

# **Milk, Blood and Oil: Petro-Melancholia and the Unruly Female Body in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Mad Max: Fury Road***



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## **Abstract**

This article explores the trope of fertility-anxiety in the work of imagining post-apocalyptic ecologies where fertile women are considered scarce resources, in the cult-favourites, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) directed by George Miller. I introduce the concept of 'petropatriarchy' to describe hegemonic forces which take advantage of gender inequalities to control economies of extraction, as illustrated in these texts. By interrogating the petropatriarchy's relationship with oil as a fetishised fluid, I propose that these texts illuminate a similar fetishisation of the reproductive fluids, milk and blood—one that manifests out of the dwindling of oil resources and the unsustainability of oil. I read the petropatriarchy's inability to think beyond modes of extraction and its reliance on hyper-regulation of women as a manifestation of a melancholy attachment to an unfulfilled, masculine, oil imaginary. This petromelancholia however, is perpetuated by the leaking, unruly female body's refusal to be subsumed.

## **Keywords**

*Petromasculinity, social reproduction, petrofiction, ecofeminism*

## **Introduction**

Milk, Blood and Oil. These are the coveted fluids in the utopic imagination of total energy control and efficiency. When a child 'slithers out' of its mother's womb, oily and 'slick with fluid and blood,' it is already entangled with fantasies of fossil-fueled progress (Atwood, 1998, p. 126).

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Reproduction is crucial to the success of patriarchal, capitalist forces, and its associated fluids—milk and blood—become resources that seem possible to be extracted in the same way as oil, from its repository, the female body. I refer to these forces as ‘petropatriarches,’ which, like contemporary patriarchal systems, impose social and cultural control which privileges men. Crucially, the specificity of ‘petro’ draws attention to a hegemonic order which takes advantage of gender inequalities to control economies of extraction. What the petropatriarchy ignores, however, is the ‘voice crying in the wilderness [...] the voice of a woman, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced, but savage’ (Cixous and Clément, 1986, p. ix): A woman whose unruly, leaking body resists extraction over and over.

Concerns of fertility and reproduction in speculative fiction can be traced across the twentieth century from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Anthony Burgess’s *The Wanting Seed* (1962), and *Children of Men* (1992) by P. D. James, to contemporary novels like *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma and Joanne Ramos’ *The Farm* (2019). The recurring trope of fertility-anxiety suggests that the work of imagining post-apocalyptic ecologies entails a particular crisis of reproduction. This article seeks to understand the extractive relationship between petropatriarchies and the female body through two texts, which dramatise and magnify this tension by situating them in contexts where fertile women are considered scarce resources—*The Handmaid’s Tale* (1998; originally published 1985) by Margaret Atwood, and the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) directed by George Miller.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in Gilead, a theonomic and authoritarian state. To cope with drastic declines in fertility, women in Gilead have been disenfranchised and forced into reproductive and domestic work. The protagonist, referred to as ‘Offred’,<sup>2</sup> is assigned to be a ‘handmaid’, for Commander Fred and his wife, Serena. Handmaids are fertile women who are forced to be surrogates for Gilead’s highest ranking officials. *Mad Max: Fury Road*<sup>3</sup>, the fourth film in the Mad Max series, portrays similar fertility anxieties, set in the aftermath of nuclear war, where access to water and fuel is scarce and controlled by the warlord Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). The catalyst for the plot and action of *Fury Road* is the discovery that a member of Immortan Joe’s army, Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) has smuggled his wives or ‘prize breeders’ out of his Citadel (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:15:15-20). Alongside Atwood’s novel, the audio-visual representation of the commodification of women’s bodies in the film, framed through the lens of men, both in the petropatriarchal perspective it depicts and in Miller’s own directorial choices, enriches the thematic analysis of this paper.

While these texts have considerable acclaim in popular culture and depict vastly different imaginations of post-apocalyptic dystopias, by juxtaposing

<sup>2</sup> The name ‘Offred’ (‘of Fred’) indicates that she is considered the Commander’s property.

<sup>3</sup> Referred hereafter as *Fury Road* (FR).

them, I argue that these texts further an understanding of the relationship between petroculture and women's work of social reproduction, particularly through their depiction of the fluids of reproduction as extractive commodities. In this article, I foreground this claim by first examining critical approaches to social reproduction and oil, to posit that while the impact of petroculture on women's work has been well established, critics fall short of exploring its implications on women's bodies. By interrogating the petropatriarchy's relationship with oil as a fetishised fluid, I go on to propose that these texts illuminate a similar fetishisation of the reproductive fluids, milk and blood. Thus confirming Imre Szeman's (2007) suggestion that 'oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capitalism nor its opponents can think beyond' (p. 806). Finally, tracing the tumultuous relationship between the petropatriarchy and the leaking, unruly female body, I argue that the petropatriarchy's inability to 'think beyond' modes of extraction and its reliance on hyper-regulation of women, can be read as a manifestation of a melancholy attachment to an unfulfilled oil imaginary (Szeman, 2007, p. 807).

