

Oscillations; or, the Display of Affect in *Mad Max. Fury Road*

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It is necessary not only to think about what images represent but also what they do and how they work, how they are perceived by various audiences, what visual affects they trigger – i.e., the affective capacities of visual culture to mobilize and modulate recipients' desires, imagination, and thinking. (Boof-Vermesse et al. 2017)

In response to the above call, this analysis of George Martin's *Mad Max. Fury Road* will isolate certain images. The reading of such images will explain that their function in the film is to engage their viewer with or into an unavoidable interval the experience of which is an oscillation or back and forth movement that itself might be called experience of antinomy or of tension.

We can distinguish, in the film, two opposed ways images are projected, received, or articulated. One occurs when characters say: A) “witness” and B) “I am your redeemer”; the other way occurs through the connections viewers make, or are invited to make, by the editing of the movie. In this latter case, the filmmaker or filmmaking team is not grandstanding and saying “witness me” to the audience; instead, the viewer becomes part of the filmmaking, the film's making. In this latter regard, the viewer is not apart from the movie but becomes part of it. This participation, I submit, is the film's perlocutionary message, in other words, its visual affect.

The first kind of image is easy to isolate. At least three examples occur, such as when War Boy utters “witness me” (Image 1; 21:25-22:08¹; cf. Nux's “witness me, Blood Bag” [28:25-28:51]) when Immortan Joe addresses the crowd in his “it is by my hand” speech (7:33-8:25).

Image 1:

¹ Stills from the film, referred to as “Image” plus number, will be followed in parentheses with time indicators (hour, minute, second) for the relevant sequence, or clip, from the film. Time indicators will be provided where appropriate even when images are not provided.



By definition, the logic of the witness is martyrdom, and therefore, sacrifice. In the first and third examples moreover, these visual images elicit only spectatorship, and thus passivity. Since Max, in the second of these three sequences, does not subscribe to that logic, he tries to break the rear window, the pane of which can be thought of as the camera lens and framing device for the spectacle.

The second kind of image is not a process of a recipient of an address being isolated and made passive, but rather of a viewer sewing, connecting, what is seen to activities that Max in particular, but others as well, come to perform in the film. This presentation will share, by doing its share, this participation or *partage* as the affective actualization of the visual.

The movie announces from its very first scene the state of the world: mankind has gone rogue, reached a terminal freak-out point, oil wars have turned into water wars. The director, George Miller, stipulates himself that the situation envisioned is after the concatenation of all possible disasters: economic, financial, but also industrial, chemical, nuclear, including atmospheric and climatic, with the air become toxic, the entire population diseased in all forms of terminal diseases (Bernstein 2017: 6). In such a situation, the ultimate commodity is the ovule and sperm, for the very procreation of the species is gravely threatened. It is the end of the world, and of organic life on the planet. Life is finished, and only survival, living-on or living beyond life, in what is called “half-life” and therefore “half-death” is possible. Such is the specific context for the character Imperator Furiosa’s attempt to take the remaining five healthy women to what she thinks still exists, to wit, a “green place,” an unpolluted place that moreover is outside phallogocentrism of which The Citadel is the

incarnation. Phallogocentrism is the name for an ideology that posits the absolute centrality of a logos or logic that itself is phallic. A literally straightforward reading of the tanker that Furiosa drives is that it is the phallus itself, which she steals from Immortan Joe. In this respect, a reading of the *logo* of the film itself would stress its phal-*logo*-centrism.

The film starts with a series of transfers that operate on the repetition of what can be called the logo of the film. First, the movie opens with the logo of the film company, Warner Bros., where its traditional logo is made over in the die of the metal or brass proper to the world of Mad Max, which is that of a post-industrial world where all metal is re-melted and re-cast.

Image 4; 0:01-0:10.



