

Ability Apocalypse
An Analysis of the Portrayal of Disability in Mad Max Fury Road

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (Animation). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Hamilton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Kate Hamilton

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of disability in George Miller's film *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015) and explores the question of whether the depiction of disability in *Mad Max Fury Road* is a progressive representation that furthers authentic depictions of disabled characters or if it is regressive and falls back on harmful stereotypes and myths about disability. Prior to attempting to answer this question, it discusses a brief history of disability representation in film, following a four-era structure proposed by Norden's book *The Cinema of Isolation*, explaining the origins of the *Mad Max* series, how disability is typically depicted in the post-apocalyptic genre and how the previous three movies in the series represented disability and disabled characters before *Fury Road*. It will then analyze the depictions of disability and individual disabled characters within *Mad Max Fury Road*, splitting them into protagonists and antagonists, and discusses elements of these depictions and whether they can be seen as positive (progressive) or negative (regressive) representations of disability. And finally, it will state my own opinion on whether *Mad Max Fury Road* succeeds at depicting a progressive representation of disability over all or whether it falls into regressive depictions that taint the overall viewing experience from a disabled lens.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I seek to show how George Miller's film *Mad Max Fury Road* and his previous *Mad Max* films can be used to demonstrate the degree to which the portrayal of disability has evolved within film. I also explore whether *Mad Max Fury Road* is progressive or regressive in its treatment of the subject of disability through a critical analysis of its characters and narrative. By progressive I mean whether the characters with disabilities are portrayed authentically and are not solely defined by their disability. Alternatively, by regressive, I mean whether the characters fulfil common archetypes that valorise or demonise disability and whether their identity is solely predicated on the fact of their specific impairment.

Originally intending to do my thesis on body horror, the investigation of the issue of 'fear of impairment' and the inherent ableism in horror's tendency to create an "OTHER" out of disabled bodies, led me to change direction to focus on disability representation instead. I have always had an interest in disability representation, as I have had to rely on disability services myself in the past, so the subject of how disability is perceived generally is of particular interest to me.

In my research, I found Martin F. Nordon's *the Cinema of Isolation* and Mick Broderick and Katie Ellis's *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max* to be very useful in assisting me to develop and structure my thoughts about the representation of disability in these films and in others. I also found the writings of Paul Drake and Alan Sutherland in *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media* useful in helping me with more specific information on the subject of disability.

This thesis project also includes close analysis of the aforementioned film texts and draws on other research including journal articles such as Emma Fletcher and Alvin Primack's 'Driving Towards Disability Rhetorics', in addition to film critiques, blog posts, conference papers, web pages and even dissertations, to enable me to gather all of the necessary information to complete this thesis.

Chapter 1 explores a brief history of disability representation in film, using as a foundation, the four eras proposed by Norden and identifies prevalent archetypes and

tropes found within them. Chapter 2 discusses the origins of the *Max Max* series and how the subject of impairment was always intended to be an aspect of each of the films. I also explore how disability factors into the post-apocalyptic genre and how these factors are demonstrated throughout the *Mad Max* series leading up to *Fury Road*. Finally, Chapter 3 discusses how disability is represented through the characters within *Fury Road* and whether Miller's treatment of the subject of disability in this film is a progressive or regressive form of representation.

In my conclusion, I provide my own opinion on the impact and influence that the film has had in relation to disability and whether it was successful in overcoming unhelpful or inaccurate depictions of disability.

Chapter One: Disability Eras

In this chapter I briefly discuss the evolution of disability representation in film from its earliest iterations to the beginning of the *Mad Max* series. In addition, I explore how the various archetypes and tropes surrounding the subject of disability were used to reflect the progressive or regressive ideologies of the times. Within this I identify the significant films within these changing eras that served to communicate these ideological changes. This sets the foundation to discuss in the subsequent chapters, how these various archetypes and tropes can be seen within *the Mad Max* series And *Mad Max Fury Road* in particular.

Social attitudes towards disability has been represented through, and largely defined by the media that have been created and consumed over generations. In his book *The Cinema of Isolation*, Martin Norden argues that the history of disability in film can be broken down into four eras; a ‘Freakish’ period pre WWII, a ‘Rehabilitative’ period post WWII, a period of ‘Degeneration’ between the 1950s-1970s and finally an ‘Enlightenment’ period from the mid 1970s onward.¹

“FREAKISH ERA”

The “Freakish” era, was characterised by the ignorance surrounding disability, using disabled people's attributes for pure spectacle, or as a part of film's visual language, and catering to an able bodied and neurotypical audience. This manifested in films and filmmaking through a cruel treatment of those with disabilities, including but not limited to their experiences on set. An example of this is that during the filming of the 1932 film *Freaks*, the able bodied actors grouped up to complain about how the disabled actors’ presence in the canteen was “ruining their appetite” and leading to them being banned from the canteen.²

The early appearance of disabled characters in film was largely to do with their use in spectacle. The audience's fascination for disability dates back to “human curiosities”

¹ Ann Pointon et al., eds., *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media* (London: British Film Institute : Arts Council of England, 1997). Pg.10

² Norden, Martin F. *The Cinema of Isolation : A History of Physical Disability in the Movies / Martin F. Norden*. Rutgers University Press, 1994. <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.iadt.ie/linkprocessor/plink?id=3bbd40dc-5738-3995-8c38-b7a2a1741d47>. Pg.118

in carnival sideshows. George Henderson and Willie V. Bryan suggests that “throughout history people without disability have had a paradoxical repulsion/attraction for those with disabilities”.³ This repulsion/attraction that is observed in non-disabled viewers is connected to our reaction to horror as contemplated in Linda Williams’s claim that “There is not that much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned”.⁴ Whether it is the fear of becoming disabled themselves, the shock of seeing a body so vastly different from their own or a feeling of superiority, this use of disabled bodies for spectacle’s sake was effective in drawing in viewers, despite being unethical.

