



The Cowboy Scientist Saves the Planet: Hegemonic Masculinity in Cli-Fi Films

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Received: 27.02.2020 | Accepted: 14.11.2020

Abstract: This paper argues that climate fiction (cli-fi) films constitute a contemporary stage for the enactment of heroic masculinity. In cli-fi films, the changing climate can be understood as a new frontier in which survival depends on traditional masculine traits of strength and bravery combined with more modern knowledge of science and nature. We identify the “Cowboy Scientist” as a heroic archetype in cli-fi films that embodies both traditional and technical attributes in an updated version of hegemonic masculinity. We examine depictions of heroic masculinity in two high-grossing cli-fi films with wide target audiences in the global film market: the US-made *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and the Australian-made *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Through a critical analysis of gender and the environment in these films, we track the Cowboy Scientist as he battles human and environmental enemies, cleverly combines primal intuitions with scientific expertise, and saves the helpless and vulnerable through a series of heroic feats. Scholars have long recognized popular culture as an important area of study because it both reflects and shapes social norms and values. Our goal in this discussion of heroic masculinity in pop culture cli-fi representations is to contribute to ongoing conversations about the relationship between gender and climate change (seen most clearly in *The Day After Tomorrow*) and the resilience of hegemonic masculinity to triumph even in the presence of defiant femininity (as shown in *Mad Max: Fury Road*).

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, cli-fi, gender, climate change

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For [President Theodore] Roosevelt, the major role model for American men in the first twenty years of the [20th] century and beyond, the cowboys and hunters of the West ... were the finest exemplars of American manhood. Having constantly to face the dangers of nature and its rigors, these men escaped from the confinements and effeteness that afflicted the Easterner (White, 1993, p. 11).

Introduction: Cowboys, Men, and Nature

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Enactments of hegemonic masculinity around the world typically take place against a backdrop of epochal challenge involving a quest to save one's reputation, protect women, children, and weaker men, and/or advance a noble way of life (Bly, 1990; Joseph & Black, 2012, p. 488). Contemporary imaginings of American masculinity share these nearly universal features, but often are framed in narratives of exceptionalism, wilderness, and the frontier. Theodore Roosevelt offered the clearest articulation of men's dependence on nature as a proving ground for the American character as "democratic, masculine, honorable, hardy, innovative, individualistic, risk taking, competitive" (Sturgeon, 2009, p. 56). In Roosevelt's guide to the "strenuous life," modeled after cowboys, hunters, Indian fighters, and trappers in U.S. history, he urged men to strive "for renewed meaning by glorifying the hard work and discipline of the vanished frontier" (White, 1993, p. 11). A man's mettle could only be tested against a wild world. Manliness was best asserted by confronting and conquering human and natural savagery. He viewed American pioneer settlers as "adventurous frontiersmen," and lauded the ranchers, railroaders, and cowboys who spread West as "men who greatly dared and greatly did...[with] a record of endless feats of arms, of victory after victory in the ceaseless strife waged against wild man and wild nature" (Roosevelt, 1903, p. 241).

Roosevelt's celebration of U.S. male vigor was motivated, in part, by his efforts to overcome his own childhood illnesses, and by what he saw as the threats to all American men from increasing urbanization and

wage labor in the early 20th century. He sought to protect the places that allowed for a cowboy existence and thus rescue U.S. national masculinity: “Wilderness areas [were] arenas where men could free themselves of the feminizing and corrupting influences of cities” (Sturgeon, 2009, p. 56). Because the vanishing frontier posed an existential threat not only to the U.S. Western wildlands, but to American manhood, Roosevelt became a pioneer of the first U.S. conservation movements to save both nature and masculine virility. Contemporary American masculinity continues to be rooted in narratives of man against nature. In the 21st century, when environmental concerns exist on a global scale, the cowboy— “a symbol of rugged masculinity”— emerges from American iconography and establishes himself as a central figure in what it means to be a man in the face of a global environmental crisis (Glotfelty, 2004, p. 128; Kimmel, 1996).

Masculinity and Popular Culture

In many narrative traditions, the natural world, sometimes enhanced by the supernatural, is an arena for enacting masculinity (Hultman, 2013; Jackson & Balaji, 2011; Sturgeon, 2009). Dystopian natural landscapes offer especially fertile opportunities for manly displays of valor, bravery, and ingenuity because they are unique settings not tethered to contemporary constraints. Although the threat to nature described in climate change science fiction (“cli-fi”) rests on a different logic from the vanishing frontier of Roosevelt’s era, cli-fi dystopian landscapes transformed by environmental disaster are equally rich venues on which to stage the trials of manhood (Brady, 2017). The depiction of men as uniquely in possession of essential knowledge is part of the construction of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to culturally embedded and naturalized actions, attitudes, and behaviors that assert male dominance and legitimize gender inequality (Connell, 2019). In contemporary discussions of masculinity, scholars recognize hegemonic masculinities as multifaceted, omnipresent, and legitimating gender inequality

(Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018). Messerschmidt (2019) summarizes their power and invisibility:

Hegemonic masculinities...are ubiquitous throughout society [but] often are simultaneously *hidden in plain sight*...hegemonic masculinities are so obvious that people do not actually “see” them—because they are everywhere, they are nowhere—and this social condition signals *bona fide* hegemony. (p. 17, emphasis in original)

