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NOT THINGS:  
GENDER AND MUSIC IN THE *MAD MAX* FRANCHISE

by

Lisa Pollock Mumme

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts  
degree in Music in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Nathan Platte

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To John Michael, who knew I could,  
and  
to Granny, who would have liked to know I did.

“Thus strangely are our souls constructed,  
and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin.”

Mary Shelley  
*Frankenstein*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the gender politics through musical discourse in the *Mad Max* series. Dystopian narratives are particularly interesting texts for study of gender because they allow for extreme hypothetical situations in worlds that are at once familiar and unfamiliar. Musical discourse in the *Mad Max* films both supports and complicates dominant readings of gender constructions. I consider the gender politics of the franchise, using *Mad Max* (1979) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as case studies, and drawing on scholarship on gender in film music, feminist film theory, and Australian car culture. In analyzing this music, I consider its broader cultural connotations, including film music tropes and operatic character types. After considering these genre associations, I analyze the musical gestures for narrative content and consider how the placement of themes with images and dialogue influences that content, with attention to how these factors contribute to a gendered understanding of the character. As the first deep thematic analysis of music in the *Mad Max* films, my project extends existing scholarship on both onscreen performance and gender categorizations that include musical forces resistant to strict binary categorization. My analysis of gendered musical discourse emphasizes the power of inquiry about gender in film music to clarify, enrich, and complicate texts.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The study of film music reveals narrative information that can limit, enrich, or oppose the film's dominant narrative. This project is an analysis of the gendered implications of music in the *Mad Max* films, using *Mad Max* (1979) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as case studies that represent the polarities of gender politics in the franchise. In analyzing this music, I consider its broader cultural connotations, including film music tropes and operatic character types. After considering these genre associations, I analyze the musical gestures for narrative content and consider how the placement of themes with images and dialogue influences that content, with attention to how these factors contribute to a gendered understanding of the character. As the first deep thematic analysis of music in the *Mad Max* films, my project extends existing scholarship on both onscreen performance and gender categorizations that include musical forces resistant to strict binary categorization. My analysis inflects the interpretations of *Mad Max* and *Fury Road*, demonstrating the power of the study of gender in film music to clarify, enrich, and complicate texts.

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## CHAPTER ONE: “FULL OF TREACHERY”

“We have a problem here. She is not what she seems. [...] she’s sent by the bronze.  
Full of treachery.”  
– The Toecutter, *Mad Max* (1979)

“We are not things!”  
– The Wives, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)

“No one barks orders to Mad Max,” wrote masculinist blogger Aaron Clarey in response to *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015), the fourth installment of the *Mad Max* film franchise.<sup>1</sup> Although the film had not yet been released, Clarey identified the film as feminist propaganda from the trailer alone. Based on footage that showed Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) giving directions to Max (Tom Hardy), Clarey believed Furiosa had supplanted Max as the protagonist of the film. Clarey and the community at the blog *Return of Kings* garnered media attention for this vitriolic post and the 5,772 attending comments. *Return of Kings* is a right-wing blog “for heterosexual, masculine men” on which “[w]omen and homosexuals are strongly discouraged from commenting.”<sup>2</sup> Clarey’s exhortation that his readers boycott “Mad Max: Feminist Road” and its underhanded attempts to erase physical and mental difference between men and women was reported in *The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, and *CNN*, among others.<sup>3</sup> Mainstream critical reception largely agreed with Clarey—although in celebration rather

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Clarey, “Why You Should Not Go See ‘Mad Max: Feminist Road,’” *Return Of Kings*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.returnofkings.com/63036/why-you-should-not-go-see-mad-max-feminist-road>

<sup>2</sup> “About,” *Return of Kings*, <http://www.returnofkings.com/about>

<sup>3</sup> Jason Wilson, “The ‘Man-O-Sphere’ is outraged about Mad Max? Hand me my popcorn!” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/15/the-man-o-sphere-is-outraged-about-mad-max-hand-me-my-popcorn>; Jessica Goodman, “Misogynist Who Says He’s Not A Men’s Rights Activist Doesn’t Want You To See ‘Mad

than condemnation—that Furiosa was the central character of *Fury Road*.<sup>4</sup> Articles in the online film community made much of the movie as a feminist work, reporting George Miller’s comment that the film’s “so-called McGuffin, the thing that everyone is struggling over, came down to five wives who were basically the breeding stock, as it were, to a decaying warlord. They needed a road warrior. It had to be female.”<sup>5</sup> During production, Miller invited *The Vagina Monologues*’ Eve Ensler to consult with the Wives about how sex slavery would have impacted their characters psychologically. Ensler insists that the film is feminist, saying “women are portrayed as equally capable of defending themselves and other people.”<sup>6</sup> Other critics did not accept *Fury Road* as a feminist text. Some looked askance at Ensler’s feminist credentials, claiming that her international work with survivors of sexual violence has “inclined [her] to speak for them in dubious ways.”<sup>7</sup> Others read the plot as a gender-essentialist attempt at

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Max,” *Huffington Post*, May 13, 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/mens-rights-activists-mad-max\\_n\\_7276144.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/mens-rights-activists-mad-max_n_7276144.html); Lorena O’Neil, “Men’s rights activists boycott ‘Mad Max: Fury Road,’” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/15/entertainment/mad-max-fury-road-boycott-mens-rights-thr-feat/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Brody, “Ridin’ Dirty: ‘Mad Max: Fury Road,’” *New Yorker*, May 21, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/ridin-dirty-mad-max-fury-road>; A.O. Scott, “Review: ‘Mad Max: Fury Road,’ Still Angry After All These Years,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/movies/review-mad-max-fury-road-still-angry-after-all-these-years.html>; Brian Tallerico, “Mad Max: Fury Road Movie Review (2015),” *RogerEbert.com*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mad-max-fury-road-2015>.

<sup>5</sup> Cara Buckley, “George Miller on ‘Mad Max: Fury Road’ and Furiosa Tattoos,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/16/movies/george-miller-on-mad-max-fury-road-and-furiosa-tattoos.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Youngs, “Putting Human Trafficking Centre Stage,” *BBC*, May 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-32824637>.

<sup>7</sup> Eileen Jones, “Actually, Mad Max: Fury Road Isn’t That Feminist; And It Isn’t That Good, Either,” *In These Times*, May 18, 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/17960/actually-mad-max-fury-road-isnt-that-feminist>.

empowering one woman (Furiosa), while simultaneously fetishizing the scantily-clad conventional beauty of five others (the Wives).<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by the cultural conversation about whether or not stereotypical feminine roles are upended in *Fury Road*, this thesis is an analysis of the gender politics of musical discourse in the *Mad Max* series. Dystopian narratives are particularly interesting texts in which to study gender because they are particularly concerned with questions of social power and oppression. Dystopian societies also allow for extreme hypothetical situations in worlds that are at once familiar and unfamiliar. As a sort of narrative thought experiment, dystopian narratives can re-imagine gender politics with clarity and creativity not always available in other narratives. *Mad Max* is both post-apocalyptic and dystopic. An unspecified apocalyptic event or series of events has destabilized society to the point where existing social structures fail and are replaced by dystopic ones. I analyze the gendered implications of the musical themes associated with the men and women of the *Mad Max* franchise, considering how cultural, cinematic, and musical codes combine to inflect dominant readings of gender constructions in the *Mad Max* films.<sup>9</sup> I consider the gender politics of the franchise, using *Mad Max* (1979) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as case studies.

In *Mad Max*, onscreen performance affects interpretation of a marginalized character's agency. When an oppressed character performs their own theme music, I theorize this performance as a site of resistance to the marginalizing forces of the rest of the narrative. My reading focuses on Jessie, Max's wife, and the ways that her ability to act and choose is

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<sup>8</sup> Tracy King, "No, *Mad Max: Fury Road* is not a feminist masterpiece (but that's OK)," *New Statesman*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/05/no-mad-max-fury-road-not-feminist-masterpiece-s-ok>.

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), 13.

celebrated or suppressed by musical interplay with Max and the Toecutter. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the gendered implications of the music associated with three main characters both uphold and upend gender stereotypes, problematizing the narrative's binary conception of power relations. Both films engage with archetypal concepts of masculinity and femininity. Heroism is coded masculine, predicated on the ability to exercise extraordinary skill and physical prowess to protect the vulnerable, while femininity is considered a source of nourishment, fecundity, and healing both for individuals, society, and the environment. Interpreting any of the *Mad Max* films is challenging due to a variety of thematic inconsistencies, including conflicting messages about gender. I do not claim to solve every narrative conundrum with the lens of gendered musical discourse, but in privileging the perspectives of marginalized characters, my analysis does propose a particular reading that challenges assumptions about masculine heroism and feminine restoration.

Australian director George Miller's *Mad Max* franchise spans 36 years; the first film released in 1979 and the latest appeared in 2015. The films are set in a near-future world struggling with the aftermath of an unspecified apocalypse. Oil and water are precious commodities. Nuclear fallout has laid waste to cities, landscapes, and bodies. All four films follow Max Rockatansky (played by Mel Gibson in the first three films, by Tom Hardy in the fourth), a former police officer who is driven mad by the loss of his family. After exacting his vengeance on the brutal motorcycle gang responsible for the deaths of his wife and son, Max wanders the road, attempting to avoid human entanglements, but being repeatedly drawn into conflicts with violent gangs in order to rescue decent people. Society continues to degrade over the course of the series, leaving Max to navigate the wasteland accompanied by the ghosts of those whom he failed to save.

*Mad Max* is particularly interesting as a text because it is a long-running transnational franchise. The first film was a low-budget Australian film run by inexperienced filmmakers that astonished everyone with its international popularity. At that time in Australia, government was primarily financially backing period pieces about Australian life, so George Miller (1945) and his business partner, Byron Kennedy (1949-1983), raised the money themselves from friends and acquaintances. The second film had a much bigger budget, but was still produced in Australia by Australians, retaining the idiosyncrasies of production and pacing that mark Australian films as distinct from Hollywood films.<sup>10</sup> The third film was a sort of Hollywood/Australian hybrid, as noted in 1985 by Richard Fox, the president of Warner Bros International, who predicted then that the fourth installment would be thoroughly American.<sup>11</sup> The Americanization of *Beyond Thunderdome* is perhaps most immediately noticeable in the changes in the music. Maurice Jarre's score for the film conforms to Hollywood practices of the time for scoring epic films. In addition, the film's opening and closing credits feature Tina Turner singing two different rock songs written for the film, a popular Hollywood practice of the era that may have had as much to do with marketing opportunities as with artistic significance.<sup>12</sup> The fourth film was not considered a foreign film at all, produced in partnership with American movie studios and premiering in Los Angeles. *Fury Road* won six of the ten Academy Awards for which it was

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<sup>10</sup> George Miller, interview, "The Madness of Max," *Mad Max: High Octane Collection* (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Garry Maddox, "Marketing *Mad Max 3*," *Encore* (August 1985), quoted in Rebecca Coyle, "Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy," in *Off The Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 122.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the history of films using songs to market a film, see Jeff Smith, "My Huckleberry Friend," in *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69-99.

nominated, none of which was Best Foreign Film. This brief overview of the transnational production history of *Mad Max*'s four films demonstrates just a few of the shifting elements at play in the franchise's journey through time and global space.

Although the franchise has maintained continuity of creative control through George Miller as writer and director, three different composers have scored the series. Australian composer Brian May (1934-1997) composed the scores for *Mad Max* (1979) and *Mad Max: The Road Warrior* (1981). Maurice Jarre (1924-2009) was enlisted for *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) and Dutch DJ and composer Junkie XL (aka Tom Holkenborg, 1967) scored *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). May's scores have been compared to Bernard Herrmann's thriller scores for Alfred Hitchcock with spare orchestration of angular themes designed—according to May—to “antagonize the audience.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Miller hired May because of the similarity of his score for *Patrick* (Richard Franklin, 1978) to Herrmann's work.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Jarre's *Beyond Thunderdome* score bears more resemblance to his other epic work like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago* than to a horror-film score, and features Tina Turner (who plays Auntie Entity in the film) singing rock ballads over the opening and closing credits. Where May's scores feature short moments of music that comprise a fraction of the film's run time, Jarre's music accompanies the film almost continuously. Jarre also featured instruments outside the usual Western orchestra, including the indigenous Australian didgeridoo and gamelan instruments. Finally, the music for *Fury Road* blends orchestral themes with electronic and rock idioms. Junkie XL's orchestral writing has elicited comparisons to both Herrmann's score for Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and to Richard Wagner's operas *Tristan und Isolde* and *Das Rheingold*.

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<sup>13</sup> Coyle, “Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy,” 119.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, interview, *The Madness of Max*.

Junkie XL employs electronic additions to the soundscape primarily to signal hallucinations, while diegetic electric guitar and drum riffs function like a drum-and-bugle corps, spurring troops into battle.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The fact that the music has elicited comparisons to other genres highlights the hybridity of the *Mad Max* films. Miller has cited inspiration from his residency in the emergency room as a medical student, silent film, westerns, and Aboriginal Dreaming.<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, I draw upon diverse areas of research to conduct my analysis, building on scholarship in gender in film music, which itself builds on film music study and feminist film theory. My work also considers the particular efficacy of gender studies in dystopian narratives, as well as academic writing on the impact of Australian car culture on understanding how the films signal gendered power dynamics. Finally, my work takes into account previous writings on the music of *Mad Max*, noting that in-depth musical analysis has not yet been performed, though other scholars have briefly discussed the gendered implications of instrumentation.