Right after this image, the voice (speech, logos) of Max introduces himself (0:15-0:19), followed by a series of media clips about the disastrous post-apocalyptic world in which will take place the action of the film, a world perhaps 50 or 75 years after our current time. Several minutes, during which the context is described, pass and then Max delivers a monologue (1:21-1:35) that triggers the entrance into the diagesis of the film which basically involves Max's capture (2:19-2:25), his body being written upon (Image 3, 3:42-3:47), up to an important image, which is that of a red-hot metal skull to be branded onto the back of his neck (Image 4, 3:53-4:03), as is the case with all the characters in the film, a fate Max remarkably escapes from throughout the film.

Image 3; 3:42-3:47

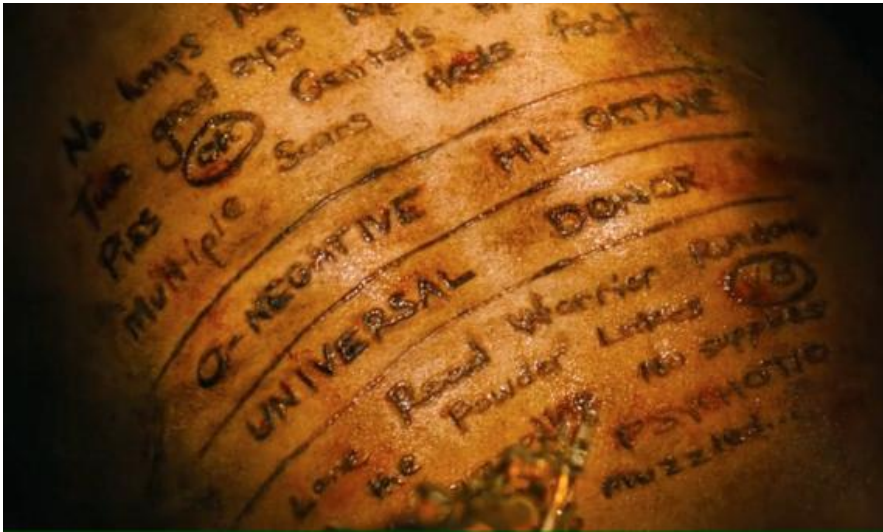


Image 4; 3:53-4:03.



This branded skull image represents the logo of the dictator Immortan Joe in the film, a dictator being etymologically the one with the speech, *dicere* or logos. The transfer *from* the logo of Warner Bros., *to* the logo of the skull, is visually funneled ahead to the moment after Max's mad dash through a tunnel to doors he opens that however halt his escape as he comes face to face both with the very skull logo and to the aporia of a lacking path.

Image 5; 5:14-5:27



The rapid cutting and splicing of separate shots, prior to this still, show Max look at the logo, then Max's face seen from the logo, and then again (in this still) the logo of the skull cut into the stone tower formation seen from a point of view that also shows us, this time, the back of Max's neck.

Thus far, we can pinpoint the following observations: 1) after the Warner Bros. logo, the film begins with Max's words, with Max's speech, i.e., with Max's logos; 2) Max is captured and, brought to The Citadel, his mouth gagged, a fabric tied in the back of his neck that by gagging his mouth therefore prevents him from speaking; 3) Max's attempted escape from his brander-tattooers is halted by the dead end of his escape tunnel, putting him in a face-to-face, or, more accurately, in a gagged-mouth-face-to-logo-skull; 4) this logo is seen in an image that simultaneously focuses on the back of Max's (unbranded-with-logo) neck.

Immediately after this shot (Image 5), Max is again captured by his pursuers, and this time a wrap is put over his face, muffling him.

Image 6; 5:41-5:58



Face sealed over, Max is deprived of any possibility of speech. This deprivation of speech fades into a return of the film logo, but this time the brass logo of Warner Bros. becomes the brass logo of the film's title, *Mad Max*, doubly branded by the subtitle, *Fury Road*.

Image 7:



“Fury Road” obviously introduces the second main character, the Imperator Furiosa. My point in this initial demonstration is that there is a series of transfers of the logo, by which speech, or logos, is taken away from the male, the main male character, and relocated in the female, the main female character. The logo of the film is a synecdoche of the logos in which the film is inscribed and away from which the film seeks to wrest itself.