In the context of popular culture, Sparks (1996) notes that action heroes embody hegemonic masculinity in ways that are so widely held and taken for granted that they are difficult to recognize and typically go uncontested: “the heroism, the villainy, the action, and the violence are in a certain sense invisible for as long as the masculinities on which they rely remain unmarked and unremarkable” (p. 349). For decades, scholars have noted that “the heroic agents of popular film and television...have, predominantly, been men,” and they have long proclaimed that hegemonic masculinity is inevitably and inextricably linked to action heroes (Sparks, 1996, p. 348). In her analysis of masculinity in science fiction films, Kac-Vergne (2018) argues that despite any “redefinition of hegemonic masculinity” that has taken place since the hypermasculine heroes of the 1980s, “white [Western] males remain the central figures” in these films, which have failed to “[challenge] male hegemony” (p. 192). Leikam’s (2017) discussion of the *extreme weather hero* in the U.S. made-for-TV *Sharknado* (2013) film series speaks to this. She advocates for close readings of cli-fi heroes in order to expose “the ways in which masculinity is decisively entangled with our imaginations about environmental crises” (p. 29). Her focus on an action parody TV movie limits her analysis, however, because such spoof representations of masculinity are purposefully exaggerated.

Whether exaggerated intentionally or not, global consumers of cli-fi films and fiction are quite likely to see the masculine hero, what we are calling here, the “Cowboy Scientist,” grappling with a complex unknown challenge and saving the day by virtue of his technical prowess and

bravery. The Cowboy Scientist is a heroic figure who possesses the extraordinary courage, inventiveness, and scientific knowledge needed to face any threat and find the solution to save humanity. As the one who is most equipped to facilitate humanity's survival in extreme environmental conditions, his presence legitimizes men's dominance in discussions of climate change science and policy.

In this paper, we identify representations heroic manhood in two commercially successful, mainstream cli-fi films: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004; hereafter *Day After*) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015; hereafter *Fury Road*). We find that the male heroes of these two films are not simply caricatures of the *extreme weather hero* in Leikam's critique. They are more mainstream, representing a legacy of Western (in this case, American and Australian) hegemonic masculinity that has made its home in scientific and policy-related discussions of climate change that extend beyond the borders of fiction into actual research and political realms. In both films, they are Cowboy Scientists—Western white men who are depicted as global male hegemony without whose essential help the world would end. In the following section, before we begin our analysis of the films and discussion of the Cowboy Scientist, we provide brief plot summaries and outline our reasons for choosing these specific films.

The Films: Plot Summaries and Social Context

In *Day After*, a global "major climate shift" is taking place and paleoclimatologist Jack Hall (played by American actor Dennis Quaid) calls for a change in public policy. His warnings are not taken seriously by the U.S. Vice President, who considers the economic risks to be too great. As the weather conditions worsen and the Vice President still denies the need for action, Jack fights the odds to face the weather and trek to New York City to rescue his son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal), who is braving the weather successfully because of his dad's advice and his own competence. In the end, the climate has shifted into a new ice age, Americans have sought refuge in the Global South, Jack makes it to New

York, Sam and his friends have survived, and they all get transported to a safer environment thanks to newfound military support.

Fury Road is set in a post-apocalyptic, post-climate changed world. After a series of nuclear wars over scarce natural resources, Earth has become a barren wasteland where violence defines interactions and the religious dictator Immortan Joe rules the water supply, the Citadel, and its inhabitants. Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron), an androgynous woman with a cyborg arm, is one of Immortan Joe's trusted rig drivers, and she uses her position to help his five wives ("breeders") escape his tyranny and abuse. She plans to take them to the Green Place, a female Eden from which she was taken as a child. She meets Max Rockatansky (played by British-born actor Tom Hardy) along the way, and they end up working together to survive.

Day After and *Fury Road* are both considered firsts of their kind—*Day After* in addressing human culpability in climate change and *Fury Road* in presenting developed female characters as action heroes in the established hypermasculine *Mad Max* franchise. Critics and commentators rarely put these films in conversation with one another, because, in many ways, the films seem to occupy opposite ends of the cli-fi genre. They have strikingly different narrative styles, and their social commentaries seem unrelated, one deals with the environment and the other with gender. We argue, however, that both films are vehicles for the Cowboy Scientist to rescue humanity and the future. In both films, the changing climate and the social distortions it generates are backdrops for heroic masculinity to perform and prevail. Both films position the Cowboy Scientist against a male antagonist who represents a competing masculinity. In both films, the changing climate represents a new wilderness, an unknown frontier that only men with particular kind of masculine bravery (cowboy) and technical knowledge (scientific) can conquer. The survival of women (and other men) in the films depends on the macho intuition and scientific acumen of the leading male character who embodies the gendered key to everyone's survival.

We compare these films because they were commercially

successful, critically acclaimed blockbuster hits. They stand in contrast to documentaries and art films, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) (often discussed alongside *Day After*), which have more self-selecting audiences, reflecting different priorities and the conscious use of social conventions to deliver a critique. Both films were marketed first and foremost as action films, and the principal motive for their production was financial profit. As Leiserowitz (2004) notes “their primary goal was to create a ‘popcorn movie’”—which means the films needed to be accessible in order to “draw a mass audience” (p. 26). Any environmental or social commentaries were “secondary goals.” This makes them particularly amenable to a critical examination of popular imaginings of gender and the environment.

Popular culture is an important area of study because it both reflects and shapes social norms and values. As Tanenbaum et al. (2017) write, “For every person who reads NASA’s most recent reports on carbon levels in the atmosphere, there are thousands of people who watch films like *Fury Road*. These stories matter” (p. 67). Yes, but they matter only if we are looking at the right things, which discussions of cli-fi are not, we argue, because they have failed to integrate considerations of gender with concerns for the environment. Critics have yet to address the ways in which the hero fighting climate change perpetuates a hegemonic masculinity that is deeply embedded in cli-fi morality tales. Until there are critical discussions of how men, women, and the environment interact in cli-fi films, the films remain co-creators—not critical representations of—a narrative that reinforces hegemonic masculinity.

