven to extreme situations in which he wishes he didn’t have a choice—in every movie he essentially evades the role of savior before assuming it. Maybe the haunting is a good sign in any case. It means Max still has a conscience—or most of one. Thus, Max as quasi-hero invites us to think about what we would do in this post-apocalyptic world of “fire and blood.” What politics could we build? What ethics could we salvage for parts? The external conditions are abysmal. What about the internal ones?

Max’s story echoes heroes and anti-heroes across the ages, recapitulating the paths taken by great adventurers as well as thinkers. An innocent, lawful inception, the loss of love and family, the search for meaning in a world gone mad, and the discovery of embers of humanity in the desert. The Wasteland is not just a place, as T. S. Eliot’s poem of the same name makes clear, it exists among us and within us. It is a place ripe for self-discovery and for musing about the nature of humanity, for finding our essence, for discovering our souls.

Max’s setting also invites us to think about what living would be like with all the comforts of modern western life stripped away.

In that way, many themes in the films provide useful contrasts to our own lives and lifestyles. In the essays that follow, we will see the stripped-down world of Max analyzed according to its politics, heroics, ethics, aesthetics, and more. We will see conventional views of these ideas tested—and we will consider whether these new ways of thinking apply to our own world.

As stark and dire as the world of Mad Max is, George Miller always strikes a chord of hope, which is how we close this project, in the hopes it enriches your enjoyment of the films, as well as of philosophy. We hope that you enjoy reading the book and that you too find the Wasteland an apt place for philosophizing.

Acknowledgments

While Max appears “alone” in the beginnings of the films, we realize pretty quickly that, for better or worse, he is not. Neither were we alone in the creation of this volume. First, we want to thank all of our contributing authors for their excellent ideas, fabulous writing full of wonderful insights, and patience in assembling this volume. Like Max’s journeys, the creation of this volume led to new places we didn’t expect. We’d like to thank Bill Irwin, the *Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series* editor, for his encouragement to put forward the volume, his advice and guidance, and for generally shepherding us through every step of the Wasteland. We’d also like to thank Will Croft and Charlie Hamlyn and the whole publishing team at Wiley Blackwell for turning this mad idea into a reality.

Matt would like to thank David for agreeing to co-edit and assemble this book together. Oddly, we both had the idea to assemble this volume for the first time almost immediately after seeing *Fury Road*, but it was only upon realizing that was not the last installment that we, along with Bill, realized that it would be a valuable contribution to the *Philosophy and Pop Culture Series*. Many thanks to David for his amazing ideas for essays and for his invaluable editing work throughout the assembly of the volume. Matt would also like to thank his family, Jill and Charlie, for putting up with moments of editing “insanity.”

David would like to thank his family: Vanessa and the kids, Ame and Alex, as always, for putting up with his madness and his obsessions, including with popular culture and philosophy, as well as his parents who introduced him to film and film criticism at an early age. He is indebted to Matt for helping to marshal the resources and channel his procrastination into a final work of which we can all be proud.

Part I

POLITICS AFTER THE POX-ECLIPSE: ANARCHY, STATE, AND DYSTOPIA

Post-apocalyptic Anarchism in *Mad Max*

Aeon J. Skoble

In George Miller's 1979 film *Mad Max*, we are introduced to a post-apocalyptic dystopia in which official law enforcement is weak and predatory gangs are powerful. In three sequels, the breakdown of traditional social order is made even more explicit, and the protagonist's struggle, first for revenge and then later for justice, more difficult. Is this "anarchy"? Does anarchy entail violence, or is peaceful anarchism possible? What are the results of social breakdown? Is this portrayal of a lawless world realistic? This essay will explore the meanings of concepts such as *anarchy*, *government*, *society*, and *order* by looking at the social backdrop of this film franchise.

Anarchy and Apocalypse

Of course, a world of marauding biker gangs and violent warlords is exactly what people tend to imagine when they think of anarchy. Anarchy is associated with chaos and disorder, whereas words like *society* and *government* are associated with order. But just as the presence of a government is no guarantee of a functional and just social order, the absence of government shouldn't be taken to imply their lack.

