
MAD MAX: A POST-APOCALYPTIC CRITIQUE ON THE RHETORIC OF ECOLOGY

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Abstract

George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) is a cinematic presentation of a life after the apocalypse depicting environmentally ruined earth and the struggle of survivors in post-apocalyptic situations. This article analyzes film as a method for depicting futures and especially life after the apocalypse. To link dramatization of the struggle of survivors after apocalypse to the possible future of humanity after the exploitation of nature, apocalypse and post apocalypse, the analysis of the study highlights the social, psychological, political and environmental problems of post-apocalyptic societies. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is used as a cautionary tale underscoring the importance of environmental stewardship and to shape public imagination of what would be the future of humanity if the exploitation of nature is not being stopped and to explain the need for sustainable human practices. In the research article *Mad Max: Fury Road* is analyzed by using the lens of post-apocalypse presented by James Berger (1999) and his theory is also supported by Teressa Heffernan. The article qualitatively explains the disastrous impacts of apocalypse on post-apocalyptic societies. Catherine Belsey's approach of thematic analysis is applied by method of familiarization in analyzing the movie. The study is a cautionary tale to avoid the present exploitation of nature otherwise the future of human kind would be disastrous in the form of post-apocalyptic situations. The article concludes that the environmental collapse and its connection with social disintegration, violence, and authoritarian rule would emphasize the resistance of survivors and the quest for renewal after the apocalypse

Keywords: Environment, Degradation, Post-apocalypse, Resistance, Survivors,

1. INTRODUCTION

The alarmingly accelerating crisis of the environment in the twenty-first century has found its representation in culture and cinema as well as envisioning the destruction of human civilization. Post-apocalyptic movies offer speculative and imagined projections of ecological calamities by dramatizing the scarcity of natural resources and environmental degradation reshaping social and political orders. George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) is a seminal work that foregrounds life after ecological collapse by depicting stark representation of a wasteland where water, food, fuel, and vegetation are scarce. The dystopian setting of the movie serves as a background for action and it functions as a critique of contemporary concerns about climate change and overconsumption causing scarcity of resources.

The depiction of the destructive landscapes, polluted air, and toxic water in *Mad Max: Fury Road* show the lethal consequences utilizing nature by exploiting it. In the post-apocalyptic world, nature and natural resources such as water, food and fossil fuel are in the control of tyrannical rulers and the tyrannical rulers exploit the weak and poor, linking environmental destruction to power structures. The film's emphasis on war on resource, ecological collapse, and survival in extreme depravity are in alignment with real-world concerns about the Anthropocene, petroleum dependency, and environmental justice. Through the visual representation of environmental ruin, the narrative of the film highlights the destructive impact of human negligence and the possibility of resilience and solidarity causing ecological renewal.

This research analysis that how *Mad Max: Fury Road* portrays the environmental collapse in a post-apocalyptic society and it also explores three dimensions that are interconnected: the deserted wasteland signifying ecological collapse, the scarcity of resources as a symbol of environmental injustice, and the post-petroleum condition as a critique of unsustainable dependence of human beings on petroleum. The film is situated in ecocritical discourse and the analysis of the film in this context demonstrates Miller's vision of dystopian operating as a cautionary tale against exploitation

of nature and at the same time a cultural commentary on environmental challenges of today. The film portrays that humanity is inseparable from the environment as survival in a post-apocalyptic world is not possible without rethinking ecological responsibility and social justice.

1.1 Research Methodology

The present research is qualitative in nature and employs Catherine Belsey's approach of thematic analysis as a guiding framework. According to Belsey (2013), "interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge and some of it is derived from secondary sources" (Belsey, 2013, p. 161). This view underscores that textual meaning is never self-contained but is always shaped through the interplay of cultural repertoires, personal context, and critical interpretation. Hence, thematic analysis here functions not only as a method of textual engagement but also as a means of connecting cinematic narratives to broader socio-political and ecological discourses.