In this paper, we identify the Cowboy Scientist as a heroic archetype specific to cli-fi films, where extreme weather conditions and eco-disasters create a set of conditions that require his specific skillset to survive. In the sections that follow, we first describe how the Cowboy Scientist is characterized in *Day After*, which is often considered the gold standard for cli-fi films. Next, we analyze Max as *Fury Road*’s Cowboy Scientist, paying specific attention to how his characterization compares to that of Immortan Joe (a competing masculinity) and Furiosa (a

competing femininity). Finally, we address the implications of our analyses for larger discussions of gender and climate change.

The Day After Tomorrow: The Gold Standard

In our discussion of *Day After*, we have three goals: to elaborate the film's contributions to the cli-fi genre before characterizing Jack and Sam as standard Cowboy Scientists; to analyze the film's explicit environmental message and its commentary against climate change denialism; and to address the matter of gender representations, specifically focusing on the absence of women in the film.

The Day After Tomorrow is considered a turning point in the genre of cli-fi films. It was a box office hit that delivered a targeted political commentary, and it was "undoubtedly the first film of its kind to cite humanity, namely western humanity, as the central and sole problem for the cause of apocalyptic events" (Livesey, 2014, p. 71). Fifteen years after its theatrical release, *Day After* has continued to inform the cli-fi films that followed it and remains "a ready point of reference for discussions—and visualizations—of climate change" for filmmakers, cli-fi fans, and scholars alike (Svoboda, 2014, p. 12). Current scholarship about *Day After* and subsequent cli-fi films describes the films as "cautionary tales," analyzes how they shape audience attitudes toward climate change, and debates the social and political "usefulness" of the genre (Leiserowitz, 2004; Manzo, 2017; Schröder, 2010; Von Burg, 2012). For better or for worse, *Day After* has established which messages are important to communicate, what types of solutions can fix the problem, and who has the authority and expertise to face the changing climate; therefore, its representations are especially important for analysis.

As is the case in all action films, the hero plays a defining role in cli-fi films. According to Murray and Heumann (2009), the eco-disaster film (i.e., cli-fi) “looks like most disaster [action] films in every way other than the way the image of the hero is constructed” (p. 10). Murray and Heumann (2009) see *Day After*'s Jack and his son, Sam, as *eco-heroes*—“a new breed” of hero that has only “the best qualities” of the other action hero archetypes (p. 6). These heroes “serve the community [with science] while maintaining solitary quests,” as cowboys would (p. 6). They see the “new” type of hero in films like *Day After* as indicative of a positive turn in heroic representation, but they do not question how masculinity is constructed or what the gendered implications might be. Salvador and Norton (2011) are less taken with Jack's and Sam's heroic ventures, arguing that they convey the message that “there is nothing we can do about global climate change” (p. 60). They see Jack and Sam as undermining the film's environmental message, because their “heroic victories are obtained through rugged individualism and the wherewithal to know what ‘really’ matters for survival” (p. 55). They read this as a message that “the only course left is to hope that nature will ultimately set things right” (p. 60), while we argue that the more subtle takeaway is that only the Cowboy Scientist can help us survive.

Because the Cowboy Scientist is genre-specific to cli-fi, it is useful to analyze in more detail how he is characterized in *Day After*. Early in the film, we meet Jack Hall, a climate scientist who spends his time in Antarctica studying ice shelves and is a classic example of the Cowboy Scientist. His relationship with his family is strained, because like the cowboy out on the range, he has a dangerous job that requires him to leave his wife and son behind for extended periods of time (Glotfelty, 2004). When disaster strikes, however, his family relies on him to save them. His work as a climate scientist may have made him an absentee father, but it is also the thing that gives him the “right stuff” to make the trip to New York City and be there for his son when it really counts.

In the Antarctic wilderness, Jack's strength and endurance are

tested constantly. In the film's opening scenes, he risks his life to save his research when an ice shelf breaks off and destroys his campsite (Emmerich, 2004, 00:03:43-00:06:03). So, when Jack reports his findings to policy makers at an international meeting, he is not making "sensationalist claims" based on abstract data or speculation (Emmerich, 2004, 00:07:56). His climate models and scientific training may inform his presentation, but he collects his own data and has directly experienced the shifting climate. Jack's physical endurance speaks to his "more traditionally heroic features," but he is also "intellectually driven" and has a value system that reflects those of an American "everyman" (Murray & Heumann, 2009, pp. 6-7). Wearing denim shirts and flannels throughout most of the movie, Jack opposes suit-wearing government officials and takes matters into his own hands when it comes to saving his family. At the end of the day, Jack is just a dad who will stop at nothing to reunite with his son. Both action hero and American patriarch, Jack not only saves the world, but also his son, who, by the end of the film, has "evol[ved] into a new eco-hero [Cowboy Scientist] like his father" (Murray & Heumann, 2009, p. 8).

Jack's son, Sam is a second-generation Cowboy Scientist whose intelligence and resourcefulness make him the expert on survival for him and his friends. When a devastating blizzard hits New York City and panicked survivors crowd the public library, Sam steps up and keeps everyone alive who will listen to him (Emmerich, 2004, 01:09:58-01:10:48). He burns books for heat, raids the vending machines, and tells everyone to stay inside. When Laura, his classmate and crush, gets sick (01:28:38-01:29:50), he fashions snowshoes out of wicker chairs and braves the blizzard to fetch antibiotics (01:32:25-01:33:01). On his journey to get medicine, he fights a pack of hungry wolves, demonstrating that he is every bit the cowboy that his dad is (Emmerich, 2004, 01:36:01-01:36:05).