The work of Heather Laing, Caryl Flinn, and Peter Franklin forms the scaffolding on which I have built my work on gender in the *Mad Max* franchise, allowing me to answer the question, “How does music influence an understanding of gender in this film?” These scholars build on the precedents of film music study established by Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman, Robynn Stilwell, David Neumeier, Kathryn Kalinak, among others who have argued for the importance of integrating sound and music into narrative analyses of film in concert with the

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<sup>15</sup> Coyle, “Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy,” 112, 122.

visual information.<sup>16</sup> Kalinak points out that “contemporary film theory has addressed itself to issues of ideology, revealing that the image is not a duplication of the experiential world but a representation of it, structured by a complex set of relationships between the cinematic apparatus and the spectator and between the spectator and the image.” However, because of the privileging of the visual over the aural, the same issues have been ignored when it comes to examining the contribution of sound and music, instead “there remains a tendency to perceive sound as an unmediated discourse.”<sup>17</sup> In studying film music as a gendered discourse, Laing, Flinn, and Franklin attend to the ideological issues underlying this aural stream of narrative information.

While Laing and Flinn both locate the feminizing influence of music in Romantic-era gender politics, Franklin critiques this approach, suggesting that as part of a modernist endeavor, film music occupies a position that bridges between both high and popular art, as well as Romantic and modern sensibilities. For Franklin, this position allows music to reflexively critique both nineteenth- and twentieth-century artistic and social sensibilities. Both Laing and Franklin use a variety of historical and cultural insights—many of them which trace connections between film and operatic tropes—to construct their thoughts about how music may be understood as gendered discourse.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Michel Chion *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Robynn Stilwell, “Music in Films: A Critical Review of Literature, 1980-1996,” *Journal of Film Music* 1, no. 1 (2002): 19-61; David Neumeyer, *Meaning and Interpretation in Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classic Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> See Heather Laing, *The Gendered Score: Music in 1940s Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Peter Franklin, *Seeing*

I build directly on Laing's work in constructing my argument about female characters who perform their own theme music. Laing appeals to the ancient narrative archetypes of the Siren and the Muse, both performing women themselves.<sup>19</sup> That *Fury Road* begins to expand beyond the standard orchestral film score necessitates recourse to Franklin's thoughts about the gendered effect of modernist techniques.<sup>20</sup> I employ Laing's and Franklin's scholarship in tandem with the hybridized gender characterizations theorized by Carol Clover in her work on the Final Girl in slasher horror films. Clover teases out the ways that feminizing and masculinizing narrative forces may work on characters of any gender, resulting in complex gender relationships that resist binary categorization.<sup>21</sup> Using the work of Laing and Franklin, I identify how masculinizing and feminizing musical forces complicate interpretations of Max, Furiosa, and Nux in *Fury Road*.

Flinn's work in *Strains of Utopia* most explicitly draws connections between her work on gender in film music with the thought of feminist film critics including especially Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, and Kaja Silverman. Flinn's work is useful in integrating musicological approaches to film with film theory. Flinn uses Doane's principle that music's "ineffable, intangible quality... requires that it be placed on the side of the emotional or the intuitive."<sup>22</sup>

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*Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, *Seeing Through Music*, 162-163.

<sup>21</sup> Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations*, no. 20 (Fall 1987): 187-228.

<sup>22</sup> Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 6; Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 55.

Doane continues, “the ideology of the audible demands that there exist simultaneously a different truth and another order of reality for the subject to grasp.”<sup>23</sup> This principle indicates a foundational assumption of film music study—that a particular power of analyzing film music is to integrate musical discourse about the character’s inner life into a richer reading of the film.

Flinn notes that Mulvey’s classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” finds that films in which “feminine action and desires propel [...] narrative” are rare.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Mulvey argues, films are governed by the male gaze, in which relationships of power between are represented by the looking relationships conveyed by the camera.<sup>25</sup> I employ Mulvey’s thoughts on gaze because of the evolving looking relationships in this film franchise. Earlier *Mad Max* films use camera work to introduce and interpret female characters through Max’s eyes, a positioning of subjects that affects how the music associated with these characters is understood. Kaja Silverman considers the role of the female voice in the power negotiations of both the male and female subjects in the film, as well as for male and female subjects as viewers.<sup>26</sup> Since the film music of a character is considered an inner voice, Silverman’s observations on the voice are easily applied to a character’s musical themes.

As science fiction films, the *Mad Max* series are particularly suited to analysis around gender. The *Mad Max* films are post-apocalyptic dystopias, a more specific subset of the science fiction genre. Other notable dystopian films include *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1928), *Blade Runner*

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<sup>23</sup> Doane, “Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing,” 55.

<sup>24</sup> Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1 October 1975): 6-18.

<sup>26</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

(Ridley Scott, 1982), *The Matrix* (Lana & Lily Wachowski, 1999), *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), and *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2014). Dystopias are particularly fertile ground for exploring gendered power dynamics, because they can examine existing power structures by making them seem unfamiliar, by imagining roles and ways of being that may be hidden from current societal positions.<sup>27</sup>

Dystopias grew from science fiction, a narrative genre with a history of speculation about the possibilities of human progress. Science fiction is related to fantasy, with ancestors across narrative history. However, science fiction differs from fantasy in that it is considered to be a particular product of the modern consciousness formed by capitalist industrialization. Science fiction is the creative response of humans who have experienced the rapid growth of technology. In other words, “Science fiction’s domain is the possible.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, although every chronology of science fiction mentions Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia*, historians who emphasize the extension of scientific advances to humanity’s imaginative limits tend to consider Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) the first work of science fiction proper.<sup>29</sup>

Dystopian texts focus on the dark possibilities of progress, sharing certain narrative characteristics that make gender study an effective approach to the genre. As an antonym of the word “utopia,” a dystopia focuses on the misuse of social power in order to create a nightmarish

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<sup>27</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 28, 42.

<sup>28</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, “Science Fiction: The Early History.” <https://www.hbrucefranklin.com/articles/history-of-science-fiction/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sharon R. Wilson, ed., *Women’s Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 1.

society. Dystopian narratives usually involve some sort of seismic societal change that leads to new power structures predicated on cruelty and oppression. Dystopian narratives in particular are often set in unfamiliar settings in terms of space and/or time. Although the words utopia and dystopia are linguistic opposites, the worlds manifested in these sorts of narratives are rarely so easily separated from one another. Utopian conditions for the privileged are often supported by dystopian realities for the many, as in *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*. Or in the words novelist Margaret Atwood, “Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some.”<sup>30</sup> Because of their uncanny settings and their historical connection to utopian narratives, dystopias are usually seen as social criticism that “provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable.”<sup>31</sup> Dystopian settings can exaggerate existing social problems by making them seem unfamiliar. Although they usually take place in alien or future worlds, dystopian narratives tend to explore the power structures and repressed anxieties of contemporaneous society, often hypothesizing the repercussions of violent or base impulses freed from social censure and released upon society. In this way, dystopian narratives are both familiar and unfamiliar, allowing deep, long-held psychic characteristics to be safely played out on the terrain of a different world.<sup>32</sup>

Academic writing about the first three films often considers the gendered power structures of *Mad Max*, generally by situating the franchise as a display of male power amidst the

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 241.

<sup>31</sup> M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> For more on how familiarity and unfamiliarity in narrative release repressed impulses, see Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003).

disintegration of society. The particular masculine zeitgeist of *Mad Max* is inspired by late-twentieth-century Australian car culture, which influenced other Australian films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974) and *Dead-End Drive-In* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1986).<sup>33</sup> Car culture in Australia springs from the harsh conditions of the vast land mass. Cars are necessary for safety, independence, and mobility. However, the “road toll”—the phrase used to describe the number of deaths on the road—also looms large in the Australian imagination, so much so that director George Miller says that *Mad Max* was inspired by his work as a medical student in the emergency room, treating the victims of “autocide.”<sup>34</sup> These experiences contributed to the spectacular car chases and crashes for which Miller’s franchise is known, but also explains the centrality of the car in the narrative’s concept of masculinity. Rebecca Johninke notes that “the crashed car usually signifies individual, cultural, and industrial decline, but it also provides the opportunity for heroism and renewal. Traditionally the car on the screen has mythic properties; it is a cipher for freedom, escape, power, masculinity and virility.”<sup>35</sup> The cars of *Mad Max* signal the dystopic decline of society through their degradation, but the way their owners repair and decorate them provides visual representations for how these groups envision society and power. In this way, vehicles manifest the identities of the characters. As a patriarchal order, these vehicles are almost always wielded by men as an extension of their own masculine power. By contrast to the rest of the series, *Fury Road* is the first film to feature women as drivers.

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<sup>33</sup> Theodore F. Sheckels, “Filming Peter Carey: From the Adequate to the Distorted,” *Antipodes* 13, no. 2 (December 1999): 91-94

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Johninke, “Manifestations of Masculinities: *Mad Max* and the Lure of the Forbidden Zone,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 25 (2001): 12.

<sup>35</sup> Johninke, “Not Quite *Mad Max*: Brian Trenchard-Smith’s *Dead End Drive-In*,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 1, no. 3 (2009): 309.

Consideration of the gender politics at play is incomplete without attention to how vehicles are used as external markers of violent hypermasculinity and how this meaning evolves depending on who sits in the driver's seat.

Much was written on the first three films in the 1980s and 90s, including a few essays on the music. Rebecca Coyle examines sound and music in the first three films, situating the films in the intersecting genres of the western and the road movie. Coyle also ponders the Australian-ness of the first two films, the Hollywood-ization of the third film, and the pervasive influence of Australian car culture across the franchise. Coyle's analysis does not examine the narrative import of specific musical themes, but considers the films' broader soundscapes with particular relation to the differing technological characters of different groups and their social structures.<sup>36</sup> Although Coyle's work does not center gender in her considerations of *Mad Max's* music, she makes frequent use of the observations of feminist communications studies scholar Anne Cranny-Francis, whose observations about gender in the *Mad Max* trilogy center on the third film, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. Cranny-Francis positions the characters Aunty Entity (Tina Turner) and Savannah Nix (Helen Buday) as the symbols of two opposing models of how to rebuild society. Music is briefly mentioned as one of the gendering forces of the film's visual and aural discourse, but not analyzed in depth.

Cranny-Francis' other work on feminist uses of genre fiction—including science fiction and dystopias—also informs my work, particularly my consideration of Furiosa's character in *Fury Road*.<sup>37</sup> Although *Fury Road* has been discussed from film-studies, feminist, and

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<sup>36</sup> See also Ross Harley, "Creating a Sonic Character: Non-Deictic Sound in the *Mad Max* Trilogy," in *Screen Scores: Studies in Contemporary Australian Film Music*, ed. Rebecca Coyle (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 16-28.

<sup>37</sup> See Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction*.

theological academic viewpoints, very little has been written on the music at all. One of the most valuable resources in analyzing *Fury Road*'s score is the composer's YouTube videos, in which he talks about the characters' themes, composition process, and technological set up.<sup>38</sup> Coyle's and Cranny-Francis' work on the first three films are foundational for how I contextualize my more thorough musical analysis of gender in the broader setting of the franchise as a whole.

### FRANCHISE OVERVIEW

In all four films, Max is a sort of post-apocalyptic cowboy vigilante, embodying the trope of the outlaw hero who must save society but can never really join it.<sup>39</sup> Miller wrote about the evolution of Max over the franchise that "The first movie is pretty much a one-dimensional revenge fantasy, but in the second and third Max is the closet human being who, in the end, rekindles his compassion. Furthermore, by relinquishing his self-interest he becomes an agent of renewal."<sup>40</sup> The fourth film, *Fury Road*, extends the trope of Max as a closet human being, emphasizing the transformation that comes over him when he agrees to be part of a community. In a similar way, the films present varying views of women that seem to develop over time. In *Mad Max*, Jessie is "fridged," a narrative practice in which characters who are disproportionately

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<sup>38</sup> Junkie XL, "Episode 3: Mad Max String Theme – Studio Time with Junkie XL" (May 25, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkJNeXS0Lmxc&t=200s>; Junkie XL, "Mad Max: Fury Road – Behind The Music with Tom Holkenborg aka Junkie XL" (June 5, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xESFyIxito0>.

<sup>39</sup> Johninke, "Manifestations of Masculinities," 118-119, 124; Coyle, "Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy," 122.

<sup>40</sup> George Miller, "The Apocalypse and the Pig, or the Hazards of Storytelling," in *Second Take: Australian Film-makers Talk*, ed. Raffaele Caputo & Geoff Burton (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 35.

women are subjected to violence in order to influence a male protagonist's story arc.<sup>41</sup> Although my analysis in Chapter 2 uses analysis of Jessie's music in order to posit ways in which her character somewhat resists the attempts of male characters in the narrative to silence her agential voice, Jessie is ultimately doomed to serve as Max's moral anchor and emotional catalyst in life, and as the impetus for his revenge spree in death.

In *The Road Warrior*, there are only a handful of minor characters who are women and none have particular music associated with them. Perhaps the most memorable is the Warrior Woman, whose name states both her function and her gender. When she is killed during the final battle, the fighting stops and the camera focuses closely on the Warrior Woman and other characters. Diegetic sound is overtaken by the non-diegetic theme that has played throughout the film to signal tragedy—often when Max or another character witnesses another character meet a violent end. Warrior Woman's greatest moment of musical subjectivity is actually a window into the emotions of those around her at her demise.