Methodologically, the process of familiarization outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2004) guides the analysis. This involves three key steps: (1) close observation of the filmic texts to identify dominant themes such as social disparity, scarcity, and resistance; (2) generation of initial codes from the observed themes; and (3) identification of recurring patterns across the films that reveal structural and ideological critiques embedded in the narratives (Strauss & Juliet, 2004). In this way, the framework integrates Belsey's interpretive emphasis with a systematic coding process to uncover the rhetorical and cultural dimensions of ecological and social collapse in cinema.

1.2 Research Question

The main and overarching research question of the research is following

- How does *Mad Max: Fury Road* represent environmental degradation and survival in the face of environmental collapse?

1.3 Research Objective

The main research objective is following

- To highlight environmental degradation and survival in the face of environmental collapse in movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*

1.4 Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinning

The study of the post-apocalypse is done on the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* by using the theoretical lens of Teresa Heffernan depicted in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2014), and James Berger's theory depicted in *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (1999). These theoretical frameworks offered lenses for the analysis of the film. These lenses of theoretical framework have discussed the themes of post-apocalypse situations as the end is not the end rather it ushers a new start (Berger, 1999, p. 5). At the end humanity finds the means to survive from the scratches as in apocalyptic writings always an idea of a better future and renovation of damaged earth is given (Kermode, 1967, p. 84). The books of Heffernan and Berger depict the struggles of the survivors, their traumas, the situations of ruined post-apocalyptic societies and struggles to live after apocalypse as the trend has shifted from apocalypse to a new era that is named as post-apocalypse (Heffernan, 2014, p. 6).

1.4.1 The Desert Wasteland and Degraded Environment

Post-apocalyptic settings as depicted in films usually represent problems relating to the environment such as polluted land, toxically lethal air, and dearth of water. Berger describes this dreadful condition as "a landscape of symptoms and ruin" (Berger, 1999, p. 49). In the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* the annihilated wasteland serves not only as a backdrop but it is also one of the main features of the post-apocalyptic societies. The post-apocalyptic world lacks all the meaningful beliefs and hierarchies that used to established order in the world before apocalypse (Stifflemire, 2017, p. 12).

The barren and desolate landscape serves as a visual for post-apocalyptic destruction, representing ecological wreckage and the annihilation of social structures. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Immortan Joe ushers exploitation of an already devastated environment for his personal benefits. He is able to do that by exerting tyranny as he does so by his control over remaining resources after the apocalypse. Max Rockatansky, the protagonist of the film, becomes a symbol of survival in the hostile setting of post-apocalyptic society. Furthermore, post-apocalyptic cinema often integrates the "landscape of memory" (Stifflemire, 2017, p. 12) and physical wasteland because the traumatic memories are associated with the environmental ruin. So, the barren wasteland embodies both the physical devastation of the apocalypse and the psychological wounds of the survivors.

1.4.2 Lack of Resources

The post-apocalyptic community consistently suffers from the shortage of basic necessities, particularly eatables, drinking water, and fuel. This dearth is caused by two different causes: natural and contrived. Natural causes of the dearth are generated because of apocalyptic disasters rendering the water and land toxic, infertile and barren. The reservoirs of water are either dry or polluted and post-apocalyptic world becomes worn, old landscape and lost any habitation described as, "Wild, wild" (Berger, 1999, p. 104). The contrived scarcity is developed by tyrannical figures who monopolize the existing fertile land and pure water supplies. In *Mad Max: Fury Road* Immortan Joe takes hold

of water and fertile land to enforce his authority over obedient masses, while Furiosa's quest for the land of mothers symbolizes her longing for continuity with her past. Furiosa's sense of rupture is presented in post-apocalyptic world as waste land, dead land and with the impossibility of connecting with the fertile past (Heffernan, 2014, p. 16). Scarcity showcases both a practical condition of survival and a symbol of power and exploitation in post-apocalyptic societies.

1.4.3 Post-Petroleum Situations

Post-apocalyptic representation includes another critical aspect that is the exhaustion of energy resources. Berger describes post-apocalyptic societies as "dematerialized," (Berger, 1999, pp. 32,33) because they are deprived of vital reservoirs of petroleum. This depravity causes covetousness and causes many wars for fossil fuels which makes the world a bad place to live. In *Mad Max: Fury Road* dearth of fuel is the main cause of conflict as scavenging and violence become the normal activity because the survivors try very hard to repurpose the remains of the pre-apocalyptic world.