As the first disaster film to feature the destruction of New York City post-9/11, *Day After's* environmental message is a "call to political action" and national "unity in the face of crisis" (Kakoudaki, 2011, p. 352; Livesey, 2014, p. 73). According to Livesey (2014), the film's environmental stance is an overt critique of the Bush administration, evidenced by the fictional Vice President's likeness to Dick Cheney and by "scenes undermining the efficacy of corporate lifestyles and contemporary capitalism" (p. 72). In fact, Kirby (2011) argues that the film's critical value lies in its depiction of politics. The science behind the film may be dismissed easily, but critics "could not, and did not, challenge the film's portrayal of [the conservative] political stance on global warming" (p. 180).

Day After's much-discussed environmental message is that we must accept the reality of climate change: "the dangers of global warming are real and continued denial can only result in disaster" (Von Burg, 2012, p. 11). This message is directed at the growing number of American skeptics who doubt the severity of climate change or perceive its science to be uncertain, despite the scientific consensus that climate change is real and serious. Studies indicate that the majority of climate change skeptics are white, conservative men, which is a crucial point of consideration in larger discussions of skepticism and climate change (McCright & Dunlap, 2011). This demographic also holds the most power in society; therefore, "Men not only are the primary articulators of climate change skepticism, they set the agenda, provide the funding, and are the main supporters of organized climate change denialism" (Nagel, 2016, p. 173).

The film's critique of climate change denialism is articulated by the white, male Vice President, who is the film's primary antagonist—he is a climate change skeptic who repeatedly ignores Jack's warnings and denies climate change is a threat until the very end of the film. Mimicking the rhetoric of real climate change skeptics and deniers, the Vice President accuses Jack of "making sensationalist claims," and

recommends he “stick to science and leave the policy to us [politicians]” (Emmerich, 2004, 00:07:56; 01:03:49-01:03:52). The Vice President finally revises his beliefs after the President dies in the storm. In his first presidential address, he calls for collaboration and unity in the face of disaster, expressing hope for the future (Emmerich, 2004, 01:51:43-01:53:30). Ultimately, the film delivers a critique against those who would deny the severity of climate change.

Day After takes a bold stance against climate change denialism, but it does not challenge the overrepresentation of white men as scientists and policy makers. The film and its critics effectively communicate that the problem is not that there are too many men; the problem is that those men must accept and address climate change as a legitimate threat. There is a notable absence of women in *Day After*, which communicates that they do not belong in discussions about climate change. Film scholars apparently agree, since hardly any—in academia or popular media—have commented on the absence of women in the film. In the scholarship about *Day After*, we have not found anything that meaningfully addresses gender. McGreavy and Lindenfeld (2014) come close when they identify the overrepresentation of white men “as decision makers and leaders” and men of color as “less empowered” in *Day After*, but their analysis stops with men (pp. 132, 124). The small number of women occupying minor roles reflects and reproduces hegemonic masculinity’s pervasiveness and invisibility.

There are only two women in *Day After* with significant roles—Lucy and Laura—and their primary purpose is to serve the men’s storylines. These women take care of others as women are expected to do, but their capacities are limited, and there is little they can do without men. Lucy is Jack’s ex-wife, Sam’s mom, and a pediatrician. When she is not being consoled by Jack or worrying about Sam, she is taking care of Peter, a young boy and cancer patient. Even though Lucy is a doctor, her care for Peter is limited to reading him children’s books and watching over him as a mother would do. Her supposed act of heroism is staying with Peter, who is left behind when the hospital is being evacuated. She “bravely” waits with him—until a *male* firefighter shows up to rescue

them (Emmerich, 2004, 01:25:04-01:25:47). Ultimately, her heroic act consists of taking care of a child while waiting for a man to save them.

Laura is Sam's classmate, love interest, and ultimately the reason he joined the scholastic decathlon team and is in New York City in the first place. When New York is flooding, Laura separates from her cohort to help a Haitian mother and daughter who are trapped in a taxi, and she cuts her leg in the process (Emmerich, 2004, 00:47:59-00:48:52). Inexplicably, Laura does not see the giant wave quickly approaching her, but Sam does, and he risks his life to pull her to safety just in time (Emmerich, 2004, 00:50:18-00:50:58). Sam risks his life for her a second time when her cut gets infected, and he faces inclement weather and a pack of wolves to get her antibiotics (Emmerich, 2004, 01:33:05-01:36:25). Her single attempt to be heroic to assist an unnamed, black, foreign mother and daughter ends up endangering Sam again, further demonstrating that women are not equipped to handle serious threats. Throughout the course of the movie, Sam evolves from a science student into a Cowboy Scientist, because the people he cares about need him, and he's the only one who can help them survive.

Other representations of women in *Day After* reflect reductive stereotypes, including an Asian scientist running reports and sending updates to Jack and his boys from the comfort of the lab, an unnamed blonde woman sexually distracting a meteorologist from monitoring the weather in L.A., a group of nurses in the children's hospital where Lucy works, and the female spinster librarian who hosts survivors taking shelter in the library. These representations cast women in supporting roles, reinforcing their subordination to men. Critical discussions of the film overlook the place of women in the film, which communicates the message that the only relevant roles for women are in relation to men.

Mad Max: Fury Road: Gender Challenge or Confirmation?

