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**THE SOCIAL CRITICISM OF AUSTRALIAN ROADKILL CULTURE IN GEORGE MILLER'S «MAD MAX» SERIES**

*Film series “Mad Max” is the George Miller’s social critical statement about the Australian car culture that is based on auto-fetishism. The Australian car culture is a kind of consumerism. The car murder culture, within what car is considered as a weapon of murder, is embedded into the Australian car culture.*

**Keywords:** *Australia, culture, car, murder, consumerism.*

George Miller’s *Mad Max* is a bright representative of Ozploitation<sup>1</sup> and the significant and emblematic film series in the history of Western popular culture. In particular the second film of the series influenced violently on Post-apocalyptic thematic in cinema (for example: Lance Hool’s *Steel Dawn* (1987) starring Patrick Swayze, Lee H. Katzin’s *World Gone Wild* (1988) starring Michael Parí or Kevin Reynolds’s *Waterworld* (1996) starring Kevin Costner) and in video games (e.g. *Fallout* series), and on aesthetics of diesel-punk [9]. One of the scenes in the first film of the series inspired the whole film series in *tortureporn* genre known as *Saw* (1–7, 2003–2010).<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile with the first movie about *Mad Max* George Miller intended not only to make another one Australian action movie but to make the critically social commentary on Australian car culture. Thus, on the occasion of release of *Mad Max* in 1979 in the movie theatres director George Miller gave the interview to *Cinema Papers* and noticed: “The USA has its gun culture, we have our car culture” [3]. In the other interview G. Miller repeated his idea of Australian car culture: “In Australia we have a car culture the way Americans have a gun culture. The cult of the car. Violence by car” [7]. Garry Maddox illustrated the G. Miller’s “car culture” with metaphor “death by autocide” [7]. But I think it would be quite appropriate to denote Australian car culture as Australian roadkill culture. Australian roadkill culture was embodied into the George Miller’s film series titled *Mad Max*. From the certain standpoint the series can be considered as the critically social statement of George Miller about Australian car culture. Hence **the purpose** of this research is to explore the social criticism of Australian roadkill culture in George Miller’s *Mad Max* series.

American political theorist Michael Walzer thinks that social criticism is one of the practices of complains. Social criticism may have manifold forms of its expression and, what is more, varied effects on social practice: “Political censure, moral indictment, skeptical question, satiric comment, angry prophecy, utopian speculation – social criticism takes all these forms” [13, p. 9]. Walzer thinks that “the list may include too much” – and that allows me to consider

every text as a possible form of social criticism.

Here I'm following David Hesmondhalgh's interpretation of the concept of text [5]: text is a result of symbolic creativity which denotes cultural objects, artefacts and events with meanings. This interpretation of text differs from the accepted in linguistics interpretation of text what is as follows: text is a product of the speech process which is accomplished and objectified as written document. After the manner of David Hesmondhalgh I conceptualize linguistic term "text" as a product of symbolic creativity in general since speech is a form of symbolic creativity and text as written document is certain combination of written symbols (signs). All these gives the opportunity to create hermeneutics of cultural objects, artefacts and events provided by meanings (or better to say: hermeneutics of products of symbolic creativity).

*Mad Max* series is just the product of symbolic creativity of George Miller and, therefore, is the text from which I can extract meanings including critically social ones.

*Mad Max* series is a part of Australian car culture. Therefore, it would be natural to start from the examination of Australian car culture. Australia has 7,692,024 km<sup>2</sup> of total area, 23,990,800 of people population and 2.8/km<sup>2</sup> of density. It's no wonder that such big territories and comparatively small population demand automobiles as the main vehicles and branched road system. Constant movement in cars at long distances gives birth to Australian auto-fetishism and certain car culture. Scale of Australia influences on mentality of the Australian motorists allowing them to break the rules of the road and violate the laws in general.

There is a lot of research works which depict Australian car culture represented in cinema and appeal to the idea that filmic depiction of Australian car culture is a mirror of Australian social imaginary [1; 4; 6; 11]. I'd like to instantiate the noteworthy article of Catherine Simpson: "Antipodean Automobility and Crash: Treachery, Trespass and Transformation of the Open". She reviewed different works on the filmic depictions of Australian car culture and summarized them into the concept of antipodean (here it is the synonym to "Australian") automobility. Antipodean automobility is bond to a brand new dialectic created by the Australian filmmakers. Referencing to Paul Carter [2], C. Simpson considers that the Australian filmmakers have been tempted to invent a new dialectic between pioneer and nature or – better to say – a new dialectic between car-driver and nature: "In many Australian movies, the tension between nature and white car driver – the mechanical coloniser – climaxes in the form of the car crash, when cinematic cars and their white occupants are forced to stop, leave the road or are propelled into the landscape beyond"

