

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Mad Max* (1979)**

George Miller

OVERVIEW

Director George Miller was born in 1945 in Chinchilla, Queensland, Australia. From an early age, Miller was interested in both film and medicine: he practiced for several years as a medical doctor while simultaneously making short films with producer Byron Kennedy. Miller and Kennedy achieved huge international success with *Mad Max*, Miller's feature film debut. Kennedy Miller Productions went on to produce the *Mad Max* sequels and films by other Australian directors such as John Duigan and Phillip Noyce. Miller then directed high-profile and internationally acclaimed films including *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998), and *Happy Feet* (2006), for which he won an Oscar. Miller returned to *Mad Max* in 2015 with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which earned widespread praise and prompted the writing of two additional sequels.

Film *Mad Max* (1979) is the first film in a series of postapocalyptic stories about the adventures of a man named Max Rockatansky (the actor Mel Gibson in his breakout role). This initial film establishes many of the elements that reappear throughout the series (five films as of 2025): the desert landscapes, fights over fuel and other resources, road races involving custom-made vehicles, a punk or sadomasochistic aesthetic, and so on. The ending of the film dramatizes the event that shapes Max's behavior throughout the following films—the loss of his family. After his son is killed and his wife horribly maimed by a gang of motorcyclists, Max turns into a seemingly cynical loner who, in a typical plot from the series, refuses to help those in need before a change of heart reveals his underlying altruism. The plot and setting of this film as well as the rest of the series draw significantly from the genre of the American Westerns.

Background *Mad Max* is a direct inheritor of fellow Australian Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) as well as other postapocalyptic films of the 1970s that reveal concerns about the collapse of civilization under the combined pressures of social change and the Cold War. Even the institutions that remain within *Mad Max*—such as the police force that Max himself belongs to—work in dilapidated buildings and have to scavenge parts for their vehicles. Both Weir and Miller have cited road violence in Australia as an inspiration for their films and Miller's experience as an emergency room doctor made him particularly aware of dangers of reckless driving. J.G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash*, about people who get a sexual charge from car accidents, also seems like a possible source of inspiration for *Mad Max*. Julia Durcournau's 2021 body horror film *Titane* also carries many of these tropes into the present as it follows a main character, a serial killer who becomes impregnated by a car.

CHARACTERS

Max Rockatansky – A police officer tasked with intercepting motorcycle gangs

Jessie – Max's wife

Sprog – Max's infant son

Jim Goose – Max's fellow officer

Fifi – Max and Goose's boss

Toecutter – The leader of a motorcycle gang

Johnny the Boy – The youngest member of Toecutter's gang

Nightrider – A member of Toecutter's gang

Benno – A member of Toecutter's gang

May Swaisey – A friend of Max and Jesse

Bubba Zanetti – A mentally disabled man who lives near May

SYNOPSIS

Sometime in the not-so-distant future, a threadbare-looking police force called the “Main Force Patrol” (or “MFP” for short) tries to keep ordinary people safe from rampaging motorcycle gangs. Both human society and the natural world appear to be falling apart. Though there is still a police force and a court system, these institutions are frequently disrespected and ignored. Even if they are caught, criminals go free. Much of the landscape looks dusty and dry, the plants brown and withered. Biker gangs (sometimes including cars and trucks) roam the roads causing vehicle crashes so that they can rob and rape and sometimes kill those they encounter, as well as stealing fuel from tankers and taking anything else they can get their hands on. The bikers value mayhem and psychotic behavior and though the film does not dramatize them taking drugs (only drinking alcohol), they often seem to be in an altered state, yelling and screaming continuously and frequently repeating themselves.

Max Rockatansky, one of the MFP’s most talented officers, gets on the bad side of the motorcycle gang because he plays a part in the death of Nightrider, one of their members. The gang starts targeting officers, such as Jim Goose—Max’s friend and colleague—who is killed by the gang when they sabotage his vehicle. When Max, grieving, tries to retire from MFP and take a vacation with his wife and son, the gang finds them and runs over his family, killing his child and maiming his wife. The stage is set for revenge: Max returns home, puts on his uniform and gets behind the wheel of a speed-enhanced MFP car. Max follows the remaining members of the gang and kills them one-by-one by running them off the road or setting them on fire. The film ends with Max driving away from an explosion.