Taken together, the desolate wasteland, the dearth of resources, and the post-petroleum situation is a critique that describes the interconnected dimensions of post-apocalyptic cinema by portraying the fragile situation of human civilization. These above-mentioned elements not only construct dystopian landscapes of post-apocalyptic society but also expose the environmental degradation explaining the situations of survival in post-apocalyptic narratives. Catherine Belsey's framework of thematic analysis, the recurring themes function as cultural texts interpreting post-apocalyptic society, describing the anxieties of people about ecological catastrophe and unjust power structures.

2. Analysis

In the research paper, *Mad Max: Fury Road* would be analyzed with reference to the impact of apocalypse on the survivors. The post-apocalyptic societies would be inhospitable because of degraded and toxic environments. The study analyzes the rhetoric of ecology in post-apocalyptic situations employing thematic analysis.

2.1 The Rhetoric of Ecology in *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Heffernan enunciates that the landscape of setting in post-apocalyptic society deals with environmental issues such as scarcity of water, environmental degradation and issues relating to fossil fuels. In the landscape of the setting the issues relating to degraded environment and lack of resources are highlighted by dearth of water, food and infertile land serving as objects because they play the role of valuable commodity. These objects play a very crucial role in maintaining power. The appearance of the image of water again and again highlights its importance after the apocalypse and water becomes a commodity playing a crucial role in survival and at the same time it is used as a tool to exploit common people too. The post-apocalyptic wasteland is haunted by scarcity and dearth of resources with the impossibility to be connected with the green past that is also lost because of the madness of the survivors, depicting a fragmented post-apocalyptic present in a dead wasteland (Heffernan, 2014, p. 16). The persistent efforts of the survivors to get drinking water explains the necessity of water for survival in a post-apocalyptic world demolished by environmental crisis.

Social alienation is depicted by Berger by the infertile landscape and demolished towns enhancing the post-apocalyptic situation of deprivation in the film. The characters want to be alone by not mixing with people presenting distorted survivors trying their best in personal and social healing (Berger, 1999, p. XVIII). The social isolation of the people represents the destruction of social structures and depravity caused by ecological collapse. The depiction of the struggle for provisions in the situations of scarcity of resources also aggravates the social isolation of the survivors reinforcing the depiction of depravity in post-apocalyptic situations. The figure 01 shows the ending scene of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) that highlights the theme of social alienation as the goodbye includes only the silent exchange of looks between the two main characters of the film: Max and Furiosa. Max takes the decision of not living among the people because of his traumatic apocalyptic past and unhealed psychological scares. The last goodbye between Max and Furiosa happens after the deadly battle of finding fertile land of breeding mothers, defeating Immortan Joe and liberating the Citadel. The survivors of the apocalypse welcome Furiosa to be their leader and Max refuses to be their leader as he is not interested in interacting with the public. Although Max takes an active part in the fight, after the triumph over Joe he decides to be alone and he starts his journey alone again. The director skips conversation and dialogues and he only creates a simple exchange of looks applying the minimalistic approach as the lack of words deepens the impact of the moment of separation. The exchange of looks also prophesies hope for the better future of Furiosa and survivors. The contributions of Max, in securing a safe future, is acknowledged and admired in the last glances of exchanged looks.