[11]. And C. Simpson uses Meaghan Morris' trope of "white panic" [8] "to argue that it is the white settlers who forget the violence of colonisation and imagine themselves to be the victims of violence. The automobile collision in the Australian context can be read as an interruption to this "forgetting"; a moment of rupture in unspoken settler/indigenous violence. For many white Australians, being forced to stop the journey and engage with the landscape generates "white panic"; confronting "unsettled settlement" in a hostile, alien landscape where they imagine themselves to be "innocent" victims of car crash violence caused by "nothing" in particular" [11]. "Central to the concept of antipodean automobility is an absolute dependence on the vehicle not only for mobility but also for survival (or not). As a result, a constant fear or threat of immobility (through a crash, bogging or breakdown) in a hostile environment permeates the Australian social imaginary" [11]. All of these make the certain effects on the Australian social imaginary. First, as Graeme Turner points, "the Australian context uses harshness of the natural environment as an alibi for the powerlessness of the individual within the social environment" [12, p. 9] and, therefore, makes the dialectic between individual and (social or natural) environment. Second, the dialectic between pioneer and nature creates the dialectic between hunters and hunted; besides in the person of hunters or hunted there might be either pioneer or nature. Third, the dialectic between pioneer and nature appears as a displacement (in Freudian sense) of the dialectic between colonizers and aborigines: it's a collective unconscious attempt to suppress the white Anglo-Saxon male colonizers' guilt before the Aborigines. Fourth, the dialectic between pioneers who are the white Anglo-Saxon male colonizers and nature causes the dialectic between male and female or between masculinity and femininity, because women as aborigines are minority historically suppressed by white men [8, p. 80–104].

Resuming aforesaid, it can be said that Australian car culture is antipodean automobility what is characterized by the following oppositions: pioneer / nature; individual / environment; hunter / hunted; colonizer / aborigines; masculinity / femininity.

Now I want to show you how this antipodean automobility is examined by the Australian filmmakers differentially. I'll give you a few examples.

In the limelight of the story of Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) there is Paris, a small Australian town isolated from the outer human world. Citizens of Paris earn their living by arrangement of car accidents and gathering the stuff of people who meet the accidents. Peter Weir's film is based on the idea of wrecking that allowed people who lived on the coast to gather the stuff after shipwreck and sell them. Peter Weir just interferences this idea on to car accidents. In *The Car that Ate Paris* cars functionates as wild beasts which are

the objects of hunting. Citizens of Paris hunt for cars to survive. But in the final of the film these wild beasts strike back: youth of Paris destroys the town with their cars designed as wild animals. That's why the film is titled "The Cars that Ate Paris". Peter Weir's film operates with the dialectic between hunters and hunted: Parisians are hunters and cars are hunted. But it's more important that Parisians are the settlers surrounded by hostile nature and cars are the part of this nature. Moreover, Parisians are humans who refused to ride on cars and stopped moving. They chose to survive as the settlers but not as the pioneers. On the more complex level the interpretation of *The Cars that Ate Paris* is the story about struggle between civilization embodied as Paris and wild nature embodied as cars and their owners. In the context of the interpretation automobilists functionate as animals with the instinct to kill, i. e. as dangerous animals that must be killed. The good model of this interpretation is the main character of *The Cars that Ate Paris*: Arthur Waldo meets the car accident and is no able to drive the car until he kills the leader of Parisian youth and gains ability to drive the car again.

Another example. Brian Trenchard-Smith's *Dead End Drive-In* (1986) tells the story about a couple of young lovers, Jimmy who is nicknamed Crabs and Carmen, who goes to the local Star Drive-In to watch the movie under the stellar sky and to make love. But in reality Drive-In is some kind of concentration camp for young outcasts of society (weak, unemployed, incapable) and there is no way out. Living there young people create their own society in which each "prisoner" has its own place and created state of affairs suits them because young people don't have any perspectives in outer society. Only Jimmy wants to get out of there. Therefore, he tries hard to find missing wheel for his car because local policemen took the one. In the end Jimmy escape Star Drive-In killing the cops with the car. *Dead End Drive-In* presents critically social trying to find the sense of phenomenon of lost generation of 1980s that under the influence of consumerism sinks into nihilism and anarchy. I think that Brian Trenchard-Smith uses the theme of auto-fetishism to expose the essence of youth nihilism and anarchy: here automobile functionates as an identifier of human's status in society (Jimmy takes the cool car from his brother to impress Carmen), as a vehicle (Jimmy constantly tries to transport himself from the Drive-In), as a home (Jimmy together with Carmen literally live in the car), and as a weapon (Jimmy uses the car to kill the cops). *Dead End Drive-In* shows the consequences of a forced stop and impossibility to move on, especially by car. Thus, the film demonstrates that it's impossible to remove car culture (and auto-fetishism) from ordinary life of the Australians.

Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* and Brian Trenchard-Smith's *Dead End Drive-In* are the models of forced stop and impossibility to move by car.

They show that forced stop leads to destruction of settlement and trying to escape from settlement. In both films cars functionate as the weapon against established society, civilization; they are living pictures of wild force of nature. But in Australian cinema there are films about cars as the weapon against nature. I'll show you one example of this: Mario Andreacchio's *Fair Game* (1986).

*Fair Game* is the story about a young woman who runs a wildlife sanctuary. Three kangaroo hunters enter the sanctuary and terrorize her. They think it's some kind of game but the game goes too far: hunters kill a lot of rare animals in the sanctuary and destroy her house with their own full-sized jeep. The climax of the hunters' terror is the scene, in which the hunters catch the woman, take her clothes off, tie her to the hood of the jeep and run up on the jeep along the sanctuary. In the culminating point of the film the woman kills hunters; besides she kills the leader of the hunters destroying him together with his jeep.

*Mad Max* series researches on Australian car culture as a whole and Australian roadkill culture in particular. At first glance the first film of the series – *Mad Max* (1979) looks as a composition of films about tough cops like *Dirty Harry* (1971) and films about bikers like *The Wild Angels* (1966). *Mad Max* tells the story about cop Max Rockatansky (portrayed by Mel Gibson) who goes into action with the bikers' gang after bikers kill his partner, son and wife. *Mad Max* appears as a typical action motion picture but it operates with three oppositions of antipodean automobility: individual / environment; hunter / hunted; masculinity / femininity. In *Mad Max* bikers functionate as hunters who hunt for usual car drivers; the road is their hunting ground. Cops are hunters too but they hunt for bikers. In that case bikers functionate as wild beasts who can be dangerous and repulse to cops as hunters. Max as a cop functionates as a part of the road as the social environment that is constituted by interrelations between cops, bikers and usual car drivers. But when he loses everything what he cares about Max becomes an individual who goes against the social environment violating its (un)written rules and laws and takes revenge on the bikers ruthlessly. Opposition "masculinity / femininity" is presented in the scene when the bikers commit senseless act of violence against the Max's wife: hidden in the bushes they spy on her and then suddenly attack her on their bikes. Thus, it shows the essence of woman as a prey. The vulnerability of woman as the prey is stressed by the final moments of her lifetime: she is trying to save her son unsuccessfully when bikers run after her on the bikes.

In first *Mad Max* nothing tells a viewer that the film is science fiction. It looks like a simple action movie, a kind of road western where instead guns motor transport (motorcycles, motor cars) is being used as weapon – in a manner of speaking "a Mexican standoff" is substituted by "an Australian standoff". Meanwhile, first *Mad Max* was positioned as scientific fictional: the story of

the film unfolds in near Post-apocalyptic future but in the film there is nothing that could indicate it. In essence this characterizes some Australian motion films, e. g. David Michōd's *The Rover* (2013). Another thing is the second film in the series: *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981).

This second film was created at the time of 1979 oil crisis that went after 1973 oil crisis. *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* gives a meaning to this crisis. As early shot soft he film a dumb rate to a viewer that in the Post-apocalyptic future totalitarian and corrupted Australia ceased to exist. In contrast to *Mad Max 1* that shows violence on the roads *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* pictures the struggle for fuel. There are no more roads because there is no more state. But motor transport survived. The whole story of *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* is about a small community around a lone oil derrick. The community is under siege organized by the gang of blood thirsty bandits who want to seize priceless fuel. The bandits are interested not only in fuel but in technology of producing fuel – that's why the bandits wish to captivate members of the community, the carriers of the technology, to make them their slaves. Between the community and the bandits there is Max Rockatansky who also needs fuel.

Here are two analogies. The first one is as following. The community symbolizes European colonists who built the fort to defend against natives who want to seize the fort. In that case *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* is an allusion on the colonization of Australia and developing of the Australian frontier. The second analogy works on higher abstract level. The community, as a carrier of technology, is a carrier of civilization whereas the gang is barbarism, savagery that desires to get civilization goods by force. In other words *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* is about the less advanced society that tries to get the advances of the more advanced society. In that case road kill culture proceeds to another one level: if in *Mad Max 1* roadkill culture is embodied in civilization, in *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* road kill culture per se is a way to civilize uncivilized.

The third film in the series – *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* (1985) says nothing about Australian car culture because George Miller tried to make film for children and transform Max Rockatansky into Australian Indiana Jones. But within the story of *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* there is an idea that would be realized in the fourth film of the series: cargo cult. *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* tells the story about the group of kids who survive in the wasteland and believe in Captain Walker, some kind of Messiah. The kids believe that Captain Walker will return, repair their aircraft and bring them back to the civilization. The concatenation of circumstances makes Max Rockatansky this Captain Walker.