Our second film, *Fury Road*, has been widely hailed in popular and scholarly commentary as a feminist upending of traditional male action heroes because of its central female character, Imperator Furiosa—an independent and rebellious woman who not only survives but excels in a dystopian world of toxic masculinity. In the sections that follow, we challenge this reading, and argue that in this film, the Cowboy Scientist still manages to rule the road. We begin by analyzing *Fury Road's* representations of women, with a particular focus on critical debates about the film's feminist politics, followed by a brief discussion of the how the film links gender and environmental destruction. Next, we offer an extended characterization of Max as the film's Cowboy Scientist, and we conclude by we conclude by questioning the tendency of critical discussions to position Max as the standard against which Immortan Joe's toxic masculinity and Furiosa's feminist heroism can best be understood.

In contrast to simplistic and supporting roles of women in *Day After*, representations of women in *Fury Road* are more complex and central to the plot. On the surface, *Fury Road* seems to challenge the masculine-dominated realm of cli-fi depicted in *Day After*. The film is often read as a feminist hijacking of an otherwise male-centric film series, a fact that has incited outrage from men's rights activists and praise from practically everyone else (Garcia, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Sandars, 2019). Reviews published in the popular press have lauded *Fury Road's* feminist twist, portraying it as evidence that the franchise is "keeping up with the times" (Robinson, 2015, para. 5). Klassen (2015) explains that "audiences need to be saved from yet another male-dominated action flick," and "2015 doesn't need an insane wanderer, we need a strong and capable warrior named Furiosa" (para. 8). Despite fears that feminism will ruin the film, commentators assure moviegoers that "the movie is

fantastic, calibrated perfectly to appeal to fans of the action genre in general and the Mad Max franchise in particular" (Perry, 2015, para. 11). Feminism is seen to be palatable in this film, allowing entertainment, action, and empowered women to coexist. Furiosa may be in the spotlight, but "it's not like Max (and the other guys) don't get to participate in some truly spectacular orgies of violence" (Smith, 2015, para. 13).

Discussions of gender in *Fury Road* pinpoint Furiosa as a feminist action hero and Immortan Joe as a narcissistic religious dictator who personifies toxic masculinity, and in some readings, the white capitalist patriarchy (Boulware 2016; Yates 2017). Scholars have debated the extent of the film's feminist politics, especially the masculinization of Furiosa which stands in opposition to the sexualization of Immortan Joe's "wives" (Bampatzimopoulos, 2015). The wives' repeated assertion that they are not "things" creates the basis of the film's much-discussed critique of violence against women. The wives are vocal about how they have been mistreated; they have been sexualized, weakened, and rendered helpless against their will at the hands of Immortan Joe. In contrast, Furiosa has agency precisely because she "has renounced stereotypically feminine attributes" (Martínez-Jiménez et al., 2018, p. 413). She forfeits motherhood, long hair, and makeup in favor of driving a truck with a buzzcut and a forehead blackened by grease "war paint." The wives, on the other hand, wear clinging scant clothing and look scared, frail, hyper-feminine, and "sexy in an undernourished, 'lingerie catalogue model' way" (Di Paolo, 2018, p. 201). In the scene where the wives remove their chastity belts to reclaim their sexual liberation from male control (Miller, 2015, 00:33:06-00:33:37), they are seen "moistening their white sheer clothing" with a hose "in the middle of the desert" in an overtly sexual scene reflecting a familiar male fantasy (Martínez-Jiménez et al., 2018, p. 413).

The fact that *Fury Road* was written and directed by men makes some commentators hesitant to consider the film a true "feminist masterpiece" (King, 2015, para. 3). Still, director George Miller allegedly "recognized the limitations" facing men who attempt to tell "a story

about female exploitation and survival,” which led him to bring in consultants like Eve Ensler, who wrote the *Vagina Monologues* and works with women who have survived abuse (Robinson, 2015, para. 3). Ensler spent a week with the female cast to “give their back stories depth” by offering them “a perspective on violence against women around the world” (Del Barco, 2015, para. 7; qtd. in Dockterman, 2015, para. 5). Feminist readings of the film suggest that *Fury Road* may have overcome what Kac-Vergne (2016) identifies as “feminist tokenism,” wherein the introduction of “active female characters” simply creates “the illusion that women have gained power in postfeminist America” (p.2).

Gender and the Environment in *Fury Road*

It is not difficult to draw parallels between Max's world and our own. In the film's opening scenes, voices of men, women, and children explain that the apocalypse followed humanity's absolute consumption of Earth: “oil wars,” “killing for guzzoline [gas],” and “water wars” created “this wasteland” (Miller, 2015, 00:00:25-00:00:53). Even after human-induced climate change created a wasteland, this post-apocalyptic world still relies on the consumption of fossil fuels. The wasteland remains a wasteland because the environment continues to be abused. This abuse is certainly linked to certain masculine regimes. Tanenbaum et al. (2017) identify “water, gasoline, and ammunition” as “the backbone of warlord Immortan Joe's power” and a “synecdoche for the power structures underlying today's so-called developed world” (p. 64).