Two examples of Freakish era films are *Freaks* (1932) and *Frankenstein* (1931). In *Freaks*, set within a travelling French circus, Hans, a little person, has unrequited feelings for Cleopatra (Cleo), a non-disabled trapeze artist that mistreats him and at one point, tries to have him killed. Much of the film is dedicated to the disabled circus folk (freaks) being presented as “normal people” and the “othering” they experience through their treatment by the other able-bodied performers. While *Freaks* is a complicated example because it is relatively sympathetic towards disabled persons especially given the era it was produced, its director and producer Tod Browning intended for this film to top *Frankenstein* in terms of horror. We see this in the latter half of the film with the brutal revenge that the “freaks” enact on Cleo, where the film falls back on their stereotypical “monstrous” image. As the “freaks” are portrayed crawling through the mud with murderous intent during a storm, stalking Cleo's every move and eventually mutilating her, they flip the script on a situation where a minority group are victimised by members of the majority, into singling out a member of the majority in order to “make her one of them”.

In contrast, the audience has an opposite experience in terms of story arc when viewing Universal Pictures’ *Frankenstein* (1931), directed by James Whale. Whereas in *Freaks*, the audience develops sympathy and empathy toward the disabled circus folk at the earlier stages of the film before their “monstrous” depiction at the end, in *Frankenstein* the audience sees a monster from the outset and develops their

³ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.5

⁴ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.6

sympathy and empathy at its tragic climax. It could be argued that the audiences at the time felt more comfortable empathising with an allegorical representation of a disabled person than a literal one, given the fact that *Freaks* was banned in the UK until the 1960s.⁵

Archetypes in the Freakish Era

As displayed in *Freaks*, Norden observes that the principle times the disabled characters are endowed with the look of “the other” are either “when they are in relatively helpless positions or murderously bearing down on abled bodied miscreants”⁶ There were two main roles for disabled characters in film at this time: the victim and the villain. The line between character archetype and stereotype blurs in the case of disability. There are a plethora of different archetypes that surround disabled characters, with some being more harmful than others. Many disabled characters fall under stereotypical perceptions of disabled people and often misrepresent the disabilities they are portraying. Some examples of this include (but are not limited to), “the sweet innocent” and “the obsessive avenger”.

“The sweet innocent” often takes the form of a child and is used for a moral compass within the narrative. This type of character usually has a sweet sense of naivety about the world that endears them to the audience, and makes the characters around them want to help and protect them. Arguably, Hans, the character that Cleo takes advantage of, falls under this archetype. He is naive to Cleo's intentions, and her underhanded mockery and later murder attempt is the driving conflict of the film. He even remains innocent after it is shown, post confrontation and maiming in the final act, that he is distraught at the actions of his fellow circus folk. He claims later that he never intended for her to get hurt, only for her to come clean. In contrast to this, the “obsessive avenger” archetype takes on a far more sinister tone. Harry Benshoff describes the obsessive avenger as a “stereotype of a disabled or disfigured man who exacts revenge on ‘normal’ society”.⁷ This trope is typically very popular in the horror genre such as in *Frankenstein*, as it displays intense motivation and almost a

⁵ Pointon et al., *Framed*. Pg.10

⁶ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.117

⁷ Harry M. Benshoff, *America on Film : Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Malden, MA, USA : Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), <http://archive.org/details/americafilmrep0002bens>. Pg.424

sense of a self-righteousness or ‘just cause’ for such brutal and horrific actions. The American sociologist Robert Bogdan observed that “From the first horror movies to modern day renderings, physical and mental disabilities have been shown to connote murder, violence, and danger”.⁸ We can see how such visual language is used in both *Frankenstein* and *Freaks*.

“REHABILITATIVE ERA”

The cultural attitude around disability changed after World War II, with many survivors and veterans returning home physically and mentally scarred from their experiences during the war and with an improving awareness by the general public of the effects of these impairments. This newfound knowledge created opportunities surrounding disability as film audiences grew more open to hearing stories about it. This created the period of ‘rehabilitation’ with many films of this period portraying returning war veterans, many of whom are disabled, and in some cases films that would focus on the experiences of a sole disabled character.

Paul Drake lists two notable films depicting disability in this era: the multi-Oscar winning *Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) and *Pride of the Marines* (Delmer Daves, 1945).⁹ In the former, the protagonist, Homer Parish, who has lost both hands during the war, is reunited with his loved one. The reunion scene is not characterised by pity for Parish’s injuries but by the love he shares with his partner. In the latter, based on a true story, the protagonist Al Schmid returns home to a post war America embittered, as a result of being blinded by a Japanese grenade. Owing to the support and love of his family and friends, he overcomes his angst and succeeds in communicating the message to the audience that “individuals can’t make it on their own”.¹⁰ Drake argues that while this was an improvement in the representation of disabled people from the Freakish era it was still “fairly shallow” and was more

⁸ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.113

⁹ (Pointon et al. 1997) Pg.11

¹⁰ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.161

about “ validating society's own conception of normality and its boundaries, than accepting difference”.¹¹

Archetypes of the Rehabilitative Era

The two main archetypes of this era that I will be focusing on are the noble hero and the super crip. The archetype of a noble hero is someone who because of the traits that they possess, such as honour, courage or duty, experience a period of adversity or struggle, resulting in personal growth and wisdom and heroic accolades. The two protagonists mentioned previously, Homer Parish and Al Schmid both portray these archetypal aspects as both are war veterans who overcome adversity to reach a rehabilitative and heroic status.

Author Emily Rap states that the sociologist Rebecca Chopp coined the term ‘supercrip’ to explain the tendency to “elevate disabled people as extraordinary and as a way to make them acceptable in society”.¹² Rapp argues that this is derived from society’s fear of people with disabilities and that this is deeply embedded in our social consciousness. Alicja Mironiuk identifies the character of Homer Parish as one of the early breakthrough presentations of the super crip archetype in films in that by depicting his struggle to adapt to the social sphere psychologically and emotionally, he projects a more self-sufficient and confident front to deflect from society's preconditioning towards disability.¹³ In their journal article, *Reevaluating the Supercrip*, Sami Schalk states that

“Almost all discussions of supercrips focus on how these representations rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary. Additionally, most scholarship also mentions how these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and

¹¹ Pointon et al., *Framed*. pg.11

¹² “Why Are We So Afraid Of People With Disabilities?,” *Role Reboot* (blog), August 9, 2012, <http://www.rolereboot.org/life/details/2012-08-why-are-we-so-afraid-of-people-with-disabilities>.

¹³ Alicja Mironiuk, “(Un)Seen Difference, i.e. Regarding the Image of Persons with Physical Disabilities in Selected Feature Films,” *Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej*, no. 31 (December 15, 2020): 173–99, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ikps.2020.31.08>. Pg.191

perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough”.¹⁴

REGRESSION ERA

– “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party”¹⁵–

The above question would be asked many times over the course of the Cold War in America as the result of the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in October 1947.