SCENES

Pursuit of the Nightrider In a dilapidated area covered in graffiti, a man watches a couple have sex through binoculars. Another man in a car that is labeled “MFP” for “Main Force Patrol” in block letters hears through a walkie-talkie that there is a “cop killer.” He calls the man with the binoculars to come. They argue over who gets to drive. They drive off, sirens blaring. Elsewhere, another man stands by the same kind of car; he tinkers with it. The car that the MFP officers will be pursuing comes into view, driving quickly, with a yelling man and a grinning woman inside. The yelling man calls himself the Nightrider. Other cops join the pursuit in cars, motorcycles and a tow truck. The couple in the car continue to laugh and yell, and a shot reveals that the man is driving barefoot.



Nightrider’s Destruction One by one, the MFP cars are destroyed as Nightrider repeatedly tricks them into driving into cars, buildings, and other obstructions. A toddler wanders into the middle of the street and is barely missed by the racing vehicles. In response to a radio call of “Hey Max?,” the cop who had been tinkering with his car now sets off in pursuit. His car is labeled “Interceptor.” As Max catches up, Nightrider begins to cry. Max successfully runs the Nightrider off the road; Nightrider’s car catches fire.



Family Man Max sits in a kitchen drinking a beer while a toddler sits on the table and plays with crackers and cards. A young woman plays the saxophone in the living room. Max and the woman embrace and discuss the toddler, whom they call ‘Sprog’. The news on the TV reports the death of the fugitive called Nightrider. The woman says that Max has made the news again. He describes Nightrider to her as “just another glory rider.”



Halls of Justice

In the morning, the woman looks out the window frowning. Max, calling her Jessie, says that Goose told him he has to come in to work this morning. Max leaves. As he approaches the car, Jessie follows him outside and makes gestures with her hands. He asks what they mean. "Crazy about you," she says. Both smile. Max drives into a parking lot through a gate that says "Halls of Justice" over it, with the "u" of "justice" a little lopsided. One of the other cops from the first scene arrives on his motorcycle, circling the parking lot. He is shirtless and his leg is in a cast. He brings Max inside a garage where another man is standing by a car. The third man describes how he cobbled the car together with pieces from various salvaged vehicles. Max grins and asks when they can take it for a ride. In a room nearby, two older men, one in a suit, listen to the proceedings over a radio and discuss the fact that the new car is a ploy to keep Max from quitting his job. In the evening, at the scene of a wreck, another cop tells Max that he has heard that Nightrider's friends are out to get him.



Motorcycle Rally

About fifteen men on motorcycles ride into the main street of a town that somewhat resembles the Old West of Hollywood. Though the town almost looks deserted, a few people come out to watch them. The men park their motorcycles all in a row and remove their helmets. They tell one of the local men that they are here to meet their friend who has come in on the train; the man realizes they are referring to the coffin sitting at the train station and takes them to it. The man in the coffin is the Nightrider. The bikers make the man who took them to the tracks repeat Nightrider's name before they lead him away.



Cut to the Chase

Cut back to the main street. A man does motorcycle tricks as a small crowd of locals watches and cheers. A dog follows him. A few of the motorcycle gang members chase a local man into a building; they soon toss him out again, attach him to one of their motorcycles and drag him down the road. The coffin is still waiting at the station. A young local couple, watching this, get into their car and drive away rapidly. Their car is red with a white fur interior. The motorcycle gang's leader whistles and they all ride off together in pursuit of the couple. They surround the car and attack it with axes and clubs. The car stops. The gang continues to destroy the car, tearing off pieces and breaking the glass, as the couple screams inside. They drag both the man and the woman out of the car. The camera cuts to a close-up of a squawking crow.



