

**Arts and Politics of the Everyday**

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series editors

# **SOUTH OF THE WEST**

Postcolonialism  
and the  
Narrative Construction  
of Australia

Ross Gibson

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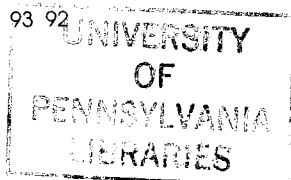
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BEARINGS . . . . An Introduction

Australia

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,  
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West  
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?  
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?  
Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,  
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?  
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?  
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

The cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere  
That in your limits leap and swim and fly,  
Or trail uncanny harp-strings from your trees,  
Mix omens with the auguries that dare  
To plant the Cross upon your forehead sky,  
A virgin helpmate Ocean at your knees.

This poem from the turn of the century, by Bernard O'Dowd (1866–1953), has launched innumerable English Literature classes in Australian secondary schools. The arresting first line stays in the mind for decades between readings. Because of the *élan* of the initial image, one always remembers the poem as a Western-imperial creed, taking as given the idea that Australia waited through millennia of destiny until the English “discovered” it into existence late in the eighteenth century. In effect, therefore, the opening line is too arresting, because it stops one's remembrance of the sophisticated skepticism that bubbles through the rest of the first stanza. On re-reading, one notices that the poem abounds with questions. And they emphasize the South's status as a conundrum for

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## Yondering

### A Reading of *MAD MAX Beyond Thunderdome*

"WELCOME! OPEN YOUR BOOK AT PAGE ONE."  
In the final stages of *MAD MAX Beyond Thunderdome* this message rings out from a gramophone disc, a record of the past, which the lost tribe of children have been carrying with them in their exile. To the characters within the narrative, and to the viewers outside of it listening in, the declamation resounds with an oracular tone. At least two riddles are thereby posed.

In the case of the children, they have always deduced, from scant information condensed in their fogged memories, that the disc is some kind of sonic generator, and they have been using it (albeit doubtfully) in a way that is spiritually effective even though no material benefits have been manifest. However, it is not until Max has operated a turntable and stylus

Yondering

for them that they comprehend how the record once fitted into another system that created specific meanings. Availed of their new knowledge, the children see that they have been misapplying their found artifact. Or more precisely, they have been applying it for a different purpose, in a different significative system.

So, with Max manipulating the circulation of the record, the motley tribe hearkens to the oracle. Appropriately enough, these infantile practitioners of a mutated Austral-English are listening to the first installment of a self-tutorial foreign language program for English speakers. The gramophone disc poses a conundrum, therefore: in a polyglot community, how might one negotiate the trade of truth and belief from one culture to another?

This leads directly to the second riddle: how can one confidently assess the exact tonal register of this film? What is its voice, what is its "attitude," and ultimately what might it be "about?"

In answer to both riddles, the gramophone is emphatic: "Open your book at page one." The voice is a *deus ex machina*, and it is calling for a start; it is alerting the characters and the audience to the notion of *origins*. And here the film signals that it is unequivocally mythological. That is to say that *Mad Max 3* conclusively adopts an enunciative register that had been invoked only intermittently in the earlier films.

The first *Mad Max* is predominantly naturalistic in its art direction, its time setting ("a few years from now") and its characterization. Even its horror is expressed in a suburban, or *worldly*, idiom of verbal crudity, mechanical cacophony, and automotive and editorial speed. Of course, the film has a flavor of fantasy, but it has an even stronger whiff of plausibility. It is notable that George Miller has spoken repeatedly of his

original conception of the film as a report on the road carnage endemic to Australian society. Despite all its genre cues and its fetishism of automobilia, *Mad Max I* remains representational rather than, say, surrealist or escapist. The roads are recognizable and, although they lead to the badlands, they are badlands that one can get to on a Sunday drive.