Led by J.Parnell Thomas (a Republican Representative for New Jersey), the HUAC opened an investigation into the Hollywood industry, seeking to identify those that may at any point have associated themselves with the Communist Party in order to prevent “subversive” ideas from reaching the screen. The rise of McCarthyism in America and the fear of “progressive ideology” created a blacklisting culture in Hollywood that smeared the reputations of screenwriters, directors, and actors that had previously made so much progress in the ways that disability had been portrayed on screen.

This new apathetic approach to filmmaking resulted in the regression of the portrayal of disability in media and film to pre-war attitudes. Such a backlash to progressive ideas led major film producers like Jack Warner (the production head of Warner Brothers), to declare that he was “through with making movies about the ‘little man’”.¹⁶ William Wyler also expressed significant concern, arguing that the HUAC members were “making decent people afraid to express their opinions . They are creating fear in Hollywood. Fear will result in self censorship.”¹⁷

This in fact came to pass. The result of this was a more conservative “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality being depicted in Hollywood films from the 1950s through to the mid-1970s, which denied the institutional struggles relating to the

¹⁴ Sami Schalk, “Reevaluating the Supercrip,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2016): 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2016.5>. Pg.73

¹⁵ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.184

¹⁶ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.187

¹⁷ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.185

subject of disability and purveyed larger than life heroes and unrealistic expectations being placed on disabled individuals. Also, the concept of “inspiration porn”, described by Stella Young in 2014 as the ‘objectification of one group of people for the benefit of another’ began to manifest itself during this regression period.¹⁸

Popular Archetypes in the Regression Era

Civilian Superstars

Martin Norden describes the definition of a civilian superstar as depicting “exceptional characters triumphing over the odds with the same kind of gumption that got them to the top of their profession” and hence instilling the audience with a sense of inspiration.¹⁹ Two good examples of this archetype are the biopics, *The Stratton Story* (Sam Wood, 1949) and *With A Song In My Heart* (Walter Lang 1952). In the former, the protagonist Morty Stranton, a talented baseball pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, loses his leg in a hunting accident only to triumphantly return to play in the Texas minor leagues. In the latter, the actress and singer Jane Froman who has been crippled in an airplane crash overcomes her adversity to sing for the troops in WWII despite having to walk on crutches. Norden comments on the evolution of this archetype by pointing out that a collaboration between Warner Brothers and International Artists led to the development of a number of civilian superstar films from the mid-1950s onwards portraying ‘fictional characters seemingly appropriate for the new conservative age’.²⁰

Disabled Villains

Disney movies were no exception to the new regressive era of disability archetypes using the disabled villain in a number of their films that they released during this era. The characters of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* (Byron Haskin, 1950) and Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (Hamilton Luske et al, 1952) served to introduce children to the concept of disabled villains from the early 1960s. In *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley

¹⁸“Inspiration Porn: A Look at the Objectification of Deaf,” accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.handspeak.com/learn/364/?signInSource=one-tap>.

¹⁹ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.188

²⁰ Norden, “*The Cinema of Isolation*.” Pg.192

Kubrick, 1964), Peter Sellers plays a comedic disabled villain with a prosthetic arm that has a mind of its own. This regression back to the “Freakish” portrayal of disabled characters only solidified the visual language that relates disability to forms of villainy, acting as a kind of moral punishment for their actions before these are even revealed.

“Enlightenment Era”

By the early 1960s the economic system of movie making began to change significantly, with the model moving away from large studios to a more contractual system that saw an uptake in smaller independent production companies. This led to more relaxed hiring practices leading to producers being less concerned with the previous political blacklisting of their co-workers. The guidelines also changed leading to more freedom in the creative ways that disability could be depicted in film. In addition, the status and independence of movie directors was significantly enhanced, shifting authorship away from the studios and into the hands of the film director. These changes coincided with civil rights activism and legislation that led to progress on the rights and treatment of people with disabilities and ultimately translated into the wider depiction of disability in films.

By the 1970s all of these changes translated into an explosion of various creative depictions of disability on screen. Films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), exposing the impact of the lack of social support structures, *Raging Moon* (Bryan Forbes, 1971), showing a wheelchair bound protagonist falling in love, *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975) a psychedelic story about overcoming impossible odds, *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978) presenting disability as no barrier to sexuality and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), exploring PTSD and trauma in times of war, are some examples of the new creative ways used to explore the subject of disability.

The degree to which the various ways that disability’s archetypes tropes and themes were presented to audiences as a result of the enlightenment era, was such that, without this untethered creativity, films like *Mad Max Fury Road* could never be imagined, let alone created. The road that is travelled between the beginning of the

Enlightenment Era and *Fury Road* cannot be mapped without an understanding of the evolution of the *Mad Max* series.

Chapter Two – Origins and the Post-Apocalypse

This chapter explores how the origins and ideas for the *Mad Max* series are used to link up with the theme of disability and how the other various themes of the post-apocalyptic genre are relevant to this portrayal of disability. It examines the first three *Mad Max* films and the archetypes, stereotypes and myths contained within them. It will also consider the extent to which these films feed into or overcome these tropes and how they perpetuate further myths and misunderstandings around the subject of disability. It will seek to show how the world building of a post-apocalyptic setting can accentuate conditions of physical and mental impairment and then finally will discuss the actual portrayal of disability in *Mad Max* prior to *Fury Road*.

The concept of *Mad Max* stems from the mind of its producer and director George Miller. The son of Greek immigrants, Miller was born in Queensland in 1945. Graduating as a medical doctor he completed his residency in Sydney in 1972. An avid motorcyclist who travelled extensively in his youth, Miller found himself spending most of his spare time working on experimental film, which in his early work polarized both critics and audiences for his “matter of fact” depictions of violence.¹

The combination of his experiences motorcycling the roads of Australia, the injuries he witnessed working as a physician, together with the rising death tolls on Australian roads in the 1970s (an issue that Miller was particularly critical of), all served to inspire the first two *Mad Max* films. Mick Broderick and Katie Ellis argue that Miller uses road trauma as a metaphor for broader social decline.² In fact, Miller once stated that it occurred to him “that the kind of degeneracy on the roads was indicative of a kind of general social degeneracy” and he admitted that “his motivations for creating *Mad Max* were partially a desire to integrate the disabling impacts of trauma and using it as a vehicle for social critique”.³ Miller's idea of this degeneration of social

¹ Cathal Gunning, “*Mad Max: How George Miller's Past Made The Road Warrior Darker*,” ScreenRant, February 7, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/mad-max-george-miller-medical-past-gore/>.