To the Rescue

Max and Goose are together in an MFP vehicle. They get a command over the radio to deal with a situation nearby. They drive off. They see the man from the couple in the car, running through a field, naked from the waist down. He refuses to come when they call to him. They keep driving and see the destroyed car, the woman, and one of the biker gang members, who had been previously addressed as Johnny. The MFP officers approach with their guns out. The woman, whose clothing is torn and who is chained on a leash with a collar around her neck to the destroyed car, crawls away as Goose approaches her. He assures her that everything will be all right. Johnny appears to be in an altered state. Max and Goose put the woman in their car as Johnny screams "The Nightrider!" repeatedly. The biker gang, minus Johnny, drives along the road together. The leader sits in the back of a yellow pickup truck with his bike and the Nightrider's coffin. They discuss the fact that Johnny has gotten himself in trouble again. The leader tells Bubba to go back for Johnny, which Bubba protests but does anyway.



Johnny Behind Bars

Johnny is chained up at the MFP station. Goose and another officer sit in the police station, which is otherwise empty and full of broken office furniture, the walls scuffed and damaged. Max, a few other cops, and two men in suits enter. Max tells Goose that no one showed up at the trial – not the bikers, the girl, or the townspeople. The lawyer says this means the police have no case because there is “no contest.” Goose shouts and lunges at Johnny; one of the men in suits says the courts will hear about this. Goose says that Johnny is his prisoner and he will not allow him to walk out the door. The other officers eventually restrain Goose and Johnny leaves, saying, “See you later Goose; it’s been a pleasure.” Goose yells, “We’ll see you on the road, scag!” An older cop tells Goose and Max that as long as the paperwork is “clean,” they can do what they want.



Bikers at the Beach

The bikers goof around on a beach, carrying a mannequin and being suggestive with it before their leader becomes serious, says the mannequin is treacherous, and gets one of his men to use it for target practice. The leader then tightens Johnny’s tie around his throat and puts a gun in his mouth before releasing him, removing the gun and walking into the water with him.



Goose’s Last Cabaret

Goose drinks and watches a woman singing at Sugartown Cabaret. Outside, in the dark, one of the bikers tampers with his motorcycle, which is parked in the parking lot. The next morning, Goose gets dressed, leaves his home, and gets on his motorcycle and drives off; Johnny burns his own arm with a lighter and then pursues Goose in a car. The motorcycle begins to malfunction; Goose is thrown off into a field. After a moment, he gets up, holding his helmeted head in his hands. A man comes by in a pickup truck, which he lets Goose use to transport his broken motorcycle while he switches to a bicycle. Goose sings a silly song as he drives. Johnny sneaks up on a pile of rubble above the road and throws a wheel down at the pickup truck, causing Goose to run the vehicle off the road. The truck turns over multiple times and lands upside down with Goose stuck inside and fluid dripping down on him. The biker gang leader, Toecutter, approaches, stands next to Johnny, and tells him to light the truck on fire. Johnny hesitates, saying, “This isn’t what I want.” The match drops as the two men struggle with each other and set the grass near the truck on fire, soon consuming it.



Grieve for Goose

Max drives to the hospital. Other cops stand in the hallway and try to prevent him from going into the hospital room. He goes in anyway and sees a horribly burned body, barely breathing with the help of machines. Max runs out, saying, “That thing in there is not the Goose.” Max wakes in the middle of the night gasping. In the morning, Jessie gets up and joins him in sitting on the beach near their house. He tells her that he just can’t believe what happened to Goose. Max says, “He was so full of living, you know?” Max goes to work and hands in his resignation. His boss, Fifi, tries to give him a pep talk about staying at work. Max says, “Any longer out on that road and I’m one of them.” Fifi tells him to take a few weeks off and think about it.



Second Honeymoon

Max and Jessie and the toddler, Sprog, drive off together. They pick up a dog on the way and play in a river. Max tries to tell Jessie how much he loves her but struggles to express himself. He talks about going for long walks with his father and how he never told his dad how proud and good it felt to be with him. She kisses him.



Escape from the Bikers

The family go to a repair shop to get a replacement spare tire. The man who works there tries to talk them into additional repairs and alterations. Jessie goes with Sprog to get some ice cream, but it turns out that Toecutter's biker gang is hanging out nearby at the beach. They surround Jessie at her car. Toecutter leans over and licks her ice cream. Jessie knees him in the groin and her ice cream smashes into his face. Another gang member tries to stop the car by throwing a chain around it, but the chain sticks and his hand comes off with it as Jessie drives away. Jessie drives back to the repair shop and picks up Max. She yells at him to "get in!" They leave without their new tire. Toecutter rides up on his motorcycle and asks questions about who had been there and where they were going. The mechanic tells him they were heading north. When Max and Jesse stop for a moment, their dog finds the man's detached arm attached to the chain at the back of their car.