The second *Mad Max (The Road Warrior)* is far less tied to the everyday. This is not to say that it is patently concerned with examining or purveying myth, even though the legendary status of Max is emphasized in the homeric prologue and even though close attention is paid in scripting to reworking the topos of the wanderer's trek through a purgatorial wasteland. Rather, because the suspense cinema devices of subjective camera-placement, movement, framing, and cutting are honed so keenly that the mechanics of the narrative are themselves a source of wonder (the editing is better tuned than any pursuit vehicle), the filmmakers build a hot rod of a film that could best be interpreted as principally formalist or stylistic. For example, the celebrated appearance of Wez suddenly from under the bonnet of the beleaguered rig near the end of The Chase is so effective and in keeping with the spirit of the entire film not only because the frame-invasion trick is reliably startling, but also because the audience acknowledges, somewhat sardonically, that it is *that device again!*

Kennedy-Miller have never underestimated the cinematic literacy of the contemporary audience, and they have repeatedly reaped the benefits of relying on this collective savvy. There is a sense all through *Mad Max 2* that, if the film deals with anything that must be counted as "real," then it is fundamentally about storytelling and the cinema rather than any habitable world which the film might represent, reflect, or impinge upon. The second film of the trilogy simply has too

few of the ploys and conventions of naturalism for a sociological or realist critique of it to be of much value.

Of course, *MAD MAX Beyond Thunderdome* is also centrally concerned with storytelling. Its bardic sense is made no less significant by the comic verve accompanying it. The popular, *participatory* aspects of mass entertainment are being celebrated. If a film can be regarded and heard as an orator, then the institution of cinema is quite properly a sophisticated oral science—all the orators from all the film industries around the globe can be said to *communicate* to form a huge, unquantifiable mythology. Thus, when the ringmaster of the Thunderdome turns to the camera to confide the artifice of it all, he need have no doubt that sooner or later everyone will know that Max's story can make sense only if viewers are able to recognize the reenactments and the rhetorics from a myriad cinematic stories. For example, without beginning to strain credence, one can cite deliberate quotes in *Beyond Thunderdome* from *North by Northwest*, *Casablanca*, the "Roman" films of fifties Hollywood, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Shining*, and Sergio Leone's westerns. Every sight and sound in *Beyond Thunderdome* is part of a folk history. Every sight and sound is carrying vestigial messages from the repeated ceremonies of cinema-going, and the film knows this, the film is about this liturgy, and it tells its watchers so.

However, episode three of Max's saga takes on an added dimension (dare I say a certain grandeur?) because the urge to *narrate* is shown to be a central theme of the film. *Beyond Thunderdome* declares itself incontrovertibly to be mythic. It demands to be interpreted that way. What's more, it is designed as a *primary* myth: a myth of origins, a type of Genesis. The film and its characters are destined to tell stories not just obliquely about the cinema, but also quite explicitly about col-

onization, ethical realignment and social gestation. Whereas the moral scheme organizing *Mad Max 2* is no more perspicuous or evangelical than the virtues underscoring the aestheticised anarchy of Merry Melodies cartoons, the precepts of *Beyond Thunderdome* loom enormous because the film is dealing in primary myth, in a narrative system that prescribes the histories of a community.

The film repeatedly declares itself to be generically Australian (which is to say it is also generically transgeneric). In the first ninety seconds, the insignia of nationality abound. Kennedy-Miller's trademark is first up—the "BHP of the culture-industry" proudly present themselves along with their newest product. Then almost immediately, the initial image hazes up: of course it is The Desert. Next, we get Bruce Spence and Mel Gibson, the former whooping his caricatural, antipodean head off, the latter squinting from his desirable corporate-Australian visage. Clearly, the film is to be a festival of leitmotifs and icons from white Australian cultural history. Quite apart from Frank Thring, there are . . . the convict escaping from his penal hell, the prophet emerging purified from the desert, the lost children from numberless bush legends all sheltering in a fecund haven concealed in the blasted interior. These are all cliches, admittedly, but the sophistication of *Beyond Thunderdome* is that it analyzes and redeploys the cliches, knowing them to be usefully true because the community recognizes them as truisms. It knows that two or three cliches can be an embarrassment; but hundreds of them constitute a mythology which can embody the many complexities of history and aspiration contested by a national community.