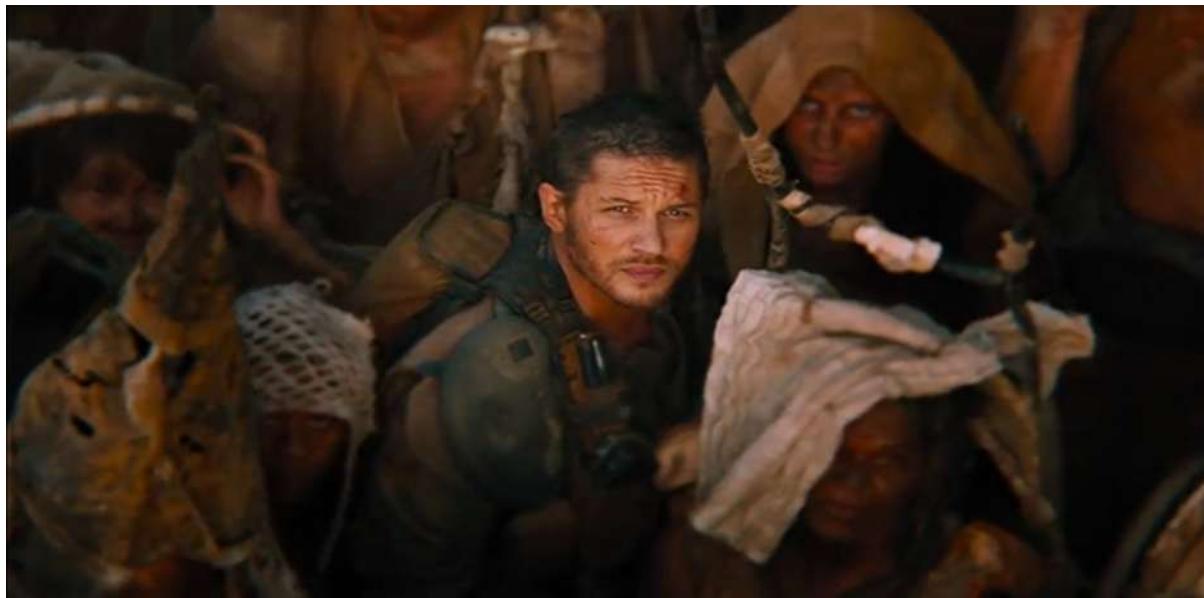


Figure 01: Scene from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015)

The point of view about trauma is related to the physical and psychological scars because the survivors in *Mad Max: Fury Road* suffer from trauma caused by dreadful experience of the apocalypse. The scars are portrayed in the form of objects as the makeshift prosthetic arm, different weapons and the other remains of the pre-apocalyptic world become the symbol of the trauma suffered and endured by the survivors as what the survivors of apocalypse have to deal with is trauma of apocalypse (Berger, 1999, p. 47). The memories of the past in the form of flashbacks with different visual cues constantly refer back to the past traumas adding the layers of deep trauma to the survivors who are already traumatized. The incongruous post-apocalyptic society with constant threat of being hunted by the tyrants makes it very difficult for survivors to maintain trustworthy connections and alliance with others as the hero "... remains locked into the immediacy of grief" (Berger, 1999, p. 46). The post-apocalyptic survivors are not in a position to keep trust in one another and on the other objects such as equipment for surveillance, weapons and barricades resulting in making intimacy with others in post-apocalyptic situations more complicated.

Berger explains that social alienation is a crucial issue that needs to be resolved by talking and discussion as the fear of intimacy abounds at the start of post-apocalypse that is resolved by discussion among characters. Empathy and the desire to be helped also highlight the deep desire of survivors for companionship in different stages of post-apocalyptic struggle for survival. In the start of the film Max is not willing to help Furiosa in her struggle, later he helps her when he becomes aware of true intentions of Furiosa to save the humanity and the social alienation of Max is cured by telling the of stories of pre-apocalyptic world and by narrating the trauma of apocalypse (Berger, 1999, p. 45). The figure 02 is the depiction of the central conflict depicting Immortan Joe's ambition of hoarding all the remaining resources by controlling the supplies of water, food and petroleum. On the other hand, the female character of the film, Furiosa rebels against the tyranny of Joe by raging a war of liberation to rescue enslaved and she is succeeded in redeeming all the suppressed survivors separating good from evil and true from false (Berger, 1999, p. 8). Objects such as vegetation and other natural resources are the main cause of conflict which are also the objects which help to get control and power in post-apocalyptic situations. The principal conflict and action of *Mad Max: Fury Road* revolves around the struggle of taking control of natural resources because they have become the symbol of control in post-apocalyptic situations.