Gang is back again

Max and Jesse drive on to a friend's farm in a wooded area. Max does some work on the car while Sprog plays on a blanket nearby. She invites him to come to the beach, but he says he needs to fix the car. As she walks away, he tries to do the "crazy about you" sign that Jessie did earlier in the film. She smiles. Jessie goes off for a walk on a nearby beach, along with the dog. The elderly friend, May, tells Jessie not to worry about Benno if she sees him. The woman says, "He's only a baby." Jessie walks off along through the woods and the viewer can see someone's arm reaching into the frame behind her. The dog runs around in the woods, encountering bikers hiding in the trees. Jessie and the dog swim and play on the beach. Members of the bike gang show up on the cliff above the beach, but Jessie does not notice them. Jessie falls asleep on the sand; the dog runs away. Jessie wakes and begins to walk back through the woods. She hears yelling and sees some of the bikers running. She falls repeatedly, is startled by birds, and runs into Benno. Finally, she manages to get back to May's safely. Max goes into the woods with his rifle in pursuit of the bikers. May settles Jessie down on the couch but then Jessie suddenly realizes that Sprog is missing. She shouts for Sprog and runs around the yard before discovering that Toecutter and the rest of the gang are at one of the outbuildings, with Sprog. Toecutter threatens to chop off her hand, maim her face, and so on. May appears with a rifle. She shoots in the air and tells them all to get inside the building; they obey. She locks them inside. May and Jessie and Sprog drive off as the gang tries to break down the door of the building from the inside.



Jessie's Last Stand

Max, having heard a shot, races back from the woods as the bikers get on their bikes in pursuit of Jessie, May, and Sprog. The car lurches to a stop, smoke pouring out of the hood. It won't restart. Jessie gets out and takes off running down the middle of the road with Sprog, while May shoots at the approaching bikers with her rifle—to no avail. The bikers zoom past May and run over Jessie and Sprog, killing the toddler and maiming the woman. A baby shoe and a ball fall to the road. The bikers disappear into the distance. Max runs up to them, sobbing as he realizes what has happened. In the hospital later, Max overhears a doctor listing all the injuries, internal and external, that Jessie has sustained. She is on life support systems and appears to be missing limbs.



Vengeance is Max

Max looks out on the beach and crumples a biker mask in his hands. He runs inside and pulls his uniform out of a trunk. Max puts his uniform on and goes into work. He gets into the black car he had been excited about earlier and drives off, sweating. He interrogates a mechanic about the whereabouts of Toecutter. When the man doesn't cooperate, Max lowers the car he is working on onto him until he becomes more helpful.



Max in Pursuit The bikers, meanwhile, steal fuel from a tanker by climbing onto it while it is moving and filling up their gas containers. A little later, Max drives up to them on their bikes; on a bridge, he runs several of them off their bikes and into a river. One of the bikers has a mangled mannequin attached to the back of his bike. Max watches them fall and continues to pursue the others.



Toecutter and the others stop at a repair shop, and when they come back outside, Toecutter finds two polaroid photos on his bike, one of Goose and the other of Jesse and Sprog. Max watches from a bridge as Toecutter and his companion ride away.

Toecutter's End Max follows them in his car, getting stuck behind a truck as they disappear into the distance. Eventually Max gets out of the car when he sees a motorcycle and man alone, lying down, in a field by the side of the road. Bubba and Toecutter are concealed then suddenly appear on their bikes and shoot him in the leg. Max falls to the road. The two men on motorcycles ride toward him, and Bubba drives over Max's arm. When Bubba comes back to ride over him again, Max shoots Bubba. Max sits up. Johnny gets on his motorcycle and drives off and Toecutter does the same. Max drags himself to the car and drives in pursuit. A hawk lands on Bubba. Max looks ill but continues to gain on Toecutter. As he races to avoid Max, Toecutter crashes into and is run over and killed by an oncoming truck.