For example, the welter of cliches in *Beyond Thunderdome* conjoin to evoke a sophisticated antipodean cosmology of inversion and redemption, wherein a saintly seer might logically

(and meaningfully) be dressed in black and blinded by a comic mask as he rides backwards toward the future and toward, perhaps, yet another beginning now that the features of his identity have been obscured. This one composite image, cobbled from a few commonplaces of legend, constitutes a condensed and evocative metonym of many tomes of white Australian history. In short this film is dealing in vibrant contemporary myths, myths of colonial canniness.

*Beyond Thunderdome* is one tale from this collection of stories of origin. One might call such a collection a mythology, or one might prefer to call it a history. As in most modern colonial societies the difference is harder to discern the closer one looks for it. Certainly, Australian historiography takes its shape from the myths of creation which colonists enacted while establishing the European society in an ostensibly empty locale. Mark Twain's famous comment that "Australian history is almost always picturesque . . . [that] it does not read like history but like the most beautiful lies,"<sup>21</sup> makes sense with reference to this process of prefiguring actuality by fiction. It is a certain type of fiction, a structuring fiction, a myth of origins, that gets enacted in the antipodes. As Twain extrapolated about the lies, "they are all true, they all happened."

Thus, when the children in *Beyond Thunderdome* repeat their stories of arrival, settlement, and destiny, when they fashion an adaptive language comprised of words, sound effects, gestures, and the parting curtains and focusing frame of cinema, all in order to make sense of their present predicament, and when Max himself begins to learn this language and these stories, the audience is privy to some beautiful lying. Commensurately, earlier in the film, in another arena of origin, Aunty Entity (Tina Turner's character) describes Bartertown: "Where there once was a desert, now there's a town; where there was

despair, now there's hope; where there was robbery, now there's trade." It amounts to one bright word: "Civilization!"

Her colonial admiration of order echoes countless tracts from the annals of white Australia. Take for example David Collins's rendition of the first English encampment at Port Jackson: "[The] spot which had so lately been the abode of silence and tranquillity now was changed to that of noise, clamour and confusion: but after a time order gradually prevailed everywhere. As the woods were opened and the ground cleared, the various encampments were extended, and all wore the appearance of regularity."<sup>2</sup>

If a society and its habitat have a shape, it is an arbitrary one which can be scrutinized and renovated as the communities demand. It is the shape of history, which is in turn the shape of the myths of origin. With reference to the social milieu pictured in *Beyond Thunderdome*, Bartertown is shaped to a particularly crude and brutal myth of commerce, while the Crack in the Earth is regulated by fairytales of excessive innocence, and Max's wastelands bear up under connotations of purgatorial trial and renaissance. The landscape of *Beyond Thunderdome* is kept barely safe from erosion by these little plots of culture.

All this determinedly local historiography would be of little consequence had the legend of Mad Max not been taken as universally relevant, and, perhaps, even universally true, during the 1980s. Through an accident of world history, entailing developments such as the telecommunications revolution, international monetary upheavals, the "emergence" of a politically assertive Third World, the imminence of the *fin de siècle*, and the continuing ransom of Armageddon, the world seems presently to require myths of origin and recommencement. And the tales of white Australia, stamped as they are with

an impression of historical veracity, supply shapes for such myths. (Herein could lie one explanation for Australia's high stakes in the current international cultural market.)

In this context of a contemporary vogue for stories of renaissance, one can see that the style of *Beyond Thunderdome* is well suited to its themes. Clearly the film is stitched together from innumerable fragments and quotes, be they cinematic, literary, or even painterly. For example, it seems appropriate that some of the savage children should resemble so closely John White's sixteenth-century portraits of American Indians, while others look like slightly addled versions of the Care Bears. Clearly, the film invites descriptions of its "post-modernity."

Now, I happen to think the *Beyond Thunderdome* is too resonant to be summarized adequately by any one critical term, and should I employ labels from time to time throughout this essay, I must emphasize straightaway that the epithets are meant to be facilitative rather than conclusive of our thinking. This said, I would like to assay the film's postmodernism for a few paragraphs.

