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The Motif of the "Lost Paradise" in Blockbuster Films Set in the Post-Apocalypse

Considering that mythology and storytelling are an integral part of the human experience, in this paper we will take a look at contemporary iterations of certain archetypal myths. While the authors do not espouse the idea that "science fiction is the mythology of modern society", we believe that there is something to be said about popular culture as a medium of narrative transmission in post-industrialist society. In this sense, the paper analyses the utilization of origin myths in post-apocalyptic science fiction movies: *Waterworld* (1995), *The Matrix* franchise (four installments 1999–2021), *Wall-E* (2008), the *Mad Max* franchise (four installments 1979–2015), among others. Common to all of these narratives is that they are set after a global catastrophe that frames the "Earth before" as a paradise that was lost due to human agency. Some of these narratives also feature a search for the remnants of that lost world (most notably *Waterworld* and *Mad Max: Fury Road)*, as well as "lesser" origin myths that pertain to groups of survivors themselves

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(e.g. *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*). In the context of current debates on the Anthropocene, an era rapidly leading towards a global catastrophe, and following Donna Haraway's work on storytelling, we believe that the act of telling these stories, and the *ways in which they are told* is of vital importance if we, as a species, are to survive. Furthermore, post-apocalyptic science fiction offers not only a warning but also possible outcomes exemplified through new, emerging and different naturecultures. These naturecultures range from the emergence of new and better adept bodies of a minority (which triggers stigma), to bodies which are increasingly dependent on other actants, e.g., AI. We argue that within the genre of science fiction these novel postapocalyptic naturecultures are framed as imperfect, and that such framing strengthens the myth of Earth before the apocalypse as a lost paradise. Consequently, posthumanist bodies are seen in a Biblical manner as bodies "after the Fall", rather than as bodies which have not only the potential to survive but also to prevent the catastrophe.

Key words: myths, post-apocalyptic science fiction, Anthropocene, naturecultures

Мотив „изгубљеног раја" у блокбастерима на тему постапокалипсе

Будући да су митологија и приповедање интегрални део људског искуства, у овом раду ћемо се позабавити савременим итерацијама одређених архетипских митова. Иако аутори не прихватају у потпуности идеју да је „научна фантастика митологија модерног друштва", мислимо да је у антрополошким проучавањима важно узети у обзир популарну културу као медиј трансмисије наратива у постиндустријском друштву. У складу са тим, у овом раду ћемо анализирати коришћење митова о пореклу у научнофантастичним филмовима на тему постапокалипсе: *Waterworld* (1995), *The Matrix* франшизи (четири наставка 1999–2021), *Wall-E* (2008), и *Mad Max* франшизи (четири наставка 1979–2015), између осталих. Заједничко за све ове наративе је да је радња смештена након глобалне катастрофе која „Земљу некада" представља као рај који је изгубљен услед људског деловања. Неки од ових наратива такође укључују потрагу за остацима тог изгубљеног света (нарочито *Waterworld* и *Mad Max: Fury Road)*, као и „мање" митове о пореклу који се односе на одређене групе преживелих (нпр. *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*). У контексту савремених дебата о Антропоцену, ери која убрзано води ка глобалној катастрофи, и следећи радове Доне Харавеј о приповедању, верујемо да

су чинови причања оваквих прича, и *начини на које се оне ӣричају* од животне важности ако, као врста, мислимо да преживимо. Надаље, постапокалиптични СФ нуди не само упозорење већ и могућа разрешења ситуације на примерима нових, различитих природакултура које се помаљају. Ове природакултуре варирају – од настанка нових и боље прилагођених тела мањине (што изазива стигму), до тела која све више зависе од различитих актаната, нпр. вештачке интелигенције. Сматрамо да су у оквиру жанра научне фантастике ове нове постапокалиптичне природакултуре представљене као несавршене, а да овакво представљање оснажује мит о Земљи пре апокалипсе као изгубљеном рају. Сходно томе, постхумана тела су виђена кроз библијску призму као тела „након Пада", а не као тела која не само да имају потенцијал да преживе већ и да спрече катастрофу.