In *Beyond Thunderdome*, two women are central narrative characters—Aunty Entity (Tina Turner) and Savannah Nix (Helen Buday). Aunty Entity runs Bartertown, a frontier town in a desert wasteland. Aunty has pulled together a community replete with luxuries like electricity by enforcing a strict code of conduct based on the free market and violent entertainment. In contrast, Savannah Nix is the leader of a group of children called The Lost Tribe, who survived a plane crash that killed all the adults aboard. The children formed a tribal society that relies on nightly “tells” in which they rehearse the mythology they have created from

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<sup>41</sup> For more on this, see the original website that popularized this term by Gail Simone, “Women in Refrigerators” (March 1999), <http://www.lby3.com/wir/>. See also the article by Aja Romano and Alex Abad-Santos, “‘Fridging,’ One of Storytelling’s Most Noxious Tropes, Explained,” *Vox* (May 24, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/2018/5/24/17384064/deadpool-vanessa-fridging-women-refrigerators-comics-trope>.

the pieces of civilization that survived the wreckage. The tells prophesy the return of the deceased pilot Captain Walker, who will take them to Tomorrow-Morrow Land. Aunty Entity and Savannah Nix are both symbols of differing strategies for social renewal. Aunty Entity represents a sexualized, violent, capitalistic order which, while materially successful, necessarily kills and oppresses in order to function. In contrast, Savannah Nix is presented as an unspoiled Madonna-figure who leads the band of children through ritual and storytelling.<sup>42</sup>

*Fury Road* presents Emperor Furiosa as the film's central character, for the first time giving a woman as vital a character arc as Max. In Chapter 3, I analyze her music, along with Max's and Nux's themes in order to examine how the gender characterizations resist strict binaries, reinforcing certain gendered stereotypes, while upending others. These complexities belie the binary power structures in the world of *Fury Road*, which suggest that men are essentially violent, while women are essentially nurturing.

## METHODS

My project will examine the influence of the gendered material in the film scores of *Mad Max* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* on the overall reading of the films. The film scores in particular chart the increasing centrality of female characters in the narrative, but in doing so navigate the complexity of gender identity in ways that both rely on and complicate standard constructions of femininity and masculinity.

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<sup>42</sup> For further analysis of Aunty and Savannah, see Anne Cranny-Francis, "The Moving Image: Film and Television," in *Communication and Culture: An Introduction*, ed. by Gunther Kress (New South Wales: New South Wales University Press, 1988), 157-180 and Meaghan Morris, "White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime," in *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, ed. Meaghan Morris (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 80-104.

Since I did not have access to scores for these films, I transcribed major themes and their transformations in the film. Although no scores are currently published, *Mad Max: Fury Road* composer Junkie XL has published several videos detailing his creative process on his YouTube channel. These videos have been helpful in defining thematic material and production methods. For readability, all transcriptions are notated in treble or bass clef.

I focus on two case studies for my analysis. First, I examine the tone of gender relations set in *Mad Max*. My concerns the themes associated with Max, his wife Jessie, and the film's villain, Tocutter. My second case study deals with the music associated with Max, Imperator Furiosa, and Nux in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In analyzing this music, I consider its broader cultural connotations, including film music tropes and operatic character types. After considering these genre associations, I analyze the musical gestures for narrative content and consider how the placement of themes with images and dialogue influences this content, with attention to how it contributes to a gendered understanding of the character.

As the first deep thematic analysis of music in the *Mad Max* films, my project extends existing scholarship on both onscreen performance and gender categorizations that include musical forces resistant to strict binary categorization. Theorizing onscreen performance as a moment of agency can open avenues of study for other marginalized characters who perform onscreen. I consider the complex operations of masculinizing and feminizing musical forces that complicate a character's gender identity in ways that may be hidden without attention to the particular analytical framework I employ here. My project offers a musical answer to the cultural question of whether and how *Fury Road* may be a deviation from a franchise that celebrates violent masculinity.

## CHAPTER TWO: “CRAZY ABOUT YOU”

“I suppose you don’t need a sense of humor with a pretty face.  
The only trouble is though, missy, if you should... lose the face.”  
– The Toecutter, *Mad Max*

Across narrative genres and media, characters who are women are often restricted to flat stereotypes like the mother, the distressed damsel, and the whore. In addition, women tend to be subordinated, serving the character development of the male protagonist. These limited roles are traceable back to the gendered archetypes of Greek narrative. Drawing on Charles Segal’s work, Heather Laing labels these two major female archetypes the Siren and the Muse. While the Siren’s overt sexuality is interpreted as exciting but destructive to the men around her, the Muse’s sublime beauty is employed by male characters for artistic inspiration. The Siren/Muse dichotomy emphasizes feminine connection to music and vocality, a useful connotation for film music scholarship.<sup>43</sup> These archetypes can be located in gendered narrative tropes across time. Laing notes that film music often follows the musical conventions of the nineteenth century, employing Romantic-era orchestrations as an “ahistorical, emotive signifier.”<sup>44</sup> This connection to nineteenth-century musical systems for signifying emotion invoke a Romantic gender politics. Because musical dynamics and social dynamics are interrelated, musical semiotics will necessarily be gendered.<sup>45</sup>

Romantic philosophical associations of musical meaning and gender politics are crystallized for Laing in the form of nineteenth-century opera. Therefore operatic female

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<sup>43</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

characterizations are particularly instructive as templates for thinking about the filmic woman.<sup>46</sup> Laing goes on to say that, most pertinent to the understanding of female characterization in both opera and in film, “opera’s use of music to allow more telling representations of character interiority than words alone could achieve offers a particularly compelling model for later cinematic configurations of gender, emotion and music.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, both opera and film consider a character’s music to be the revelation of a their true inner nature.

Furthermore, as Rebecca Fülöp suggests, when it comes to musicological inquiry there is a fundamental difference in the agency of the operatic feminine character and the cinematic feminine character. The operatic woman produces her own music, while the filmic woman is often separated from her defining musical material by non-diegesis.<sup>48</sup> How might Fülöp’s observation influence readings of films in which female characters perform their themes?

The work of Laing and others examines the agency of female characters who perform in film, identifying musical forces that empower or disempower female characters – sometimes both simultaneously. Laing writes that, “The operatic text presented the excesses of women in order to demonstrate, in turn, the desirability and necessity of their containment, control and even destruction in death.”<sup>49</sup> The role of the woman as subordinate to the male protagonist is depicted here as necessary, with transgressions punishable by death. Laing and her compatriots

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Fülöp, “Heroes, Dames, and Damsels in Distress: Constructing Gender Types in Classical Hollywood Film Music,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2012), 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 15; see also Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

do not consider that the onscreen physical presence of the characters interacting with their music is an additional empowering factor. If film music is to be the window into a character's inner truth, then those characters who perform their own themes have a particular agency in defining themselves. Laing hints at, but does not explore, the implications of embodied performance when she briefly examines the onscreen association between a performer and her instrument. When a diegetic performance visually centers on the instrument, Laing argues that the performer is presented as experiencing the emotionality of the music in an abstract way, consciously working to lose herself in the music for the sake of artistic expression. Conversely, when a performer's body is central and the instrument itself is de-emphasized, Laing reads the music as serving to express the performer's emotions, usually in response to events transpiring at some prior moment of the film.<sup>50</sup>

Building on Laing's work, I identify instances when a character performs her own theme music onscreen as sites of embodied resistance within narratives that may otherwise restrict the agency of female characters. In this chapter, I apply such a reading to the character of Jessie from *Mad Max* (1979). The film paints Jessie as a Muse, subordinated to Max and his character development. She is Max's moral counterweight, catalyst for self-expression, and tragic motivation for his transformation into the titular Mad Max. However, the fact that Jessie is introduced playing her own theme imbues her musical material with an agency that resists the boundaries of the stereotypically gendered categories the narrative otherwise attempts to enforce on her.

In order to produce this reading, I analyze Jessie's introduction and extrapolate how the resonances of that scene subtly alter the dominant reading of the film in subsequent iterations of

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<sup>50</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 103-105.

her music. Accounting for musical-cinematic conventions that encompass the entire sensory message – both music and image – my work demonstrates that apart from studying her music, this oppositional reading of Jessie would be missed. *Mad Max* as a whole is an idiosyncratic, multivalent film that resists straightforward interpretations. However, it is particularly well suited to my goal in this chapter – to propose that female characters we could consider oppressed in a certain narrative might be reimagined when they play their own tunes.

*Mad Max* is the first of four films in director George Miller’s series about a man navigating an increasingly hostile post-apocalyptic world. In the first installment, markers of civilization are strained, but still functioning. There are hospitals, restaurants, roads, and a police force. Max Rockatansky is an officer of the Main Force Patrol, protecting the roads from a marauding biker gang run by the Toecutter. Growing morally uncomfortable with the violence he enacts in stopping the gang and his proclivity for it, Max attempts to retire to a domestic life with his wife Jessie and their small son, Sprog. While the family is vacationing, the Toecutter and his gang run Jessie and Sprog down. Max avenges his family, hunting the gang members as a vigilante.

Australian television and film composer Brian May scored both *Mad Max* and its sequel, *The Road Warrior*.<sup>51</sup> The *Mad Max* score garnered May the 1979 Australian Film Institute award for best original score.<sup>52</sup> May’s scores were known for their similarities to influential Alfred Hitchcock collaborator Bernard Herrmann, a comparison particularly apt for his thriller-like

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<sup>51</sup> The second film in the franchise is known as *Mad Max 2* abroad and as *The Road Warrior* in the United States.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Hannan, “The Brian May Collection: Two Decades of Screen Composition,” in *Screen Sound: The Australasian Journal of Soundtrack Studies* 1 (2010): 59-66.

score for this film.<sup>53</sup> Director George Miller noted criticism of May's scores saying, "We're continually being told that we should have rock scores, because the movies already have something like the feel of rock. They're visual rock 'n' roll in a way. But I don't think I've ever heard a rock score that really coalesces with the visuals, or that didn't stand out as something apart."<sup>54</sup> Instead, May reported that "George particularly wanted me to antagonize the audience by making them feel uncomfortable."<sup>55</sup> Perhaps this is why May's angular, spare themes often punctuate action already in progress with bombastic entrances. In addition, long stretches of the film do not have musical accompaniment. There are only fifty minutes of music in the movie's ninety-five-minute run-time.

*Mad Max*'s score depends on strings, brass, and percussion. Max's theme appears most frequently on French horn. The Toecutter's gang is announced by descending low brass and timpani. Action sequences are accompanied by hurrying strings and punctuating brass. Jessie's theme makes striking contrast both because of its soft, lyrical melody and because it is introduced diegetically on tenor saxophone before migrating to the non-diegetic score for the rest of the film.

## JESSIE

Jessie's introduction is one of the most musically striking sequences in the film. As one of the few instances of diegetic music, the filmmakers seem to place great emphasis on Jessie as a character. However, after this introduction, Jessie disappears for more than thirty minutes, finally reappearing only to embody the gendered stereotypes of supportive wife and nurturing

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<sup>53</sup> Coyle, "Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy," 114, 119.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

mother. When considered apart from analysis of the score, the narrative employs Jessie to serve Max's character development as his moral anchor, the access point for his interiority, and the incitement for his mad revenge.

Throughout the film, Max struggles with the moral gravity of the violence he enacts to stop the Toecutter's violence. Jessie is presented as the force pulling him away from his role in law enforcement, toward domesticity. Near the middle of the film, Max attempts to resign as an officer of the Halls of Justice, telling his commanding officer that although he has a badge to sanction his actions, he is no better than the biker gang. When the commander, Fifi, advises Max to take some time off and reconsider, the Jessie's theme surfaces in the score for a moment, invoking Max's love for her, and the domestic respite from policework that she symbolizes.

Jessie also functions to provide access to Max's inner emotions. Max's laconic nature is addressed explicitly in the film and always in the context of Jessie's silent presence, which allows him to haltingly express his thoughts and feelings. Jessie sits silently at Max's side as he attempts to describe his feelings at the death of his best friend and partner on the Main Force Patrol, Goose. Later, Jessie wordlessly listens as her husband muses on his relationship with his father and his desire to overcome his manly reticence and fully express his feelings for her. In contrast, Jessie's role as love-object and mother is emphasized repeatedly in both dialogue and narrative, categorizations that robs her of the interiority afforded to Max.

Finally, Jessie's death transforms Max into Mad Max.<sup>56</sup> Having lost Jessie as his moral counterweight, Max surrenders himself to the violent impulses he had tried to control and murders the gang members responsible for her death. In one of the film's final scenes, Max

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<sup>56</sup> After being run down by the Toecutter on a motorcycle, we see Jessie's bandaged form in the hospital and overhear with Max two doctors talking in vague terms about her prospects of survival. Max runs from the building to hunt the biker gang and we never hear of Jessie's death explicitly. However, subsequent films refer to the death of Max's family.

chains last of the culprits to a car with a leaking gas tank and gives the man a saw. The prisoner can try to hack through the chain before the fuse hits the fuel, or he can saw through his own ankle in half the time. As Max walks away from the death trap, the gang members cries, “You’re mad!” This is only moment in which the title of the film is explicitly referenced, as our protagonist is baptized as Mad Max with the literal fire of the car’s explosion.