Figure 02: Scene from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015)

Heffernan supports Berger's idea that the desolate landscape of setting makes the survival more complicated because it adds fuel to fury in post-apocalyptic testing situations. In *Mad Max: Fury Road* the depiction of toxicity of the environment such as toxic water reservoirs, polluted air accentuates the bleakness of post-apocalyptic societies, "The waste Land is haunted by the impossibility of connecting with a past. Lost in the madness of a fragmented present, in a dead land" (Heffernan, 2014, p. 16). The presentation of a polluted environment depicts the dangerous, uncertain and unpredictable situations for the characters, complicating the struggle of survivors in post-apocalyptic situations. Polluted water and toxic air highlight the dangerous consequences of industrialization and apocalyptic literature serves as a cautionary tale for human beings disseminating awareness to avoid destructive tendencies to avoid a cataclysmic future by futuristic aspects of literature.

Berger explains that the societies after apocalyptic would-be dematerialized societies full of violence and injustice as the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* depicts a post-petroleum society where there is dearth of petrol as the physical heat in form of hot weather, the emotional heat of trauma, the heat of unjust violence, and insanity of dictators were causing the post-apocalyptic societies to be dematerialized (Berger, 1999, pp. 32,33). The iconic vehicle of the film is a war rig symbolizing the dearth of fuel in the dystopian post-apocalyptic futuristic world. *Mad Max: Fury Road* describes post-petroleum situations causing conflict to take control over fuel supplies to get petrol for the vehicles as in post-apocalyptic situations good and speedy transportation is synonymous with safety from all types of dangers. The landscape of settings depicts the bleak atmosphere in *Mad Max: Fury Road* serving as a backdrop for the action of the film. The desolate landscape provides a canvas to highlight the dilemmas of post-apocalyptic societies including lack of resources, infertile land, toxic air, and post-petroleum situations enhancing the profundity of the film.



Figure 03: Scene from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (2015)

2.2 Wandering into the Wasteland: Thematic Analysis of *Mad Max: Fury Road*

The film *Mad Max: Fury Road* depicts post-apocalyptic settings by using the technique of thematic analysis that portrays social, political, psychological and environmental issues of survivors of apocalypse. The film showcases a dystopian world of post-apocalypse depicting a collapsed civilization struggling to live in an inhospitable environment of dearth. Immortan Joe is the tyrant dictator who exerts his authority through his henchmen and he skillfully maintains a hierarchy between the privileged survivors and the oppressed survivors, “Rudderless and without direction, man turns to violence and instant ego gratification, and the only cure is to get back on course, to move toward an end ... their repulsive egotism, their violent tendencies” (Heffernan, 2014, p. 154). Heffernan is of the view that the life after apocalypse lacks order full of depravity and dearth explaining the social incongruity of post-apocalyptic situations. The film depicts the situation where resources are scarce and the survivors have to compete with one another to get these resources for their survival such as fuel, and food. The scarcity of the resources is also the main cause of the tussle in the film because Joe controls water, food and fuel and these resources are used as a tool by him to control and monitor the helpless survivors of the apocalypse. The pursuit of the survivors to get access to these resources highlights their efforts to survive in a post-apocalyptic society of limited resources that are contested fiercely “... forward thrust and passion for a mechanistic order, reproduces the same deadly conditions that lead to the war” (Heffernan, 2014, p. 122).

Berger describes the pollution and environmental degradation of society after post-apocalypse as in *Mad Max: Fury Road* it is depicted in the form of scorched land and dusty air. The barren land is polluted with the residue of industrial waste highlighting the exploitation of the environment by humans as the consequences of degradation death, waste and depravity become emblematic in post-apocalyptic societies (Berger, 1999, p. 14). The film depicts that environmental degradation is actually caused by unsustainable consumer practices and the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* serves as a cautionary tale depicting the hazards of ecological decay.

Berger describes the continuous efforts and new skills of the survivors of apocalypse invented by them in different dangerous situations and in *Mad Max: Fury Road* the survivors struggle for their survival in the inhospitable wasteland by fighting with fierce adversaries not only by injustice but by a violence of bad characters (Berger, 1999, p. 123). The protagonist of the film is Max who uses his skills to keep himself and others alive in the face of devastating odds. The survival instinct in post-apocalyptic society highlights the harsh realities of life after the apocalypse and the extreme limits to which the survivors have to go for their survival.