Кључне речи: митови, научна фантастика на тему постапокалипсе, Антропоцен, природакултуре

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, we published a paper entitled "*Alien* and Storytelling in the Anthropocene: Evolutionism, Creationism and Pseudoarchaeology in Science Fiction" (Matić & Žakula 2021), in which we looked at the changing metanarrative of the "Alien" film franchise and its transformation from an evolutionist to a creationist narrative over time, in the context of current global events regarding, specifically, climate change. As we researched and discussed our paper, the role of myths in science fiction and fantasy loomed large, and became something we wished to research further, especially since we noticed that many of the stories that are told in contemporary science fiction echo or rework, in a myriad of ways, earlier myths told by various human societies (Banić Grubišić 2018), or modern and contemporary colonial myths (Matić 2015). Anthropological interest in myth goes back as far as anthropology itself (for a brief overview of anthropological theory of myth see, for example: Tomašević 2017), and various anthropologists have interpreted the social role of myth in different ways (e.g. Malinowski 1954; Levi-Strauss 1958). The general consensus is that myths serve to resolve life's great contradictions and strengthen community within social groups. Here it might be pertinent to recall Levi-Strauss' observation about the translatability of myths: unlike poetry wherein much meaning and/or beauty is lost in translation, even the worst and clumsiest translation of a mythical tale will get the meaning across, as

myth functions both as language and beyond it (Levi-Strauss 1958, 216-220). In this paper we argue that the trait of translatability also makes myths easy to translate into *other mediums* like comic books or film. On another level, the importance of mythical stories, both religious and political, in strengthening the sense of community and identity within different groups, and providing meaning for individual lives cannot be overstated. The other takeaway from this is that *stories can change the world*. They can become a way to hack reality, and this is where the storytelling for Earthly survival idea comes from. In that sense, while we're racing towards ecological collapse on a planet plagued by extreme weather events, wars and a pandemic, mythical stories that can reach a global audience in a short period of time are important: they can ease anxieties, provide escapism, but also give hope, instruct and provide meaning. While most post-apocalyptic stories echo the myth of the Flood in that they talk about the end of the world, they are actually about *surviving* the end of the world and beyond: these are inherently hopeful stories. And they are, in a sense, atemporal: even though they presumably speak of events taking place in the future of the world we currently live in, they are also *the origin stories of a new world*. The thing is that this new world must begin now, not after a future cataclysm: the point is to avoid the proverbial iceberg not play the fiddle on deck while the ship sinks.

In that sense, we believe that there are two main avenues of pursuing our interest in the mythical aspects of contemporary stories: the first is looking at the structure of the stories (in our case, films) themselves and revealing, through comparison, their similarity to earlier myths; the second, arguably more significant one, is looking at movies, the products of popular culture, as vehicles for the transmission of these stories on a hitherto unmatched scale (as argued by Banić Grubišić 2013, 143 and further).

Following the work of Ana Banić Grubišić (2018, 261-270), in this paper we view post-apocalyptic narratives as bricolages of mythical narratives. The author herself states that post-apocalyptic narratives are mythical stories – adapted to modern times – about how the world was destroyed and how it will come into being again. She goes on to connect them with myths about the Flood (as well as a slew of others), and the survivors therein, whose task is to rebuild the world (Banić Grubišić 2018, 261). While we agree that post-apocalyptic narratives in general, and those we have chosen to analyze here in particular, follow the basic structure – as narratives about a near-end of humanity events

– of myths about the flood (both Biblical and earlier[2]), we are more focused on the motif, more specific we argue, to post-apocalyptic science fiction stories, of the lost paradise (or loss of paradise): of a world that was lost, not so much through Divine destruction, but through human destructive action. While the distinction is not an easy one to make, and such stories are intertwined (a bricolage of myths, as Banić Grubišić states), *destructive human action* as opposed to Divine intervention, is the order of the day, and is what sets these modern stories apart from their mythical precursors.

Thus, in this paper we will consider the motif of "the lost paradise" in narratives set in the post-apocalypse: how it defines the Earth Before and the messages inherent therein. We will also focus on how changing, post-apocalyptic bodies are portrayed, and the emergent naturecultures that take the place of extant ones after the apocalypse. We believe that this is especially pertinent in the era of the Anthropocene, with the re-awakened threat of nuclear war, the encroachment of AI technologies on more and more aspects of human lives, as well as with the looming man-made ecological disaster that is the defining anxiety of the time we live in.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In her seminal 2018 book *Filmovi na temu postapokalipse: antropološki ogledi* (eng. *Movies about the post-apocalypse: anthropological reflections*), anthropologist Ana Banić Grubišić notes that, in films set in the post-apocalypse, the events that lead to the "end of the world" occurred in the near or distant past: the global catastrophe itself is not shown on screen, rather the characters are shown grappling with its aftereffects. The infrastructure, states, armies and governments of the "old world" are gone, and the survivors are left to fend for themselves. As the author notes: their situation may be described using Herbert Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest" (Banić Grubišić 2018, 95-96). Here it may be pertinent to point out