Jessie’s initial appearance presents ambivalent factors in relation to her agency. Several narrative elements indicate her fetishized role as wife and mother. A smash cut transitions from the opening sequence of the film – a sequence in which Max has pursued a gang member called the Nightrider in a high-speed chase that wreaks havoc on property and culminates in the Nightrider’s death. A sustained E-flat elides the loud fanfare-like ending chord of the automobile crash with Jessie’s theme, which begins during an exterior night shot of the well-lit Rockatansky home. Both editing and musical transition contrast Max’s violent law enforcement career with Jessie and domesticity. A cut to the interior reveals Max enjoying a beer while his toddler, Sprog, sits nearby. Both are looking offscreen at Jessie, who is revealed to be the source of the music, playing a gentle melody on tenor saxophone.

Thus Jessie’s music appears with her home, her husband, and her son before she is revealed, pointedly positioning her as wife and mother. Her association with the saxophone persists throughout the film, though her theme is also reprised by French horn, strings, and xylophone. The fact that Jessie’s theme is associated mainly with the saxophone plays on the gendered stereotypes of the film noir femme fatale. The saxophone and jazz in cinema have carried connotations of femininity and sexuality since the days of Classic Hollywood when the femme fatale was announced by a saxophone or muted horn riff.<sup>57</sup> Jessie’s theme accesses these

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<sup>57</sup> Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 120.

ideas of femininity to establish her as Max's love-object but limits the film noir associations of dangerous sexuality by situating her in relation to her nuclear family. However, this scene seems to upend both Siren-esque film noir conventions and the opposing non-threatening domesticity by placing the saxophone into the hands of the woman, instead of associating the instrument's disembodied sound with her onscreen presence.

As these factors demonstrate, Jessie's characterization is complex, sometimes conflicting. But reading her narrative arc in conjunction with the development of her musical material in the context of her initial diegetic performance provides an understanding of her character as fighting for agency in a world of violent men. Attending to Jessie's musical material, its impact on the film's narrative as a site of resistance, and the way in which her theme goes on to interact with the music associated with Max and the Toecutter, creates a different understanding of the film's narrative. The reading of *Mad Max* as the tragic tale of a man whose life is destroyed and who is driven insane by his thirst for revenge renders Jessie as a docile symbol destroyed for the sake of narrative progress. In contrast, my reading centers on Jessie, her musical assertions of autonomy, and the ways in which her ultimate undoing is prefigured by the interactions of her musical material with that of Max and the Toecutter.

In spite of the gendered tropes that relegate Jessie to a stereotype in service of Max's character development, her performance of her own theme at her introduction reclaims some narrative agency for her. The viewer is quite literally oriented to Jessie by the male gaze – we first behold Jessie from Max's point of view. But Jessie is the only character in the film to state her own thematic music diegetically. Thus Jessie's first "words" in a film in which she speaks very little are her song. Jessie meets Max's gaze with a creative voice that commandeers the male-coded saxophone, producing by her own performance the music that defines her character.

As established in Laing’s scholarship, a character’s theme may be considered a revelation of identity.<sup>58</sup> The fact that Jessie’s own body acts to establish her identity musically is a powerful act of resistance to a narrative that will proceed to alternately limit and celebrate her ability to act independently. After Jessie establishes her own musical identity as a performing body, her theme returns non-diegetically in varying ways that either affirm or disrupt her agency.



Figure 1. *Mad Max* (1979): Jessie

Musically speaking, Jessie’s theme is a lyrical melody that can appear romantic or melancholy depending on its setting in the score. Each phrase begins with a large leap – sixths, sevenths, and an octave—then moves in much smaller intervals. The second and third phrases include a descending leap at the end of the phrase, anchoring the melody in the low register of the female voice. The smaller intervals in the second part of the phrases gradually expand, spanning half steps, whole steps, and finally thirds. A dramatic octave slide culminates the melody. Although Jessie’s introduction invokes jazz with saxophone and swooping articulations, the melody itself does not seem to retain this association when it appears in other instruments.

Subsequent appearances of Jessie’s theme present instances in which her agential voice is alternately absorbed by Max’s music or silenced by the Toecutter’s theme. Whereas the

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<sup>58</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 14.

Toecutter's theme interrupts Jessie's music, intimating the violent designs of the gang leader, Max's theme at first seems to converse with Jessie's. For instance, on the morning following Jessie's introduction, Max's theme alternates with Jessie's as he tries to convince her that he must return to his work. Jessie speaks little, but demonstrates her opposition to Max's involvement with the Main Force Patrol silently, staring out the window. Her theme seems to stand in for her part in the conversation. Max dons a grotesque rubber mask and clowns about, trying to make her smile. When Jessie finally grudgingly consents, she stands on the porch as Max approaches his car and, getting his attention, uses a makeshift sign language.<sup>59</sup> When a puzzled Max asks what it means, she smiles and responds, "It means, 'I'm crazy about you.'" Max wordlessly returns her smile and leaves in his car, not seeing Jessie bite her lip and look at the ground as Max's theme sounds and the scene ends.

## MAX

Max's theme is that of a tragic hero, distorting the characteristics of the typical hero's theme. Brass instruments, occasionally with mutes, most frequently announce Max's presence. Heroic themes are often marked by brass instruments, which may invoke martial connotations, and frequently begin with an ascending leap of a fifth or octave. There tends to be a strong preference for ascending triadic melodic motion.<sup>60</sup> Popular examples of heroic themes include the main title from *Back to the Future* (1985), or the theme associated with Luke and the Rebellion in *Star Wars* (1977). Max's theme subverts these tropes to suggest that he may not be a straightforward hero. Max is associated with a five-note motive that begins with an ascending

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<sup>59</sup> These signs do not match vocabulary in either Australian or American Sign Language and seem to have been invented for the film.

<sup>60</sup> Kalinak traces the development of Classic Hollywood scoring practices to the adaptation of these practices in the 1970s and 1980s in *Settling the Score*, 98, 101, 193-195.

minor seventh that immediately descends in C minor. Although the first and last notes outline a stable fifth, the three intervening notes are all within C natural minor. This minor character emphasizes Max's status as a tragic hero—the upward striving of the first interval is immediately undercut by the descending line in C natural minor.



Figure 2. *Mad Max* (1979): Max

The breakfast scene opens with Jessie's theme, now uttered in F major on French horn. Max's theme enters as he wheedles for her approval. The two themes alternate in fragments, imitating the conflict as Max seeks to leave and Jessie wants him to stay. Jessie's theme sounds fully when she finally relents. Max's theme is repeated in sequence in the strings while Jessie signs her expression of affection to him. At the end of the sequence, the harmony changes, ending the phrase with a pivot chord to modulate from F major to a new iteration of Jessie's theme in E-flat major. The lyrical melody plays as the pair part ways, but Max's theme returns over the shot of Jessie biting her lip with downcast eyes, followed by a cut to the exterior of the Halls of Justice.

This exchange is the first instance in which Jessie's theme is juxtaposed with that of a male character. The theme serves as Jessie's voice for the first part of the scene, accompanying the moments in which Jessie wordlessly indicates her wish for Max to stay. Max argues back, accompanied by his theme, eventually overcoming her resistance. Her theme accompanies her expression of affection, but notably, the scene ends with Max's music having the last word as he

returns to his role in law enforcement. The music in this scene highlights that Max has exerted his will to the contrary of Jessie's desires. Although their exchange is lighthearted (Max's mask) and affectionate (Jessie's farewell), it demonstrates an unequal power dynamic, particularly as it mirrors their conversation and ends with Max's theme played over a shot of Jessie worrying over his departure.

Near the middle of the film, Jessie's theme appears without her presence in the scene, instead employing what has been her statement of identity and wishes in service of Max's character development. Max attempts to resign as an officer of the Halls of Justice, telling his commanding officer that although he has a badge to sanction his actions, he is afraid of the moral effect his violence may have on himself. Max's theme dominates this section of the diegetic score, but when the commander, Fifi, advises Max to take some time off and reconsider, Jessie's theme sounds in strings. In stark contrast to Jessie's introduction, here her theme is played although she is entirely absent. Although it is not strange for a character's music to be used to evoke her presence in a scene without her presence, it is not really Jessie who is being referenced. Over Jessie's music, Fifi tells Max "Take off a few weeks, huh? Grow yourself a beard. Draw flies! Just think about it for a while. If you still feel the same way when you come back, well, it's okay with me! Go on." Jessie's music is not referring to her as a character, but to her function in Max's life. Although she is not mentioned, the coincidence of the dialogue and music imply that she will be the one to care for and rejuvenate Max so he can continue his career. This instance of Jessie's theme reduces her to the cipher of Wife instead of promoting her as independent.

Elaborations on Jessie's theme begin immediately after Max's exchange with Fifi, spinning out over a montage of the family traveling in their car, singing, buying a dog from a

farmer, and running toward a swimming hole. We are seeing Fifi's implied orders at work—the family is on vacation and Jessie-as-Wife is revitalizing Max via domestic bliss. As Max uses a rope swing to drop into the water, his theme sounds, first on strings and then on saxophone—an instrument previously associated only with Jessie. In the next frame, Jessie's theme returns in call-and-response between the strings and saxophone as Max and Jessie recline together by the water. Max begins to talk about his struggle to express his feelings verbally, musing on his regret about never expressing his love to his father directly and telling Jessie that he does not want to make the same mistake in their relationship. Max's theme returns with brief statements, but within the context of Jessie's theme. Now, Max's theme is in major, subtly interpolated between the phrases of Jessie's theme so that the two melodies have combined into one. Jessie's theme is the dominant melody while Max's appears almost as an accent or filler between phrases. Musically, this scene corresponds to the breakfast scene, except the sense of call-and-response has given way to the melding of the themes. Like the breakfast scene, the swimming hole scene ends with a statement of Max's theme in the strings that moves back into its usual minor mode.

The dominance of Jessie's theme during the swimming hole scene could suggest an emphasis on Jessie as a character, but this emphasis is subverted by both the preceding material and the dialogue within the scene. This scene is part of a sequence that directly follows—and is musically continuous with—the scene with Fifi and Max, in which Jessie's theme was used apart from her presence in order to assert her identity as Jessie-as-Wife. The dialogue in this scene focuses on Max's struggle to express his emotions in the context of his and Jessie's combined theme. This highlights Jessie's role as the access point for Max's ability to express his emotions. She does not speak during the scene, but her theme plays. However instead of introducing her character or expressing her wishes, here her theme provides a hospitable environment for Max's

interiority to be verbally expressed, ignoring her own interiority. The combination of the themes further supports this reading—Max has appropriated Jessie’s theme as his own, weaving his melodic material in with hers. The scene ends with the return of his theme in its usual minor mode, emphasizing both his control over the preceding action and suddenly establishing an ominous tone as the intimate moment ends.

### THE TOECUTTER

Shortly after Max annexes Jessie’s theme, her music resurfaces as an expression of her agency. Leaving Max to negotiate the repair of a spare tire, Jessie takes Sprog into town to buy ice cream, not knowing that the Toecutter’s gang has camped there. As Jessie’s car approaches the shop, a fragment of her theme plays on pitched percussion in the style of a lullaby, emphasizing her maternal relationship with her child and the pair’s vulnerability without Max. The lullaby is interrupted by the first two notes of the Toecutter’s theme to announce the gang’s presence.



Figure 3. *Mad Max* (1979): The Toecutter

The Toecutter’s melody appears most frequently in low brass accompanied by timpani, beginning with sharp emphasis on the descending minor second. The dark timbre of the instrumentation and the emphasis on the non-diatonic B-natural combine to emphasize the Toecutter as the villain. However, Max’s and the Toecutter’s themes share some similarities. Both outline triads related to one another by a third, with E-flat and G as important pitches in the

melodic contour. The middle parts of the themes both feature an overall descending character, ending with a leap up of a third. Max is set apart as the hero by his initial leap up of a minor seventh, while the Toecutter's chromatic beginning signals danger. These shared musical characteristics emphasize Max's concern that a violent cop is no morally different than a violent biker, and also associates the two in their effect on Jessie. While Max's theme has melded with Jessie's theme into a joint melody that ultimately empowers his personal development, here the Toecutter roughly inserts himself into a tender moment between mother and child and attempts to harm them.

This is the first of two times that Jessie leaves Max behind in order to do something enjoyable on her own—in this case to buy ice cream for her son. When the Toecutter keeps Jessie from leaving and suggestively licks her ice cream cone, Jessie smiles, pretending to go along before kneeling him in the groin, smashing the ice cream in his face, and fleeing in her car. The opening few notes of her theme recur in the hurrying strings at the end of the sequence, suggesting that in escaping from her pursuers, Jessie has retained her agency, that is, her ability to act and choose.

The second time Jessie leaves Max behind is also the final full appearance of her theme before her death. After the attack at the ice cream shop, the family takes refuge at the rural home of an older woman named May. When Max declines to go along in order to finish repairs on their car, Jessie takes their puppy down to a nearby beach, swimming and napping in the sun. As Jessie walks alone through the woods and frolics on the beach with her dog, the camera seems to stalk her from the underbrush. Ominous strings accompany the revelation that the Toecutter and his gang are surveilling her. Eventually, the men will chase Jessie back to the house, kill her dog, kidnap Sprog, and run the mother and child down with their motorcycles.