Critical discussions of the environment in *Fury Road* often liken the destruction of nature to the subjugation of women in society. Throughout the film, the wives repeatedly ask about the devastation of the environment, posing the question, “Who killed the world?” Although the question goes unanswered in the film, this question has been central to gender analyses of *Fury Road*, which identify men as oppressors of women, symbolized by the male destruction of the world. Gallagher (2015) argues, “there is no doubt that [the answer to this question] is

'men'" (p. 52). He identifies "unchecked masculinity" and "the glorification of war" as the culprits of environmental destruction, lauding the film's social critique of "several key tenets of traditional masculinity" (Gallagher, 2015, p. 52). Magnett (2017) argues that it is "perfectly clear" who killed the world: "It's the same people who keep making the world worse: men" (para. 4). Yates (2017) suggests that the capitalist patriarchy is a more accurate, nuanced answer to the question, arguing that the film "assign[s] blame for the 'killing of the world' (the creation of the Wasteland) to capitalist patriarchy itself, the system that Immortan Joe embodies" (p. 365). Boulware (2016) agrees, arguing that the question is not rhetorical, "and the answer is abundantly obvious: Immortan Joe, and everything he represents" (p. 5). But Max does not enter the conversation, because he is not seen as part of the masculine tradition that has killed the world.

Industrial modern society and its violence against nature have been fueled by a masculine logic that perceives "men/culture as rulers over women/nature" (Hultman, 2013, p. 84). Hultman and Pulé (2020) point to "masculine configurations" that "represent 'unmarked' (i.e., normalised) categories whose social and environmental impact on the world is hidden by the systems that created and continue to maintain them" (p. 478). Critical discussions are so preoccupied with the question of who killed the world that they neglect to acknowledge that it is also a man who is positioned to revive it. Max, not Immortan Joe, is an "unmarked," but nevertheless central, masculine figure in the film.

Max Rockatansky: Cowboy Scientist in *Fury Road*

Throughout *Fury Road*, Max maintains masculine structures through his physical strength and mastery of the environment. Max's self-confident characterization, expertise in fighting, and knowledge of the land make him a definitive Cowboy Scientist, though his strengths are more primal than those of Jack and Sam in *Day After*. Max roams the world alone. Like an animal, he is "hunted by scavengers, ... a man reduced to a single instinct: survive" (Miller, 2015, 00:02:43-00:03:17). Early in the film,

Max is captured and muzzled by the War boys, who call him a “raging feral” (Miller, 2015, 00:16:07-00:16:09). His primitivity links him to the land, proven by his ability to subsist on his own, unlike the disfigured people of the Citadel, trapped because they are “addicted to water” (Miller, 2015, 00:09:49-00:09:54). Max is “an archetype that celebrates the masculine belief that isolation and independence are sources of strength” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 54). He is a survival expert — “the master of his environment, ...who tames the land” for those who cannot, “before fading back into isolation so that his memory can become legend,” like all great cowboys (Gallagher, 2015, p. 54).

Max’s cowboy characterization remains unproblematized in critical discussions of the film. Critics have acknowledged him as a masculine heroic figure, but only to the extent that he provides a foil against Immortan Joe and Furiosa. Immortan Joe and the War Boys are flagrant representations of toxic masculinity in a patriarchal society, where violence defines a man, and women are sexual objects. Max’s strengths are magnified in his confrontations with Immortan Joe and his caravan of Half-Life War Boys for whom fighting is central to their way of life—a marker of masculinity. It is a grand performance accompanied by a soundtrack played by a musician strapped to the front of a giant war rig playing a fire-spouting, electric guitar (Miller, 2015, 00:17:00-00:17:17). Immortan Joe orchestrates the fight scenes, and though he is too weak to fight anyone, he wears a costume that embellishes his decrepit body with military medals (Miller, 2015, 00:06:51-00:07:22).

A clear distinction can be drawn between Max and the other men in the film. Max does not share “the masculine beliefs of the villains, nor of the men who ‘killed the world’” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 54). This is most evident in the scene where Max kills the Bullet Farmer, a weapons dealer who rides with his crew in a tank, shooting indiscriminately at anything and everything that crosses his path. The scene takes place off-screen in “the only action sequence in the film not shown head-on,” which Gallagher (2015) sees as a demonstration that “Max possesses a capacity for brutality that even the film wants to keep hidden” in order to maintain the distance between Max and Immortan Joe (p. 55). In the

scene, the Bullet Farmer is in hot pursuit of Max and the women, whose escape is temporarily stalled by an overheated engine. Demonstrating his authority and expertise, Max arms himself with a few weapons, tells Furiosa, “You need to take the War Rig half a klick down the track,” and disappears into the fog (Miller, 2015, 01:12:31-01:12:34). We see an explosion in the distance, and Max emerges carrying supplies and covered in blood—“not his blood,” Furiosa notes, it is the Bullet Farmer’s blood (Miller, 2015, 01:14:24). Max is thus capable of extreme violence, including single-handedly taking down a tank full of men who are armed with machine guns. Like the cowboys of “the imaginary West,” Max’s violence is for survival, and in protecting the women, he “serves a greater good,” which makes his actions not only “justifiable,” but heroic and distinct from Immortan Joe and the War Boys (Martins, 2019, pp. 50-51). Max does not have to publicly perform his masculinity; he just *is* masculine.

Max’s masculinity goes unchecked, and in many scholarly readings of the film, he is upstaged and outdone by Furiosa, a woman. Researchers often point to Furiosa as Max’s equal and the film’s true hero. The scene leading up to Max’s off-screen act of violence has been considered evidence of their partnership (Bampatzimopoulos, 2015; Gallagher, 2015). In this scene, Max wastes two bullets in an attempt to eliminate the fast-approaching Bullet Farmer. With one bullet remaining, Furiosa takes the rifle and stabilizes it on Max’s shoulder with the instruction, “Don’t breathe” (Miller, 2015, 01:09:41). Furiosa’s shot manages to blind the Bullet Farmer, and this scene has been read as a demonstration of Furiosa’s superiority — she hits the target when Max cannot. For instance, Bampatzimopoulos (2015) describes the scene “as a moment that disrupts the binary logic of gender and indicates the momentary possibility of a relationship between two equals, where gender is of little importance” (p. 215). In our analysis, however, Furiosa may outperform Max with a gun when she has his shoulder to stabilize her shot, but Max is the one who finishes the job with his superior hand-to-hand combat skills. Max is a better fighter, a fact that is established early on in the film when he first meets Furiosa and they fight. Furiosa attacks first and

proves to be a strong opponent, but Max still wins.