[2] Banić Grubišić cites Goldstein's (1988, 44) interpretation of the myth as a narrativization of a catastrophic flood in Mesopotamia. However, the prevalence of the flood myth in many cosmologies all over the world maybe indicates that this could be a narrativization, or a sort of remembrance, of the end of the last ice age. At the beginning of the Holocene, great rivers (Yellow River, the Indus, Tigris, the Nile) were mostly wild and unpredictable, however, around 7000 years ago flood regimes started changing towards more settled routines. Parallel to this, already in the Middle Holocene the melting of the polar glaciers slowed down so that sea levels all over the world stabilized to a greater degree than before (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, 286). While the authors are sympathetic to the latter interpretation, we could not find any bona fide scientific literature on the matter, and it remains just a hypothesis.

that "survival of the fittest" is a gross oversimplification of Darwin's idea of evolution (see: Žakula 2013) through natural selection: being the "fittest" to survive is a matter of circumstance, not individual action or violence toward conspecifics, as it refers to populations of organisms being fit to survive the changing circumstances on a dynamic Earth, and not to killing off all competition. "Survival of the fittest" thus has more in common with the "rugged individualism" of capitalist economic theory than with the biological evolution of life on Earth. As Peter Kropotkin famously noted, mutual aid is a factor of evolution (Kropotkin 2017): a fact that is glimpsed in post-apocalyptic narratives when the protagonists, working together, struggle against their oppressors and manage, more often than not, to win and build (albeit implied) better worlds in the future.

Writing about disaster movies, anthropologist Milan Tomašević (2014) notes (following Judith Hess Wright 2003, and Susan Sontag 1965) that genre films are often vehicles for the dissemination of political ideologies: they disrupt the everyday lives of moviegoers and terrify them within an acceptable social context, offering a happy ending (that often comes about through the actions of the US military or other similar actors) that serves to cement the idea of fundamental *safety* within the extant capitalist and military-industrialist system. While this is true of disaster movies[3], we believe that films set in the post-apocalypse are a different beast entirely: the failure of the existing system is a *sine qua non* of such narratives. This does not mean that these films aren't powerful tools of ideological indoctrination, it just makes them *even more interesting* in that regard, especially from the standpoint which the authors of this paper espouse. Following Donna Haraway's (2016) work on storytelling in the Anthropocene (Chachkhiani et al. 2019), we believe that post-apocalyptic science fiction is in a unique position to both critique the current state of the world (something that science fiction has, in different ways, and mostly in written form, done since the 1950s as argued by Đorđević 2006), as well as offer alternatives to current modes of livelihood in the future. The emergence of new social relations (Banić Grubišić 2018; Mandić 2022) following the end of the world is the most important distinction. That, we believe, is precisely why post-apocalyptic stories are important – they have the potential to portray different modes of adapting to human-made crises that don't necessarily include reverting to the previous constellation of power relations. However, post-apocalyptic narratives that make it to

[3] Tomašević goes on to argue that this is not the sole purpose or significance of disaster movies.

screen (in contrast to the more niche, written stories) often echo the fact that, as noted by Fredric Jameson (2005, 199), "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (see also Žižek 2010).

This is, in different ways, true of *The Matrix* franchise (in which machines exploit humans for "fuel"), of the *Mad Max* franchise (in which most of the storylines revolve around fuel and the ways in which and lengths to which people will go to get it), as it is of *Waterworld* (wherein the main villain searches for a map to Land in order to be able to rule and exploit it) and *Wall-E* (that offers a sanitized, more child friendly, version of *Star Trek*-like human life in space, after we've left a devastated Earth behind). What emerges as significant in these narratives is the fact that they all revolve around the exploitation of resources and humans (and humans as resources, as in the *Matrix* films), rather than emphasizing sustainable systems. This, however, is the crux of the issue, as post-apocalyptic narratives we have chosen here serve to lay bare the systems of exploitation that already exist in the world by, in a way, "toning everything else down" and emphasizing the modes of production. And therein lies the subversive potential of these narratives: by taking systems of exploitation and dependence on resources to their logical extreme, they present a critique of the world *as is* and serve as a warning about what may come. As Donna J. Haraway argues, we need to change our stories and they need to change the world (2016, 40). If, that is, we are to survive as a species.