Figure 4. *Mad Max* (1979): Jessie - Last Look

This iteration of Jessie’s theme occurs in the strings as Max finally expresses his love for Jessie just before she is attacked and killed by the gang. The theme has returned in E-flat major, the same key as in the previous corresponding iteration. The melody is ornamented and the orchestration is lush, underscoring the tender moment. Max’s theme is not involved, only Jessie’s. However, the moment ends with dissonant chromatic sonorities that lend an air of foreboding to the affectionate exchange, pointing to the violence that will shortly befall her.

As a mirror image of the breakfast scene, Jessie is cast in Max’s place. She is the active, departing one, walking down to the beach and leaving Sprog to be cared for by May. When Max declines to accompany her to continue repairing the car, she walks breezily away with a flippant joke, calling him Tarzan. Max assumes her role, calling after her and clumsily attempting to reproduce her signs for “I’m crazy about you.” She accepts his affection with a smile and continues down to the beach. Here, her music is not overpowered by his will or absorbed by his interiority. She exerts agency—choosing to enjoy herself at the beach—and receives the reciprocation of the affection she expressed early in the film.

In the sequence that follows, Jessie is the center of the action but her theme never reappears. Jessie is silenced even before her death at the hands of the Toecutter's men, subsequently reappearing only in Max's memory. Jessie's theme sounds a final full time without the influence of Max's or the Toecutter's themes as Max finally expresses his affection to her, then is silenced by the gang's voyeurism and violence.

After Jessie's death her theme returns in small snippets, highlighting her role as the motivation for Max's descent into vigilante madness. Like the previous appearance of Jessie's theme without her onscreen presence, Jessie's music is used to symbolize her effect on Max. However, while her music presented hope, domesticity, and rejuvenation in the scene with Max and Fifi, now the fragments of her melody highlight how her absence has caused Max to embrace the life of violence he had hoped to leave. The first occurrence features Max sitting on the beach holding the mask he had used to make Jessie laugh in the breakfast scene. The first three notes of her theme are quickly intoned by the strings but are overtaken by a dissonant, hurrying riff. Over the strings, the brass enter with three iterations of Max's theme as he runs into the house to get his leather police uniform. Max takes the Main Force Patrol's only souped-up V8 Interceptor—which will become his car throughout the series—and begins to hunt the Toecutter's gang. The second time Jessie's theme returns, the same three initial notes sound in the saxophone. Max has already killed the Toecutter, but continues to pursue the other members of the gang. In this scene, he is driving through the night and becomes drowsy. As he nearly falls asleep, the beginning of Jessie's theme enters. Max rouses himself and drives on. These brief recurrences of Jessie's theme harken back to the first time we heard her theme without her onscreen presence, emphasizing that just as in life she was reduced to a symbol of domesticity

and functioned as a catalyst for the expression of Max's interiority, after her death, her absence now pushes Max into violent madness.

## CONCLUSION

Jessie is characterized as the romantic object, the emotional laborer, and the MacGuffin that triggers Max's trajectory for the rest of the franchise. She is doomed to feed the hero's character development with her life. However, Jessie reclaims a measure of agency by upending cinematic stereotypes and participating in her own definition by performing her theme music onscreen. Jessie's bids to assert her own autonomy struggle against the attempts of Max and the Toecutter to subsume her identity, one for romance and the other for violence.

Jessie's treatment in *Mad Max* represents a measure of internal conflict within the film's overall narrative. This inconsistency is encapsulated by Jessie's introduction, which presents a portrait of Jessie that can be read neither as fully empowering nor disempowering. The film seems to present elements of both viewpoints as the treatment of Jessie's music highlights the reversals with which her agency is honored or suppressed. Jessie is alternately nurturer and femme fatale, self-sufficient and damsel-in-distress. This plurality does not allow for a neat distillation of Jessie and her music, but attention to her music elevates an otherwise one-dimensional character to emphasize the tragedy of a violent patriarchal order. The focus on the interaction of her material with Max's and the Toecutter's themes, emphasizes that both are villains in their own way. In my reading, Jessie's story, as told through the score, highlights the plight of creative and personal autonomy in a world where violence rules the road.

Theorizing onscreen musical performance as a site of embodied resistance has potential to open new avenues of inquiry that uncover other kinds of hidden or oppositional readings. Classic Hollywood films like *The Paradine Case* (1947) and *Angel Face* (1952) are prime

candidates for further study. Unlike Jessie, the heroines in these films are central characters, but their performances seem to raise similar questions concerning gender and empowerment. The detective film *Angel Heart* (1987) poses an interesting counterpart to readings that understand performance-as-empowerment. In *Angel Heart*, the male lead's performance of his theme music ultimately disempowers him by suggesting with increasing clarity that he may not be fully under his own control. Engaging these films through the framework of the empowerment/disempowerment present in onscreen performances allows for deeper or even conflicting readings of the films that would otherwise be missed.

### CHAPTER THREE: “A FURIOUS VEXATION”

“Hope is a mistake. If you can’t fix what’s broken, you’ll go insane.”  
—Max, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

If Jessie presents a stereotypically marginalized woman in the first *Mad Max* film, Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) symbolizes a significant shift in the gender politics of the franchise. As mentioned in Chapter One, Furiosa’s behavior in the film’s U.S. trailer was enough to signal to militant masculinists that the patriarchy of *Mad Max* had been dethroned. In the same way that analysis of the music in *Mad Max* illuminated hidden moments when Jessie’s agency was honored, as well as moments when Max and the Toecutter suppressed that agency, analysis of the musical material associated with three central characters in *Fury Road* illuminates a new state of gender politics that eschew strict categories. Examination of Max’s, Furiosa’s, and Nux’s musical themes in the context of established film music gender norms reveals that certain stereotypes are upheld while others are subverted. By including characteristics coded as masculine and feminine in the music for all three main characters, the film complicates standard film gender characterizations, though perhaps not in entirely new ways. This reading disallows clean categorization of the film as fully patriarchal or fully feminist, but conflicts with the film’s binary worldview in regard to power relations. Although *Fury Road* presents a woman as Max’s equal for the first time in the franchise, the film’s strict binary concepts of patriarchy and matriarchy seem to subvert attempts to nuance the gendered depictions of Max, Nux, and Furiosa.

*Mad Max: Fury Road* premiered in 2015, thirty years after *Beyond Thunderdome*. Continuing to recall the tradition of the outlaw hero of the Western, Max (now played by Tom Hardy) travels through the post-nuclear wasteland attempting to keep to himself, but constantly

becoming entangled with beleaguered groups of people whom he must try to save but can never join permanently. Society has degraded thoroughly in *Fury Road* due to a nuclear event referenced briefly in the prologue and signaled by the fallout sickness much of the population exhibits. Paved roads have disappeared under desert sands.<sup>61</sup> Language and culture reflect a harsh survivalist society dependent on scavenging resources like water and gasoline. Through all four films, Max is presented as a wanderer haunted by the ghosts of those who died under his protection. In *Fury Road*, the haunting is manifested onscreen. Particularly in times of distress, Max is assaulted by visions of a band of accusers led by a young girl called Glory the Child. The ghosts scream, “Where were you?” and “You promised to help us!” and subvert his attempts to flee or fight his real-world enemies.

During the film’s prologue, Max is captured and brought to the Citadel of Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne, returning to franchise for the first time since his role as the Toecutter). Immortan Joe has built a violent patriarchal society in the Citadel. Joe controls the water in the Wasteland, which he dispenses capriciously to the masses who have nuclear-fallout-related diseases and deformations. The patriarch trades his water and hydroponic crops with two nearby settlements, Gas Town and Bullet Farm, but people are arguably his most precious resource. Joe extracts mother’s milk—a beverage drunk by the Citadel’s adult elite—from a group of lactating women hooked up to milking machines. The War Boys are Joe’s disposable “kamakrazee” shock troops, a motorized cavalcade of young men eager to give their half-lives fighting for Joe, who has installed himself as the god of their militant, car-centric religion. Those who die on the Fury

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<sup>61</sup> For analysis on the progressive erosion of the road over the course of the first three *Mad Max* films, see Delia Falconer, “‘We Don’t Need To Know the Way Home’: The Disappearance of the Road in the *Mad Max* Trilogy,” in *The Road Movie Book*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1992), 249-286.

Road fighting for Joe are promised an eternity in the nebulous paradise, Valhalla.<sup>62</sup> We are introduced to one War Boy in particular—Nux (Nicholas Hoult)—who, nearing the end of his half-life, is sufficiently revitalized by a blood transfusion from Max to join in the pursuit of Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron). Furiosa is a high-ranking officer in Joe’s army who has gone rogue, sneaking Joe’s five “breeders” out of the Citadel and racing across the desert toward freedom. The Wives are five healthy young women whom Joe keeps as sexual slaves, hoping to father a healthy son. Furiosa’s destination is the Green Place of Many Mothers, from which she was kidnapped as a child. Furiosa was part of a matriarchal tribe known as the Vuvalini who rule the Green Place. Max’s escape from the Citadel becomes entwined with Furiosa’s when, to his horror, he realizes he cannot escape without her assistance. The film ultimately suggests that the violence and scarcity created by the rule of violent patriarchy might be healed when women revolt.

Max, Furiosa, and Nux present three different types of gendered characters. An initial reading of the film—that is, without attention to the music—indeed shows that Max and Furiosa at least share the spotlight. Both characters are presented as heroes, but Furiosa’s story is the meat of the plot. Max joins her group out of self-preservation. Furiosa is as capable as Max, matching his skill as a driver and fighter, surpassing him as a sharpshooter. However, Max is still presented as the ideal male of the film—laconic and violent, unwillingly conscripted from his life as a lone wanderer to help protect others with his physical prowess. Although he may not be the leader of the group, his assistance is foundational to the success of the undertaking. Furiosa is a masculinized woman. Her abilities as a driver and fighter have put her in a position of military

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<sup>62</sup> According to Norse legend, Valhalla is the name of the hall in Asgard to which Viking heroes who died in battle were carried by the Valkyries. Here it is used to stand in for a kind of heaven or paradise to which martyred War Boys are admitted.

leadership over the men in Joe's army, despite having lost the lower part of her left arm.<sup>63</sup> Her shaved head and heavy leather clothing also suggest a more masculine gender expression, particularly in contrast to the long-haired Wives, who wear skimpy outfits of flowy linen. Finally, Nux presents a feminized man. His poor health separates him from the physical vitality of ideal masculinity, though his fanatic participation in the War Boys' violent vehicle-centric religion suggests aspiration toward that version of hypermasculinity. Nux's attempts to achieve immortality on the Fury Road fail, leading Immortan Joe—the War Boys' father/god figure—to reject him.

My concept of the masculinized woman and feminized man is built on Carol Clover's analysis of the Final Girl in the slasher film.<sup>64</sup> For feminist film theorists, the idea of lack is crucial to considering the empowerment and oppression of women in narrative. The concept that masculinity and femininity correspond to the binary categories of power and lack undergirds film theory on gender. Lack as a category is built on the idea that the female body serves as the site of literal lack, that is, without a phallus. However, the concept of lack is extended to men who are passive or deficient—or feminized—in some way. In contrast, women who take active or penetrating roles are masculinized. Clover's work on the Final Girl is a particularly effective example of this cross-gender dynamic. In slasher horror films, the Final Girl is the only person who survives to the end of the film and often kills the would-be murderer herself. Famous Final Girls include Sally in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), Laurie in *Halloween* series (John Carpenter, 1978), and Nancy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984).

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<sup>63</sup> My perusal of writing on *Fury Road* has not revealed an analysis that considers the film in light of disability studies. I expect such an undertaking would reveal rich insight but am not prepared to undertake it myself.

<sup>64</sup> Clover, "Her Body, Himself," 187-228.

Clover's analysis of gender in slasher films is important to my work because it theorizes the ways in which a character's gender may take on facets of another gender. Clover notes that slasher films almost invariably cast the victim as a woman and the murder as a man, but her analysis identifies the Final Girl as a masculinized woman, while the killer is a feminized man. The Final Girl is masculinized by her "active, investigating gaze" and her ultimate emasculation of the killer by taking his life.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, the killer is usually a man who stalks and stabs his victims with a phallic object (e.g. a knife, a chainsaw, or bladed gloves), but he is often revealed to be deficient in his masculinity in some way. Many killers are sexually inexperienced or impotent, and may be physically or mentally disabled.<sup>66</sup> While this layered analysis of gender characterization may be particularly blatant in the slasher film, these same characterizations can also be identified across film genres. Lack may be mental, physical, or sexual, but in analysis it is understood as a feminizing trait, while action—especially violent action—is considered a masculinizing element.<sup>67</sup>

Music tends to symbolize the emotional excess of the woman, which is a different kind of lack, namely a lack of the masculine traits reason and objectivity. This idea was first proposed by Claudia Gorbman, who wrote that "a certain kind of music will cue you in correctly to the presence of Woman on screen. It is as if the emotional excess of this presence must find its outlet

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<sup>65</sup> Clover, 210.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>67</sup> For an example of a similar kind of gender analysis applied to woman's films in the 1940's, see Catherine Haworth, "'Something Beneath the Flesh': Music, Gender, and Medical Discourse in the 1940s Female Gothic Film," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8, no. 3 (2014): 338-370.

in the euphony of a string orchestra.”<sup>68</sup> Gorbman, and Laing after her, both note that the nineteenth-century Romantic style of classic Hollywood film scores are particularly hospitable to its function as a signifier of “emotion, depth, the obverse of logic.”<sup>69</sup> Bearing this framework in mind, the *Fury Road* score works to both support and subvert gendered characterizations. Furiosa’s theme is far longer and more emotionally complex than Max’s, emphasizing the emotional excess associated with femininity. But her music does not allow for a simple exchange of gender roles. Especially when considered together with Max’s and Nux’s themes, the music exerts narrative force that complicates the straightforward characterizations.