To support this point, it is only necessary to follow the seconds that immediately follow these shots of Max muffled, and of the logo *Mad Max Fury Road*, because they transition straight into the introduction of the character Furiosa in the very next still, who is seen from behind with the camera dwelling on the back of her neck, in other words, on the back of the neck which, in Max's case was not and will not be branded by the skull logo, but which, in the case of Furiosa, bears the scar of the red-hot metal logo branded into its skin.

Image 8; 5:56-6:13



Because the bobbing up and down, or the back and forth, i.e., the swaying, movement of that logo on her neck (created by the ambling of her gait), will be important in the argument that follows, I merely stress here that that logo in the back of the neck – which, if it need be said, is situated at the back of the mouth that will produce and be the site of speech, or of logos – is not stable, but is rather moving back and forth or up and down in a particular given interval.

The sequence immediately following this bobbing skull logo re-inscribes that logo in several shots: 1) Furiosa putting the steering wheel into her truck. Image 9:



2) The tanker, a long cylindrical black phallus being attached to her truck with a large round scrotum behind it. Image 10:



3) The armor being put on the diseased body and loins of the dictator, or controller of speech or the logos, Immortan Joe. Image 11:



4) Immortan Joe being given the instrument of speech, the dicta-tor-phone, to address the crowd (8:03-8:11).

Unmistakably, the logo of the skull is synonymous with the logos of the film. The logo and the logos are taken away from the male, Max, temporally shifted to the female, Furiosa, and then situated clearly in the speaker, the dictator, Immortan Joe. This logo/ logos is identified with the phallus of the truck, tanker and pod. Phallogocentrism is encapsulated in that vehicle, which is the metaphorical vehicle of the phallogocentric tenor of the film. The action of the film, the clinamen or veering that constitutes the action of the film, is Furiosa's confiscation of the war rig, of the phallus, and of logos, when she veers from the straight road, taking an oblique course which will be her attempt to escape to another place, a different topos, called the "Green Place," which moreover is a female space.

Thus far, focus on the logo of the film has enabled us to show that the film is about how the visual image of the logo is taken away from the male and transferred to the female. Until late in the film, Max, for whom the film is named, will be largely mute, whereas Furiosa will be the main speaking protagonist. *Fury Road* explores the path, or method, by which the phallus, the logo, and the logos, are re-directed away from phallogocentrism.

The subsequent analysis therefore will be about how the visual in this movie is wrested away from a kind of passive spectatorship to an affective participation. The means of the viewer's participation, the viewer's affect, is the way the film uses cutting and therefore the back and forth movement between stills, to necessitate a swinging or swaying movement.

In an over two minute sequence (1:42:00-1:44:41), during which Furiosa kills Immortan Joe, there are numerous cuts back and forth between the narrative lines involving, respectively, Max and Furiosa. This sequence ends with Max pulling Furiosa up from the side of the vehicle from which she otherwise would have fallen to her death. Already these cuts back and forth, which are the forte of George Miller's editing technique, turn the viewers' head back and forth like a rapidly moving windshield wiper, as they pass back and forth from one cluster of action to the other. However, in each cluster, action is constantly forward and backward, as Nux alternately jams the war rig into Immortan Joe's vehicle, and then jams on the brakes, or as Max attacks Rictus Erectus only to be thrown back, before that to and fro movement being repeated. Because this moment in the film seals the Max-Furiosa bond precisely through a reinscribed image, the action strictly pertaining to Furiosa merits brief comment. In this sequence we see Furiosa approach the cabin of Immortan Joe's vehicle, yet she is driven back several times, once when she mistakes the size of the entrance and is knocked back because the bar she is carrying won't fit inside. This moment of "mediocre" or