Much has been written on "genre" in anthropology (Gavrilović 1986; Gavrilović 2008; Gavrilović 2011; Žikić 2006; Đorđević 2006), and while the authors are aware of the limitations of genre fiction in reaching a wider audience in the past[4], as well as the lesser value attributed to such stories in literary and other "high culture" circles, in this paper we are not concerned with the minutiae of classification, nor with class-based value determinations of cultural products. Rather, we are concerned with storytelling for Earthly survival (Chachkhiani et al. 2019), and view the narratives we chose for analysis simply as *stories* told, for better

[4] Thankfully, Marvel movies about superheroes have, with their billions of dollars in revenue, transformed the cinematic landscape. While it wasn't just Marvel that influenced the popularity of genre stories with a global audience (James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* comes to mind, for an anthropological analysis of the film see Kulenović 2011), it is now safe to say that genre stories – be they science fiction or fantasy - both in cinema and on television (wherein *Game of Thrones* 2011 ushered in a new era of serialized storytelling) are here to stay, and more importantly, are reaching audiences that, 20 years ago, would not have shown an interest in them.

or for worse, to a worldwide audience. Therefore, in the context of the Anthropocene, we need a collective identity for a worldwide audience, one which unites rather than splits, an identity which relies on a myth of survival on a dying planet.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

The Anthropocene is rife with apocalyptic scenarios – nuclear war is in vogue again, climate catastrophe is imminent, pollution is rampant, ecosystems are collapsing left and right, COVID-19, a zoonotic disease, is still (in late 2023) a major global pandemic, and the only apocalypse the species seems to have a handle on is asteroids – the only one not caused by human action: NASA has recently managed to successfully change the orbit of a near-Earth asteroid using a drone. However, the 2021 disaster movie *Don't Look Up*, directed by Adam Mckay, might actually present a more realistic scenario in the event of an imminent asteroid impact. In the film, the wealthy elites controlling the defense systems that could destroy the asteroid ultimately decide against destruction, in favor of redirecting the asteroid and mining it for precious materials. The redirection goes awry and the Earth is destroyed, but not before the wealthy (ironically, mostly old, white men) board a kind of ark spaceship and flee the planet, leaving everyone else to die. *Don't Look Up* is a subversion of the disaster movie genre in the sense that it shows that we are not *safe* in our current militarized capitalist systems, and it is a succinct metaphor for how capitalism is destroying the planet by choosing profit over people and the planet over and over and over again. Coming back to Jameson's (2005, 199) remark, it might be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but we would also like to add that it is absolutely necessary to imagine the end of capitalism and devise new modes of living if we are to avert the actual end of the world.

When considering storytelling for Earthly survival, we believe that it's pertinent to look at post-apocalyptic science fiction, as the futures it imagines are becoming more and more probable. The relation between real world Anthropocene and science fictional world consequences of the Anthropocene has only been recently considered (Eckenhoff 2021; Harrington 2021; Matić & Žakula 2021; Moore 2017, 37; Pesses 2019; Pesses 2021). Here we will consider these relations using the movies *Waterworld, Mad Max* (four installments), *The Matrix* (four installments) and *Wall-E* as examples.

In *Waterworld*, the polar ice caps have melted resulting in most of the Earth being submerged in water. People live in small communities on

floating atolls, regularly attacked by pirates. Although oil is necessary for water transport, the primary commodity traded by the movie protagonist is dirt. Dryland is searched for by the movie protagonists and is found at the end on top of Mount Everest. This strongly resembles the Biblical myth of the Flood and the landing of Noah's ark in the mountains of Ararat, as attested in the Book of Genesis.