Johnny Begs for His Life Max drives around in the dark and rain in pursuit of Johnny, the one remaining gang member. Finally, it is daylight again, and Max finds Johnny on the side of the road, stealing the boots off a dead man at the scene of a car crash. Max points his rifle at Johnny and puts a handcuff around his ankle. Johnny insists that he was not really involved in anything that happened. He says "This isn't what it looks like." Max handcuffs him to an overturned car and rigs it up so that a gas leak is going to ignite in about ten minutes. Johnny continues muttering and trying to defend himself. "Hey listen," he says, "I'm not a bad man." Max hands Johnny a saw and tells him that he can cut his foot off if he wants to escape and survive. As Johnny screams, Max drives away. The car explodes behind him.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Max Rockatansky is an officer of the Main Force Patrol who spends his days trying to stop motorcycle gangs from taking over the roads. He is a skilled road racer and handy with cars and other vehicles. He has a family that he loves dearly.

Competent Max seems to be good at nearly everything he does. He can repair cars and drive them expertly. He is valued by his colleagues and they call him in for the most difficult work, chasing criminals who have escaped from all of the other officers. When he tries to quit, his boss Fifi gives him a pep talk about his value and how essential it is for the world to have good guys to stand against the bad ones.

Affectionate Though Max struggles to put his feelings about his wife into words, it is clear that he feels intense love for her and their child. His efforts to express himself show the depth of his affection, as does his response when his family is under attack. When he is unable to save his wife and child, he shows intense grief, crying in multiple scenes, and then exacts vengeance by killing all of the men involved.

Vengeful After his child is killed and his wife injured, Max compromises his values to avenge them. Although he has previously vowed to leave the MFP because he is worried that he is becoming like the criminals, his family tragedy leads him to seek vengeance in ways that look very similar to what was exacted by the gang earlier in the film (driving them off the road and burning Johnny just as Johnny was involved in burning Goose).

Jessie is Max's wife. Jessie is an affectionate partner and mother. She plays saxophone, helps Max talk about his feelings, and shows surprising talent for evading the motorcycle gang considering how much they terrify her. She dresses simply and wears little makeup—she seems like an ordinary person.

Loving Jessie often shows emotional support for Max and states feelings that they share but he has difficulty expressing. She tells him how she feels in many ways; in spoken words and in sign language as well as in her facial expressions and caring actions.

Resourceful Jessie is a small person without any particular fighting skills, but when members of the motorcycle gang attack her, she is quick to knee one of them in the groin and successfully escapes from them twice, in a vehicle and on foot, even though she is terrified and unarmed in both cases.

Toecutter is the leader of the motorcycle gang. He has wild hair that is partly dyed blonde and a leather jacket with fur attached to it. He enjoys terrorizing innocent bystanders and taking out MFP members.

Sadistic Toecutter is cruel to the MFP officers, but he is not much nicer to his own gang members. When Johnny the Boy does not want to set Jim Goose on fire and seems very upset about the prospect of killing someone in such a violent way, Toecutter insists that Johnny help start the fire. In an earlier scene, Toecutter begins to strangle Johnny with his own tie and then puts a gun in Johnny's mouth.

Charismatic In spite of how he treats others, Toecutter continues to have dedicated followers. Benno, for instance, does everything that Toecutter tells him to and is very happy when Toecutter compliments him on how he has injured Max during one of the final scenes of the film. For at least some of his followers, Toecutter's sadism seems to be part of his charisma.

Johnny the Boy is the youngest member of the motorcycle gang, who often causes problems for the rest by being rash and thoughtless (he is the only member who actually gets arrested by MFP). Because of this behavior, he suffers threats and punishment from the leader, Toecutter. He is more hesitant to kill and commit other violence against people than the rest of the gang.

Innocent Johnny is only innocent compared to the rest of the motorcycle gang. He insists that he is not at fault for various things at the end of the movie when he is confronted by Max. Max does not believe him and offers him the option of cutting off his own leg or burning up. This is more than Max offers the other gang members.

