

# ADRIAN MARTIN

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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

# the mad max movies

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CURRENCY PRESS, SYDNEY



SCREENSOUND AUSTRALIA  
NATIONAL SCREEN AND SOUND ARCHIVE

# AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

JANE MILLS  
Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us what it is to be Australian. But the picture can be blurred by unruly forces including competing artistic aims, inconstant personal tastes, political vagaries, constantly changing priorities in screen education and training, and technological innovations and market forces.

When these forces remain unconnected, the result can be an artistically impoverished cinema and audiences who are disinclined to seek out and derive pleasure from a diverse range of films.

Screen culture, of which this series is a part, is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the food chain that feeds the imagination of our filmmakers and their audiences. It's what makes sense of the opinions, memories, responses, knowledge and exchange of ideas about film.

Above all, screen culture is informed by a *love* of cinema. And it has to be carefully nurtured if we are to understand

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and appreciate the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and sentient value of our national cinema.

**Australian Screen Classics** will match some of our best-loved films with some of our most distinguished writers and thinkers, drawn from the worlds of culture, criticism and politics. All we ask of our writers is that they feel passionate about the films they choose. Through these thoughtful, elegantly-written books, we hope that screen culture will work its sticky magic.

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# Introduction

## Violent, Lacking in Social Value

'We have forgotten that kinetic quality of film, how the rhythm of those bits of film creates what you can almost call visual music.' George Miller, 1984<sup>1</sup>

'You've seen it! You've heard it! And you're still asking questions?' Goose (Steve Bisley) in *Mad Max*

No other Australian films have influenced world cinema and popular culture as widely and lastingly as George Miller's *Mad Max* movies—*Mad Max*, *Mad Max 2* (US title *The Road Warrior*) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. From a horde of trashy Italian exploitation films to the hip homage by the Coen brothers' *Raising Arizona*; from a low-budget, leftist allegory like *Diesel* to a grandiose Hollywood epic like *Waterworld*; from Australian rock videos by John Paul Young, Rose Tattoo and The Angels to the delirious, supernatural or sci-fi fantasy-thrillers of Tsui Hark in Hong Kong, Luc Besson in France and Guillermo De Toro in Mexico; from post-punk fashion to cyberpunk fiction and an impressive, Internet-driven fan base culminating in the 'Back 2 the Max' anniversary celebration at Broken Hill in July 2002—the trace of Max is everywhere.

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No one needs to be told that the *Mad Max* movies made a major world star of Mel Gibson. But the fame of the series has spread also through many, less stellar names. Some of the key crew principals who worked on the series went on to gainful employment in movies made in awestruck imitation: such as cinematographer David Egby who, ten years after *Mad Max*, shot the stylish futuristic co-production *Salute of the Jugger* (aka *The Blood of Heroes*) made in Australia, and another ten years later, the Vin Diesel vehicle, *Pitch Black* (the latter also handpicked Graham 'Grace' Walker, art director and production designer for the second and third *Mad Max* films); or Vernon Wells, one of the series' many colourful character actors, who became, among other outlandish characters, Plughead in the US low-budget sci-fi *Circuitry Man* and its sequel. And the *Mad Max* movies launched the career of not only an important director but also the innovative, collaborative production company of which he is a principal part, Kennedy Miller.

For Australians, the *Mad Max* movies are an international success story that, at the start at least, gave rise to some queasy feelings. Phillip Adams, a well-known media celebrity who was instrumental in relaunching the Australian film industry in the early '70s, remarked in a much-cited attack on the inaugural instalment of the series that it was 'doomed to make a great deal of money, both here and overseas',<sup>2</sup> while reviewer Sandra Hall ambiguously greeted it as a film that 'has about it the rare and heady smell of a money-maker'.<sup>3</sup> For such critics, viewing *Mad Max* must have been akin to a season in hell. Adams determined its content to be instantly 'infamous', while for Hall it hadn't 'an idea to call its own'. Journalist Martha DuBose, in a report titled 'Violent, Lacking in Social Value', put the outrage best: *Mad Max*

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was ‘so consistently superficial that one cannot excuse its appeal by ascribing to it higher motives or themes’.<sup>4</sup>

However, by the time that *Mad Max 2* seized the cover of the prestigious US magazine *Film Comment* in July 1982—a space reserved, until then, for the best of American and European cinema—a radical flip-flop had occurred. Some highly cultured Australians were more than willing to redefine their sensibilities to fit the new, internationalist, postmodern mood announced by the film’s awesome commercial triumph. This conversion was most marked in the local art world. *Art & Text*, the magazine that introduced postmodern theory to Australia in the early ’80s, showcased the proud declaration of internationally acclaimed Australian painter Jenny Watson: ‘The Australian artist of the mid ’80s is a sort of *Mad Max* character, the nomadic warrior alone with him or herself against the Beckett-like dead landscape in a nuclear, post-Capitalist society’. What’s more, she went on to evoke (with poetic license) the poster image of *Mad Max 2*—‘where the road warrior stands against the smoke of the destroyed petrol base, a black leather-clad figure against the red, grey and orange of the fire and smoke’—and mused on ‘how easily it could have been painted’ by any member of a generation of cutting-edge artists including herself, Dale Frank, Howard Arkley and Mike Parr.<sup>5</sup>

The dual local and international success of the *Mad Max* series is of a different order to that enjoyed by *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Piano* or even *Crocodile Dundee*. Miller’s gruesome, frenetic, garish, lurid, sardonic extravaganzas are neither ‘quality’ films nor feel-good, populist comedies. They scarcely fit the standard models of character-driven drama drawn from respectable traditions of theatre and literature—models which still dominate

our industry. As they garnered acclaim and even a kind of respectability, their paradoxical, hybrid status as cult objects became more glaringly apparent: they were a rare feat, these movies at once instinctual and meticulously crafted, vulgar and sophisticated, popular and modernist.