In the *Mad Max* franchise, a global nuclear war led to oil shortages and the consequent collapse of civilization. This and the excessive American automobility[5] (Pesses 2019) transformed the Earth into an inhospitable wasteland. While the first film, *Mad Max* (1979) sees Max (Mel Gibson) trying to cling to some semblance of normality in a rapidly decaying society, the subsequent installments embrace their post-apocalyptic nature, among other things by introducing snippets of "newsreels" into the opening credits, informing the viewers that the world was destroyed in a nuclear war. The second film in the franchise, *Mad Max: The Road Warrior* (1981), revolves completely around the struggle for oil. In the film, the residents of a remote desert enclave that produces and refines oil struggle against a gang of thugs who want to enslave them and take control of the oil rig. A pervasive theme in the film is getting to a "safe place" that is known to exist, not so much a "lost paradise" as a new Eden. The good guys in the film need the gas in order to get there. With Max's help, in the end the residents manage to leave their enclave and find a better life, as narrated by the child who grows up to become the leader of "The Great Northern Tribe". The third film in the franchise, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) follows two main storylines. One takes place in Bartertown, a market town where survivors gather to exchange goods and services. There Max is engaged by Aunty Entity (Tina Turner) to help her get control of the town's energy supply ("pig shit") run by Master Blaster (Angelo Rossitto and Paul Larsson, respectively). The other storyline follows a group of feral children who survived a plane crash at some point in the past. They remember the event through the "tell", a story the older children tell using props that make it look like a movie. The narrative consists of remembering the past and a "prophecy" that speaks of a "Captain" that will return for them and take them to "Tomorrowmorrow land". Over the course of the film, "Tomorrowmorrow land" is framed as a lost paradise, a place where the children can settle and remember the

[5] While the Mad Max franchise is seemingly set in Australia, the real-world location is not really relevant. However, the notion of mobility and reliance on cars – or even camels – is a major theme in all films.

"Knowing" - all the knowledge that was lost after the end of the world. This place turns out to be the ruins of Sydney, and the children get there with Max's help, also taking the little person, Master, with them. They "light the city" so others will come. In this case, the ruins of civilization and Earth before the fall are explicitly framed as good and safe, and serve as a basis for rebuilding society. The last installment of the franchise, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) sees Max (now played by Tom Hardy) teaming up with Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron), a rebel general fighting to free the enslaved wives of the main antagonist, Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). What begins as Furiosa's attempt to run away, back to "The Green Place", an oasis in the desert controlled by the *Vuvalini* (or Many Mothers), a matriarchal tribe from whom Furiosa descends, goes awry, when it turns out that soil in the oasis went sour and everything died. However, Max and Furiosa (along with the other escapees) then team up with the Vuvalini and take on the armies of Immortan Joe, The People Eater (John Howard) and The Bullet Farmer (Richard Carter) – the three old white men running the three cities where survivors live[6]. In a move away from the earlier films in which the survivors, using cunning, manage to escape in the end and find a "lost paradise", *Fury Road* sees the protagonists take the antagonists head on, defeat them (with great sacrifice) and return to the Citadel in order to build a better society.

In the *Matrix* franchise humans initiated the destruction of Earth when they, due to reasons of corporate greed, decided to destroy the civilization of the machines using nuclear weaponry. However, this did not destroy the machines which then retaliated. In order to win the war, humans decided to scorch the sky so as to cut the machines off from solar power. This, in turn, prompted the machines to enslave humanity: trapping their minds within the titular Matrix – an artificial, virtual reality, while the biological processes of their physical bodies are used to fuel the machines.

In *Wall-E*, the Earth was abandoned as a result of capitalist culture, which left it buried in waste. The film's robot protagonist, Wall-E (whose name is shorthand for Waste Allocation and Load Lifting) is left behind to sift through the garbage. In the film, the arrival of the generation ship on which the surviving humans now reside, and with it EVE (Extraterrestrial

- The three "cities" are an apt metaphor for both late stage capitalism and toxic masculinity. The Citadel, run by Immortan Joe, produces and trades drinking water ("aqua cola") and mother's milk (sourced from enslaved breastfeeding women); the Bullet Farm, run by the Bullet Farmer produces and trades weapons; while Gas town, run by The People Eater, produces and trades gasoline.

Vegetation Evaluator) the second, arguably "female" robot protagonist, kick off a series of events that lead to the restoration of the Earth (to the "Earth before"), with Wall-E and EVE forming an emotional relationship that serves to liken them to the original Biblical humans, Adam and Eve (Reinhartz 2022).

POSTHUMANIST AND POST-APOCALYPTIC BODIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

We would like to argue next that post-apocalyptic science fiction uses the body as one of its central themes. The bodies which survived the various apocalyptic events or evolved after them are different to pre-apocalyptic bodies in many ways, as narrated in different movies. However, whether or not all who survived the apocalypse have the same novel bodies, or only some, is a question differently explored in the examples we have chosen. This is crucial for our understanding of how difference is constructed in these narratives (see Baldwin 2022).

