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Cinematizing Dystopia: Mad Max I

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This paper is an attempt to analyze the theme of "dystopia" in Mad Max I (1979), a movie from the Australian cinema, which uses American leitmotifs in new disguises.[1] While, on the one hand, the paper will focus on the cinematic representation of the theme of dystopia in the specified movie; on the other, it will have occasional references to other literary and cinematic works that are related to or center on the theme. Before embarking on a discussion of the semiotic and structural workings of cinematic dystopia, I consider it inevitable to give a definition and origin of literary dystopia, in reference to which I will argue about the subject matter. Therefore, in the first part of the paper, there will be a laconic survey of literary dystopia and its fundamental characteristics. Then, a thematic and technical analysis of the individual films in dystopian paradigm will follow up.

I. Dystopia as Literature

Literary dystopias have emerged as a reaction to or counter-attack on utopias, sometimes the former being directly contingent upon the latter, and sometimes divided by centuries and with no direct dichotomy of interest. For instance, Orwell's 1984 (1949) is an attack on Marxist utopianism, expounded in The Communist Manifesto (1848), as practiced by Stalin in the Soviet Russia. What is utopia, then? Though he

was by no means the trailblazer of the genre, Thomas More was the first to apply the word "utopia" to a literary genre when he depicted his imaginary ideal island in Utopia (1516). Punning on "eutopia" (a place where all is well), More came up with "utopia," derived from Greek ou=not + topos=place. The title of the book denotes "nowhere." By choosing such a title as Utopia, More actually intended to imply the double nature of his subject matter. First, he wanted to give the picture of a country which he idealized; second, by inverting the "eutopia" into "utopia," he wanted to convey his tacit assumption that it was really too difficult to have such an ideal place as Utopia in the world; it is simply "nowhere."[2]

Common to many utopias is an ultimate optimism that people can better themselves and create an ideal society with its social and economic organizations functioning perfectly well.[3] They often project onto an idealized past or imaginary future some spatio-temporal possibilities, which human intellectual and physical dynamics can explore and realize.[4] For instance, H. G. Wells, a vigorous advocate of socialism, evolutionalism, and the advancement of science, prophesies in A Modern Utopia (1905): "No less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern utopia."[5] Early in the 1940s, Orwell attacked Wells for his utopianism because he concluded that the latter saw history as "a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man."[6] Furthermore, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World (1932), whose title comes from Shakespeare's Tempest (1611), demonstrates a dystopian perspective opposite to Wells'. Set in the year 632 AF (After Ford), the book unravels a grim picture of the world, which, Huxley suggests, scientific and social developments have begun to create. The book presents human embryos developed in bottles and conditioned to collectivism and passivity.[7] To present a contrast between the serially produced humans and a natural human being

Huxley introduces an interesting case study. A so-called "Savage" is found in New Mexico and imported as an experiment. He appears to be a self-made man, and, unlike denizens of his new environment, believes in spirituality and moral choice. In the new world where he feels out of his element and alienated, however, he goes berserk and kills himself.[8] This suicidal cognizance of the Savage is an attempt in many ways to protest life in the modern metropolis where humans are relegated to nothingness, and machines and capital are predominant, thus turning upside down the notion of who is, if any, going to be the slave and who, the master.

In general, the weakness of all utopias, albeit secular or religious, retrospective or prospective, A. Gray explains, is that they "dodge the real difficulty of how to transform this present world into something better."[9] It is this conspicuous difficulty or impossibility of utopia, and the failure to realize it that have produced utopia's converse, dystopia. Chad Walsh often uses the terms "anti-utopia" and "inverted utopia" to refer to dystopia.[10] While the former term has evidently been derived by a simple addition of the prefix "anti-" to the root "utopia," the latter seems to be Walsh's coinage, which indicates the inversive nature of dystopias. As for “dystopia,” according to Krishan Kumar, the word has been in use for more than a century. Kumar writes in his notes that Jeremy Bentham has invented " 'cacotopia'... and it was later joined to 'dystopia' by John Stuart Mill. As MP for Westminster, Mill... in 1868 mocked his opponents: 'it is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians'."[11]

The anti-utopian vision is largely a phenomenon of the last century.[12] What is more, Jean-Charles Seigneuret writes, works objecting to utopian ideas as either unworkable or leading to a bad society have been prominent in the last half century.[13] The theme of

humanity lost in a quest for the ideal word is common to most twentieth century anti-utopias.[14] It is in this century that the utopian yearning for "idealized stability, the eternal sameness once associated with heaven, took on hellish connotations," as Naomi Jacobs observes.[15] Unlike utopias, which, to use D. Rohatyn's phrase, "promise salvation from earthly cares," dystopias "signify, not the promise of damnation, but the absence of promise."[16] Shane writes that, following the waning of hopes about a dream future, writers like Huxley told Russian writer Zamiatin's "dystopian fable and made it more responsive to the impact of technological change and made the fable even more narrowly concerned with politics and power."[17]

Utopia as well as dystopia would pay particular attention to the landscape or the setting. It is in the way they treat the landscape and the direction they aim at in manipulating it that they differ. The utopian changes the landscape for the better; the dystopian subverts it into the worse.[18] The utopian landscape often savors of heaven; the dystopian reflects a vision of hell. Elizabeth Hansot calls hell a kind of "thought experiment."[19] It is, therefore, a vision of hell or hell-like ambience in the writer's intellect that runs through dystopia. The narrator-agent's reconnaissance through dystopia, to use Walsh's statement, is more or less "a repetition of Dante's journey through hell."[20] The dystopian eyes obsessively rove about dismal and cataclysmic lands, and present in meticulously woven images that the world is going awry. The loss of utopian hope in the twentieth-century, Walsh writes, could simply mean "man is abandoning his humanistic delusions and returning to... a mood of total pessimism...."[21] That pessimism has actually persisted and was aggravated as time went on with wars, economic and cultural crises.