In addition to the gendered discourse in music, nineteenth-century orchestral idioms are familiar and decodable for the film audience.<sup>70</sup> General audiences understand that in Western cinema, soaring legato strings signal emotionality, while strings playing tremolo are meant to establish tension before a jump scare or attack. As popular and avant-garde idioms were introduced into film scores, they were integrated into the existing system of musical signifiers. In the case of *Fury Road*, familiar musical codes ground the unfamiliar dystopian setting. The score, by Dutch DJ-turned-film-composer Junkie XL (aka Tom Holkenborg) includes orchestral, rock, and electronic idioms, all of which are used in accordance with cinematic convention. Hurrying strings, electric guitar riffs, and driving drums undergird chase and fight scenes. Strings and woodwinds spin slow melodies to emphasize characters’ emotional states. Short electronic interpolations signal the presence of sinister or otherworldly presences. These kinds of cues allow viewers to accurately contextualize the narrative in spite of the dystopian setting.

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<sup>68</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 80.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

With these different genres in play, both Laing and Franklin's scholarship help establish my framework for gender analysis of *Fury Road*'s musical discourse. Laing's work on classic film scores builds on Gorbman's observation that female characters tend to be strongly associated with music to emphasize their "excessively emotional" states.<sup>71</sup> In studying how the musical associations of female characters affect their characterizations, Laing locates the excessive, feminine emotionality of the film score in the Romantic sensibilities of orchestral film scores. These connections are intrinsically gendered by cultural codes surrounding appropriate displays of emotion in relation to gender. Film music draws upon nineteenth-century Romantic orchestral compositional style as an "ahistorical emotive signifier."<sup>72</sup> Laing argues that music in film to emphasizes the interiority of characters, as windows into their inner character and lives.<sup>73</sup> Peter Franklin elaborates on Laing's work by noting that as film composers began to draw on a wider variety of compositional techniques, Romantic-style scores remained gendered feminine, while scores that employed atonal or other modernist techniques were instead gendered masculine.<sup>74</sup> Franklin is more directly concerned with critiquing constructions of popular and high art that are destabilized by the use of "classical" music in film, but his observation here is important to deciphering the gendered musical discourse in *Fury Road*. The bulk of the music associated with particular characters is in the Romantic-style orchestral genre, which raises the question—is Romantic-style film music still coded feminine when it is expressing a masculine identity? Although these themes are expressing identities that are coded masculine ("hero," for

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<sup>71</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Franklin, *Seeing Through Music*, 138-141.

example), they are doing so as an expression of interiority and emotionality, realms which are coded feminine even if the subject is a man. Masculinizing modernist music appears in the form of electronic musical cues that can double sound effects. Although invoking a popular rather than high art genre, the diegetic rock music played by the Doof Warrior (played by Iota) can be included in this type of masculinizing musical discourse, but will not be considered in this project.<sup>75</sup> The remainder of this chapter focuses on the orchestral themes and electronic cues associated with Max, Furiosa, and Nux in order to untangle the competing gendered forces at work in their characterizing music.

## MAX

Max's theme has changed radically from previous iterations in the franchise. In previous installments, Max has been associated with different melodies that have shared certain attributes. Most frequently played by brass instruments, Max's theme normally features a melodic contour that strives upward but twists awry into a descending terminus. Max's theme from the first film is a good example, while his themes from *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* share similar general characteristics.

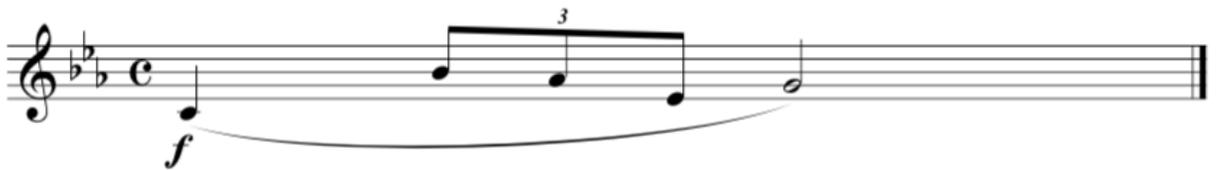


Figure 5. *Mad Max* (1979): Max

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<sup>75</sup> The Doof Warrior is like the bugler of Immortan Joe's army. Playing electric guitar riffs from a truck equipped with stacks of amps and a corp of drummers, he sends signals and encouragement to the War Boys.

However, in *Fury Road*, Max is associated with a handful of one-note pulses on low strings. Although most frequently occurring in groups of three, the pulses can number from one to five per iteration. With only one note is sounding and no supporting chordal structures in other instruments, there is no real sense of key that accompanies Max’s theme, though it does tend to recur on this C2. It also lacks unifying metric motion to link instances of the theme together. The thematic cells occur in isolation from one another, without a sense of underlying beat indicating when the next one might be heard. These characteristics emphasize Max’s lone wandering, unmoored from society, in his words “A man reduced to one instinct—survive.” In addition, the short punctuations of the low strings suggest Max’s low speaking voice. As is typical of his character throughout the franchise, Max speaks little, often communicating via grunts and gestures. The theme’s short iterations of the same note could therefore recall Max’s non-verbal vocalizations. Throughout the franchise, Max is laconic, a trait that is fundamental to traditional conceptions of Australian masculinity.<sup>76</sup> Max’s theme emphasizes his position as the narrative’s ideal male by constructing him as a both self-sufficient and terse.



Figure 6. *Fury Road* (2015): Max

The theme also recalls the revving of a car’s engine. This association is most pointedly made by an iteration of the theme over the title card in unison with an actual engine. As in the rest of the *Mad Max* franchise, Australian car culture is mined to symbolize violent

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<sup>76</sup> Coyle, “Sound and Music in the *Mad Max* Trilogy,” 120.

masculinity.<sup>77</sup> The automobile is central to the plots of all four films, and action centers on roadways. A biker gang murders Max's family in *Mad Max* (1979). In *The Road Warrior* (1981), the antagonists drive souped-up cars bedecked with spikes, besieging a small band in possession of an oil refinery in effort to steal their stores of gasoline. Max's car is stolen at the beginning of *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) and his attempts to reclaim it embroil him in the plot of *Aunty Entity*. In *Fury Road*, Immortan Joe's War Boys engage in fanatical worship at an altar made of skulls and steering wheels and speak in vehicle-inspired slang. For instance, the War Boys respond to Immortan Joe's speeches by chanting "V8!" and describe anything they approve of "shiny and chrome." The good guys' vehicles are equally important. Max's famed V8 Interceptor makes brief cameo appearances in *Fury Road*, calling back to its centrality in previous films. The War Rig – an enhanced semi-truck – houses intimate character moments and triangulates the center of action sequences. Miller cited John Ford's *Stagecoach* as part of his inspiration for this film, particularly in the use of the War Rig as the epicenter of the plot.<sup>78</sup> By evoking the revving of a car engine, Max's theme therefore associates him in the violent, hypermasculine world of the film. Though he is not characterized as exploitative like Joe or sycophantic like the War Boys, his ability to enter into the violence of the patriarchal order of the Citadel and survive marks him as the ideal male of the narrative.

However, Max's music also complicates his status as ideal man. Although the entire franchise is titled *Mad Max*, this is the first film to externally mark Max as mentally ill. In the first, second, and third films the "madness" of Max could be better understood as rage, violence,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>78</sup> Garry Maddox, "On the Set of 'Mad Max: Fury Road' with Director George Miller," *Sydney Morning Herald* (April, 24, 2015), <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/on-the-set-of-mad-max-fury-road-with-director-george-miller-20150423-1mhimu.html>.

grief, and withdrawal from the society of other humans, but he is always capable and self-contained. In *Fury Road*, Max seems to struggle with something similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Glory and her band of Ghosts are hallucinatory manifestations of Max's trauma, and they frequently impede his ability to fight or flee. For instance, during a sequence in which Max is running away from the War Boys, Glory and the others block his path in increasingly disturbing forms, causing him to falter. This is accomplished by alternating increasingly rapid close-ups of Max and the ghosts. These shot-reverse shot compositions show Max and the Ghosts both moving straight forward toward the camera, so that they appear to be moving toward one another. As the Ghosts' assault on Max becomes increasingly aggressive, the cuts between the closeups are faster, suggesting a crescendoing frenzy.

Electronic cues are often used to introduce something outside of reality, in this case Max's hallucinations of those who died under his care. These kinds of interactions between Max and the Ghosts occur intermittently throughout the film, most often with Glory the Child. Max's hallucinations of the Ghosts are announced by the electronic musical cues mentioned above. Although one might wonder if the electronic music is therefore the Ghosts' theme, the occurrences always occur in close-up of Max's face and suggest a ringing in the ears. This indicates that what the viewer is about to see is a projection emanating from Max's psyche.<sup>79</sup>

Although the electronic music emanates from Max's mind to signal an impending hallucination and to suggest that what the audience is about to witness may not be entirely real, it is separate from his theme as represented in Figure 2. However Max's theme itself includes the

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<sup>79</sup> For more on the use of tinnitus on film soundtracks to signal trauma and subject position, see Dale Chapman, "Music and the State of Exception in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 289-306.

suggestion of mental instability due to the variability of the number of pulses that may compose an iteration.<sup>80</sup> The connection of the erratic number of the pulses and Max's mental state is demonstrated in the scene in which Max is forced to join with Furiosa. Having escaped from the War Boys when Nux's car crashed, Max comes upon Furiosa and the Wives. Still chained to Nux, Max fights Furiosa, finally overpowering her with Nux's help. It sounds with three pulses at the moment he gains control of the situation. His theme continues to punctuate at irregular periods of time with one, two, and three pulses as Max tries to take the War Rig, but cannot without the kill switch sequence Furiosa has set. With Immortan Joe's forces visible in the distance, Furiosa convinces Max to allow her and the Wives back into the cab of the War Rig. He continues to hold a gun on them while attempting to saw off the metal face mask he was given to keep him from being able to bite his captors. Max barely speaks during this tense sequence, giving orders by grunting and waving the gun he holds. His theme is the central musical feature for nearly six minutes as he is forced to forge an uneasy partnership with the women in order to survive. The prominence of his theme as it occurs with unpredictable frequency and fluctuating number of pulses emphasizes his erratic volatility, which is externalized onscreen with the markers that emphasize his mental instability by animalizing him (the muzzle, communicating via grunts).

Max's madness is therefore foregrounded by his theme as an essential trait, which compromises his status as the ideal man of the narrative. Mental illness is lack and therefore a feminizing trait, associated with women, villains, or otherwise unideal males.<sup>81</sup> In addition,

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<sup>80</sup> This theory is supported by the composer in Junkie XL, "Mad Max: Fury Road – Behind The Music with Tom Holkenborg aka Junkie XL" (June 5, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xESFyIxito0>.

<sup>81</sup> Clover, "Her Body, Himself," 236, 238.

Max's hallucinations seem to try to thwart him during fight and flight, indicating that for all his strength and capability, his mental vulnerability endangers his survival. Therefore Max's theme is both a masculinizing and feminizing force. While the music aligns Max with external markers of ideal masculinity through associations with self-sufficiency, low-pitched non-verbal communication, and the hypermasculine car culture of the film's patriarchy, the theme also essentializes his mental illness as a vulnerability.

### IMPERATOR FURIOSA

Furiosa's theme is performed by a string ensemble, with cellos playing the melody. Unlike Max's short theme, Furiosa's theme is thirty-one measures long. The complexity and drama of her theme in comparison to Max's short thematic bursts, foregrounds her character as the protagonist of the film. Some reviewers have noted the theme's similarity to Bernard Herrmann's love theme from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, itself a reference to Richard Wagner's "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>82</sup> These associations highlight the Romantic character of the theme's dramatic melodic contour. However Furiosa's theme is simpler and less dissonant than the love theme from *Vertigo* and the "Liebestod," though the songlike melody is accompanied with dense chords flush and a moment of chromaticism.

Filmic tropes of vocalicity are carried over from operatic tropes, in which the timbre or quality of the voice is indicative of the character's experience and morality.<sup>83</sup> Although Furiosa speaks roughly twice as many lines as Max's scant forty-one, she is also characterized by

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<sup>82</sup> Bill Desowitz, "How the 'Mad Max: Fury Road' Score Paid Homage to Hitchcock's 'Vertigo,'" *IndieWire*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/05/how-the-mad-max-fury-road-score-paid-homage-to-hitchcocks-vertigo-187618>.