Starting with the earliest of the franchises we analyze in this paper, *Mad Max*, we can note that the topic of bodily differences is not thematized by a simple binary opposition between the pre- and post-apocalyptic bodies. Bodies in this franchise are as diverse after as before the apocalypse. However, the *Mad Max* movies allow those bodies which would have been considered as abnormal or disabled in the pre-apocalyptic world, to gain prominence, lose their abnormality or even enter novel assemblages in order to go beyond their disabilities. The titular Max Rockatansky (played by Mel Gibson in the first three installments and Tom Hardy in *Fury Road*) suffers a leg injury in the first film, and wears a kind of leg brace and walks with a limp in all the subsequent installments. The disability doesn't impede him however, and the metal parts even prove useful outside their primary use. In *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome,* the third installment of the movie, a person with dwarfism, called Master (Angelo Rossitto) rides around on his giant bodyguard Blaster (Paul Larsson) who has an intellectual and hearing disability. These two individually disabled bodies become one able assemblage, called Master Blaster in the movie (Broderick & Ellis 2019, 44-45). It is as if the director wants us to see the madness of the new world becoming materialized in the bodies of survivors. This ableist notion in a way reflects the seminal idea of Michel Foucault (1988; 2003) that the Modern era in Europe brought not only the confinement of the mad in mental institutions, but also the close monitoring of their behaviors and their bodies, so that, in order to cure the mind, the medical practitioners targeted the body. In the world of Max, these bodies roam

free. Even in the most recent of the *Mad Max* movies, *Fury Road* (2015) we can see that what would have been interpreted as impairment before the apocalypse becomes a useful trait in a specific post-apocalyptic heteropatriarchal social constellation. For example, the wives of Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), the primary antagonist, embody the beauty ideals of late modernity high fashion. These are young slender women without any externally visible mutations or cancerous growths which are often found in Max's world. However, it is exactly this which paradoxically makes them disabled. Due to their physical appearance they are chosen as ´breeders´ for Immortan Joe and forced to wear chastity belts. This is a reminder that beauty ideals are quite often tied to asymmetrical power relations between genders (Matić 2022 with contributors). Contrary to them, Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) is a woman missing an entire arm which we can only suppose she lost in one of the many battles she fought for Immortan Joe. Her prosthetic arm enables her to merge her body with an oil tanker (Broderick & Ellis 2019, 63).

As argued by one of the authors of this paper (Žakula 2012), and building on Donna Haraway's (1991) notion of the "cyborg", in popular culture cyborgs tend to be portrayed as hybrids of machine and organism, wherein the hybridization comes about through bodily injury or impairment[7], as opposed to "uploading" one's consciousness into a digital world, as was Haraway's original idea. In that sense, it can be argued that Imperator Furiosa is a ("standard" pop-culture) cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism[8]. Master Blaster is also a kind of hybrid, except rather than being a cyborg, he is a symbiote of two organisms who work in tandem in order to survive and thrive – as noted before, mutual aid is key to survival in the new world, and even allows Master Blaster to accrue significant power in Barter Town where the film takes place. Enough so that the main antagonist, Aunty Entity (Tina Turner) enlists Max' help to overthrow him, which is the main catalyst for the events of the film.

In *Fury Road,* Imperator Furiosa wears her hair short like the men in Immortan Joe's service, which genders her as more masculine than feminine. This is heteropatriarchal ideology *par excellence*. In order to survive in the new world, women need to "man up". Furiosa is also

[7] Think Robocop, Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader and his son Luke with the prosthetic hand, Tony Stark/Iron man (before the whole extremis virus storyline).

[8] It is also interesting to note that in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the "doctor" – or rather, the only remotely qualified medical practitioner – at the Citadel is referred to as the *organic mechanic*.

designated as different (from the other women enslaved by Immortan Joe in "the Citadel") because she is infertile. This is something that is implied in the movie, but was discussed and stated openly by George Miller and Charlize Theron when doing press for the film[9]. However, Furiosa's infertility is not construed as an impairment in the film, and allows her to rise up through the ranks to a position of power, nor is it construed as monstrous[10], or putting her at odds with other women. Furiosa decides to mutiny against Immortan Joe and help his wives escape in an act of solidarity and rebellion. In that sense, her cyborg, infertile female body is an asset rather than an impairment in the post-apocalypse.