poor calculation is comic, belonging to many other moments in the film when a hero sort of trips (the prime example being Nux's chain getting caught when he is lifted onto the War Rig with Immortan Joe's silver colt pistol). Such comic moments – and the fact that the movie itself is the incarnation of a comic book – themselves create an alternation with the intense action of the movie, such that the viewer is constantly being tugged between intense participation and comic distance-taking on that intensity. Yet these comic reliefs or releases merely intensify the subsequent return or re-engagement with breathtaking danger. In this sequence, Emperor Furiosa, driven back onto her back and then headbutting Immortan Joe's warboy, rebounds to her feet and she and he are then catapulted overboard by Nux's crashing the war rig into their vehicle. The warboy is cast to the ground by Emperor Furiosa, whereas she hangs on and begins her crawl to Immortan Joe's window. Again, the editing or cutting back and forth between Max and Furiosa necessitates the viewer's articulation of them. This articulation is fully sutured ironically at the moment that Furiosa rips Immortan Joe's face off yet simultaneously loses her prosthetic arm, a dismemberment that is itself in fact accidental because its wires get caught in the wheels of the vehicle. That loss of arm, however, is precisely where Max supplements it. Because she's lost the arm, she could not get up and Max supplements the supplement. Max's lifting her up explicitly repeats Furiosa's saving Max from falling off the side of the War Rig.

Further linking this image of Furiosa's going overboard the side of Immortan Joe's vehicle is the fact that, in her case, it is Nux whose crashing the War Rig into the back of Immortan Joe's vehicle (use screen shot) precipitates Furiosa over board whereas it will be Nux also who kicks Max onto the front of the People Eater, just when Max is literally at the end of his tether after being saved hanging upside down by Emperor Furiosa's prosthetic arm.

Every narrative line is built on images of rapid and violent swaying. One crucial such incarnation is the image of the device that measures r.p.m. (revolutions per minute), in a sequence from 1:38:03-1:39:11. Image 12.



The key image in this sequence is the needle on the r.p.m. or revolutions per minute gauge. This gauge goes up suddenly, and the image is cut into action that involves Slit driving Max's car before being squished between the War Rig and the People Eater during which Slit, in holocaustic fashion cries out Valhalla in what is an ironic recall of Nux's own Valhalla delusion during the giant storm. Slit cries this out, and Miller's editing makes it clear that Nux, symbolically at least, hears it, at the moment that Nux fixes Engine #1, which enables the r.p.m.s to go back up to 40. We will return to the r.p.m. measuring device, but first some comments on this sequence.

Affect here is a function of the number of synapses. Synapses are created by Miller's cutting technique. Visual effects supervisor, Andrew Jackson, states that "one of George [Miller's] real fortes is fast-cutting action, and he pays enormous attention to where your eyes are on the screen across the cut, so that it's easy to watch. A lot of the cuts are a half a second" (Bernstein 2015: 20). In the sequence above with the r.p.m. needle (1:33:05-1:34:08), first of all, Slit's cry is the counter-movement to Nux's having abandoned the Valhalla myth (constitutive moments of which are the following: A) the initial moment in the Citadel [15:37-16:00]; B) being looked at by Immortan Joe [16:49-17:13; Slit: "he looked at your Blood Bag": i.e., their bond]; C) going wild in the Storm [27:00-29:18]; D) getting the mission from Immortan Joe [55:07-55:59]; E) telling Capable about his deception [1:00:43-1:01:58]), yet Nux's relinquishment of it does not prevent him from adopting the discourse of hope ("feels like hope" at the moment of turning back [1:23:19-1:24:30 {the point here is that Nux and Max are the outer limits of the discussion}]) which Max tells Furiosa is a mistake (1:21:00-1:22:00). Also, and secondly, in this same aforementioned sequence with the r.p.m. needle, Nux's repairing the engine (itself a moment of bonding with Max when Max asks him if he, Nux, is "a black thumb" [1:28:25-1:28:34]: Max gives to Nux the job of fixing Engine One

and takes one of the Vuvulini to unhook the tanker), which thereby re-enables the r.p.m. needle to soar in a giant arc back upwards to the right, explicitly announces the polecats' soaring seesawing arc movements one of which will imminently snatch Max off the (War Rig). Hence, the r.p.m. soaring rebounding arc functions by the reversal in fortunes that Max's being nabbed by the soaring and then descending polecat illustrates. Thirdly, still relative to the r.p.m., Nux's transferring Max from a position of to-be-squished to one of further-life is a very big part of the reversal by which Max has gone from being Nux's Blood Bag to being Nux's mate.