As has been pointed out, dystopian works such as Butler's Erewhon (1872), Well's When the Sleeper Wakes (1899), Orwell's Animal Farm (1945) and 1984 (1949), Huxley's Brave New World (1932), Goldin's Lord of the Flies (1954) have emerged as a reaction or counter-attack to the idea of utopia. Some of these works, with their apocalyptic pessimism, J. A. Cuddon writes, canvass "chiliastic forecasts of the doom awaiting mankind."[22] Others are "like desert island fiction... traveler's tales...."[23] This is not to say that dystopian writers are merely scaremongers or doomsayers. Common to dystopias, nevertheless, is a kind of disillusionment and lack of optimism or hope as delineated in the treatment of their landscapes, their characters, and their structural devices.[24]

The dystopian's disapproval of the immediate world available to him/her stems from the fact that s/he does not live in a world of his/her ideal; therefore, s/he is inclined to dwell upon the sordid and decaying aspects of the world, thus revealing his/her bitter awareness of them. Viewed from this perspective, every dystopian writer is, in a sense, utopian because s/he has an ideal place in his/her mind. However, the idealized values and the dream society s/he envisages clash with those of his/her immediate universe--expectations of the here and now. On the other hand, the utopian writer, by setting his/her works in an ideal place and time, sets a future goal for the reader to conceptualize and achieve. Two important tools the dystopian exploits to reach his/her aim are inversion and re-canalization. The dystopian quotes, implicitly or explicitly, and inverts his so-called utopian "sources" or opponents throughout his/her work. The inversive process aims at turning upside down the leitmotifs in the utopian tradition. Re-canalization directs utopian tools in the reverse direction. It is against this

background of mediocrity that the theme of dystopia in Mad Max I (hereafter MMI) will be examined.

II. What Drives Max Mad: the Thematics

On the surface, MMI is a simple action-woven Australian movie made in Australia, in 1979, starring Mel Gibson, and directed by George Miller. Mel Gibson, in his star-making role, plays Max Rockatansky, the restless highway patrol officer in a grubby desert where he pursues and knocks down the bikers, who disturb peace in his jurisdiction, and later kill his fellow patrol officer and family. Set in an Australia in a time of decaying order and violent highways, the film portrays Max as a police pursuit driver drawn into a path of counter-vengeance after a motorcycle gang targets him for the death of their former leader. Max's pursuit is two-fold, however: he sets himself on a quest for the outlaws, which in turn leads to a questioning of the meaning of life in his various roles as a cop, friend, husband, and father. Though these scenes dominate the outward show of the film, MMI, I will argue, is actually a dystopian reworking and even deconstruction of the Western, which the American "frontier myth" helped shape.

As is known, though later historians have challenged his ideas, F. J. Turner, in a paper called "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)," rejected the traditional emphasis on the influence of the East and of Anglo-Saxon political institutions. Turner claimed that the form and spirit of American democracy were the direct product of the frontier spirit, with its free land, its stimulation of ingenuity and resourcefulness, and its dominant individual. The term "frontier," for Turner, clearly designated more than the Western boundary of American settlement. Metaphorically speaking, the term conveyed "social, psychological, and philosophical meanings" analogous to the American nineteenth-century spirit of endless human potential.[25]

Portrayed in pink often, the frontier was not only “a land of romance, but also it helped shape the distinctive civilization of the United States.”[26]

MMI, despite its twentieth century perspective and decor, is deconstructive and inversive of the Western tradition and its values centering on it: the frontier, the constant advance, and the heroic though melancholy cowboy. The American myth of the frontier and its values Turner formulated in his long 1893 essay are silently quoted and inverted to present a dystopian perspective in MMI: the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American development.[27] This is not to say that Turner imagined the American frontier as an earthly paradise; he continues, however, the line of optimistic vision of America from Columbus' letter depicting the American landscape to the Spanish Queen to Jean de Crevecoeur, to the French-inspired Declaration of Independence on. The frontier did mean for Turner, as Simonson puts it, "the American Dream... an open road."[28] It is against this background of mediocrity that MMI stands out. The West and the Westerner are two inseparable components of the Dream.

In order to establish the link, a fast rewinding of the image comes to focus here. Tough the cowboy figure has his origins in South America, his appearance and mystification is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, the open range roundup and the long trail drive had passed into history, and cowboy’s way of life had changed forever. Homesteaders had been settling down all over the West. To protect their fields and keep their livestock from straying, they began to use the newly invented barbed wire, which made it possible for the first time to fence off large areas cheaply and easily. Soon, cattle ranchers were also putting up barbed-wire fences. Long strands of barbed wire stretched across the western plains, and wherever the new fences appeared, they

marked the end of the open range. Meanwhile, a network of railroad tracks was spreading throughout the West. By the early 1890s, railroads reached all the way to central Texas, making long trail-drives unnecessary. The last was driven north to Kansas in 1896. Roundups, which once had ranged over hundreds of square miles, now were conducted within barbed-wire enclosures. Men on horseback still drove herds of cattle, but only from their fenced pastures to railroad loading pens a few miles away. Cowboys began to spend much of their time fixing fences, repairing windmills, and mowing hay. The golden age of the cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned. Yet a cowboy culture was still looming larger in the minds of Americans. While this culture still permeates the American society, it is not the culture of the real nineteenth-century cowboy. Rather it is a fabrication of imagination, and it is rooted in the writings of many writers. These writers produced romantic and adventurous stories about the West to capitalize on the public's curiosity about the frontier. The popularity of these fictional tales became so great that more and more of them were written to satisfy the public's craving. By the 1870s, the cowboy was an integral part of this literature.