Compassionate Johnny is not tough enough to survive the life that he has chosen. In some ways, this is admirable. He does not want to kill people and seems to have some kind of moral compass, at least compared to his comrades in the gang. However, he is also not strong enough to truly stand up to Toecutter or change sides. By the end of the film, he seems to be just as immoral as the rest of the gang. His last act is to try to steal shoes off a dead man, a man whose death he may have caused by driving the man's car off the road, which is hardly heroic.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Mystery Man *Mad Max*, as the first film in a series set in the same futuristic world as the others in the series, establishes the origin story for the character Max and provides background on the tragedy that motivates his character in the narratives that follow. Max is consistently more skilled and braver than those around him, and he often appears just when he is needed and then disappears down the road when he has ensured the safety of others.

Illustrative Moment: Mystery Man When Max initially appears in the film, the viewer does not see his face, only his hands working on the car, a glimpse of him in a side view mirror, and other fragments of his body. In other words, he is revealed suspensefully, and after multiple other characters have already been introduced and participated in action sequences. The cinematography and film editing in this sequence

make it clear that he is not an ordinary man. Max is not part of the initial pursuit of Nightrider but is called in by the other MFP officers when Nightrider injures and eludes them. Max's face is finally revealed as he races to intercept Nightrider. This scene reveals what is evident throughout the film: Max is more skilled than his colleagues and better able to problem solve and meet criminals head-to-head. He himself expresses concern that he is becoming too much like the gang members the more time he spends fighting them.

Subcultures *Mad Max* features two subcultures in conflict with each other: the rampaging gangs and the MFP officers who try to stop them. These two groups have their own distinct visual styles, ways communicating, and moral codes (or lack thereof). The bikers have a punk aesthetic, with wild dyed hair, and most of their lines of dialog consist of a stream of shouted words, sometimes nonsensical. They seem to have no concerns about the negative impact that they have on society or the deaths they have caused. The MFP officers, for their part, wear dark leather and look very crisp and put-together compared the biker gang. Except when they are enraged or upset, they speak clearly and reasonably. They see themselves as protectors of society who are standing up against the chaos of the bikers (though it is not always clear that the MFP officers are right about this).

Both subcultures stand out from the rest of society in their dress and behavior. The other people in the film, including Max's wife Jessie and all of the innocent bystanders who are unfortunate enough to get in the way of their road chases., dress in ordinary clothing, usually light-colored, and look more like flower children or rural farmers than punks. Most of them also have more typical looking vehicles, ones that have not been significantly altered from their original manufacture. At the same time, the bikers and the MFP officers overlap with each other in various ways, from their adrenaline-seeking behavior to their preference for leather clothing and use of silver chains to restrain those they have captured. They are also similar in that they do not seem to follow the social patterns of mainstream society. Max is the only MFP member with a family, as far as the film reveals, and the motorcycle gang members seem mostly to interact with women and children in violent ways, though they are sometimes seen with women as passengers. The gang's victims on the other hand, are often couples.

Illustrative Moment: Toddler Crosses the Road During the chase after Nightrider, a toddler wanders into the middle of the road and is nearly run over by Nightrider and the MFP officers chasing him before he is rescued. The toddler stands for all of the innocent bystanders in the film who are simply going along in their lives without awareness of the danger racing towards them. The fact that the child is equally in danger from Nightrider and those trying to stop Nightrider shows that the two subcultures may think they are very different from each other, but their adrenaline-fueled behavior puts everyone at risk. Perhaps the MFP officers would not act this way if the gang members did not make it necessary for them to do so. In any case, as Max later worries, fighting the gang can mean becoming like them.

POLITICS

Conflict All the *Mad Max* films are structured around conflict, particularly protracted fights over limited natural resources and fundamental moral values. In other words, the conflicts are usually both practical and ethical. The later films foreground the scarcity of resources like fuel and water and depict brave individuals who fight against militaristic dictators who control those resources and mistreat their fellow human beings. In the first film of the series—though it is set in a world more like our own than the later films—hints of these future conflicts can be seen. The world of *Mad Max* is already in a state of disrepair, from the MFP offices to the vehicles and farms of ordinary people, which suggests declining resources and powerless institutions. Toecutter's gang steals fuel, and many of the MFP vehicles are made from recycled parts. More significantly, the conflict between the MFP officers and Toecutter's group foreshadows the further splintering of society into small kingdoms ruled by autocrats with only a few ethical individuals brave enough to stand up to them.