The last for now film in the series – *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) develops

the ideas of the previous films. In the beginning of the film Max Rockatansky (now portrayed by Tom Hardy) is captivated by the War Boys, the army of tyrant and cult leader King Immortan Joe. Max conveys to the Citadel and is used as a universal blood-donor. The Citadel is a residence of King Immortan Joe. King Immortan Joe is not only the ruler but the savior and god for the Citadel citizens, especially for under privileged children, old people and sick people. King Immortan Joe created cult based on the technologies remained after the Western civilization collapse and on the memories of Western culture. The bright example of the remained technologies is a pumped storage plant in the core of the Citadel. The bright example of the memories of Western culture is product water that is named "Aqua-cola". In some way *Mad Max: Fury Road* illustrates what would happen if the gang from *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* succeeded and could create a brand new society – a surrogate of the Western civilization that reproduced precisely the essence of modern Western civilization: consumer society. King Immortan Joe's cult is a crisis cult (the term is coined by Weston La Barre) based on roadkill culture. Thus, King Immortan Joe owns three towns: the Citadel, Gas Town and Bullet Farm connected by the only road. Between the towns the special armored car called "War Rig" together with the military support motorcade runs. The task of War Rig is the deliverance of bullets and fuel to the Citadel. The military support is implemented by the War Boys who believe that after glorious death they will go to Valhalla and ride there by *Range Rover*. The War Boys live in the Citadel caves. In the centre of the caves there are the Wheel altars. When the War Boy goes to war he takes one wheel from the Wheel altar.

As you can see, roadkill culture in fourth *Mad Max* draws to a head: it becomes the cult of road killing, a peculiar religion that justifies death. In other words car culture transforms into the car cult. Automobile is a symbol of status in consumer society that reveals the level of access of a carrier of the status to consuming of goods. Apparently, in this case the social criticism of Australian roadkill culture offered by George Miller draws its head revealing all absurdity of Australian car culture that in reality is the consumerism manifestation.

As the conclusions I may note that *Mad Max* series is the critically social statement of George Miller about Australian car culture based on auto-fetishism which is a sort of consumerism, and about Australian roadkill culture (embodied in Australian car culture) in context of which automobile is not only a transport but a weapon.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ozploitation (Australian exploitation films) is "a term denoting 1970s and

1980s commercial genre films including action, road movies, sexploitation, and horror films” [10, p. 44] made in Australia. The term was coined by Quentin Tarantino (“Aussiesploitation”) and Mark Hartley (“Ozploitation”).

<sup>2</sup>Australians James Wan and Leigh Whannell, creators of *Saw* series, were inspired by the final scene of *Mad Max* (1979), in which one of bad guys was given the option of cutting off either the resistant chain or his own foot to escape. Interesting fact: James Wan directed the most successful film of the *Fast and the Furious* series (an American franchise including a series of action films, which center around illegal street racing and heists) – *Furious 7* (2015) which box-office was \$1.516 billion.

**Константин Райхерт**

#### СОЦІАЛЬНА КРИТИКА АВСТРАЛІЙСЬКОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ «ДОРОЖНЬОГО ВБИВСТВА» В КІНОСЕРІАЛІ «СКАЖЕНИЙ МАКС» ДЖОРДЖА МІЛЛЕРА

Киноцикл «Скажений Макс» є соціально-критичним висловлюванням Джорджа Міллера щодо австралійської автомобільної культури, яка побудована на автофетишизмі. Австралійська автомобільна культура є різновидом консюмеризму. В австралійську автомобільну культуру вбудована «культура дорожнього вбивства», в межах якої автомобіль розглядається не як засіб пересування, а як зброя для вбивства людей.

**Ключові слова:** Австралія, культура, автомобіль, вбивство, консюмеризму.

**Константин Райхерт**

#### СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ КРИТИКА КУЛЬТУРЫ «ДОРОЖНОГО УБИЙСТВА» В «БЕЗУМНОМ МАКСЕ» ДЖОРДЖА МИЛЛЕРА

Киноцикл «Безумный Макс» является социально-критическим высказыванием Джорджа Миллера об австралийской автомобильной культуре, которая построена на автофетишизме. Австралийская автомобильная культура является разновидностью консюмеризма. В австралийскую автомобильную культуру встроена «культура “дорожного убийства”», в рамках которой автомобиль рассматривается не как средство передвижения, а как оружие убийства людей.

**Ключевые слова:** Австралія, культура, автомобіль, убийство, консюмеризм.

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