To begin with, it's worth noting that the word *anarchy* doesn't even mean "no government" or "no order." It means "no rulers." The root word *archon*, for "ruler," is the same as in the word *monarchy*. So, modified by the *mono-* prefix, it means "one ruler" and modified by

Mad Max and Philosophy: Thinking Through the Wasteland, First Edition.

Edited by Matthew P. Meyer and David Koepsell.

© 2024 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

the negating *a-lan-* prefix, it means “no rulers.” To equate “no rulers” with “no government” or “no order” is to beg an important question about the nature of social order and the extent to which it can be achieved without coercive authority imposed from the top down. The world *Mad Max* lives in offers us some useful touchpoints for thinking about this, but also, as we’ll see, some less-than-useful ones.

We’re never told explicitly what apocalyptic events happened, but context clues and scattered bits of dialogue imply wars for scarce resources, which of course are now more scarce. It’s never explained why this would lead to the complete collapse of the social order. In the first film, it hasn’t completely vanished. Max Rockatansky (played by Mel Gibson in the first three films and Tom Hardy in the fourth) is a police officer, of course, so there’s some organized law enforcement apparatus. But, as the film depicts, their authority is often flouted and the biker gang that drives the plot seems to act with impunity, terrorizing people at will. So the police department seems like a vestigial force, greatly attenuated but still trying to protect innocents from the gangs. The vestiges of the court system that we see in the film are similarly attenuated and essentially toothless. Part of the problem seems to be that the structures in place for rights-protection are so remote and vestigial as to be insufficient for deterring the biker gangs and other outlaws. In this respect, *Mad Max* resembles a “Western” film where, even though there’s technically a legal authority, it is either physically remote or else too weak to adequately respond to criminality. For example, in the 1993 Western *Tombstone*, there’s a sheriff and a marshal, but the criminal gang “the Cowboys” acts with impunity, as if they need not worry themselves about law enforcement. Similarly, the “Nightrider” gang can roam freely and act as predators. What little police enforcement still exists can’t pose a significant threat to them. Once Max becomes a vigilante, he *is* able to dispatch the gang, as his willingness to match their level of savagery permits strategies that might previously have been unavailable. With his family having been murdered and his revenge taken, Max himself is no longer part of the vestigial law enforcement apparatus, taking to the road as a loner.

Roaming the Wasteland

In the sequel films, we see Max on his aimless roaming, and his encounters with other pockets of people show an even further detachment from the old civilization he left behind. In the first film, there are

towns and cities, people are still conducting commerce, and while there seem to be fewer people around, the ones who are there seem relatively healthy. Times are tough but recognizable. In each sequel film, this is less and less the case. Max is roaming not on the outskirts of a city, but through a literal Wasteland, and the few concentrations of people are exclusively either straggling bands of survivors or predatory gangs. There's evidence of environmental spoilage, but it's possible to grow food in some places, and while gasoline is scarce, there's obviously still enough to power all the cars, trucks, and motorcycles everyone uses. So it never becomes any more clear what exactly is the extent of the "apocalypse" or *why* it led to a breakdown of the social order. The explanation we might extract from Westerns, that in a frontier setting, authority structures are so removed as to be inefficacious, doesn't seem like it would explain what we see in these films.¹ In 1981's *The Road Warrior*, a small refinery has been converted to a tiny walled settlement and is besieged by a violent gang led by the mutant Humungus (Kjell Nilsson). The residents of the settlement hope to escape "to the coast" but we have no indication of whether that would be more hospitable—after all, the setting of the original film is near the coast. In 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, Max encounters a town of sorts, governed by the despotic Auntie Entity (Tina Turner), but its governance is capricious and in some ways medieval, a regression from the Australia Max would have grown up in. He also encounters a colony of orphaned children, whom he helps find a way to Sydney, which we learn has been destroyed. In 2015's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Max encounters a community ruled by mutant warlord Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). Neighboring "communities" are also ruled by warlords.