<sup>83</sup> For more see Marcia Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

economy of speech.<sup>84</sup> In contrast, her theme is long and dramatic. According to the principle that music is a window into the character's inner reality, Furiosa's theme indicates that her lack of speech conceals a rich inner life. This interiority is characterized by suffering and striving as expressed by both the historical associations with the contralto voice and with the figuration employed in the melody. The melody is set in the range of a contralto or high tenor voice, again recalling Furiosa's low-pitched speaking voice. For instance, high female voices generally connote femininity, purity, and desirability. Classic soprano roles include the pious heroine (Marguerite from Gounod's *Faust*), the beautiful, tragic love interest (Lucia in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*), or the cheeky coquette (Musetta in Puccini's *La Bohème*). The low female voice in opera can connote suffering (Angelina in *La Cenicientola* by Rossini), promiscuity (Bizet's *Carmen*), evil (Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera* by Verdi), or a caretaking role (Amelia in Verdi's *Otello*). In addition, low voices in women were often employed in "pants roles," or to play adolescent boys (see Cherubino in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*).

The melody's contralto vocal range, in combination with Furiosa's personal history—having been kidnapped and spending nearly twenty years in captivity to Immortan Joe—suggest the archetype of the suffering woman. Conversely, her masculine visual presentation and the lower-than-average tessitura might suggest a pants role or possibly the woman in drag. The string accompaniment foregrounds the low strings, with the higher strings playing soft sustained notes over the cello melody. This orchestration shifts the overall timbre of the theme toward the lower, darker end of the spectrum. Although Furiosa does not pretend to be male in the narrative, the range of her theme situates her character as masculinized, emphasizing that she has stepped into a role normally executed by men and taken on masculine dress and authority, in addition to

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<sup>84</sup> Maddox, "On the Set of 'Mad Max: Fury Road' with Director George Miller."

great suffering. In this way, the tessitura of her theme both emphasizes her suffering femininity and imbues her with masculine characteristics.

i v VI<sup>7</sup> III iv v<sup>7</sup>V  
 V<sup>4</sup> - 3 i v VI III VI<sup>7</sup> V<sup>6</sup><sub>3</sub>  
 i V VI<sup>7</sup> iv<sup>6</sup> bVII V<sup>6</sup><sub>3</sub> i v<sup>6</sup>  
 VI<sup>7</sup> vii<sup>o</sup> i V<sup>7</sup>/iv iv i<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> V i

Figure 7. *Fury Road* (2015): Furiosa<sup>85</sup>

Furiosa’s theme is in A minor and has two major sections: measures 1-16 are section A, while mm. 17-31 comprise section B. This first section “sighs” rhythmically, with short phrases punctuated by rests. The melodic character emphasizes Furiosa’s suffering by suggesting sighing

<sup>85</sup> My original transcription was influenced by Brad Frey’s transcription of the midi piano roll in Junkie XL’s “Episode 3: Mad Max String Theme – Studio Time with Junkie XL.” Brad Frey, “‘Furiosa’s Theme’ – Mad Max: Fury Road (Score Reduction & Analysis)” (January 19, 2019), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=58&v=NMx8yKbX1-4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=NMx8yKbX1-4).

and weeping. On his YouTube channel, Junkie XL notes that, to him, the theme resembles a music box, “something you can play to remind you of the good old days.”<sup>86</sup> The melody’s sense of simplicity and nostalgia suggest associations with Furiosa’s memories of her childhood home, the Green Place of Many Mothers. These associations are emphasized by the fact that the Green Place is mentioned in all but one instance that Furiosa’s theme appears.

In the second half of the melody, the “sighs” cease and the melody begins to drive rhythmically and ascend melodically, evoking the energy and forward motion of a hero’s theme. In contrast to the focus on suffering that marked the first half of the theme, these more active rhythms, without the frequent rests that mark the first measures, evoke a sense of questing or striving. The steadily ascending melodic sequences establish a new sense of forward motion in the piece and suggest the musical trope of the upward striving (see mm. 17-20 of Figure 2). Here the sequences and their steady rhythms emphasize Furiosa’s active, heroic status.

In addition, Furiosa’s melody emphasizes both her history and her interiority in ways that Max’s theme does not. The contemplation of suffering (A section) moves into steely resolve (B section). Based on Furiosa’s character arc in the movie and supplemental sources, we could interpret the A section to refer to her difficult past, while the B section evokes her quest to return to the Green Place.<sup>87</sup> The range of the theme both establishes her as a character who has suffered greatly, and emphasizes her status as a masculinized female. However, as a female subject, the Romanticism of her theme aligns with gendered expectations of women as more prone to

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<sup>86</sup> Junkie XL, “Episode 3: Mad Max String Theme – Studio Time with Junkie XL” (May 25, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkNeXS0Lmxc&t=200s>.

<sup>87</sup> The backstories of several characters in *Fury Road*—including Furiosa—are elaborated in a comic book; see George Miller, Mark Sexton, Nico Lathouris, Tristan Jones, and Riccardo Burchielli, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2015).

emotionality.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Max's theme reads as bloodless, indicating, if anything, an emotional emptiness. Although the melody's range can be read to in part emphasize Furiosa's masculine qualities, her music is also feminizing due to style associations.

In comparison to Jessie's first appearance in *Mad Max*, which is also the introduction of her music, Furiosa's theme occurs rarely, and is only heard in complete form twice. The first full statement occurs nearly an hour and twenty minutes into the film. Before this full statement there are two moments in which the timbral and textural space of the theme is established with vague melodic fragments. Such a late introduction of a main character's theme is strange, particularly since the other characters' music has accompanied or followed shortly after their onscreen introductions. I suggest two possible reasons for this, one practical and one dramatic. Practically speaking, Furiosa's long, slow theme in low tessitura would be hard pressed to fit into the frenetic action that composes nearly all of the first eighty minutes of the film. Although there are a few brief moments in which characters converse together in the safety of the War Rig's cab, these quiet moments are short, always interrupted by Immortan Joe's encroaching forces. Logistically, there has not been time in the film for Furiosa's thirty-one-measure-long theme to be fully stated.

However, the theme's appearance late in the film also coincides with the revelation of Furiosa's backstory. Like Max, we meet Furiosa *in media res*, with little time for introductions or explanations. The two preparatory suggestions of Furiosa's theme occur during rare quiet moments that deal with partial disclosures about Furiosa's identity or past, while the first full instance of her theme accompanies her as she publicly announces her identity as one of the Vuvalini.

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<sup>88</sup> Laing, *The Gendered Score*, 9.

The preparatory occurrences of Furiosa's music do not feature recognizable snippets of her theme, as is often the case in scores that prepare the full expression of a character's theme with shorter instances. Instead, two different sequences that center on Furiosa as a character with varying degrees of insight use music that shares the same timbral and textural characteristics of her theme, featuring the long, slowly shifting chords in the strings that characterize its accompaniment theme as a cello plays short melodic fragments. An oboe enters briefly to echo the cello. These fragments do not fully map onto any one part of the theme, but are characterized by a similar kind of intervallic motion (stepwise motion and large descending leaps) that characterizes the melody. The harmonic structure also suggests the progression in Furiosa's theme, particularly the V/iv – iv moment in m. 26-27. Through instrumentation, texture, and general harmonic and melodic character, these musical appearances mark small revelations about Furiosa's character.

This musical material occurs for the first time when Max asks where the Green Place is and Furiosa answers "It's a long night's run, heading East." Furiosa then assigns tasks to the women and crawls under the speeding truck to repair it. As the first moment of relative safety the group has experienced, the situation also points to Furiosa's leadership over the other women and Max. Leaving Max to drive the War Rig and the Wife called Capable to stand watch in the rear, Furiosa tends to the vehicle's battle wounds. There is not personal revelation here about Furiosa's past but she tacitly identifies herself as the leader of the group, which is reflected in the fact that music associated with her aurally dominates of the scene.

A longer moment of musical preparation for Furiosa's theme appears during a sequence in which Furiosa and Max have an intimate conversation while the Wives and Nux doze in the back of the War Rig's cab. When Max asked Furiosa about herself, she reveals that she was



has collapsed and she has lost a great deal of blood. Max works over her, inserting a knife between her ribs to remove the air from her chest cavity and allow her lung to inflate. Early in the film, Max was literally marked as a universal blood donor, which was why the War Boys used him as a “blood bag” for Nux. Now he voluntarily gives his blood to Furiosa, finally telling her his name in a tender moment of camaraderie. This moment could be understood as a moment in which Max donates an infusion of his masculinity to Furiosa, priming her to be installed as the leader of the Citadel. Throughout this scene, Furiosa’s theme plays, ending without resolution just as Max speaks his name for the first time in the film. Although Furiosa is all but unconscious during the scene, her theme establishes that the scene is concerned with her survival, not with Max’s heroics in saving her. Furiosa’s theme ends as the scene fades to black without resolving harmonically, dying away on a V chord with the melody on the raised seventh. The next scene opens without music as the group returns to the Citadel and installs Furiosa as the new ruler of the Wasteland. Furiosa’s theme does not appear. Instead a new marchlike, percussion-heavy theme in major closes the film as Furiosa watches Max melt away in the crowd.

The first three instances of Furiosa’s music are notable because of their association with the Green Place, which in the context of the film’s themes, constitutes another feminizing influence. In the film, the Citadel stands for patriarchy, while the Green Place of Many Mothers symbolizes matriarchy. When Furiosa’s band of women encounter the Vuvalini, one of the Wives asks one of the Mothers about her skills with a rifle, saying, “I thought you girls were above all that.” The Mother shows the younger woman the bag of seeds she carries, planting one whenever she finds a bit of soil that may not be poisoned. The Vuvalini explains that there was no need for violence when everyone had plenty to eat. This association of women with the hope of the earth’s renewed fertility suggests that perhaps the plight of the post-apocalyptic earth is

modeled in the bodies of women in the narrative. The final iteration of Furiosa's full theme occurs just before she is installed as the new leader of the Citadel. Taken together, this affiliation between Furiosa's music and the Green Place, can be read as a suggestion that, though the rule of men has resulted in apocalypse, sickness, and oppression, perhaps the leadership of women will restore equity, health, and plenty. Although this premise upends traditional power dynamics, it is still based in an essentialization of gender differences where men equal violence and women equal nurturing. This type of strict binary conflicts with the nuanced depictions of Max, Furiosa, and Nux which maintain both feminine and masculine qualities.

In summary, although it appears relatively little in a film in which Furiosa can be said to be the main character, her theme is indicative of her identity, past, and emotions. Her music seems to do much more to emphasize her femininity than her masculinity. The ambiguous tessitura, which could pertain to either a low-voiced woman or a high-voiced man, and the heroic character of her theme's B section can be considered masculinizing influences. But the Romantic orchestral character, the focus on her emotions, and the association with the fertility and rebirth of the Green Place, all work to feminize Furiosa.

## NUX

Nux represents the feminized man, striving for recognition from Immortan Joe, the father-god of the hypermasculine religion of the War Boys. His initial death-wish is represented in his theme – the Nux/Valhalla theme.

Immortan Joe has promised the War Boys that any of them who die in his service will be carried to Valhalla. This promise of paradise must be particularly attractive to the War Boys because they have only “half-lives” due to the effects of nuclear fallout on their health. During the film, whenever a War Boy is about to embark on a suicidal action against Joe's enemies, he

sprays his mouth and teeth with chrome paint and screams “Witness me!” to the others, who whoop and scream to encourage the martyr. As I will demonstrate, the Nux/Valhalla theme is inextricably associated with ideas of martyrdom. Thus although the theme is associated with Nux, it is not purely his theme, as Max’s and Furiosa’s are. Instead, the theme offers specific insight into Nux’s desires and psyche—his death wish to give his life for the cause and attain admission to Valhalla.



Figure 9. *Fury Road* (2015): Nux/Valhalla

The theme is characterized by a soaring melody in low brass. Low brass are often used in opera and film to indicate the underworld or afterlife. For instance, brass figure prominently in Richard Wagner’s “Valhalla” leitmotif from *Das Rheingold*. The settings are similar in that they are both set in chorale style and prioritize triadic harmonies, but Wagner’s “Valhalla theme is in

major and is faster-paced. The Nux/Valhalla theme begins with a triumphant ascending fourth, continuing to emphasize leaps of a fourth, fifth, and sixth. These open intervals emphasize the desire of the War Boy to ascend to the spiritual plane. However, like the final iteration of Furiosa's theme, this theme ends without resolving to the tonic, instead resting on the leading tone harmonized by a V chord. This sense of unfinished-ness has different connotations in each appearance of the Nux/Valhalla theme. With its brass instrumentation and ascending leaps the theme share some characteristics with a masculine heroic theme. Nux's musical feminization arises less from the melodic and harmonic content of this theme than from how it is thwarted in its pursuit of Valhalla.

The Nux/Valhalla theme appears three times. The first iteration sounds as Nux watches his fellows dying in the tornado-like funnel at the center of the sand storm during the initial pursuit of Furiosa. The wish is eventually fulfilled – both narratively and musically – when Nux sacrifices himself by crashing the War Rig to save Max, Furiosa, and the others. While the theme plays during the sandstorm scene, the camera shows Nux's rapt face as he watches the storm's funnel suck up the vehicles in front of him, flinging the bodies of other War Boys to and fro. The next shot reverses the perspective so that the viewer sees the carnage through Nux's eyes. The shot composition coincides with the beginning of the theme, suggesting that the music emanates from Nux's psyche to represent his desire to join his comrades as they die in Immortan Joe's service. The theme establishes itself as the product of unquestioning zeal, allowing its appearance of the theme to be read as ironic or tragic to the viewer who is sensible of the exploitation and false promises of Immortan Joe's religion. Here, the unfinished resolution can be interpreted to symbolize Nux's unfulfilled death wish.