² Mick Broderick and Katie Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max: Beyond the Road Warrior's Fury* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19439-0>. Pg.37

³ Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.37

structure leads us down the road to the post-apocalyptic genre that frames the original *Mad Max* trilogy.

Disability in the Post-Apocalypse

Disability is often explored in different versions of real-world contexts, but when it comes to exploring disability within a fictional setting, especially one as brutal and survival focused as most post-apocalyptic settings are, new layers are added. Post-apocalyptic settings often emphasize the new dangers that challenge survival by showing the difficulty in completing what may be considered a simple mundane task today, like getting gas for your car. The new barriers preventing the completion of such tasks are created by the removal of the support systems and infrastructure that we have around us today. Post-apocalyptic worlds act like an exaggerated version of what it's like to live with disability within a world where one's impairments are not readily considered

Brett Stifflemore points to the early 19th century having witnessed,

“a fascination with tales of the Last Man, the last days, and the end of empires, but the general lack of cultural concern for apocalyptic and future scenarios during the mid-1800s is reflected in the relatively small output of future fiction for almost fifty years following the publication of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* in 1826”.⁴

The post-apocalyptic genre, while it can be traced back to as early as the 19th century, really started to gain traction in the aftermath of World War II as a result of people dealing with the impact of the war’s destruction. Again, Stifflemore reminds us that after the war,

“publication of imagined apocalypse resurged in greater numbers. The number of stories with apocalyptic themes published in the aftermath of both World Wars is an indicator that when war is fresh in the

⁴ Brett Samuel Stifflemire et al., “VISIONS OF AFTER THE END: A HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE POST-APOCALYPTIC GENRE IN LITERATURE AND FILM,” n.d. Pg. 109

collective cultural memory, tales of the end of the world abound. The postwar period also witnessed the emergence of a truly post-apocalyptic genre.”⁵

After the two World Wars the post-apocalyptic genre was solidified, stemming from the fears and fascinations of the culture’s consciousness of the times. This type of speculative fiction revolved around how the world might continue after a major catastrophe resulting from realistic events such as nuclear war/annihilation and plague, to more fantastical events like alien invasion or zombie outbreak.

A key theme in such literary scenarios is ‘survival’ as pointed out by Zena Mohammed and Sabrina Abdulridha,

“The post-apocalyptic genre is characterized by a variety of themes, but one of its central themes is survival. Relatively, most narratives of this genre envision a depopulated world in a post-cataclysmic wasteland whereby a group of survivors is exposed to harsh, arduous circumstances in the midst of chaos, destruction, and suffering as each one of the survivors tries to break away from a malevolent and corrupted society and retain social order.”⁶

This focus on survival and rebuilding lends itself well to the use of disabled characters in such narratives. Cataclysmic changes will render the world as we knew it, a foreign wasteland and the risk of central characters becoming disabled themselves increases substantially. The harshness of the new world will often show itself on its survivors through grave injury, psychological damage or birth defects, caused by factors such as a toxic environment, accident and violence. Kit Kavanagh-Ryan reminds us that “Post-disaster novels are also rich for discussions of trauma and

⁵ Stifflemire et al., “VISIONS OF AFTER THE END: A HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE POST-APOCALYPTIC GENRE IN LITERATURE AND FILM.” Pg.127

⁶ Zena Dhia Mohammed and Sabrina Abdulkadhom Abdulridha, “The Mechanism of Survival in Post-Apocalyptic Pandemic Narratives: A Comparative Study,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 14, no. 4 (April 2024): 1237–45, <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1404.31>. Pg.1237

change, and discussions of disability grow particularly dense in any narrative that focuses on scarcity”.⁷

The setting of a post-apocalyptic world is built with the idea of limited access to resources and pointedly when dealing with impairment, limited access to mental and physical health services. The setting puts people that are born disabled or become disabled in a far more vulnerable position by default. The assumption that people with disabilities would not survive a post-apocalyptic setting due to the destruction of any supportive social and civic structures, however, could be considered dismissive. Historically, narratives that speculate on how people would survive in such a dystopian world tend to miss the importance of how those with disabilities might function and navigate such an environment. Ignoring the subject of these challenges misses an essential question that comes with the building of such a world. If impairment is something that most people will eventually need to live with under whatever circumstances, how would people with such impairments adapt in a world that has been stripped of any and all supportive structures? Consideration for aspects such as human resilience, creativity, and community support can easily be extended to disability for showing that form of adaptation.

In the instance where disability is considered within the post-apocalyptic genre, some stories have fallen into perpetuating myths that portray disability dishonestly. A good example of this is presented in *Mad Max Fury Road*, as explained by Emma Fletcher and Alvin J. Primack when they state

“the film plays into the “Disability as Symptom of Human Abuse of Nature” (Dolmage, 2013, p. 44) myth that frames disability as a negative consequence of human caused environmental pollution and degradation. Conditions of disability within the film have only become normalized because of the ecological destruction that created *Mad Max*’s post -apocalyptic setting. This myth is damaging, as it ignores how environmental degradation is not distributed equally, masking the

⁷ Kit Kavanagh-Ryan, “Who Gets to Survive the Apocalypse? Disability Hierarchy in Post-Disaster Fiction in Australian YA,” *Australian Literary Studies* 37 (May 2, 2022): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.4801bfd4aa>. Pg.2

ways in which issues of race and class influence who is directly impacted by environmental pollution”.⁸

Other myths like that of overcoming or compensating for disability as put forward by Jay Dolmage, which imbues characters with exaggerated abilities to “compensate” for their disabilities⁹ or through hypermasculine performance as posited by Lindemann & Cherney¹⁰, are evident through many post-apocalyptic films, including the *Mad Max* series. Two examples of this can be seen in the characters of Rictus Erectus and Max himself.