*Beyond Thunderdome* confirms Max as a "hero-despite-himself," or as a hero suffused with a sense of ambiguity, a hero celebrated anthemically by the song "We Don't Need Another Hero." The project announced by Fifi in *Mad Max 1*—to give the people back their heroes—is fulfilled, but with an ironic camber because Max has still not learned to be either consistently or voluntarily altruistic. One of the special characteristics of the film is this tendency for definitions inherited from the past to alter or mutate even as they are being applied. This volatility is appropriate to the tale of a culture that is "beginning (again) at page one." In such a circumstance, all available signs and artifacts might be counted temporarily



equal, or even interchangeable. In such a circumstance, there would be no certainty, for example, that the hero who might be constituted at the *end* of page one would be the same entity you started with.

Given this mutability of definitions and criteria of judgment in Max's world, it should not be surprising to find that "inappropriate" discourses need to be redeployed to supply interpretive hints for critics attempting to follow some of the ramifications of the film's postmodernity. For example, take and mutate this quote from academic art history: Max could be said to inhabit a "world peopled with signs, figures and emblems, where all objects and beings (including rational beings) exchange attributes and properties in a perpetual semantic shift."<sup>3</sup> This description is actually from Germain Bazin's classic study of the European Baroque, but it does apply very neatly to *Beyond Thunderdome*. Think of the transmogrifications worked by Max in his adaptation of the common fly-swatter for the purposes of self-defense; or consider his manipulation of the whistle which was originally disguised as a boot-brace and which later affords him salvage in the Thunderdome. Think also of the various names applied to Max: by his own assignation he is "Nobody"; by Aunty Entity's he is "Raggedy Man"; according to the children he is "Captain Walker"; in the Thunderdome he is "The Man with No Name," as well as the "Romantic Hero" (called "bad, beautiful and crazy," in echo of Lady Caroline Lamb's characterization of Lord Byron as "mad, bad and dangerous to know").

What is most intriguing about Bazin's quotation concerning the exchange of attributes and properties is that originally (before the semantic shift that I am working here) the sentence referred to the "transcendental world" that is recur-

rently evoked in seventeenth-century European painting and architecture. How is it that there can seem to be some formal *and* thematic similarities between contemporary Australia and late-Renaissance Europe? How can one era speak *to* and *of* the other?

To justify highlighting Bazin's words here, I contend that the postmodern, or "high contemporary" mentality that seems to prevail in *Beyond Thunderdome* has been formulated by social conditions similar to those obtaining in the baroque era when the world began to mean too much, when "every object embodied a message."<sup>4</sup> To explain such a complex time in schematic terms, the baroque sensibility could be said to have arisen out of an epistemological adjustment necessitated by several sea changes such as Europe's encounter with the "New World," the development of industrial printing, the higher incidence of widespread travel by writers and artists, and the rise of an economically influential bourgeoisie at the same time as the great European dynasties of artistic patronage were still able to sponsor memorials to themselves. It doesn't stretch feasibility too far to propose parallels between the intellectual tumult of the present day and the epistemological volatility of the baroque era.

The baroque sensibility was produced by a breakdown in discriminative criteria, but it also *celebrated* such "lawlessness." Baroque art and architecture, sponsored in the main by the church or the aristocracy (each in contention with the other for preeminence in this time of change), operated on a corporate aesthetic, celebrating the notion of agglomeration and hyperbolic ambition. For all its lust for power, however, the baroque was also animated by an imaginative vigor. For all its "monstrosity," the baroque existed to valorize creativity.

It was a transcendental aesthetic. A baroque artifact was always intended to be much more than the sum of its parts. It was meant to lead the viewer elsewhere.