In *Waterworld* mutations are beneficial for survival, as we see in the body of the main protagonist Mariner (Kevin Costner), who has gills and webbed hands and feet – the bodily characteristics of aquatic animals. However, since such mutations are exceptional and not common for the entire population as in the *Mad Max* franchise, Mariner is subject to social stigma (Goffman 1963). The way Other bodies are framed and treated in *Waterworld* is a prime example of what Andrew Baldwin (2022) termed racial futurism. Therefore, we can postulate that the search for land corresponds to retrieving living space and conditions for the bodies which are becoming less and less normal, as the world around them becomes more and more suitable for those with mutations. Instead of accepting the differences caused by mutations and working towards common survival goals, the majority chooses stigmatizing those who are different and better adapted, and they search for a lost paradise. However, in the end the survivors are, with Mariner's help, able to reach the last patch of land in the world, where they will, presumably, live happily ever after, or for as long as they can exploit the scarce resources before they lay waste to it and are forced to start over again, or die out. In the film, Mariner's mutations are played as a useful novelty, and his ultimate "reward" is being accepted by wider society and possibly passing on his mutated genes to future generations in order to help them better adapt to a water world

In *the Matrix* franchise humanity paradoxically continues to rely on the machines it fights to free itself from. Humans awaken from the simulation

[9] https://web.archive.org/web/20150714090405/http://www.ew.com/article/2015/05/14/mad-max-fury-road-charlize-theron-shaving-her-head-eating-dirt-and-being-part (Accessed December 12, 2022).

[10] Speaking of infertility and childlessness in blockbuster films, Marvel has a horrible track record of portraying childless and infertile women as monstrous, most notably Black Widow (Avengers: Age of Ultron 2015) and Scarlet Witch (WandaVision 2021; Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness 2022).

that governs their minds and helps the machines in keeping their bodies alive (in order to use them as fuel). However, upon awakening, they find that, in order to save the physical world, they have to re-enter the titular *Matrix*, using technology, and fight the AI programs that govern it within the framework. Therefore, unlike the directors of the first movie in the series, we argue that the Matrix is far more than a simulation they carefully indicate to us when they show us the seminal work of Jean Baudrillard (1994) on the bookshelf of the protagonist Neo (Keanu Reeves). The Matrix represents a new post-apocalyptic human-machine entanglement (for the concept of human-thing entanglement see Hodder 2012), one which indeed includes humans in the world of machines, but in the same manner in which humans include cows and chickens in mass factory farms of the pre-apocalyptic ticking Anthropocene bomb. In fact, in the narrative of the movie, this gets an interesting twist when we find out that the ones who destroyed the atmosphere in order to cut the machines away from solar power, were humans. The idea that they are a geological force of the Anthropocene cannot be more bluntly communicated. Ultimately, it was humans who, by doing this, caused the machines to use their – humans' – bodies as batteries and entrap their minds in the Matrix. This is very similar to the already stressed dependance of humans on machines in the Wasteland of the world of *Mad Max* (Pesses 2019; Pesses 2021).

In *Wall-E,* the humans living on Executive Starliner the Axium, rely on machines to such a large extent, they become so obese that they float around in hoverchairs. This makes them fully reliant on machines in their daily life, sometimes leading to full dependance, since most of them never even turn their heads away from the holographic displays in front of them, even using video chats to communicate to people right next to them. This is probably why Oly Roy (2021, 59) describes them as a 'quasi-human populace'. In fact, the robots even play sports instead of humans. This is actually a prominent ableist notion – the association of obese people with laziness (Forth 2013, 144). However, at the end of the movie when they try to restore Earth from its remains retrieved by robots Wall-E and EVE, the humans lose their weight. Again, the retrieval of the lost paradise is the retrieval of normality which is also materialized in restoration of normative embodiments.

Finally, what we observe is that post-apocalyptic bodies are fully posthuman if we understand posthumanism as a number of perspectives that share the basic idea that the human subject should not be regarded as a stable bounded substance with ontological primacy over other beings and things, but as a decentred phenomenon constituted within immanent

networks or flows (Kay & Haughton 2019, 7). The post-apocalyptic bodies in science fiction are either abnormal, mutated and disabled or fully dependent on machines. The underlying message being that new worlds are inhabited by new bodies. Searching for the lost paradise is at the same time a search for or the fight for a normal human body, understood as the Vitruvian Man, an Enlightenment image of the Humanities man, an ideal of bodily perfection, the White, Global Northern propertied, straight, cis and able-bodied man (Braidotti 2012). However, one should stop and think here. These other bodies we encounter in the post-apocalyptic world are the bodies some of us already have. In fact, some of us have bodies that are stigmatized now (disabled, trans, queer, black, fat etc.), before the apocalypse started. Therefore, rather than telling stories about how monstrous the new corporealities can be, we should tell stories about how acknowledgement of difference, mutual respect and aid can, first of all, remove the stigma and form identities based on survival of different bodies thanks to mutual aid. Such stories could consequently create a social paradise for all, rather than ableist stories already destroying the world we live in and then searching for a lost paradise which was never there for some of us in the first place. Therefore, the Anthropocene bodies for earthly survival are Master Blasters, assemblages formed through mutual support for the benefit of all.