HOW THIS RELATES TO THE WORLD OF *MAD MAX*

Disability was baked into the world of *Mad Max*, even before this version of Australia descended into a lawless, irradiated desert wasteland. Miller's inspiration in creating *Mad Max* was from witnessing the injuries and trauma that came from road-based accidents in his time working as an emergency doctor. As Brent Cline states in a 2015 article

“The preponderance of physical disabilities in *Fury Road* are a logical consequence of the world Miller builds: it is barren, cruel, and environmentally poisonous. It is perhaps also an emotional consequence of Miller’s experience as a physician working with trauma victims before he wrote the original *Mad Max*.”¹¹

There is a fascination and fear that comes with the risk of chasing adrenaline on the roads and the damage one can do to oneself and others in chasing it. This is a recurrent theme that runs throughout the entire *Mad Max* series.

⁸ Emma Sophia Fletcher and Alvin J. Primack, “Driving toward Disability Rhetorics: Narrative, Crip Theory, and Eco-Ability in *Mad Max: Fury Road*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 4 (August 8, 2017): 344–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1329540>. Pg.347

⁹ Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j2n73m>. Pg.32

¹⁰ Fletcher and Primack, “Driving toward Disability Rhetorics.” Pg.348

¹¹ “Power and Disability in ‘*Mad Max: Fury Road*’, *PopMatters*,” *PopMatters*, June 18, 2015, <https://www.popmatters.com/194573-power-and-disability-in-mad-max-fury-road1-2495517489.html>.

Over the course of the first three films prior to *Fury Road* the Australian environment descends further and further into a dystopian wasteland and demonstrates how society continues to operate through its decline. The exact cause of this fall is kept vague in the first two films however the third film implies some kind of nuclear event. In the fourth (*Fury Road*) it is implied that society's collapse was driven by resource wars and rampant environmental destruction.

In the dystopian Australia as depicted in *Mad Max* (1979), motorcycle gangs are marauding the roads, with increasing tensions and social breakdown growing as a result of oil shortage and ecocide. There are still institutions left of the old world, such as working roads, a functioning police force, some elements of operating government, hospitals etc. But within this almost pre-apocalyptic Australia, Miller begins to integrate trauma and impairment into the film's narrative. He shows that disability is not an uncommon reality: many characters deal with impairments, as a result of road accidents or not, and are shown to rely on the use of medical equipment for their day to day lives. For example, the mechanic with a speech impediment who needs crutches, the cop whose throat is damaged in the first car chase and needs a device to speak, Aunt May who has a metal brace on her leg and her son Benno, who has a mental disability. Not only is impairment prominent and visible within the film's setting but its representation is also diverse and varied.

The wasteland landscape descends further in *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981), as the struggle for resources is more apparent with the constant search for oil and the marauding road gangs. The focus on the need to steal food and fuel from wrecked vehicles on the desert roads shows the increased sense of scarcity and desperation that the world has descended into between the first and second movie. Despite this increase in scarcity and lack of support we still see how Miller includes disabled characters into its setting with members of the oil refinery community. Characters with impairments are shown to participate within the post-apocalyptic community. Examples of this are the mechanic that fixes Max's car who is paralyzed from the waist down and the mute feral child who (as told by narration) will go on to lead this

community in the future. Despite the collapse of the previous governmental systems, communities are shown to create their own support structures: the mechanic's mobility aid via harness and pulley system, and how the feral child is cared for by the collective.

Mad Max: Beyond The Thunderdome (1985) shows another jump in this post-apocalyptic society. The global resource war that had caused the collapse of society has escalated to a nuclear one leading to an event that results in the final fall of civilization, adding the threat of radiation poisoning to the environment: water is poisoned and must be checked for radiation. *Beyond The Thunderdome* also shows however the progression to a new type of society in dystopian Australia, as there is the development of trading posts, tribes, and even alternative fuel industries, and is the first of these films to end with a focus of rebuilding the world that has been lost. We see how Miller reintroduces disability to the narrative through the two characters of "Master and Blaster (referred to together as "Master Blaster")" and their effect on the community of Bartertown. The two function as a unit, Master being the brains and Blaster as the brawn, as they run the pig methane farm that provides Bartertown with all of its energy. Max is given the task to overthrow Master Blaster by the leader of Bartertown, Auntie Entity, due to the energy "embargos" that Master keeps imposing to prove that he is the true leader of Bartertown. Both Master and Blaster are disabled people, Master being physically disabled (dwarfism) and Blaster is revealed to have a mental disability (implied to be Down Syndrome). This is the first movie in the *Mad Max* saga that attempts to overtly comment on the treatment of disabled people in a post-apocalyptic world. Master Blasters' disabilities are pointed out and verbally discussed by characters within the film multiple times, most notably in Blasters reveal as a man with Down Syndrome. When Max removes Blaster's helmet in the Thunderdome, intending to kill him, he stops upon discovering that Blaster is disabled, arguing that this is not the fair fight that he agreed to, and this is followed by Master's pleading for Blaster's life saying that "he has only the mind of a child".

Max's reluctance to kill Blaster, whether or not it is framed to be a moral act, can be argued to be a form of infantilization by the narrative, owing to the fact that up until this point Blaster has been seen as a very capable individual that has thrived in a violent society. It can also be argued that Miller's treatment of Master's character in

this scene is recklessly handled, as it is visually resonant of the pub/bar activity that began in Australia in the early 1980s called dwarf-tossing (albeit intentional or otherwise) and Master is reduced to more of an object or plot device during this sequence.¹²

As a background to these three films it should be noted that there were major legislative advances being made both within Australia and globally surrounding the treatment and rights of disabled and mentally disabled people around this time. Such developments led to a backlash in Australia to the deinstitutionalization of people with mental disabilities. This resulted in a rise in “not in my backyard” sentiments that can be seen to have had an effect on the depiction of mental disability in the first and third films of the series through the depictions of the characters of Benno and Blaster.¹³

The world we are left with in *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015) builds upon what the other previous films had set up while also acting as a kind of soft reset of the *Mad Max* timeline, identifying the cause of its post-apocalyptic future to nuclear war and rampant ecological destruction. We are shown how micro societies develop their own systems to adapt to the harsh conditions in a wasteland where the memory of the old world is long dead. I will discuss the depiction of disabled characters within this new world in more depth in the third chapter.

¹² “*Inebriated Midget Tossing* - *The Cornell Daily Sun*,” November 30, 1AD, <https://cornellsun.com/2009/04/09/inebriated-midget-tossing/>, <https://cornellsun.com/2009/04/09/inebriated-midget-tossing/>.