Acknowledging Max's superior strength, Bampatzimopoulos (2015) questions whether Furiosa's feminist characterization challenges or reinforces the existing gender order. He sees Furiosa as "the most challenging version of a female action hero so far," and argues that she is not part of a "breakthrough narrative that deconstructs the patriarchal world" (p. 217). Although the "patriarchal order is indeed questioned" in the film, it is not "disrupted," because Furiosa ultimately returns to "the private sphere" and Max remains an "eternal explorer" (p. 213). Although Bampatzimopoulos identifies Max as part of the patriarchal order, he does not problematize his character or make mention of hegemonic masculinity. The Cowboy Scientist's heroic masculinity is the reason why the film may only question, but does not disrupt, the existing gender order.

Martínez-Jiménez et al. (2018) critique hegemonic masculinity in the film, but they focus on Furiosa and treat Max as strictly supplemental. They argue that Furiosa "does not question hegemonic masculinity," and the film legitimizes a neoliberal social order "without questioning the social construction of masculinity or challenging the hierarchical gender complementarity" (pp. 413, 415). Furiosa not only neglects to challenge hegemonic masculinity, she conforms to it. Her strength comes from the fact that she "renounced stereotypically feminine attributes" (Martínez-Jiménez et al., 2018, p. 413). Although they recognize Max as "the real protagonist of the film," given "the story is actually told from [his] subjective point of view," they do not engage his characterization beyond that (p. 412). They argue that "hegemonic masculinity goes unquestioned" in the film because Furiosa "[has] assumed its terms," not because Max embodies it (p. 413). Furiosa—not Max—is at the center of their discussion of hegemonic masculinity. Even if Furiosa has "embrac[ed] the dominant male codes" of the gender hegemony (Martínez-Jiménez et al., 2018, p. 413), we conclude that she cannot be a Cowboy Scientist, because she lacks the necessary environmental intuition and masculine skillset afforded to men like Max. If Furiosa's successes can be attributed to the masculine characteristics

she has adopted, then her failures are the result of what remains of her femininity. In cli-fi films, only men can be Cowboy Scientists.

In *Fury Road*, women are not equipped to survive the changing climate on their own, even with Furiosa's help. The Vuvalini feminist enclave from which Furiosa originated, were unable to adapt to the conditions of the shifting climate, and most of their clan died after failing to keep the Green Place alive. Those who remain rely on their attractive leader, who uses her naked body as "bait" to distract enemies; their war tactics are based on her body and sexuality (Miller, 2015, 01:17:45). Furiosa's journey back to the Green Place provides the basis of the film's plot, but when it comes to environmental destruction and climate change, there is no going back. The Green Place "has since withered and died because of climate change" (Di Paolo, 2018, p. 202). When she finds out that she has been pursuing something that no longer exists, she decides to continue moving east. This decision offers no practical solutions to their material situation—just hope for something better. She invites Max to come along, because, while she has apparently assumed control of the Vuvalini and makes decisions for the women, she cannot speak for him. He declines, explaining, "I'll make my own way," as cowboys do, warning her, "You know, hope is a mistake—If you can't fix what's broken, you'll go insane" (Miller, 2015, 01:25:05-01:25:30).

Sensing the women's chances of survival are slim, Max feels a pang of guilt and uses his environmental expertise to invent a better solution to the problem than the women's blind hope; he convinces Furiosa to turn back and seize the Citadel, where there is known water and resources. She has a better chance at survival "fix[ing] what's broken" in the Citadel, which succeeded where the Green Place failed. There is nothing wrong with the existing structure, just the man in charge. The film may have communicated the message that men like Immortan Joe have "killed the world," but it is only men like Max who know how to ensure everyone's survival.

Critical discussions of the film seldom explore these implications of Max's intervention. Di Paolo (2018) recognizes that Max "offers key

advice" to Furiosa, but he argues that while they "benefit from Max's help," Furiosa and the other women "do not *need* him to ride in like a white knight to save them" (pp. 202-203). Max may not be "a white knight," but he is not inconsequential. Di Paolo (2018) promotes Max from mere sidekick to feminist ally—a "champion of freedom" who should be "instructive to males in the audience" (p. 202). Valenti (2015) proposes an alternative title, "Mad Max: Feminist Ally" (para. 5), which aligns with Magnett's (2017) perception of Max as "a true ally and someone worthy of admiration," and by the end of the film, argues that Max has realized "feminism is necessary not only for women, but for the creation of a better world" (paras. 16, 23).

Max, however, is the one who convinces the women to "claim the Citadel" (Di Paolo, 2018, p. 202), facilitates its successful overthrow, remains unscathed, and then uses his own blood to save the mortally-wounded Furiosa so that she can rise to power. In the film's final scenes, after the women assume control over the Citadel, Max tips his proverbial cowboy hat and exchanges a respectful nod with Furiosa before disappearing from view (Miller, 2015, 01:52:49-01:52:55). His decision to return to wilderness bespeaks the masculine tropes of self-reliance, independence, wanderlust, and adventurousness. For cowboys, "there is an implicit rejection of a feminized civility in favour of a reunion with wild nature" (Sparks, 1996, p. 352). Max's departure reflects a critical element of the hegemonic masculinity well-integrated into the film: sangfroid modesty, which Verevis (2019) notes, is fully on display at the film's end: "Furiosa kills Joe, and upon arriving at the Citadel she is heralded as a liberator. Meanwhile, with only a parting nod to Furiosa, the still reluctant hero, Max, slips quietly away into the crowd" (p. 142).

