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# Matthew P. Meyer & David Koepsell (Eds.), 'Mad Max and Philosophy: Thinking Through the Wasteland'

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**Matthew P. Meyer & David Koepsell (Eds.)** *Mad Max and Philosophy: Thinking Through the Wasteland*. Wiley-Blackwell 2024. 256 pp. \$00.00 USD (Paperback 9781119870487); \$18.00 USD (eBook 9781119870500).

*Mad Max and Philosophy* is, as the title suggests, a new addition to the ever-growing publication space where a popular category—movies, films, television shows, and the like—is paired with a more traditional academic framework like philosophy. The introduction to the book starts with a somewhat strained comparison, suggesting that “in some ways Max’s journeys’ are comparable to ‘doing philosophy’” (xiv). A more scaled-down and manageable claim is that, by way of philosophy, “the films provide useful contrasts to our own lives and lifestyles” (xv). Regardless, Matthew Meyer, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and David Koepsell, a Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Texas A&M, provide an engaging addition to The Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture Series.

The book covers all the Mad Max movies up to *Fury Road* (2015), which leaves room for a future update that engages *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024) and any additional extensions to George Miller’s universe. Its physical layout is also as relatively straightforward as its thematic coverage. The frontmatter includes contributor notes, the aforementioned introduction, and acknowledgements. The body proper is comprised of five thematic parts, each made up of between three to five chapters. The book concludes with a nicely detailed index.

The first section of the book is entitled “Politics after the Pox-Eclipse: Anarchy, State, and Dystopia”. One of the chapters, Greg Littman’s “Thomas Hobbes and the State of Nature in the Wasteland,” attempts to squeeze new insights from the British philosopher’s ideas. In many cases, this approach reduces to pairing selections from *Leviathan* (1651) to examples from most of the films in the Mad Max series, before shifting focus and asking: was Hobbes “right about politics” (26)? As per the films, not so much. Instead, Littman argues that, time and again, these movies demonstrate that Hobbes fundamentally misunderstood what motivates, no less sustains, humans faced with difficult challenges.

The second section is “The Man with No Name: Heroes and Finding Oneself Post-apocalypse Style”. In a loquaciously titled chapter, Joshua Tepley’s “Bloodbags and Artificial Arms: Bodily Parthood in *Mad Max: Fury Road*”, the author uses the then-most-recent film in the series to examine “what makes something part of the human body”, considering five different criteria: adhesion, bonding, life, function, and integration (61). Tepley concludes that none of the criteria



“aligns perfectly with common sense,” even if the third and fifth are “the most plausible” (67). Even if creator Miller never considered these sorts of questions, the author sees his exercise as demonstrating that pop culture artifacts like *Fury Road* nonetheless remain “rich with opportunities for philosophical reflection” (69).

The third section, “Building a Better Tomorrow! Ethics in *Mad Max*”, ranges widely to take in everything from feminism to Platonic thought. Justin Kitchen’s ““We’re Not to Blame! Responsibility in the Wasteland” focuses on the question of moral culpability. In so doing, the author engages philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, Harry Frankfurt, and Susan Wolf (110-11) to answer that question in the context of the Wasteland and Max’s place therein. Though not revelatory in suggesting that the titular antihero is “morally responsible most of the time” (115), Kitchen does place a decidedly philosophical question into conversation with a popular archetype well suited to such a dialectic.

The fourth section, “Mother’s Milk: Gender and Intersectionality”, is perhaps the most focused of the book’s parts. At least one of the subtitles is central to the arguments in each of the four chapters. However, there is an interesting occurrence of seepage which occurs. The second chapter, Jacob Quick’s “Liberating Mother’s Milk: Emperor Furiosa’s Ecofeminist Revolution”, finds cogent points of connection with the first chapter of the previous section, Leigh Kellman Kolb’s “What Saves the World? Care and Ecofeminism”. The latter posits that “Ecofeminism suggests emancipation . . . [from]the devastating effects of toxic masculinity and patriarchal capitalism” (93), while the former urges that the same stance can offer “radical solidarity” as a bulwark against “the regrettable state of the world” (156-57).

“Wasteland Aesthetics: Music, Freedom, Fashion, Australia, and Nature” is the fifth and final section of the book. Laura T. Di Summa’s “Carapaces and Prosthetics: What Humans Wear in *Mad Max: Fury Road*” touches on some themes found in Tepley’s chapter in the second section. What distinguishes this discussion, however, is the focus on moving beyond ableism. In a striking section, the author notes how the film allows the viewer “to see disability in context” and recognize Furiosa’s “beauty is a function” of the same (200). This is one of several moments in the book where the interplay between artifact and method provides observations that extend beyond both.

An interesting and largely positive aspect of *Mad Max and Philosophy* is the relative range of occupations of the contributing authors. While philosophy teachers are in the majority of those assembled, there are also academics working in political science (Anthony Petros Spanakos)

and history (Thanayi Jackson), at least one independent scholar (Karen Joan Kohoutek), and a project associate at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, India (Paul Thomas). This variety reinforces the fact that many roads lead into, and out of, philosophy. It also lends credence to the idea that philosophy, academic and proper, still has something to say about popular culture.

In a book of this length, made up of twenty-one chapters, there are bound to be highs and lows in terms of content and organization. It might have been useful to have an introduction that more fully explored the various themes developed in the book. In addition, internal introductions to each of the five parts could have better tied together what occasionally read like disparate strands not clearly connected. An example of this issue is the second section, with only three chapters, which reads like an example of forcing, if not thematically tying, together the three chapters. Another instance is the fifth section, which seemingly only connects the four chapters together by way of the subtitle. On a different note, and as noted above regarding the interplay of the third and fourth sections, some chapters read as if they are in more direct conversation with chapters found in other sections. An additional issue is that, as appreciated as brevity might be, some of the entries are perhaps a touch too short, with one coming in at just a hair under seven pages. These sorts of entries might leave readers wishing that certain strands of thought had been given more space to develop. So, too, with some of the hints found in chapter endnotes, which point to even more paths not explored in the chapters which they conclude. As a final, albeit minor, observation, the titling—especially regarding hyphenated words—is not standardized across sections and chapters.

The backmatter exclaims that “Mad Max fans are in for the intellectual ride of a lifetime”. In one sense, that might very well be true. This book seems tailor-made to introduce fans of the films to the world of philosophy, should they be interested and should they be introduced to what Meyer and Koepsell provide. Framed in reverse order, and in keeping with other books of this sort, it is likely that lovers of wisdom who aren’t already Mad Max fans won’t be entering Thunderdome anytime soon. Still, *Mad Max and Philosophy* is a representative addition to this flourishing subgenre.

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