¹³ Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.40

Chapter Three – Disability in *Fury Road*

In this chapter I seek to explore whether George Miller's *Mad Max Fury Road* represents disabled characters in a progressive or regressive manner. *Fury Road* (2015), benefiting from over forty years of wide ranging disability representation in the enlightenment era, begged the question of whether Miller would further develop these representations (progressive) or fall back into the old harmful or insensitive archetypes and tropes (regressive) as seen in previous eras. In the previous chapters I briefly discussed how the world of the first three films of the *Mad Max* saga treated disability and disabled characters. As O' Ragen reminds us, "At its heart, *Mad Max* was a story of mutilation, disempowerment and re-empowerment."¹ However, *Fury Road* goes about this differently, placing this theme front and centre. George Miller changes the formula that he created over the previous three films in *Fury Road*, jumping from a structure that uses a narrative that ends in a climactic final chase, to a film that contains its narrative within the structure of one long continuous chase sequence.

Fury Road "trims the fat" of Miller's previous work, removing a lot of the set up that the three previous films consisted of and putting instead, a lot of the focus of its production around spectacle with more eye-catching stunts, elaborate costumes and bigger cars and set pieces. The film does this while also having the largest number of disabled characters in any of the previous *Mad Max* films. While the previous three *Mad Max* films' narratives included some form of disability in their characters as discussed in the previous chapter, *Fury Road* takes this to a new level, as disability is used as an active force within the film. It could be argued that Miller is using disability as a tool to enhance the spectacle within the narrative, however it can also be argued that he is using disability as a much more central theme. It appears to me that Miller's intentions were clearly progressive in that not only did he creatively expand disability representation, but he also placed it front and centre. Miller's tendency toward spectacle however did lead him toward unfortunate regressive visual

¹ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978078>. Pg.104

language, particularly in the case of his ‘rogues gallery’ of villains, whether intentional or not. Through the film’s depiction of these characters and the framing around them, we can see through critical analysis, how this theme is handled and how Miller presents disability differently across a variety of characters. It is worth comparing how these differences manifest in protagonists and antagonists, for whom the viewer’s sympathies will typically vary.

Protagonists

Mad Max

Max, while being the title character of the *Mad Max* films often is not usually the main focus of the story, and rather an unlikely helper to the characters that the plot takes place around. Similarly to *Odysseus* in Homer's *Odyssey*, Max is the central character around whom many characters and events orbit. He acts as the eyes of the viewer and the foundation that the story is developed around. As Max journeys through the wasteland his primary goal of survival is constantly superseded by his deep sense of civic duty and justice. This is true for *Fury Road*, except in this film the film’s opening focuses on Max’s own disability, introducing the viewer to the expansive wasteland with a shot of his leg brace and as he experiences an auditory flashback brought on by his PTSD.



Figure 1

While Max’s “madness” is not a new element of the series, this is the first time that Miller has made it such a central focus, placing the experience of Max’s trauma front and centre. This combination of physical and mental disability is used as the lens

through which this story is introduced. While his physical disability is less apparent as the film progresses, Max's PTSD is used multiple times as a catalyst to Max's actions, like not giving up on Furiosa's quest for the Green Place. The story treats him as a tool in this way, literally and figuratively as he is used as a "blood bag" for the first quarter of the film and is the begrudging source of hope for the other protagonists like Furiosa and Nux.

Furiosa

Furiosa is very often pointed out as an example of *Mad Max's* positive forms of disability representation, even outside of the context of *Mad Max*. Furiosa stands as an example of "good" disability representation, and for very good reason. Broderick and Ellis assert that "Significantly, the main protagonist in *Fury Road* is a disabled woman. Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, challenges the gendered norms of action cinema. Likewise, her disability extends cinematic possibilities available to people with impairment"². Despite not being the title character of the film it is apparent that Furiosa is the main character as her escape plan and emotional arc of finding the Green Place drives the story.

She is an amputee with a prosthetic arm and the portrayal of this teeters the line between that of being a neutral or matter of fact element of her life and to one of empowerment, while avoiding the pitfalls of the super cripple trope, as we discussed in the first chapter. Emma Fletcher and Alvin Primack, in their article entitled 'Driving Toward Disability Rhetorics', remind us that Furiosa's prosthetic arm is never used as an issue to make her appear "less than" in any way, far from it. With or without her prosthetic she is depicted as a good strategist in the same vein as Max. She booby-traps her vehicle in a similar fashion as Max and is skilled at hand-to-hand combat, as Max discovers when fighting her. She is also proficient with firearms, as demonstrated when Furiosa blinds the bullet farmer with one shot.³ Furiosa is also seen without her arm during moments of vulnerability. She removes it upon discovering that the Green Place was destroyed long ago and when overwhelmed with emotion. Other times are when she is cleaning the war rig or tricking the rock riders and in none of these instances is she framed as weak. Although she is far from

² Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.41

³ Fletcher and Primack, "Driving toward Disability Rhetorics." Pg.349

autonomous without her prosthetic, as she is reliant on it in order to drive the war-rig, her reliance on her prosthetic is no different to the co-dependency that she and the other protagonists share in their escape from the citadel.



Figure 2

Nux The War Boy

Nux is a member of Immortan Joe's war boys, and like many of the war boys he is sick and dying of an unnamed illness, implied to be caused by radiation poisoning. As he is closer to death than the others around him, he feels excluded and his abilities are seen as less valuable. He is seeking to control the manner of his death by sacrificing his "half life" and to "die historic on the Fury Road," and take his place in Valhalla, as he believes fanatically in the cult that worships Immortan Joe. As Ellis and Broderick remind us, 'disability is typically culturally invoked as a synonym for exclusion. Ability, by comparison, signifies value. The value of human life itself is called into question only when someone is disabled.'⁴ Nux's disability plays a vital role in the plot as Max becomes Nux's 'blood bag' (a human IV) at the beginning of the film. After Furiosa is discovered to have escaped the Citadel in a war-rig, by tricking Immortan Joe, Max is strapped to the front of Nux's vehicle and becomes an unwilling part of Nux's death wish.

⁴ Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.35



Figure 3

Antagonists

Immortan Joe

Immortan Joe is the main antagonist of *Fury Road*. While most of the leaders of the war posse have some form of disability, Joe is one of the most clearly physically disabled of all the characters in the film. His skin is bleached, and his back is covered in tumours likely from radiation exposure. He is also one of the characters in the film most reliant on medical equipment, but he disguises this by having it fashioned into a kind of war suit. He is never seen without his breathing apparatus and benefits from his control of the water supply at the Citadel by always breathing the clean air that he can produce from the greenery derived from this. His masking of his disability is done to create a strong, imposing image, being one of a political strongman or godlike figure with moulded plastic muscles of the chest piece and horse teeth face mask.