The 1890s was the era, which codified the "frontier thesis" of American history, which would also directly contribute to the definition of the cowboy image, and argued that Americans had evolved a unique and superior civilization due to the impact of the frontier experience. According to historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the existence of a rugged frontier and 400 years of Americans being in contact with it had created a new breed of person, of whom cowboy would be the embodiment, and new type of culture. The ancestry of most Americans came from the Old World where, Turner suggested, individual strength had become suppressed beneath the dictates and priorities of a

complex culture and an overbearing society. Nonetheless, Turner continued, the challenge of a raw frontier helped such civilized weaknesses and shortcomings to regain a degree of self-reliance and personal strength. The frontier, Turned continued, had closed about 1890 and although occasional parts of wilderness survived, they were surrounded by civilization and would eventually be annexed by it. Nevertheless, Turner asserted, the heritage of the frontier experience would continue to impact American culture and society for many years to come since it has given rise to a strong and virile personality type and created a national character, which led to greatness. The American elite quickly embraced the frontier thesis. For many years, Americans had been made to feel like second-class intellectuals by Europeans who suggested that American achievements were but second-hand reflections of more sophisticated European prototypes. In contrast, Turner's frontier thesis would reverse the situation by asserting that on the wild frontier Americans had sharpened their skills to an edge far better than that of their European counterparts and in the process they created a sense of distinctiveness of their own:

> Closely related to the prevailing view that Americans possessed a positive and productive uniqueness is the fact that American intellectuals and the social elite were actively fighting for parity with their European cousins. Chauvinistic Europeans often dismissed American civilization as a weak reflection of the cultural traditions of Europe and Americans as cultural and intellectual second-class citizens. In this environment, Americans sought a means of asserting their equality or superiority.[29]

Just after the twentieth century began, Owen Wister, who had been to the West, almost laid the ground to what was becoming the myth of the cowboy with his novel The

Virginian. However, there were no cattle in the story, and the life of the cowboy was portrayed with enormous deviation from his historical context. As J. Frank Dobie aptly pointed out, Wister's Virginian was a "cowboy without cows," a "hero [who] does not smell of cows."[30] The novel firmly established the gunfight between the hero and the villain as a western theme. During the book's fifty years, it sold more than 1,600,000 copies, not counting foreign translations and reprints. Social elites, who were looking for a means of portraying American civilization on a par with older European cultures, quickly embraced the book since it was in accordance with Turner's frontier thesis: "Owen Wister's cowboy hero, via his social Darwinistic portrayal of the frontier thesis, provided the American elite with the intellectual justification its members needed to portray themselves as superior to their rivals from the Old World."[31]

In the early years of the twentieth century, Zane Grey, the most famous and best-seller dime novelist, also turned to writing about the west and cowboys, and added fuel to the sparkling mythical cowboy culture. He proved a successful popular writer; his sales records were astonishing. U.P. Trail was the number one best-selling novel of the year 1918 and The Man of the Forest was the hit of the list in 1920. The Lone Star Ranger, Wild-Fire, The Desert of Wheat, To the Last Man, The Wanderer of the Wasteland, and The Call of the Canyon were among the best sellers of the following years. He emphasized the wild beauty of open spaces and rugged individualism. He wrote about the cowboy in the way that non-westerners wanted him to, developing a western mythology that helped turn that area into the most romanticized area of the United States. The West, to Grey, was more an idea than a geographical region. In fact, the West did not offer the charm with which Grey endowed it, but that was not a great

problem. After all, the most important thing was that in Americans' thought the West had all these qualities and this thirst should be quenched.[32]

It was Grey who made "western" a generic term, and whose success prompted many other writers to follow his example. Much of his work has been used as the story line for movies, sometimes with astronomical profits. Another form of entertainment was adding to the misconceptions: the Wild West show. William F. Buffalo Bill Cody performed shows on the road in 1883. Cody, already a hero of dime novels, included in his repertoire demonstrations of shooting, bronco busting, roping, and riding wild steers, horse races and numerous other acts supposedly depicting life in the Wild West. The Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill toured not only the West but also many eastern cities and even foreign countries adding to the myth of the cowboy.[33]

Film industry, too, reinforced the myth of the cowboy no less effective than any other art forms. Cripple Creek Barroom was produced in 1898. Then came The Great Train Robbery in 1903. The film was to stand as a prototype for all the westerns to follow. It was produced something like a modern documentary in order to make the audiences of these early western feel that they were witnessing "not merely casual entertainment but, rather, a serious and dignified visual discussion of an era which had already passed into the nations heritage."34 The movies that followed perpetuated, perfected, and extended the cowboy myth to such a degree that the average person could not easily differentiate reality from myth when thinking about the cowboy. The scripts of writers such as Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, Luke Short, Peter Field, Peter Kyne, and Jackson Gregory turned the whole business of cowboy myth into almost a reality which people were so keen to embrace. Sensationalized, glorified, romanticized, distorted, and imaginative depiction

of the American cowboy gave body and form to him that ultimately ascended him to the heights of a legend.35

However, the cowboy captured the imagination of many Americans. Having rejected the European bounds, they had to establish a self of their own. The cowboy stepped in the right time to cater to this need. He served as a role model for many Americans to identify themselves with. It also created a referential point for Americans to keep them intact at difficult times. In this regard, "B" westerns played an immensely important role in terms of shaping and molding the "self" of American people:

> The popularity of the 'B' western was an extension of the cowboy myth in American life. Historian Carl Becker noted that Americans are prone to cling to what he called 'useful myths'. The western film hero received an adoration and continuing loyalty of amazing proportions. Villains were hissed with equal fervor. Westerns moved audiences emotionally as no other type of film. The emotional conditioning provided by these films, and the durability of that conditioning should never be underestimated by historians of American life. Some historians have dismissed the 'B' western as simply a novelty or tasteless fad with no real substance or significance. However, it is entirely possible that in the midst of the confusion and uncertainty created by the Depression and World War II audiences sustained many of their 'faiths' by identifying with such admirable and powerful symbols of straight-forward righteousness as seen in the 'B' westerns.[36]

In almost all the "B" westerns, the cowboy always exists in binary opposition to the villain. He stands for the "good" while the Indians and Mexicans represent the "bad." Racial superiority of white Anglo-American is reinforced throughout the "B" westerns. Paradoxically, the cowboy owed his origins to Hispanic Mexicans, but in movies, he often pays his sense of indebtedness by degrading them. Moreover, Indians, who had

always been under Anglo-American persecution, came to be the stock of everything bad and violent. It was only through demeaning them that the Anglo-cowboy was able to elevate himself. In the process, they often had to be invariably eradicated.

Granted, MMI is not a Western, e.g., in the tradition of The Covered Wagon (1923) attempting to recreate the events of 1848. In the traditional Western what the viewer sees is a representation of this idealized, and not quite realistic, view of the American frontier life. The Western hero is the possessor of physical strength, stamina, and an innate sense of the right thing to do; he rejects eloquence, refinement, and superior intelligence as standards of measure. The classical Western starts with an establishing shot of an immense spread of the frontier terrain or a frontier town, and figure of a lonely equestrian riding under the scorching sun. The vast area usually represents the resourcefulness, virgin land, and opens horizons for the frontiersmen able to take advantage of all. There are, of course, "bad guys" in the classical Western; however, the heroic stature of the cowboy wins the day. What MMI offers throughout, on the contrary, is diametrically opposite to this tradition; it is anti-Western donned in modern dresses, anti-road, (or anti-frontier) and anti-utopian, that is dystopian.

In MMI, the frontier is no longer a process of civilization, of a people transforming the elemental into the complex, the wild into the cultured, and the primitive into the civilized. The very title of the film is ironic: Max (Mel Gibson) is not essentially mad at all; he is a wise man, if not the wisest ever, especially when compared to such people in the film as the Nightrider (Bryson Williams), the Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne) and Johnny the Boy (Tim Burns). Max is a modernized version of the Western hero with a difference, however, that whereas in classical Western the cowboy is a lonely figure wandering on horseback, Max is a skilled, dutiful patrol officer, married with a son.

Settled, however, Max is sometimes away from home for days--a subject his wife Jessie (Jeanne Samuel) complains about. Max implicitly replaces the Western hero, the biker gangs replace the Indians ravaging the frontier town, cars and motorcycles replace the horses, and the Australian landscape replaces the American. The rugged terrain thus turns into the asphalt road, which functions like AN ancient Roman arena where Max is to keep roving bands of suicidal road-racers and biker gangs from causing havoc on the highways.

Virtually from the very beginning to the end, Max is on the road. The film opens as Nightrider (Vincent Gil) screams down the road in a stolen pursuit vehicle, keeping the cops at bay with his suicidal maneuvers. In some spectacular crashes all of his pursuers are disabled, leaving driver Max to face him. Starting with a dare, Max drives directly at the oncoming car, with a devastating crash narrowly avoided when Nightrider loses his nerve. Further down the road, this suicidal psychopath ploughs into a major traffic accident, unable to take the pressure of Max behind him.

The road in MMI, as opposed to Turner's "open road," does not represent any progression, freedom, and hope of future any longer; it leads, not to the American Dream, but to the American Nightmare. It only brings about death, destruction, and unhappiness. Though the characters seem to be constantly moving on wheels, there is no progression, geographical or spiritual, for the better. A vicious circle, corporeal and incorporeal, surrounds the characters. The notion of the frontier is thus deconstructed. The meaning of the road here turns out to be not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life, but its limitations, its material and spiritual barrenness, and the pressures of obligation for Max.

The dystopian inversion of the road image is predominant from the very beginning to the end of the film. The establishing shot of Halls of Justice at the beginning of the film reveals the mood and character of the film, which is not optimistic or promising at all. There is a “stop” sign at the entrance, which implies that justice has stopped right at the basis of justice. The building has a wreck-like appearance enshrouded by a stifling atmosphere shot through foggy lens. Then, the picture of the Halls of Justice is superimposed upon the road to connote the stream of consciousness, thus yielding a third meaning; namely, the judiciary institutions have stopped to serve justice. We get to know from the traffic sign that the road called "Anarchie Road" is only three kilometers away. There is also a pirate flag symbol on the road, which conjures up images of death and disaster. We are, then, directly introduced to Highway 9, Sector 2; it is clearly a high fatality road with the unannounced year's fifty-seven death toll.

The subsequent sequences, with a few exceptions, have been shot on or around the road. It looks as if the usual landscape has disappeared to be replaced by the lethal road. On the first day, the Nightrider - goes berserk in Sun City in the afternoon and embarks on a ride along Transcontinental One. The Nightrider burns out his own car, outsmarts a cop, and steals his pursuit vehicle to continue his self-satisfying violations. Ten hours later, the pursuit unit codenamed March Hare begins trailing the Nightrider. The Nightrider rams March Hare, smashing up the front fender. March Hare pulls up alongside the Nightrider's vehicle, and his female companion threatens them off with a rifle. A few hours later, the Nightrider's vehicle approaches sections eighteen to thirty-one of the road. The pursuit unit Big Boppa - driven by Roop and Charlie-fails to intercept the Nightrider near the Anarchie Road intersection and joins the chase. Max intercepts the Nightrider sixty miles later, and the stolen car is destroyed when it

collides with a jack-knifed road-train. Rumors of a gang headed by the Toecutter seeking revenge on Max over the death of the Nightrider begin. Thus, both the good guys and the bad guys are on the road. Jim Goose's motorcycle comes apart on the highway. He survives the wreck and walks back to the nearest town to hire a pick-up to rescue the motorcycle. Johnny the Boy, who enlists the aid of the Toecutter and Bubba Zanetti, spots Jim. Johnny drops a brake drum off an overpass, forcing the pick-up off the road and trapping Jim Goose in the wreck alongside the road.