CONCLUSION

As was previously noted, post-apocalyptic narratives represent a bricolage of myths. In this paper we considered how the motif of the "lost paradise" figures in different stories set in the post-apocalypse, because the ways in which this motif is incorporated into them can shed light on the nature of the inherent messages they communicate. We believe that this is especially pertinent in the era of the Anthropocene with its myriad of looming disasters: from pandemics and climate change to the threat of nuclear war. What we have found is that the motif is persistent across different films we analyzed and seems to always entail a struggle to regain what was lost, with little to no critical reflection on why it was lost in the first place. In that sense, even though in post-apocalyptic narratives we have chosen the end of the world came about through human agency rather than divine destruction, the stories follow the basic outline of the myth of the Flood (in the case of *Waterworld*, quite literally): in the sense that survivors wander around looking for the remnants of the old world in which to settle and rebuild society, often on the same bases as before. Following Donna Haraway's ideas about storytelling for Earthly survival,

we believe that the de-centering of human responsibility for apocalyptic events in favor of "survival of the fittest", or rather, *homo homini lupus* narratives about survivors trying to regain a lost paradise by killing each other or fighting machines, serve to blur the fact that the proverbial paradise was not so great to begin with.

If myths are understood as narratives aiming to resolve life's great contradictions and strengthen community within social groups, then in the context of the Anthropocene we need to look for myths which acknowledge human responsibility and build upon signposts towards the survival of all, and not only the fittest. Of all the films analyzed in this paper, *Mad Max: Fury Road* comes closest to being the "kind of story we are looking for" (Matić & Žakula 2021, 680) – one that seriously critiques the current order of things beyond vague references to corporate greed, and offers a way out other than regaining the Status Quo. It does this by pulling a bait-and-switch: it turns out that the "lost paradise" within the narrative – the "Green Place" the protagonists try to escape to, was poisoned and truly lost, and the only way to build a better society is to fight those responsible: old white men who exploit women, other men and natural resources and trade weapons. Paradise is not a place to be found waiting outside the reach of "bad men", it has to be built here and now, by taking responsibility and taking on the Bullet Farmers, People Eaters and Immortan Joes of the world. Leaving the clean-up to the robots, and excessive reliance on machines will not work. We need stories that emphasize diversity and mutual aid, name the culprits who made the world a wasteland, and give hope for the future.

In that sense, it is important to note that the notions about the body in the fictional posthumanist, post-apocalyptic worlds we dealt with in this paper still (mostly) operate on humanist and Biblical principles, and position the body in relation to the lost paradise. We claim that stories for Earthly survival should acknowledge that pre-apocalyptic bodies are equally diverse as postapocalyptic bodies and that neglecting diversity is one of the factors which are leading towards the Anthropocene catastrophe.

Filmography

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Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome. 1985. dir. George Miller & George Ogilvie. Sydney: Kennedy Miller Productions.

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Waterworld. 1995. dir. Kevin Reynolds. Los Angeles: Gordon Company, Davis Entertainment, Licht/Mueller Film Corporation.

The Matrix. 1999. dir. The Wachowskis. Los Angeles: Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, Groucho II Film Partnership, Silver Pictures.

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The Matrix Revolutions. 2003. dir. The Wachowskis. Los Angeles: Village Roadshow Pictures, NPV Entertainment, Silver Pictures.

The Matrix Resurrections. 2021. dir. Lana Wachowski. Los Angeles: Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, Venus Castina Productions.

Wall-E. 2008. dir. Andre Stanton. Los Angeles: Disney Pictures.

Don't Look Up. 2021. dir. Adam Mckay. Los Angeles: Hyperobject Industries, Bluegrass Films.

Avengers: Age of Ultron. 2015. dir. Joss Whedon. Los Angeles: Marvel Studios.

WandaVision. 2021. dir. Matt Shackman. Los Angeles: Marvel Studios.

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