There are enough similarities between baroque economics and aesthetics, on the one hand, and Kennedy-Miller's mode of production, on the other, to warrant pursuing the comparison. *Beyond Thunderdome* is one of the most expensive films ever produced in Australia, and the extravagance of its production values is so obvious that the prodigal expenditure of resources becomes a primary theme of the text, simply by virtue of how the film looks and sounds. The huge ensemble of actors, the far-flung locations, the array of machinery and massive sets, and the technically intricate camera movements that thread through the film were all possible only because Kennedy-Miller were in a sufficiently secure investment position to spend virtually whatever they needed to capture the required form. And this was a form signifying imperial ambition and creative exuberance, a form concerned with nation-building and the reassemblage of a culture undergoing fundamental adjustments. It is a baroque kind of form—an exuberant style entirely apposite to the themes of the film. The mood of celebration and humor that saturates *Beyond Thunderdome* from the first hurrah of the opening credits is a product of the filmmakers' delight in the sensuality, the plastic "fecundity," of cinema as a creative material. It is a mood, also, which testifies to a somewhat heartening faith in the possibilities of social reorganization in Australia. And if myths exist in order to convince us of contentions that cannot always be rationally supported, then *Beyond Thunderdome* must be a utopian myth of the cinema and of Australia.

Before becoming more specific, I will outline in abstract terms the baroque qualities that seem to operate in *Beyond*

*Thunderdome*. It is generally agreed that one of the defining qualities of the baroque is its compositional emphasis on exultation, release, or open-endedness. Germain Bazin attempts to translate this *élan* by detailing the configurations in Tintoretto's *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*:

Tintoretto's composition [ . . . ] is dynamic. Space does not unfold in breadth but in depth; the surface is crossed by a violent spiral movement; its vector, so to speak, is the gesture of the woman in the foreground. [The woman points up a stairway to a vivid sky while encouraging a girl to take her first steps of ascension.] The action begins in front of the picture plane and continues behind it. The forms, indissolubly linked in an organic unity, are animated by a levitational force.<sup>5</sup>

It is a style in which "everything is designed to astonish,"<sup>6</sup> and regardless of whether the artist's imperative is anarchistic or utopian (in the case of Kennedy-Miller it is plainly more of the latter), one can hardly disagree with Judith Hook's contention that "baroque art [realizes] a freer sense of form," and that it is "often spiral in its movement, suggesting that the work of art will only be completed beyond its formal limits."<sup>7</sup>

It is not simply glib to draw attention to the word "beyond" when we bring these baroque notions to the third *Mad Max* film. Apart from the narrative, which drifts open-ended and saga-like through the trilogy, and through representational space, as the trilogy follows the fortunes of the "man who wandered out into the wasteland,"<sup>8</sup> *Beyond Thunderdome* is threaded together by the formal trope of the ascendant spiral. In the majority of shots in *Mad Max I*, the camera is noticeably earthbound or downcast as it guns along in a storyline that has almost nothing to do with levity or transcendence. By way of contrast in *Beyond Thunderdome*, once the banshee swoop

of Jedediah's flying machine has established the locale as the legendary desert, the film is buttressed predominantly with uplifting crane shots. The ascendant camera-curve over the gates of Bartertown is the first of a series. From that moment on, the pattern of movement upward and beyond is established emphatically. Describing arcs all the way, the camera is impelled to Aunty's aerie where it swirls around Max and Aunty as they hedge and parry in a subliminal dance of courtship. Then, minutes later the camera descends with Aunty into the Thunderdome to record the gestural performance of the Ringmaster. Everything in his demeanor is expressive of movement upward and outward. As he twists, scans, and projects to welcome the audience above him, he virtually announces the film's "vector" in preface to the gyrating, projectile movements of Max and Blaster in their deadly tryst.

The most eloquent of the film's baroque motifs occurs when Max's future must be decided by the spinning wheel of fortune. Even before it starts rotating, this symbol is pushed through several semantic shifts. When the radiant game-show hostess gestures the viewer into the theatre of fate, the wheel refers to an original context involving television programs from a previous culture. But the symbol twists almost immediately, with the realization that the TV game-shows took the wheel motif from a tradition of metaphysical iconography that spirals back through centuries. So, when Max chances his arm at the wheel, the formal logic established by the first twenty minutes of the film demands that the camera will pull up and away from the whirling ring that is to fling the hero into yet another state of becoming, *beyond* a stable personal order.