Heffernan suggests that the resistance and unity of the survivors are the solutions to cope against tyrant human beings and extreme environments. Heffernan explains the importance of unity because it is a crucial aspect of survival in post-apocalyptic society as after the apocalypse the survivors' resistance against the tyrant dictator is an important feature for survival. Furiosa rebels against Joe and by doing so she starts a terrible war against the tyrant ruler. Furiosa very skillfully uses a war rig to rescue breeder mothers to the land of breeding mothers and in the resistance of Furiosa the war rig symbolizes the use of power for just cause, solidarity, collective wisdom, and rebellious war against tyranny “... unity in diversity” (Heffernan, 2014, p. 104). The depiction of resistance celebrates the courage of the survivors because of their audacity in the face of tyranny and their strive for the better life of their fellows underlying the relation between survivors and tyrants in post-apocalyptic situations. Berger explains that the authority in post-apocalyptic society is corrupt as Immortan Joe’s rule is the symbol of tyranny even in the time of disaster. He is able to maintain his authority by spreading fear perpetuating violence and subjugating the poor “Systems of law and government as being founded and preserved by violence” (Berger, 1999, p. 126). So, the unjust violence highlights the consequences of unbridled power in post-apocalyptic societies.

Berger is of the view that the rebellion of the survivors against the tyranny is holy and a motivating force too as the deadly mission of Furiosa and her fellows to get rid of Joe and to liberate oppressed survivors from his so-called “... divine violence” (Berger, 1999, p. 124). The principal cause of the rebellious war is a passionate desire for redemption for the oppressed ones and the survivors take risk for a better future. The cinematic depiction of rebellion of the survivors in the film symbolizes the struggle of survivors who go against injustices of the tyrant dictators and strive to create a better future through collective action.

Thematic analysis of *Mad Max: Fury Road* highlights the environmental issues causing further psychological, and socio-political issues in a post-apocalyptic context. The themes of scarcity of resources, striving for survival, environmental degradation, resistance against tyranny and struggle for redemption truly represent post-apocalyptic issues of pollution, violence, and unchecked power. The film *Mad Max: Fury Road* presents an immersive critique of survival in post-apocalyptic situations.

3. CONCLUSION

By applying the thematic analysis *Mad Max: Fury Road* portrays that the film is not only an action film but it is also a critique on the ecological and psychological aspects of post-apocalyptic society. The repeated imagery of toxic water, fuel, and infertile landscapes explains the disastrous consequences of environmental negligence and the

commodification of post-apocalyptic remains in the form of natural resources. The post-apocalyptic remains become symbols of survival for poor survivors and tools of exploitation for the corrupt. Heffernan's ideas underscore the ecological rhetoric of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, where dearth and toxic environments show destructive tendencies of humanity and the bleakness of survival in a destroyed post-apocalyptic world. Berger has also given his perspectives on trauma after the apocalypse, and rebellion shedding light on the psychological and social struggles of the survivors who have to navigate inner scars and as well as external tyranny.

The film portrays the environmental collapse and its connection with social disintegration, violence, and authoritarian rule, emphasizes the resistance of survivors and the quest for renewal after the apocalypse. Max's tendency to remain isolated, Furiosa's rebellious attitude, and the resilience of survivors represent human tendency for connection and hope even in devastated situations. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is a cautionary ecological tale celebrating the indomitable spirit of humans to resist oppression and strive for possibilities of survival in a devastated environment. The rhetoric of ecology in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is depicted so realistically as its fictional wasteland resonates urgent contemporary measurements about environmental stewardship, social justice, and at the same time it also depicts the fragility of human civilization.

In sum, *Mad Max: Fury Road* showcases that Miller's dystopian narrative works as an ecological and psychological critique of post-apocalyptic survivors. The film depicts environmental destruction, dearth of resources, and toxic landscapes as crucial to human exploitation and resistance, exposing the psychological trauma of its survivors. The struggle of survivors over water, fuel, and safe shelter underscores the ecological degradation fostering authoritarian rule of morally corrupt people in such crucial situations after the apocalypse. The rebellion of Furiosa and the resilience of survivors affirms the possibilities of unity and renewal after the apocalypse. So, the rhetoric of ecology in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is an allegory and a cautionary narrative for contemporary apprehensions about environmental crisis, unchecked power, and the possible precarious future of humanity caused by negligence of humans while exploiting nature.

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