When, as they chase after the Nightrider, the patrols drive through the city shot in a series of close-ups and wipes by multiple mobile cameras, the purpose is not only to record the chase, but also to present the viewer with a canvas of the townspeople. The two cops, who nonsensically argue about which one of the two will drive the car, terrify the townspeople more than the Nightrider, later driving through a parked van of an old couple. Another couple constitutes part of the panorama; the wife seems to have spent some nights with some Jonathan, neglecting the kid and her husband, and when her husband questions her, she gets angry. A more tragic moment appears when the spouses are brawling with each other and the child is left alone on the road so helpless and miserable. What is more, in the Nightrider's words, the child has been sent "right to freedom." Not only the motorway, but also the railway, a semiotic symbol of capitalism at a time when capitalism was flourishing, driving the Indians from their land, and massacring them, serve to convey the death theme.

Cruising into a small town, a gang of scruffy bikers looks ready for trouble. However, their leader, the Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne), is actually there to collect the Nightrider's coffin; it is small, as there is “not much left of him.” Casually terrorizing a couple of young lovebirds on their way out, Max and his partner Jim Goose (Steve

Bisley) is sent to check out the aftermath. Luckily, the kids are still alive but, even better, one of the bikers, psychopathic Johnny the Boy (Tim Burns), has been too drunk to drive away. The cops take him back to the headquarters for a little cross-examination. A pair of lawyers get Johnny released much to the annoyance of Goose. Revenge is in the air, with the biker gang vowing to get some "bronze" while the cops have been given free reign by their boss. The first round goes Toecutter's way when he catches Goose and incinerates him in his truck.

When Max turns up for the early morning patrol, he sees that there is an eight-vehicle pile-up on section twenty-three of the Transcon. At the scene, Chief Fifi warns Max that the Toecutter's gang is definitely out for revenge against him. In an attempt to bribe the top pursuit cop to stay with the Breaker Squad, Fifi gives him a V-8 pursuit special. The Toecutter and his gang arrive at Jerusalem in the afternoon to collect the remains of the Nightrider. The gang attacks and tortures four teenagers in the town, two of whom are found near a wrecked car on the highway by Max five or six hours later. He arrests Johnny the Boy, a member of the Toecutter's gang, who has also been left behind. Helpless, Fifi tells Max and the Goose that “boys” can do whatever they like “out there” on the roads, “as long as the paperwork looks all right.” There is simply no “exit.”

There are scores of other killings associated with the road as well, e.g., those of Jessie and Sprog, and the members of the gang. In some of the scenes we see that upon Max' figure is the road superimposed, which implies that the two have been identified with each other. In the last sequence, for instance, Max is driving his terribly noisy car again along the road to catch Johnny and take revenge on him. Because he has been wounded, and bleeding, the camera zooms in for a close-up of his face. Then, his face dissolves into dark to imply that he is about to faint. The most striking moment in the

last sequence comes when Max, without heeding the "Prohibited Area" and the danger sign --of skull and bones--underneath, crosses the bridge. Johnny the boy is there trying to put on the shoes of a dead man. Max ties him to the van of the dead man and leaves off back to the road, and Johnny is blown to death. Consequently, the pirate flag on the road superimposed upon the Halls of Justice in the initial sequence ties in with the danger sign in the final. The "Prohibited Area" sign complements the theme of the closed frontier. It also declares the end of "open road," along which tumbleweeds once used to drift, and at the same time the general theme running through the whole film: the anti-frontier and anti-road. As the landscape of MMI ceases to be the zone of free movement it used to be, and becomes a great empty waste, the sparkling light on the far end of the road on which Max is riding into the unknown, renders the road image once more ironical as well as bitter.

Together with the notion of the frontier, the concept of the Western hero, too, is undermined in the person of Max in MMI.[37] In various scenes where he appears, Max is shot from muscles and from below with his head towering in the sky, and we hear the war-cry-like music, which implies that he is a robust figure, draws his gun fast like a cowboy in the Western. Just as horses have significance for the Westerner, so does his car for Max. He is on the side of justice, and order, but justice itself fails. As he kills off vicious gangs who dominate a deteriorated land only to become a hollow man gradually, who drives off in the last scene with transfixed eyes. Life for him becomes in the end a solitary quest for meaning, and action as definition and expression of the self. Max is thus the inverted Westerner, who asserts that in killing and being killed one is not freed from the necessity of posing a heroic figure. He is emotionally too fragile and sensitive vis-à-vis the dangers of his job. Unlike the Westerner, he cannot keep his

countenance in the face of death. In this respect, MMI follows in the footsteps of some directors have attempted to present the Western and its values in a more realistic fashion since the 1950s.[38]

Max is no longer the figure of repose in the Western. At the beginning, he is lonely; he is representative of the cowboy of the past, but settled, and married with a child. However, he stays away from home for days, and his wife has to spend time taking care of the kid, and playing card games alone in a home scene.[39] Despite his married life, however, Max is lonely and to some degree melancholy. We know that he intended to resign from his job several times before, but has later given up the idea. Once more, his wife asks him not to carry on the job but Max' answer is: "The Goose wants me there really. You know Goose!" The relation between the Goose and Max is not only that of fellow patrols. Carrying on the job along with Goose is on top of his list of priorities, and Max is almost organically attached to his gun and the car, both being symbolic of the phallus.[40] There is a remarkable level of romanticism in the film, as Max shares time with Jessie, but this tends to be forgotten under the roar of super-charged engines. The portrait of the tender family man suddenly turns into that of a warrior, whom the guns and cars round out.