Most importantly, the film's "transcendental style" is not reserved solely for the Bartertown interlude. The "yondering" motifs pervade the entire narrative. Later, for example, among

the children at The Crack in the Earth, most of the talk, and many of the crucial actions (including when Max throws Captain Walker's cap to the winds), are inspired by forces of levitation and flight. This spiritual vagrancy is embodied most emphatically in the plane that forms the sacred site of the children's folk religion. At almost every turn, the film aspires to take off.

Of course, with any move beyond a status quo, a new beginning is signalled. This is to say that the baroque configurations, the plastic exuberance, and the stylistic effervescence of *Beyond Thunderdome* are right and convincing for the telling of a new myth of origin.

With each fresh beginning an adaptation has to occur, or else nothing new has actually started. In new times there are new contexts, and all available signs must be freshly assayed. With each beginning, a novel story (which is not necessarily to say an *original* story) must be arranged from the knowledge, grammar and motifs at hand. The stories are required. They explain the state of things, past, present, and future.

"Open your book at page one," says the children's record. It keeps talking, and very soon it asks, "Where are you going?" Inevitably, the reply declaims, "I am going home." The record from the past keeps resonating with clues about how we might interpret Max's story. These notions of destiny and domesticity are crucial to the saga as it has been developed in its third installment.

So, the record asks, "Where are you going?" and the answer casts our minds back to earlier in the story, at the Crack in the Earth, when the children entreated Max, "We're ready, Captain Walker; take us home." But the message Max has brought them, the message he has carried since the trauma

at the end of *Mad Max 1*, is that now, after all that has happened, you cannot go home again. You cannot rebuild without adapting old patterns. You must work with what is available, which includes the past. But you cannot *live* in the past. (In this respect, characterizations of Max as a modern Ulysses break down—Max has no Ithaca to lure him on and back.)

In the post-apocalyptic Australia that is conjured in *Beyond Thunderdome*, even historically validated notions of Australianness are no longer exclusively relevant. Although the film abounds with nationally specific icons, idioms, and leitmotifs, there are also a welter of *transnational* elements available as raw material for the reconstruction. On the occasion of a new beginning, nothing can be counted foreign or ill-fitted to the environment if it happens to be there, existing or surviving. Hence the presence of so much that would once have been counted "alien": the monkey; the camels; Max himself dressed in Bedouin garb; the Mel Gibson star-persona with his well-publicized Irish-American-Australian sense of patriality; Tina Turner in all her black Americanness and with all her legends of past survivals and rejuvenations; the exotic name of Savannah accorded to the girl who will tell the stories that will define the future. It is significant also that Savannah's second name is Nix, an austral-English word to put one in mind of starting from scratch. All these characters and characteristics need not be uniformly admired, but they can be counted foreign only if you still believe in the definitions and judgments that prevailed before *The Change*—if you still believe you can go home again, if you still believe in an English Australia. Indeed, this question of how to incorporate "foreignness" is fundamental to any redefinition of Australian culture in the last years of the twentieth century. And that, after

all, is one of the things that *Beyond Thunderdome* is most emphatically about.

The roads that rifled through *Mad Max 1* do not exist in the third film. There are only trails blazed at the moment of wandering. Admittedly, there is also the railroad track, a relic of an old order. But, as the denouement emphasizes, the train leads nowhere hopeful beyond Bartertown. (I am presuming that it is agreed that the film clearly presents Bartertown as the wrong new start. As Max tells the children, the two places to avoid are the "the nothing" tracts of the desert, where humanity is of no value, and Bartertown, where humanity is no more valuable than a million other commodities.) The direction taken, therefore, must be informed by novelty and adaptation. In short, outmoded myths must be bastardized or left behind.