It's never explained how any of these situations might have emerged. As far as post-apocalyptic action films are concerned, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Cinematically, it can be sufficient that the protagonist find himself in an outlandish and barbarous world because the drama derives from the protagonist's reactions to the situation. We don't need to know the origins of the founding of Bartertown, for instance; we just need to see how it operates and what dilemmas and challenges it poses for Max. However, what is acceptable or even advantageous to leave out of a movie is not acceptable for drawing philosophical conclusions. If I made a movie about a peaceful and prosperous society with a wise and benevolent monarch King Bob, it might be an excellent movie, but it would be a mistake to infer from it that "monarchy must be a desirable political system, because look

how great King Bob is.” Similarly, one can be a fan of the *Mad Max* series without concluding that “anarchism must be bad because it would be terrible if we had violent mutant warlords.” While the question of how Immortan Joe’s Citadel came to be is unimportant cinematically, it’s worth thinking about how realistic it is *if* we’re trying to think about political philosophy.

Not All Government Is Good Government

One reason not to take these scenarios as examples of anarchism is that they seem less like examples of “no rulers” than they are examples of “bad rulers.” Immortan Joe and Aunty Entity are in fact rulers. They have power over their territories and the people in them. The people they rule acquiesce to (even if not always enthusiastically endorse) this control. That makes them rulers. Noting that they’re not the sorts of rulers we would expect to see in liberal democracies doesn’t make them not rulers. While it seems true that the Australia Mad Max is roaming around in no longer has central, continent-wide governance, it’s also true that small, localized pockets of governance have emerged, such as Bartertown and the Citadel and Bullet Farm. That’s importantly *not* the same thing as anarchism. To define *anarchism* as “the lack of the kind of government I like and am familiar with” won’t do. We can disapprove of Immortan Joe’s rule while noting that he is in fact the ruler of the Citadel. That’s not any different from disapproving of Hitler while noting that he was in fact the ruler of Nazi Germany.

Anarchism and Voluntarism

What would it actually look like to have no rulers? It would have to mean that organized systems of production and trade would be voluntary. People can work together for their mutual benefit and common interest. They can even adopt rules for adjudicating disputes and establishing boundaries for both conduct and physical space allocation. None of these features of social living *require* their imposition by coercive authority, though of course that’s the manner in which we’re most familiar with them. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued, however, that we wouldn’t be able to sustain such a system of voluntary cooperative order because each person is

a potential predator, and our fear and distrust leads us to regard each other as enemies, rendering social cooperation impossible.² This was why he argued for absolute monarchy as a “solution” to this problem, and this has been the underlying justification for coercive authority—if sometimes only tacitly—ever since.³ On Hobbes’s view, it makes perfect sense that Lord Humungus would attract and lead vicious predatory thugs to live by raiding others. Everyone in the gang is in sufficient fear of the Humungus’s power as to motivate them to cooperate with gang activity and focus on common goals. That’s exactly how Hobbes understood the sovereign: if everyone is in sufficient fear of the sovereign’s power, only then can they be trusted to refrain from predatory behavior toward one another. For Hobbes, then, anarchism is bad not because we might get rulers like Immortan Joe, but because having no rulers at all is *worse* than having rulers like Immortan Joe.

There’s not really good evidence for this, it turns out. The history of rulers offers far more examples of tyranny and enslavement than it does of egalitarian democracy. In contrast, there’s abundant evidence of organically emerging orders based on mutual gain and benefit. It’s just that we don’t tend to classify those as “governance.” We tend to conflate “governance” with “ruling,” since the most obvious examples (good and bad) of the former come from the latter. But they’re conceptually distinct. The evolution of international merchant law in the Middle Ages and the evolution of the common law in English villages are but two of the many examples of social order that arises from and is based on mutual benefit. This sort of “governance” is created by people’s voluntary compliance.⁴ Voluntary and mutually beneficial social orders are, contrary to Hobbes’s assertion, more stable than oppressive orders, which invite both rebellion and invasion precisely because people are less likely to acquiesce to such orders when alternatives are available. That’s not to say a tyrant may not have an iron grip on power for some particular timespan. Immortan Joe seems to be pretty secure in his reign, though of course it’s a rebellion by some of his subjects that precipitates the plot of the movie, and when Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) returns triumphant, the folks in the Citadel are perfectly happy to have her be in charge of the water. On the other hand, there’s no cause for rebellion against an institution that provides mutual benefit.

The classic contrast between the worldview of Hobbes and that of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke is based on (among other things) the idea that people can recognize the mutually advantageous nature of treating others as equals and cooperating with them