Max may have played an instrumental role in Furiosa's survival and success, but in the end, he leaves, because he is a Cowboy Scientist, not a feminist ally. When Max is construed as an ally, his knowledge of the land is understood as advice, his ability to save Furiosa is read as an equal partnership, and his leaving at the end is seen as knowing his place to step aside and let the women take over. When Max is not recognized as the Cowboy Scientist, hegemonic masculinity not only hides in plain

sight, but also appears as a counter-hegemonic, safe feminist ally deserving praise.

Conclusion

We have argued here that the Cowboy Scientist is a heroic archetype of cli-fi films that valorizes a hegemonic masculinity, a valorization that remains unrecognized in most film scholarship. In cli-fi films, Cowboy Scientists overcome the dangers of the wilderness (cowboys' skillset), and find solutions to the environmental calamity (scientists' strengths). Fighting, which is central to most demonstrations of masculinity, is embedded in both of these enterprises and is a core component of Cowboy Scientist masculinity. The Cowboy Scientists we have analyzed here may seem as different as their respective films, but in each they demonstrate masculine insights and essential expertise that enable them to survive in the wilderness and engage in plenty of fighting along the way. In many scholarly discussions of heroism in *Day After* and *Fury Road*, Jack and Sam Hall are praised, while Max is seen to be eclipsed by Furiosa who is asserted to be the true hero of the film. We argue that the hegemonic nature of the Cowboy Scientist allows him to go unnoticed, yet remain highly visible as a masculine presence. The Cowboy Scientist is the personification of modest hegemonic masculinity. He is a minimalist everyman that the public can get behind. He is not excessive, and he is quietly courageous. The portrayals of climate change in these films may be hyperbolic, but the Cowboy Scientist's actions and concerns certainly are not.

Day After is the most discussed cli-fi film of all time, but in the years since its premiere, there has yet to be a substantial discussion of the stereotypical depiction and limited presence of women in the film. The spotlight is on the men in *Day After*, who are portrayed as representing the interests of the common good. In contrast, women dominate the analytical focus in *Fury Road*, and their importance tends to be overstated, camouflaging Max's centrality; he is considered by scholars as inconsequential because the presumed real hero is a woman.

On the surface, *Fury Road*'s strong female characters may seem to challenge *Day After*'s masculine-dominated realm of cli-fi and heroes, but both films create space for the timeless Cowboy Scientist. Both films communicate the message that the existing gender structures need not change and the overrepresentation of men is not a problem. Men like the Vice President in *Day After* and Immortan Joe in *Fury Road* are powerful, but not hegemonic; they must change their ways or be deposed. Despite their differences, one takeaway message from both films is that the Cowboy Scientist reigns eternal: Jack is *not* a negligent politician, and Max is *not* Immortan Joe. A second, less obvious message imbedded in both films is that while men and their machines may have destroyed the planet, masculinity is the only way to save it.

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Gezegeni Kurtaran Kovboy Biliminsanı:
İklimkurgu Filmlerinde Hegemonik Erkeklik

Öz: Bu makale iklimkurgu (*cli-fi*) filmlerinin kahraman erkekliğin canlandırıldığı çağdaş bir sahne işlevi gördüğünü savunmaktadır. Bu filmlerde, değişmekte olan iklim yeni bir hudut bölgesi olarak yorumlanabilir. Bu yeni hudut bölgesinde hayatta kalmak için geleneksel erkeklik özellikleri olan güç ve cesaret ile birlikte modern bilim ve doğa bilgisi de gerekmektedir. Bu makalede “Kovboy Biliminsanı”nı, bünyesinde güncel hegemonik erkekliğin hem geleneksel hem de teknik özelliklerini barındıran iklimkurgu filmi kahramanı arketipi olarak tanımlamaktayız. Küresel film pazarında geniş bir izleyici kitlesini hedef alan iki yüksek hasılatlı iklimkurgu filmindeki – Amerikan yapımı *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) ve Avustralya yapımı *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) – kahraman erkeklik betimlemelerini incelemekteyiz. Bu filmlerde yer alan toplumsal cinsiyet ve doğa temsillerini eleştirel bir analize tabi tutarak, Kovboy Biliminsanının insan ve doğa formundaki düşmanlarla savaşmasının, bilimsel uzmanlıkla ilkel sezgileri zekice birleştirmesinin ve bir dizi kahramanlık marifeti ile yardıma muhtaç ve kırılgan olanları kurtarmasının izini sürüyoruz. Popüler kültür, toplumsal normları ve değerleri yansıttığı ve şekillendirdiği için araştırmacılar tarafından uzun zamandır önemli bir çalışma alanı olarak kabul edilmektedir. Pop kültürün iklimkurgu temsillerindeki kahraman erkeklik üzerine yürüttüğümüz bu tartışma ile amacımız, (*The Day After Tomorrow*'da en net şekilde görülen) toplumsal cinsiyet ve iklim değişikliği arasındaki ilişki ile meydan okuyan kadınlığın mevcut olduğu durumda dahi (*Mad Max: Fury Road*'da görüldüğü üzere) hegemonik erkekliğin dirençliliği üzerine yürütülen tartışmalara katkı sağlamak.

Keywords: Hegemonik erkeklik, iklimkurgu, toplumsal cinsiyet, iklim değişikliği