The second instance of the Nux/Valhalla theme begins during another action sequence. Joe's vehicle, the Gigahorse, is on the tail of Furiosa's War Rig. Nux tells Joe that he knows a way inside the cab and promises to kill Furiosa for him. Joe responds by spraying Nux's lips and teeth with the chrome paint, promising "I myself will carry you to the gates of Valhalla." Nux leaps from the Gigahorse to the trailer of the War Rig, but the theme cuts off abruptly mid-melody when Nux suddenly falls. Immortan Joe sneers, "Mediocre!" and speeds ahead. Nux is devastated and begins to suffer a crisis of faith in Immortan Joe and his promises of Valhalla. As the pursuit continues, Nux ends up taking refuge in the War Rig with Furiosa, Max, and the Wives. Through his friendship with Capable, one of Immortan Joe's escaped Wives, Nux comes to understand Joe as a cruel false god and throws his lot in with Furiosa and her band.

Nux's new worldview leads to the final appearance of his theme, late in the film. At the most crucial moment of the final battle with Immortan Joe and his forces, Nux sacrifices himself so that the others can escape by crashing the War Rig in the narrow opening of a canyon. Just before the impact, Nux's theme begins a final time. He holds out a hand to Capable and whispers the War Boys' martyr cry, "Witness me," to which she responds with the hand gesture used by the Vuvalini to remember fallen comrades. The War Rig crashes in slow motion over the slow melody, causing the pursuing War Boys' vehicles to pile up behind it and allowing the rest of the group to seize control of the Citadel. In this case, the melody ending on the leading tone could suggest the irony and grief that Nux's death wish has been fulfilled now that he has a community and a cause for which to live, and no certainty of eternal life in paradise.

Theorizing Nux-as-feminized-male is supported by both narrative events and musical language. When the audience is introduced to Nux, he is visibly weak, apparently nearing the end of his half-life. It is only with a blood transfusion from Max—or symbolically speaking, an

infusion of ideal masculinity that Nux is able to “do war” and strive to lose his life on the Fury Road. When Joe blames Nux for failing to apprehend the fugitives, Nux’s lack is revealed. He is shunned by the others and left to die in the desert. The War Boy effectively loses his power to participate in the hypermasculine order of Immortan Joe’s culture. Nux is feminized not only by his poor health and cultural powerlessness, but by the character of his music. Once again, Junkie XL has turned to an orchestral idiom that uses Romantic harmonic language reminiscent of both classic Hollywood scores and Wagnerian opera. Although the theme emphasizes Nux’s heroic and hypermasculine aspirations, it does so with feminizing (i.e. Romantic) musical language. When, at the crucial moment, Nux fails to perform in front of Joe, his theme is cut off. By the time of the theme’s final appearance, Nux has entered a new community and established himself as a vital part of a different culture—that of the women he is helping. Nux is clearly subordinate to the women around him and his fallout sickness continues to be visible, both markers of feminization. However, his sacrifice is an exertion of agency, an action against those whom he now understands to be his oppressors.

## CONCLUSION

Because of the gendered discourse available in the score along with the visual narrative, Max, Furiosa, and Nux challenge notions of purely masculine or purely feminine categories. The score presents both masculine and feminine qualities in association with Max and Furiosa, but without completely reimagining gender stereotypes. Although it is a departure for the series that Max is grappling with something like PTSD instead of being presented as the indomitable hero, he nonetheless emerges as a fairly ideal man. He eventually overcomes his mental instability and trauma, continuing to fight and protect. Like the quintessential hero of the Western, he quietly returns to the wasteland at the end of the narrative, having saved society without being able to

fully join it. In spite of the prominence of Furiosa's character and her capability as an action hero, her music emphasizes her femininity most heavily, especially her relation to her interior emotionality. The theme's coincidence with talk of the Green Place also cements her as a key agent of the literal and figurative re-seeding of the wasteland.

However, Nux's character may be the most compelling in rejecting the gospel of binary conceptions of gender. As an acolyte of a hypermasculine fundamentalism that is not entirely dissimilar to the type espoused by Aaron Clarey and his fellows at *Return of Kings*, Nux's connection with Capable and the other women precipitates his self-actualization and liberation from the oppressive patriarchy of Immortan Joe. Instead of being neatly returned to acceptable manliness, Nux rejects the hypermasculinity to which he used to aspire in order to support the establishment of a matriarchal Citadel.

Although the film laudably attempts to present complex characters with both stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes, the binary it establishes in terms of strategies for world rebuilding seems overly simplistic. The film's criticism of violent patriarchy is valid, even incisive; however to suggest replacing the rule of men with the rule of women is not only oversimplified, but necessitates the essentialization of both women and men. Women are not by nature benevolent, wise leaders, nor are men by nature despots or vigilantes. Although the score offers hope in emphasizing the hybridity of the gender characterizations in *Fury Road*, the narrative continues to depend on essentializing archetypes that fall short of actual progress in gender politics.

## CHAPTER FOUR: “THE WAY HOME”

“Where must we go...  
we who wander this wasteland in search of our better selves?”  
– The First History Man, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

I began this project out of a desire to bring my academic research to bear on the cultural conversation sparked by the release of *Fury Road*. My aim was to examine the nature of gender relations in the *Mad Max* franchise through the film score, hoping my work would provide insights that might support or complicate interpretations based on the dominant narrative. Clarey’s post at *Return of Kings* is representative of a larger trend by which the participation of women in historically male-dominated fandoms ignites Internet backlash. Although online misogyny is by no means a new phenomenon, the vitriol associated with Gamergate in 2014 became the focal point of competing masculinist and feminist public discourses that continued in the following years.<sup>89</sup> In 2016, an all-female reboot of *Ghostbusters* (Paul Feig) was received with such rancor that cast member Leslie Jones was forced to leave social media for a period of time due to harassment.<sup>90</sup> The long-running British science fiction series *Doctor Who* has been criticized as “too PC” since the first season to star a woman (Jodie Whittaker) as the Doctor premiered in 2018.<sup>91</sup> The newest film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck; 2019), features a woman (Brie Larson) as the headlining superhero. Two

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<sup>89</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Competence: Girls Who Code and the Boys Who Hate Them,” *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 121-178.

<sup>90</sup> Katie Rogers, “Leslie Jones, Star of ‘Ghostbusters,’ Becomes a Target of Online Trolls,” *The New York Times* (July 19, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/20/movies/leslie-jones-star-of-ghostbusters-becomes-a-target-of-online-trolls.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Lucy Jones, “Doctor Who Backlash Shows Why It’s Time to Bin the Phrase ‘Politically Correct,’” *The Independent* (December 6, 2018), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/doctor-who-politically-correct-backlash-bbc-jodie-whittaker-mandip-gill-tosin-cole-a8669156.html>.

weeks prior to the film's release, men's rights activists torpedoed the film's Rotten Tomatoes score to make it the lowest-scoring film in the MCU, a practice that has become a common form of trolling.<sup>92</sup> These woman-centered properties were also celebrated as steps toward equality for women in media.

While the outcry against *Fury Road* grew from the perception that the previous three films celebrated the violent, essentialist masculinity that this film sought to overthrow, conversely, the equally vocal support for *Fury Road* seemed determined to overlook certain factors in order to install Furiosa in the pantheon of popular feminism.<sup>93</sup> My work adds to this conversation by complicating the perception that films like the first three *Mad Max* movies were initially masculinist utopias and points to ways in which characters celebrated as feminist triumphs—like Furiosa—may still be reinforcing essentialist ideas about femininity. My musical analysis has shown how *Mad Max* tantalizes Jessie with moments of autonomy followed by oppression and *Fury Road* portrays women as both capable of violence and of being vessels of renewal.

My work applies established frameworks for analyzing gender in film music to particularly resistant texts. Studying the *Mad Max* films is challenging because they all present idiosyncrasies and incongruities that make them difficult to analyze. Furthermore as self-

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<sup>92</sup> Jacob Stolworthy, "Captain Marvel's Rotten Tomatoes Score Plummets Amid 'Sexist Troll' Smear Campaign," *The Independent* (February 22, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/captain-marvel-review-rotten-tomatoes-score-brie-larson-sexist-troll-a8791691.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Popular feminism is a socially acceptable, commodified type of empowerment that tends to center the concerns of affluent white women. For more on both popular feminism and popular misogyny, see Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, which includes a chapter that focuses on Gamergate.

conflicting texts, the films provide ample interpretive space for the viewer to glean messages that suit them. The problems of interpretation presented by the *Mad Max* films are reminiscent of another famously resistant film—*Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999).<sup>94</sup> In present-day discourse about film, *Fight Club* has become symbolic of the power of misread texts. Masculinists and men’s rights activists often see *Fight Club* as an indictment of feminized masculinity, believing that the film’s fascism presents viable personal and political answers. Meanwhile, feminist critics see the film as an indictment of those very masculinist and fascist systems.<sup>95</sup> The first three *Mad Max* films share this propensity for misreading, as evidenced by the masculinist outrage at *Fury Road*. Clarey and others considered *Fury Road* a deviation from the *Mad Max* canon because they saw the first three films as supporting their patriarchal worldview. While I cannot pretend that my analysis of the films has been uninfluenced by my subject position and worldview, I propose that my interpretation of the music of *Mad Max* disallows this reading.<sup>96</sup> Although attending to Jessie’s performance as a representation of her agency and to the interactions of her music with the music of Max and the Toecutter as disruptive of that agency raises some questions that are difficult to answer, this analysis emphasizes that Max and the Toecutter are more alike than different. As such, *Mad Max* is not a film about a hero whose vengeance, though

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<sup>94</sup> To read about the widely varied critical and academic response to *Fight Club*, see Mark Ramey, *Studying Fight Club* (Leighton Buzzard, UK: Auteur, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> To begin exploring the current iteration of this cultural interpretive disagreement, see Paulie Doyle, “How ‘Fight Club’ Became the Ultimate Handbook for Men’s Rights Activists,” *Broadly* (January 5, 2017), [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/paeg89/how-fight-club-became-the-ultimate-handbook-for-mens-rights-activists](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/paeg89/how-fight-club-became-the-ultimate-handbook-for-mens-rights-activists).

<sup>96</sup> Much has been written about *Fight Club*. Although musicologists have worked on David Fincher and *Fight Club*, none of the analyses have taken the particular bent I have used here. Although the score is very different from any of the *Mad Max* scores I have analyzed, I wonder how a similar analysis might inflect interpretations of *Fight Club*.

brought about by tragic circumstances, is to be admired. Instead, my reading emphasizes that *Mad Max* has no hero.

By the same token, my analysis of *Fury Road* recognizes the heightened complexity of the film's gender characterizations, but raises questions about its persistent gender essentialism. Although Furiosa's narrative centrality is an exciting instance of a powerful woman as an action character, her musical characterization emphasizes the lingering patriarchal assumptions inherent in her depiction. In considering how the musical emphasis on Furiosa's emotions and connection with renewed fertility ground her character as stereotypically feminine, I wonder what the construction of an ideal woman-as-hero would entail. Subverting patriarchal tropes still uses patriarchy as an organizing narrative principle, even in seeking to do the opposite of its dictates. A complete overhaul of the hero seems impossible, however, based on the conventions of Western narrative. Although I do not propose an answer to these questions here, I believe that dystopian narratives are a particularly effective narrative structure in which to experiment with what heroes might look like beyond essentialist notions of gender.

This project is far from a complete catalog of the gender politics as represented in the music of the *Mad Max* films. My case studies were carefully chosen to represent the opposite poles of gender characterization in the franchise, although the women of *The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* deserve no less consideration than I have given to Jessie and Furiosa. The rich if incongruous texts of these films provides a fertile ground for all manner of musicological readings. Notable areas of representation that should be addressed in musical scholarship on *Mad Max* include queerness, disability, and race, all of which would intersect with and enrich the observations I have already made with regard to gender.

I have already indicated the ways that the type of analysis of onscreen performance I use in Chapter Two may be used in other films in which actors perform their own themes. However, I think that the potential for the study of marginalized women in action film as a whole could be best approached through musicological study, whether or not the women perform. Musical material can provide interpretive information that the onscreen narrative does not otherwise acknowledge, allowing film music scholars to engage more deeply with marginalized characters than would be possible without access to the musical discourse. Although here my work has interpreted resistant films, in other instances the score may provide support for or opposition to dominant readings. Either way, consideration of a character's musical material always provides an extra layer of information that not must be accounted for in order to make a full reading of a film. Jessie's music grants her character interest and pathos that would be unrecognized without this type of film music analysis.

The framework for analyzing gendered musical discourse employed in Chapter Three allows characters to hold simultaneous and sometimes competing masculine and feminine forces. Although *Fury Road*'s narrative is ultimately built on sustaining binaries while reassigning power to women, the methods I use to analyze the characters' gender characterizations are powerful tools for illuminating complexities and contradictions within both characters and narratives. I am hopeful that the continued study of gender in action and dystopian film using these methods will encourage careful thought about how heroes are characterized, no matter their gender.

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