The *Mad Max* films have been so influential in Australian cultural history because they have set out to adapt one of the most enduring local myths: that of the transcendent failure. Even until the 1970s, the legends of Sturt, Eyre, Leichhardt (and Voss, their fictional apotheosis), Burke and Wills, Pharlap, Les Darcy, and the ANZACs were still required by white Australia. For just under two hundred years, as the environment (and in the case of the ANZACs, the world) continued to rebuff the "advances" of Anglo-Australian civilization even as the culture persisted in its conquistadorial attitudes, myths were needed to rationalize, or to "naturalize," the continuous stalemate. For veracity's sake the myth had to be cognizant of the failures of the culture of dominion. But, for esteem's sake, some kind of glory had to be "explained into" the futility. As long as the conquistadorial attitude was not renounced, the unrequited outcome of the project had to be

regarded as romantically uplifting. When a quester pursues a myth as far as it can be taken, and he still receives no reward, then the failure itself must be mythologized, naturalized, and rendered ennobling and emotionally sustaining.

Since the 1980s, however, the imperatives behind this grand tradition seem to have altered. Success has become a popular theme—in beer commercials, corporate-raiding adventures, and highly selective celebrations of sporting triumphs. The battler has been superseded by a far sleeker, better groomed, and motivationally primed individual. Even Kennedy-Miller, after *The Dismissal*, *Vietnam* and *Bodyline* had sought to develop a critical understanding of disillusionment and humility, have more recently concentrated on stories valorizing achievement—most melodramatically in *Dirtwater Dynasty* and *Bangkok Hilton*, but also very pragmatically in the success story of *The Clean Machine* which climaxes with *achievement* in the same narrative terrain where Robert Caswell's *Scales of Justice* opted for melancholia five years earlier.

So, the grand tradition of the heroic failure is on the wane. And it is tempting to assert that the Mad Max trilogy could well have been one of the principal factors in The Change. Certainly one can interpret *Mad Max 1* as a spectacular valediction to 1970s Australia: Max begins his saga relaxed in casual domesticity, in a beach house adorned with raw pine, batik, and hippy-bourgeois bric-a-brac, but his "lifestyle" is terminally seared by a "devolving" world that he cannot opt out of. More specifically, given that the Mad Max films deal explicitly in the symbology of Australian landscape, one can argue that the trilogy analyzes the myths of failure by dramatizing white society's traditional conflicts with the land.

The trilogy can be read, then, as a chronicle of the collective loss of faith in the drive to conquer the environment. Max

can be seen to be a once orthodox, law-abiding suburbanite who is now on a journey of education. He is a likable yob who has had change thrust upon him, and he is now learning to live again by adapting his vision and his aspirations. Granted, *Beyond Thunderdome* concludes with Max still a failure (in the tradition of Leichhardt et al.) insofar as he still cannot return from his self-transcendent wanderings with any palpable prize, grace, or answers. He is still defining himself through negation: finally, yet again, he abjures society's pleasures along with its responsibilities. In these respects, Kennedy-Miller are still riding with the narrative energies contained in the waning myths. But more significantly, Max has survived; he has succeeded in *living*, rather than in *escaping*, Voss-like, into apotheosis. Max is learning and adapting. He is moving beyond the strictures of his heritage.

The trauma that blighted Max's life at the end of the first installment has forced him to move. When we first catch sight of him in *The Road Warrior*, he has already undergone change—he has given up trying to police the land, trying to coerce it to his law. Nor does he ever hanker again to return to his old role—in *Beyond Thunderdome* it is the burghers of Bartertown, not Max, who repeatedly invoke The Law. Having abandoned his adversarial attitude to the environment—having left the road—Max has begun to trace the contours of the continent, reading it a little more cannily, moving according to its dictates, and growing from it. Once The Change has occurred, he even encounters the odd renegade who is operating similarly. In *The Road Warrior*, for example, Bruce Spence's character wins Max's grudging respect by erupting in a geyser of red earth to get the jump on him. The successful characters are now the ones who are incorporated in the environment.

Max's adaptation continues in the third film, as evidenced in his desert clothing, his ingeniously customized camel train, and his now unquestionable status as an expert in the ways of the land. He is becoming one kind of native. Moreover, as a happy complication, he is also beginning to need society again, and he has started to ask about strategies for the future. "What's the plan?" he says to the convict after they have fled Bartertown. "Plan?" replies the convict, much to Max's droll chagrin. "There aint no plan!" Even more rehabilitative in its implications, Max glimpses, and *wants*, the chance to build a new community with the children from The Crack in the Earth.