In fact, it is only after Goose is burned to death that Max determines to resign for the last time. When Fifi refuses to accept his resignation, he does so not because he believes in the right operation of the Halls of Justice, but because his capitalist-oriented superior asks him to keep Max, the top gun. When Lamethush says that he does not enjoy wasting money, Fifi's response is: "People do not believe heroes any more!" We, thus, extrapolate that institutions of Justice do not serve any justice, but the money-glut lawyers, and their unlawful clients, such as Johnny. Even the two people, raped and

tortured outside the town do not have the daring to witness for themselves so that Johnny would go to jail. Ironically, the lawyers of Johnny threaten to open a lawsuit against him when Jim understands that Johnny, one of the aggressors, is being released from the Halls because there is simply nobody to witness and thus no circumstantial evidence.

Jim's premature death marks a turning point in Max' life. “Here I am trying to put sense to it [life], but I know there is not any." This scene occurs right before Max's sojourn with his family in a green area. Max has now temporarily resigned just because he is "afraid," as he confesses to his affectionate wife. This very moment is very telling in terms of remarking the dystopian inversion of the heroic cowboy figure in the Western tradition. In the Western, the cowboy is almost above such concepts, fear, love etc. Even if the cowboy dallies with a woman for a while, he cannot be married and settled peacefully; he simply has to go on living with his horse and gun. On the other hand, Max is unable to protect his own family against the death-mongers. That Max quits the job, saying "Because I wear a bronze badge, that does not make me different from the other killers," and his placation in the lap of his wife before her death totally shatters the traditional cowboy image.

The period following his resignation is one of unemployment and leisure for Max and his family; and it is very short. The happy family departs on a long-sought-for holiday, drifting along the deserted beaches and generally motoring around. Max pulls into a garage off the highway to have a punctured tire repaired. By a dreadful coincidence they run into the biker gang again, Toecutter and his menacing mob manage to track them down, which leads to a terrible climax and a turning point for Max. Jessie takes the van down to the beach to get an ice cream for Sprog, and meets the Toecutter and

his lieutenants. Escaping from the bikers, Cundalini attempts to attack her van with a chain and has his hand torn off, and is sent to hospital. As the Toecutter pressures a mechanic to have his motorcycle repaired, Johnny the Boy meets up with the group. Max drives hard to the north with his family. Later in the day, they notice Cundalini's amputated hand trailing from the van, and turn it in to the police. The attending officer, the Dark One, treats it as "lost property." The hand is never claimed. Max arrives at the farm and they settle in. The bikers begin searching for Jessie and the van. Max disconnects the fuel-line in the van and begins repairing the engine. Jessie and Sprog go down to the lake, and are followed by the bikers. Alerted by her screams, Max follows her into the forest as she runs back to the van. Jessie is cornered by the bikers, and rescued by May with a shotgun. They attempt to escape in the van, which, however, stalls out on the road. Jessie (Joanne Samuel) takes Sprog and begins running down the highway, and they are chased and killed by the bikers. That his wife Jessie and his baby son are brutally mown down by the bikers pushes Max over the edge. Returning to his well-fitted leather uniform, Max takes the most powerful vehicle with "nitro" injection in the police garage, and embarks on a personal vendetta. Max is no longer a law enforcement officer, but a self-fulfilling avenger, taking law in his hands.

The family's preceding shot in the woods shows their desire to return to nature, and the virtues of idyllic life. Max even acts like Tarzan, slinging from trees to trees and crying like out him. However, this theme is ironically treated. The family has come to May's farm in a van. On the right side of the van, there is the picture of a space ship on the moon painted dominantly in blue and its lighter tones, which implies our supposed expectations of a brighter future. The irony here is that the green farm of May, as the

name connotes, implies a rebirth, regeneration. It is also a semiotic reference to the sought-after American Dream, a nostalgic scene from the past. Furthermore, Max relates to his wife, Jessie, a significant memory of his on the farm. He talks about how much he loved his late father and his always bright shining boots when a child, evoking the image of the frontier times and the cowboy. However, he seems to have been unable to express his love for him: "The thing is Jessie, I could not tell him then, I am telling you now." This dialogue, in fact, foreshadows her death.

III. Maximizing the Cinematography of MMI

The tempo of MMI is very fast because most of the sequences have been shot on, around or along the highway; and the camera simultaneously follows these fast movements. The road image is symbolic of the American frontier, the constant westward movement. Most of the scenes have been shot on or around the road, and the characters seem to be living on wheels. Therefore, the classical trucking shot technique has been immensely employed, with cameras mounted on or in the cars to enable the director to keep pace with the drivers, and to follow those fast and far-ranging horizontal actions of the subjects. Especially in the pursuit or chase scenes are the trucking shots helpful to the director when, for instance, the two patrolmen we see at the beginning of the film start pursuing the Nightrider in their car. Dolly shots, on the other hand are rare; in the sequence where Max resigns from office at the Halls of Justice, despite Fifi's advice to patrol on, the camera is moved on wheels from one position to another to shoot Max closer to frame him with Fifi in a tighter scene size while the camera is actively recording him from another angle, which serves to follow the actions of Max down the stairs.