Illustrative Moment: Johnny's Last Stand After the bikers sabotage Goose's vehicle, Johnny has a moment of internal conflict when Toecutter insists on setting Goose on fire. Goose's borrowed truck is overturned, with Goose upside-down inside. A presumably flammable liquid drips down on Goose as Toecutter tells Johnny to light him on fire. Johnny says he does not want to do this multiple times and he

and Toecutter struggle with each other verbally and physically. The fire starts while they are struggling. This moment shows Johnny considering an ethical course and even fighting with his leader—ultimately, he is not strong enough to stand up to Toecutter and is still in the gang at the end of the film.

JUSTICE

Crime *Mad Max* takes place in a slightly futuristic world in which motorcycle gangs can commit crimes against ordinary citizens with very few consequences. The MFP officers seem barely better than criminals themselves; in their pursuits of gang members, they also cause vehicle crashes and other kinds of destruction.

Illustrative Moment: Johnny gets off When the youngest member of the motorcycle gang is arrested, Jim Goose and other officers hold him chained up in their dilapidated police station. Johnny's lawyers and the leader of the police officers arrive and announce that he will be set free because none of his victims showed up to testify against him. In other words, things have become so dangerous in this world that ordinary people are too scared to stand up against the gangs. Goose tries to attack Johnny, but the other officers hold him back. Goose's boss, Fifi, hints that they can take care of Johnny in some other way, which suggests that the police do not see themselves as being bound by the laws either—they are just quieter about going around the law than the ostentatious biker gangs.

Revenge Much of the action of *Mad Max* occurs in response to the death of Nightrider at the hands of the MFP at the beginning of the film. Though his comrades may not seem to have many morals or a strong sense of connection to other human beings, they are very focused on avenging his death; indeed, they kill Jim Goose and Max's son in their attempts to atone for Nightrider's death. Their vengeance, in turn, sparks Max's vengeance.

Illustrative Moment: Getting back on the horse When the biker gang rides over Max's wife and son, his initial response is to collapse with grief. He cries in the road when he finds them, then the film cuts to him overhearing doctors discussing his wife's unfortunate prognosis. She is shown in a hospital bed and appears to be on life support and missing limbs. Then, there is a cut to Max crying at home before he pulls his old MFP uniform out of the bottom of a chest, suddenly looking fierce and determined.

RELATIONSHIP

Love Unlike most of the relationships in *Mad Max*, Jesse and Max's marriage is affectionate without being tinged by violence or power struggle. Although the police officers and biker gangs are their own communities, and the members appear to have strong feelings toward each other, both also have a tendency to be rough with each other and constantly fight for dominance even amongst their friends.

Illustrative Moment: Fathers & Husbands While vacationing together, Max and Jesse curl up together, relaxing on the bank of a river, and Max tells Jesse about how much he used to enjoy spending time with his own father as well as how he wished he had told his father how important he was to him. Max explains that it was always hard for him to say what he felt. He tells Jesse that he feels this way about her, too, and she kisses him. The scene illustrates how difficult it is for men in the film to express how they feel about each other and how unique the affection between Jesse and Max is within the film as a whole.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In this film, what makes someone a hero? A villain? Who is innocent? How can you tell?
2. Some have argued that *Mad Max* is a misogynist film because of how women are treated within it, their relative unimportance to the story (with the exception of Max's wife), as well as other factors. Is the film itself misogynist or is it critiquing misogyny? Or both at the same time?
3. *Mad Max* contains a complicated depiction of masculinity. On the one hand, Max is an affectionate husband and father who visibly cries and tries to talk about his feelings. On the other, he is a stone-faced action hero who uses a car as a weapon. What is this film trying to say about

what masculinity is or should be? Where is it pushing against traditional ideas of masculinity or, conversely, upholding them?

4. George Miller made this film, in part, because he was concerned about road violence. Does the film serve as a critique of car culture or does it glorify it? Explain.