Figure 4

Disability also plays into Joe's main motivation as he, a misogynistic eugenicist, desires a healthy child who he can make heir to the Citadel. This is why he is desperate to recapture his wives, especially “Joe’s favourite”, Angharad, who is pregnant with his child and ‘would be heir’, subject to it being male and free of disability. Upon the death of this unborn child during an emergency C section, Joe flies into a rage when he discovers that the child was “perfect”.

Joe’s Children

Joe's other children, Corpus Colossus and Rictus Erectus are not considered to be heirs owing to their disabilities, but they are both given important jobs within the Citadel based on their skill sets. Corpus Colossus, the only character played by an actual disabled actor (Quentin Kenihan), requires a mobility apparatus and breathing tubes and is left in charge of the Citadel owing to his intellect and his inability through physical disability, to join the posse. His brother Rictus Erectus, while physically strong, demonstrates traits of a sexual predator, pre-pubescent mentality and mindless impulsivity. He is the main enforcer for Immortan Joe and requires breathing apparatus like his father. As Ellis and Broderick point out, ‘Joe’s sons are a ‘hyperbolised version of Master Blaster’ in that Colossus has the brains and Erectus has the muscle while appearing cognitively impaired’.⁵

⁵ Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.35

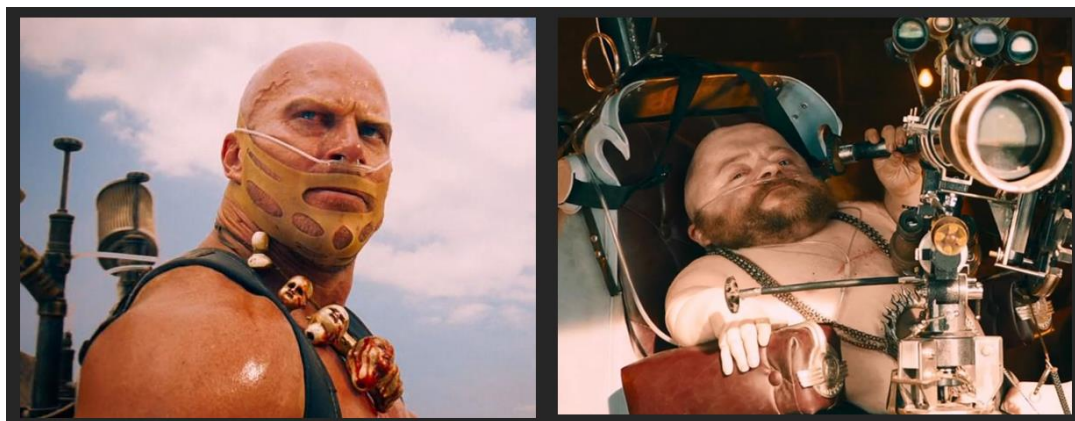


Figure 5

BULLET FARMER AND THE PEOPLE EATER

While the Bullet Farmer and the People Eater are not the most prominent characters in the film, they play a significant role in the few scenes wherein they appear. The Bullet Farmer is introduced in the film as sane and able bodied. He even questions his involvement in Immortan Joe's frenzied chase over 'healthy babies' and a 'family squabble'. However, upon being blinded by Furiosa's gunfire, he dons a blindfold resembling Lady Justice and refers to himself as such, stating that he is the 'scales of justice' before attempting to Kamikaze his motorbike into the war rig. Undermining a common trope of acquiring wisdom through blindness like Shakespeare's Gloucester in *King Lear*, the Bullet Farmer reacts in the exact opposite fashion.

The People Eater in contrast to the bullet farmer has some very clear physical impairments, such as a prosthetic to cover a missing/rotting nose, and swollen and bound feet that, combined with his size, require him to need assistance getting in and out of his vehicle. He is one of the only overweight characters in the film, and given his name and the distinct lack of resources in the wasteland, it is implied that he takes part in cannibalism. His death is unceremonious as he is used as a human shield by Max against Immortan Joe, which serves to show Joe's little value for his compatriot's life.

Positive Representations

Normalisation

One of the most striking aspects of *Fury Road* is the extent to which disability is normalised in the world within which it is set. From the beginning to the end of the

film disability seems to be on screen in almost every shot. Disability is so common in this setting that it becomes relatively unremarkable, and thus, as Fletcher and Primack note, 'it is no longer stigmatized as it might be in contemporary society'.⁶

The world of *Fury Road* is one where impairment, in some form or another, is far more the norm than "abled" people. However, this does not rid the setting of Ableism: far from it, in fact. The protagonists of the film are actively trying to fight or escape a system that disempowers them and thrives on depriving people of the help and resources they need. This de-stigmatisation and normalisation of disability opens the doors to more nuanced depictions of issues surrounding disability such as access to healthcare. As Brent Walter Cline observes "so many characters have physical impairments in *Fury Road*, it's helpful to categorize between those who have a prosthesis that allows them access to power and those who do not".⁷

The positive representation of disability is achieved through its normalisation within the film. As Fletcher and Primack observe, this enables the film to use

"the void of civilization to imagine forms of social relations that do not stigmatize conditions of disability. Investigating the meanings in the film's narrative would deepen understanding not only of the film's nuanced representations of disability, but also of the ways in which the narrative participates in the creation of new myths, carving out a positive narrative space centred on people with disabilities."⁸

Optimistic Outlook for Disability in a Post-Apocalyptic World

Broderick and Ellis remind us that "Disability is used throughout *Mad Max* to interrogate what it means to be human" and that "disabled characters throughout the four films adapt their own specialised technologies to compensate for the effects of their impairments".⁹ *Fury Road* emphasises this point by showing human resilience through the lens of creativity and invention. This becomes apparent when one

⁶ Fletcher and Primack, "Driving toward Disability Rhetorics." Pg.345

⁷ "Power and Disability in 'Mad Max: Fury Road', PopMatters," PopMatters, June 18, 2015, <https://www.popmatters.com/194573-power-and-disability-in-mad-max-fury-road1-2495517489.html>.