The hand-held camera technique is employed, e.g., when Jessie feels that she is being followed by the gangsters in the woods for portraying her subjectively unsteady feelings in an emotionally distraught condition. Thus, the hand-held camera subjectively renders the feelings of panic in that sequence in a way that could be hardly equaled by any other mobile camera technique. In one of the sequences, the crane-camera shot captures one of the best instances of its usage: the camera mounted on the height of a highly mobile crane moves up to change height for a full shot of the location. The scene develops as follows: in the scene where the gang members horrify and torture a couple and devastate their car, close-ups and extreme close-ups are used to show the panic and terror of the couple shot from different angles. Then, the camera on the height of a crane rises and shoots from above the gang members dragging the couple out of the car in the form of an establishing shot. Meanwhile, the picture of a vulture is superimposed upon the aggressors to imply both the confrontation between the two parties and the implicit analogy between the gang members and the vulture. Later, the superimposed shot is followed by a fadeout that is again linked with the blackness of the vulture, and the hopelessness of the couple, which, in turn, add to the dystopian theme.

Throughout the film zooms-in are effectively used to draw attention to details having special meanings while enabling the viewer to remain aware of the details' realization to the whole context. Sometimes the zoom-in is employed fast for a shock effect on the subject. For instance, when Max sees his friend "Goose" in the intensive care unit in the hospital with his body totally scorched, the camera zooms in towards Max' face fast, followed by an extreme close-up, for a shock effect on him of Jim's burned hand. When, in one of the scenes the Nightrider, pursued by Max, realizes that he is inadvertently driving his car into the broken truck blocking the road, the sudden camera

zoom-in and the following extreme close-up of his eyeballs shows the Nightrider's growing sense of horror and his realization of imminent death.

As the tempo of the film is very fast, the speed of the actions, especially in pursuit and chase scenes, is realized by a series of constant changes of focus to show instantaneous changes from one scene to another, usually within a single sequence. Changes of focus, from one subject to another or a change of focal length are so skillfully employed that they instantly have the desired effect and involve the viewer in the impetus, excitement and fear of the actions. The pans are also realizably helpful in following the actions of the running cars accompanied by recurrent wipes. The setting in MMI is the road most of the time. The road is where dramatic events overwhelmingly occur: the killing of Jessie, Sprog, the Nightrider, and Goose etc. Granted, there are some scenes shot in the small township when, e.g., the gang members ride into the town and beach scenes as well. What is more, in two sequences we see Max and his family in the woods or on the farm. However, this return to nature, after Max' resignation, implicitly reminding the viewer of the supposed freedom and happiness of the frontier life, does not bring ultimate happiness to the protagonist and his family.

The short moments Max spends with family in the heart of nature are usually followed by a bad turn, eventually leading to the death of his wife and son. Thus, the setting, dystopian in nature as opposed to the utopian paradise, is tantamount in effect to not only the location and physical properties of the environment, but also to the mood and atmosphere of the film. The subscript at the beginning of the film -- "A few years from now"-- does not provide a certain time period, thus adding to the uncertainty of the future, its imminent troubles while, on the other hand, silently quoting and inverting the Western tradition.

Most of the scenes in MMI have been shot in high-key tonality except in some rare night scenes when, e.g., Max is back home after three days on duty. There are various reasons for the dominance of high-key tonality in the film. For one thing, most of the sequences have been shot during the daytime, taking advantage of the sunlight. Carrying to extreme the use of sunlight, the director has omitted to light and bright values more than half the image area. In this way, he implicitly intends to create a sense of barrenness and sterility, yellow and gray tones, which adds to the essential theme of dystopia. The seemingly overexposed, if intentional, shooting yields the sense that the society depicted in the film is leading a barren life in a hell-like ambience. The same technique of high-key tonality, however, in such a comedy as The Importance of Being Earnest implies the gaiety and happiness of the characters.

MMI is extremely rich in sound effects and music, and the use of symbols. Sound effects in this film are used not only as elements of realism (as the shrieking of the tires, the sound of engines and mufflers), but also to foreshadow the danger in the consecutive scenes (e.g., when Jessie on her way back from the beach is chased by gang members), and to define a character's idiosyncrasies (e.g., when Max appears for the first time in a full shot the sound track accompanies the scene in such a way as to imply Max' top gun quality reminiscent of a cowboy in the Western). Different sounds are heard at moments of crisis or suspense as a transitional device to be identified with a character. Music in MMI is essentially used to reinforce emotions. Especially in a night scene when Max is home Jessie appears playing sad tunes with the saxophone, which implies her frustration with her loneliness, as Max stays away from home for long periods of time. The sound symbolism of birds with their raucous voices--vulture,

crow etc. -- is massively used in the film at moments of murder, terror. All these effects help to skillfully create the desired impact on the audience.

The van that Max and Jessie drive during the holiday is an important symbol. It is the only period when the family is happily united. Unlike Max' car which appears to be an ego-building and self-fulfilling vehicle, the van contains the family members altogether and functions to weld them together. The picture painted on the van also shows our technological development. However, because of its technical problems, the van fails to rescue Jessie and her kid from the pursuing outlaws, thus leading to their deaths on the road when they need technology and the power of the engine most. Therefore, neither May's farm is able to restore the past; nor can technology save the present. That especially the death of Max' son is emphasized is tragic as well as representative of the death of a tradition: the lineage of the Western. Neither Max is able to reverse this historical process, nor his ability and equipment to fight--his gun, his 600 HP as a surrogate for the cowboy horse--nor the ironical sparkling light at the far end of the road. Max drives on alone on the lethal road only to become a totally archaized figure in MMII and MMIII.[41]

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Notes

[1] For Mad Max, see George Miller, dir. Mad Max. Perf. Mel Gibson, Joanne Samuel, Hugh Keays-Byrne, Steve Bisley, Tim Burns, Roger Ward, Lisa Aldenhoven, David Bracks, Bertrand Cadart, David Cameron, Robina Chaffey, Stephen Clark, Matthew Constantine, Jerry Day, Reg Evans. Warner Home Video, 1979.