But most pointedly, Max has not yet earned or learned happiness and security in Changed Australia. He's still out there in the wasteland. Indeed, as the bandage on his leg indicates, he is still carrying the immobilizing wound that he received when his world was defiled at the end of the first film. He has not yet recovered from the trauma. There remains an arid, fearful kind of celibacy afflicting the hero. In the second film, Papagallo's tribe attempt to persuade Max to come with them to "Paradise," where there'll be "nothing to do but bree-e-e-d": he declines the invitation, with a hint of embarrassment and an almost hermetic taciturnity. In the third film, the faintest of sparks glint between Max and Aunty, particularly when the romantic saxophone refrain which Jess had played in *Mad Max 1* heralds their first meeting in the acric. But ultimately it comes to nothing more than a husky *double entendre* from her and a faintly bemused glance from him.

Even so, the affection and the humorous cooperation that he achieves with the children indicate that he might almost be ready to override his affliction and move on to subjective success rather than take solace in a tradition of transcendent

failure. In the prologue to *Mad Max 2* the audience is told that Max had wandered out into the wasteland and that "it was here, in this blighted place, that he learned to live again." *Beyond Thunderdome* maintains this theme of reanimation, highlighting Max's vital ability to keep moving. The logical project for *Mad Max 4*, should it ever eventuate, would be to show Max learning to *love* again. There are myths aplenty to commandeer for that theme, but the difficulty would be to maintain the sense of chill that creeps into the epilogue of the third film when the breath of mawkishness bubbling through the children's return home is bated by the deathly quiet images of Sydney rotting after the nuclear winter.

This prompts another question which ought to prompt another essay: given the cataclysm that Max has lived through, could it ever be plausible, or even ethical, to portray him as happy?

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16. Tom O'Regan, in Ross Gibson, Tom O'Regan, Albert Moran, and Brian Shoosmith, "Interview: On *The Back of Beyond*," *Continuum* 1, no. 1 (1987), p. 80.

17. Eric Michaels, *For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu* (Sydney: Artspace, 1987) pp. 30–31.

18. Cunningham, p. 160. Cunningham notes astutely how integral the role of women is in the film's portrayal of the Track's system of delegation.

## 8. Yondering

1. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator. A Journey Round the World* (New York: Harper, 1925), vol. 1, p. 150.

2. David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1798), p. 6.

3. Germain Bazin, *The Baroque: Principles, Styles, Modes, Themes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 63.

4. Bazin, p. 44.

5. Bazin, p. 53.

6. Bazin, p. 10.

7. Judith Hook, *The Baroque Age in England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 11.

8. "Prologue" voice-over to *Mad Max 2*.

## 9. Remembering Art

1. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 18–19.

2. Quoted in Yates, p. 47.

3. For particularly useful examinations of eighteenth-century vision, see Marjorie Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's "Opticks" and the Eighteenth Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946); and Maureen McNeil, "The Scientific Muse: The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin," in L. J. Jordanova, ed., *Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature* (London: Free Association Books, 1986).

4. See Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 11.

5. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 67.

## 11. Paranoid Critical Methods

1. Joyce Carol Oates, "Against Nature," *Antaeus* 57 (Autumn, 1986), p. 238.

2. Dana Polan, "The Critique of Cinematic Reason: Stephen Heath and the Theoretical Study of Film," *BOUNDARY2* 13, no. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 1985), p. 160.

3. John Docker, *In a Critical Condition: Reading Australian Literature* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1984); and Tim Rowse, *Australian Liberalism and National Character* (Melbourne: Kibble, 1978), respectively.

4. For a useful history of the idea of nature as the ultimate evaluative yardstick, see A. E. Pilkington's "'Nature' as Ethical Norm in the Enlightenment," in L. J. Jordanova, ed., *Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp. 51–85.

5. See, respectively, *Electrical Storm*, Hot Records-Australia, HOTLP-1020; *A Portrait Chronicle, From the Book of Painting, From the Still Life, Work to Rule*; and *On the Beach 2* (1983), pp. 13–15.