⁸ Fletcher and Primack, "Driving toward Disability Rhetorics." Pg.345

⁹ Broderick and Ellis, *Trauma and Disability in Mad Max*. Pg.39

considers the equipment used by the various characters within the film such as Colossus' chair, Furiosa's prosthetic arm, the warboy's human bloodbags and Joe's breathing apparatus. This is all part of not only survival, but also the process of rebuilding that would occur in a post-apocalyptic world. As the saying goes, 'necessity is the mother of invention'.

The portrayal of a disabled feminist action lead in *Fury Road* was a groundbreaking depiction of disability representation and explored another optimistic dimension of a post-apocalyptic world. Miller makes Furiosa such a prominent protagonist that the main villain, Immortan Joe, doesn't even acknowledge the existence of the title character of the film.

The Refutation of Joe's Vision

Immortan Joe's egocentric worldview is built upon the ideas of misogyny, eugenics, and transactional power and as such, this was the world that he was seeking to build, however the utter failure of his plans is a refutation of all these ideals.

Sarat Colling, an eco-ability scholar argues that "anthropocentric ways of thinking cause the commodification and destruction of all life, as particular humans are framed as subhuman or disabled, and nonhuman entities are treated as property for human consumption."¹⁰ The reference to Colling's argument is evident in the graffiti that the wives leave in the Citadel exclaiming 'You cannot own a human being, someday they fight back,' and "Who destroyed the world?" In *Fury Road*, Immortan Joe viewed people as commodities. A person's utility to him represents their value. Without utility, they are valueless. Joe views his brides as sexual slaves whose only other purpose is reproduction, the warboys are expendable sacrificial objects and mothers are treated as livestock. Even Max is not considered a person in Joe's world view, but as simply equipment.

Eugenics also are prominent in Joe's world view. Such a racist, sexist and ableist pseudo-scientific outlook is demonstrated by Joe's quest to produce the 'perfect' child and his particular focus on retrieving the carrier of his progeny, Angharad, seems to

¹⁰ Fletcher and Primack, "*Driving toward Disability Rhetorics.*" Pg.352

be the primary motivation for the chase.¹¹ The fact that his other sons are not worthy of inheriting the Citadel displays the degree to which he places the value of “perfection”.

Joe’s transactional world view is apparent both in the relationships that he has developed and the access to resources that his followers lack. This is evidenced by the treatment of his family and allies by their expendability and the lack of prosthetic equipment amongst the general population of the Citadel.

All of these aspects of Joe’s vision are refuted through the process of his own destruction. Beginning with his shock at the thought that his wives have escaped with the help of a trusted disabled woman, Joe is confronted with the reality of the consequences of his actions. The transactional nature of his relationships makes his pursuit, and the motivation for such, chaotic and costly. The fragility of his power is ultimately displayed by how easily the Citadel’s population rebel and celebrate upon his death resulting from being defeated by Furiosa and her allies, the antithesis of everything that Joe represents.

Negative Representations

Fury Road does, however, fall into some of the old pitfalls of harmful tropes surrounding disability representation. An example of this is the portrayal of Immortan Joe and his war posse in both the spectacle surrounding the presentation of their various characters and in their acting as a kind of ‘rogues gallery’ for the protagonists to fight, kill, or escape from. The war party comprises the largest variation and amount of disability, in contrast to those that are being pursued. In addition, the ‘rogues gallery’ being used in this way is arguably reminiscent of the ‘freakish era’.

As previously stated, disability is so common in *Fury Road*, it is no longer stigmatized as it might be in contemporary society. However, physical disability is still used as part of Miller’s visual language to communicate evil. This is emphasised by the visual contrast of the war party and the fleeing protagonists. Miller is tapping into the idea that Alan Sutherland describes as ‘one of the most basic elements of the

¹¹ Alaimo, Stacy. Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: *Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*. Edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara. University of Nebraska Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5>. Pg.142

film vocabulary’ that being, ‘that visible difference automatically denotes a more fundamental ‘otherness’’.¹²



Figure 6

Sutherland also goes on to explore another regressive trope, that being the idea of a “twisted mind in a twisted body” which can be “traced back to biblical references and is evident in characterizations such as *Shakespeare's Richard III*”.¹³ This can be seen in the overreaction and ensuing chaos instigated by Immortan Joe, the murderous bloodlust of Rictus, and the Bullet Farmer’s descent into madness upon being blinded.

The idea of death being the only escape from disability is yet another trope that is evident in *Fury Road*. All of the warboys exist to give their lives for Immortan Joe. Miller frames this as a consequence of the cultish oppression within the Citadel: however, even Nux, who experiences a process of enlightenment, still ends up sacrificing his life for someone. The Bullet Farmer also demonstrates this decision of death as an escape, albeit more instantaneously, upon being blinded. This is in stark contrast to his views on living with disability, referenced by his ‘healthy babies’ comment.

¹² Pointon et al., *Framed*. Pg.17

¹³ Pointon et al., *Framed*. Pg.17

Conclusion

I believe that overall, the representation of disability in *Mad Max Fury Road* is positive and progressive, even though in some areas it falls into regressive tropes. In fact, it is groundbreaking in a number of areas. Depicting a disabled female heroine vanquishing a misogynistic and ableist tyrant in a post-apocalyptic world was new at the time of its release. In addition, presenting a world in which disability is a social norm opened the door for Miller to explore more nuanced depictions of disability representation. Questions such as how, through human creativity and invention, challenges to disability in surviving a post-apocalyptic world, could be limited and how one powerful individual's worldview could positively or negatively impact those with disability, are just some avenues down which the audience are taken.

It is also fair to question the degree to which *Fury Road's* disability representations were progressive, relative to Miller's use of regressive tropes and the motivation behind them. I find myself wondering if Miller deliberately chose to insert these tropes to attract the biggest audience possible and by doing so, exposing them to his progressive ideas. On the other hand, it could be argued that it is simply accidental and as a symptom of Miller getting carried away by the film's eye-catching visuals. There is also the third question of whether the amount of positive representation of disability in *Fury Road*, could excuse the regressive use of disability as spectacle.

While I am not able to come down on either side of the argument for the first two of these outstanding questions, I am inclined to think that taking one step back for every two steps forward, is counter intuitive. I do think however, that overall, *Fury Road* had a significantly progressive approach toward the subject of disability and that the film's commercial success had a significant impact on depictions of disability on film going forward.

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