[2] For a description of More's ideal place, see Thomas More, Utopia, trans. R. M. Adams (New York and London: Norton and Co., 1975) 39,78 and 85. More's book, however, is not the trailblazer of its genre in Western literature. For instance, in the Sumerian The Epic of Gilgamesh, written about four millennia ago, one can read the description of an earthly paradise where even the animals do not have any trouble whatsoever with anything or anybody. See also D. Wender, ed., Hesiod and Theognis (England: Penguin,

1976) 25-6; W. H. D. Rouse, trans., Great Dialogues of Plato (New York: New American Library, 1976) 155-82; Aristotle, Politics, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1942) 1334; Desmond Lee, trans., Timaeus and Critias (1965, England: Penguin, 1986) 29-40; Cf. also Ovid's story of creation with that in Gen. 1:1-31 and 2: 1-9 in H. G. May and B. M. Metzger, eds, The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (New York: Oxford UP, 1977). The references in this study to the Bible are all from this edition. For Ovid's work, see M. M. Inness, trans., Metamorphoses (1955, England: Penguin, 1986) 31-2.

[3] Richard Gerber, Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English Utopian Fiction since the End of the Nineteenth Century (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955) 5.

[4] R. C. Elliott, The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 22.

[5] H. G. Wells, A Modern Utopia (London: Nelson, n.d.) 21. Cf Rousseau's utopian idealism in the following: "...your happiness is complete, and you have nothing to do but enjoy it; you require nothing more to be made perfectly happy than to know how to be satisfied with being so." See J. J Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in The Social Contract and Discourses, trans. C. D. H. Cole (New York: Everyman's Library, 1950) 182.

[6] George Orwell, The Collected Essays, Journals and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. II (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 142.

[7] For the entire text, I have referred to A. Huxley, Brave New World (New York: Harper, 1946). For a comparative view of dystopia, see Eugene Zamiatin, We (New York Dutton, 1924).

[8] For more information on this work and disillusionment dystopias often exhibit, see M. Keith Booker, Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide (Connecticut and London: Greenwood P, 1994) 171 and 208; Krishan Kumar, Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Times (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 168-223; Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds., Utopia and the Millennium (London: Reaktion Books, 1993) 81-88 and Krishan Kumar, Utopianism (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 43-46.

[9] A. Gray, The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin (London: Longmans & Green, 1946) 62.

[10] Chad Walsh, From Utopia to Nightmare (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962) 46. See also Mark R. Hillegas, The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-utopians (New York: Oxford U P, 1967) 5.

[11] Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modem Times 447.

[12] I. F. Clarke, The Tale of the Future: A Check-list (London: Literary Association, 1961) 12.

[13] Seigneuret 1367.

[14] Isaiah Berlin, The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 176-205.

[15] Naomi Jacobs, "Beyond Statis and Symmetry: Lessing, Le Guin, and the Remodeling of Utopia" in M. S. Cummings and N. D Smith, eds, Utopian Studies, vol.2 (New York and London: Library of America, 1989) 110.

[16] Dennis Rohatyn, "Hell and Dystopia: A Comparison and Literary Case Study" in Cummings and Smith 99.

[17] Robert Scholes and E.S. Robkin, Science-Fiction: History-Science-Vision (London: Oxford UP, 1977) 34.

[18] Mark Hillegas, The Future as Nightmare (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 9-10.

[19] Elizabeth Hansot, Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1974) 17.

[20] Walsh l3.

[21] Walsh 78.

[22] J. A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (1977, England: Penguin, 1985) 735.

[23] Jean-Charles Seigneuret, et al., eds, "Utopia," Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs (New York and London: Greenwood P, 1988)1366

[24] R. C. Elliott, The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 5.

[25] See H.P. Simonson, The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Literary Tragedy (New York and Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970) 6.

[26] R. Allen Billington, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier (1949, New York and London: Macmillan, 1974) 1.

[27] Simonson 6.

[28] For information on the frontier thesis, see Simonson 34-5.

[29] Alf H. Walle, The Cowboy Hero and Its Audience: Popular Culture as Market Derived Art (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U P, 2000) 92.

[30] Frank J. Dobie, Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest (Dallas: Southern Methodist P., 1969) 124.

[31] Walle 189.

[32] Buck Rainey, The Reel Cowboy: Essays on the Myth in Movies and Literature (Jefferson, North Caroline, and London: McFarland & Company, 1996) 39.

[33] Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1982) 46.

[34] William K. Everson, and George N. Fenin, The Western, from Silents to the Seventies (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 27.

[35] Ramon F. Adams, The Old-Time Cowhand (New York: Collier Books, 1971) 2.

[36] Qtd. in Rainey 6.

[37] For information on the Western, I have referred to Robert Warshow, "Film Chronicle: The Westerner," Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds, Film Theory and Criticism (1974, New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 434-50

[38] For the entire article, see Susan Sontag, "the Imagination of Disaster," in Mast and Cohen 451-65.

[39] One sees a gambling card in the hand of the kid in the home scene, which shows how lonely and stifled the mother is, and how she spends time when Max is away from home.

[40] For Heiddeger's work, see Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York and Toronto: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1975) 59.

[41] In the sequels of the movie, the characters inhabit an almost deserted landscape where nothing actually gets done and everyone clings on to the last vestiges of civilization. Mechanics have risen in status, since they are the only people who can construct working cars from the leftover junk, but sheer physical force is the route to power in this territory.