Moreover, Miller's films did not play by the rules implicitly set out in politically informed debates of the 1970s and '80s over the right and wrong ways to artistically depict our national identity (the kind of debates which have since become drawing-room repartee in the play and film of writer Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento*). The *Mad Max* movies seemed at once militantly un-Australian—in their embrace of a foreign (even imperialist) cinematic mode—and profoundly, shockingly Australian, not least of all for their rough, larrikin cheekiness.

Although there had been attempts at action filmmaking in Australia (such as Brian Trenchard-Smith's *The Man from Hong Kong*) before *Mad Max*, Miller's debut feature offered a virtually unprecedented blast of powerfully cinematic vitalism. Movies including Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris*, Sandy Harbutt's *Stone* and Colin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* anticipated some of its elements, but *Mad Max*, through the force of its inventiveness, instantly raised itself out of the realm of the local and into an international arena. And not just in market terms: *Mad Max* was the first Australian movie that carried on an effortless dialogue with contemporary filmmakers abroad. But the failure of Australian cinema to really learn from the event that is the *Mad Max* cycle points to an abiding resistance that inhibits our industry.

According to film academic Tom O'Regan, *Mad Max* 'rudely shook up' the twin priorities that Australian cinema had established during the '70s: ocker comedies like *The Adventures of*

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Barry McKenzie, and quality films such as *My Brilliant Career*.<sup>6</sup> It is often said that Miller's feature debut introduced genre cinema to Australia, but this is not quite accurate. After all, those successful comedies and costume dramas were perfectly generic, in the sense that every genre is a loose but familiar set of themes, topics, moods and conventions available for recycling or reworking. When commentators invoke *Mad Max* as an unprecedented exercise in genre filmmaking in Australia, what they are really pointing to is a particular family of genres, those which gather under the umbrella title of *exploitation* cinema.

What gave *Mad Max* its cult status, 'disreputable popularity' and subversive edge was the fact that it bypassed the niceties of middlebrow literary and theatrical genres—of the kind that call up from reviewers such as Evan Williams in the broadsheet *The Australian* praise for 'a dignified intelligence, a wholesome sobriety of purpose'—and headed straight for the badlands of action, horror and grisly black humour. This is a cinema primarily of sensation rather than character-based drama (the quality option) or laid back comedy of everyday social manners (the ocker option). The failure of our industry to appreciate the very particular aesthetics of exploitation filmmaking has led to the sidelining of several talented Australian directors who work predominantly in action-horror-thriller forms such as Trenchard-Smith, Tim Burstall (*Last of the Knucklemen*) and Stephen Hopkins (*Dangerous Game*).

The *Mad Max* series has been discussed in many, starkly different ways: as a modern hero myth that follows the ageless model proposed by Joseph Campbell (a reading encouraged by Miller himself); as an ideologically conservative fantasy of capitalism and gender roles; as an extravagant reflection of the anxieties and desires that inform the everyday lives of Australians;

as an essay on the national landscape-tradition, and 'Australian spatiality'; as a positive utopian reflection on the possibility of community and new social forms. In debates over the film, its cultural location shifts wildly. To the mythomaniacs, Miller's timeless tale might be set everywhere and nowhere; to postmodernists, it depicts iconic images like 'the road' that belong to Western society as a whole, or to what Miller calls a 'global hyperculture';<sup>7</sup> to local cultural commentators, it illuminates problems specific to Australian society in the 1970s and '80s; to Phillip Adams, it was 'unequivocally an off-shore American movie'.<sup>8</sup>

I want to complement and at times critique these existing approaches by paying close attention to an aspect which is glaringly obvious but often overlooked: that supremely cinematic attribute, *action*. One has to do more with these movies than simply allude in passing, as most commentators do, to a rash of fast cuts and extreme close-ups, 'violent movement and a pounding score'.<sup>9</sup> Any fan, theorist or filmmaker who makes the effort to really get inside the moment-by-moment mechanics of these films will discover how richly they reward stop-frame analysis. Conversely, the further that discussions of the *Mad Max* series get from the nitty-gritty fine grain of images, sounds, cuts and formal structures, the less persuasive and convincing their arguments become. The ascription of 'higher motives and themes' is indeed a problem when one ends up with a detached, abstract, second order analysis that loses touch not only with what Miller called the 'kinetic quality of film', but also the energy and novelty that made these movies such an astonishing *event* within Australian cinema.

My evaluations of these movies changed as I studied them closely and with fresh eyes. A decade ago, I rated *Mad Max 2* as