So those rapid-fire connections necessitate that the visual image is constituted not by itself but by the cuts or caesuras that are the condition of possibility of articulation of those visual images. Such articulation, embodied as oscillation, is the display of affect. In other words, the viewer's affection or being-affected is the viewer's enactment or performance or participation in those caesuras by which visual images are made articulate. The logos or the logic of the film is not to witness passively, but rather to come to share its logos or logic, i.e., share in its double sense that the French *partager* also has.

We return to the recurrent image of the r.p.m. Nux boosts engines: Image 13; 1:31:14-1:31:30; then the other r.p.m. images, at 1:28:13-1:28:19, including Max's car curving off (Image 14) and, asymptotically, the curving off of a motorcycle (Image 15), in a perfect double inscription of the curve, and finally the compass in Immortan Joe's car (Image 16; 26:28-26:59).

Image 13:



Image 14:



Image 15:



Image 16:



In addition, Max seesaws on the pole. Max leaves the People Eater, which is exploding, because Cheetah tells him that Furiosa is hurt. Max's jumping back onto the War Rig immediately coincides with his being lifted off, starting a majestic and gigantic movement of giant scales or measuring needles, explicitly re-enacting the measuring instruments of the cars' r.p.m. or of the de-regulated gravitational field: 1:39:59-1:40:43, as in Image 17:



These large arches of movement, clearly seen going down in one direction like the decelerating r.p.m.s and up like the accelerating r.p.m.s, will ultimately transfer Max from the War Rig to the gigantic amplifier and drum vehicle (1:40:43-1:41:02) from which Max will make his way to the War Rig and then to Immortan Joe's vehicle, leaving Nux behind driving the War Rig (Nux gets his dream). While on the music vehicle, Max also sets this swinging into motion with the Doof Warrior: 1:38:00-1:38:10. This swaying is announced at least by the polecats, in Image 18; 1:34:41-1:35:07, and also at 1:35:08-1:35:36, respectively.



To conclude, one could take the “two-way affair” of the movie, in other words the Chase [away from the Citadel] and then the Race [back to the Citadel], to be a bi-directional linear movement, that has an asymptotic frequency or interval – a swathe – but one can also see the swaying movement as a bi-directional affair that itself displaces linearly. So, the movie is basically a straight line, as in $\leftarrow\rightarrow$, with a swerving perpendicular line between, as in S or Z, giving $\leftarrow S \rightarrow$, or, in what amounts to the same thing, $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ with a concurrent undulating line on top or beneath it.

In sum, there are two basic kinds of visual images. This first is continuous, i.e., the 180° swings of a large pole. The other, discontinuous, is a reconfigured image that involves a

substitution of the person in the image, for example, Max's hanging upside down off the side of the War Rig held by Furiosa, or Furiosa's hanging off the side of Immortan Joe's "car" held by Max (but these substitutions also include who rides shot-gun in War Rig, or who drives the War Rig, or who goes to fix the engines [alternately, Max/ Furiosa/ Nux]). Both kinds of images are profoundly perlocutionary (impacting the receiver and requiring a consequent action by the receiver who becomes scriptor), because they oblige a viewer to her- or himself operate the synapses in their recurrences (for the first continuous kind) and in their intra-referentiality (for the reconfigured kind). If one may speak here of "affect," it is because the viewer makes the connections among the actants-characters, connections that themselves make the film itself as network which is a less hierarchical network and more a mutually implicated, imbricated and indebted network : this perhaps is what the official makers of the film refer to as "love" (Bernstein 2015: 170), the affect aspired to when faced with the disaster, breakdown, the consequences and groundless basis of the dictatorship of phallogocentrism.

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