## **Social Reproduction Theory and Petroculture**

According to Wilson et. al, (2017) the expansion of oil created a petroculture, predicated on a belief of 'perpetual growth, ceaseless mobility, and the expanded personal capacities and possibilities' of fossil-fuels (p. 3). Examining the relationship between petroculture and masculinity, Cara Daggett (2018) posits that 'petro- captures the desire to congeal masculinity, and to protect it from dissipation' and refers to this convergence as 'petromasculinity' (p. 36). According to Social Reproduction theory<sup>4</sup>, the designation of women to the work of motherhood, domesticity, and care is a systematic attempt to facilitate capitalism's (predominantly masculine) drive for production. Daggett (2018) builds on an existing corpus of critical theory on petrosexuality and the work/energy relationship<sup>5</sup> to reveal the ways in which women are entangled in the industry of oil, through domestic and affective work. However, there is a dearth of scholarship which considers how women's bodies are regulated and extracted in the context of the petropatriarchy's dissipating grasp on oil.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and *Fury Road* (2015) both begin with petroculture in crisis, following the catastrophic effects of over-reliance on fossil fuels and extraction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead is created because 'the air got too full [...] of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water' (p. 112). In *Fury Road*, the 'earth is sour [...] bones are poisoned' (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:00:48-52). In both worlds, the ecological collapse has severe impacts on female reproduction. Parisi and Terranova (2000), following

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between Social Reproduction Theory and capitalism is outlined in the essays, Ferguson, 'Children, Childhood and Capitalism' (2017); Fraser, 'Crisis of Care?' (2017); and Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity' (2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Deckhard (2021); Wilson (2017); and Turcotte (2011).

crisis points in the evolution of capitalism, suggest that there is a correlation between moments of entropy and the expansion of social reproduction. In Gilead, to counter the declining (Caucasian)<sup>6</sup> birth rates, 'men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness' (Atwood, 1998, p. 304). Similarly, Immortan Joe's wives are 'chosen' for their femininity, unmarred by the nuclear conflict and destitution that plagues the rest of society (Miller, 2015). It is interesting that Miller and Atwood both envision that petropatriarchy survives the catastrophe, becoming even more authoritarian. The Commanders control all movement of energy sources in and out of Gilead, and Immortan Joe's Citadel stands on top of the only known water source, the access to which he weaponises to strengthen his empire. In both systems women are deployed as a 'slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business of the world' (Firestone 1970, p. 205).

Atwood (1998) and Miller's (2015) petropatriarchies control women by creating stratified systems which assign women to particular roles. For the enforcement of social reproduction to function in these regimes, some women are designated as not fully human, and viewed as alienated and emotionless 'cyborgs' who can be subsumed into the machinery of the state. According to Donna Haraway (1991), 'the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness (p. 150). Although the cyborg in Haraway's conception is usually a subversive and transgressive entity, in these texts we see the cyborg being systematically constructed for the petropatriarchy's benefit. Women who are recognised for their reproductive potential are treated as machines for industrial scale reproduction. In *Fury Road*, Immortan Joe's 'breeders' are repeatedly impregnated and either kept locked up or forced to pump breast milk (as seen in Fig 3) for the nourishment of his army. Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred suspects that the handmaids are kept perpetually drugged to make them compliant. The woman as subhuman machine is epitomised in the ritualistic 'ceremony' or act of consummation between the Commander and the handmaid in the novel. This act of insemination, where Offred lies in between Serena's legs, can be considered what Donna Haraway (1991) terms 'cyborg sex,' where the handmaid is a 'creature simultaneously animal and machine' in her role as conduit between husband and wife (p. 150).

The treatment of women as an extension of the property or machinery of the petropatriarchy is enforced by creating an ideological separation between the woman and her reproductive organs. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), Offred recognises that the handmaids are 'two legged wombs,

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<sup>6</sup> The novel specifies that the fertility anxiety in Gilead is due to 'plummeting Caucasian birth rates' (Atwood, 1985, p. 304). Interestingly, this distinction is overwritten in Hulu's 2017 adaption, which had 'colour-blind' casting.

that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices' (p. 136). The importance of women's wombs in the petropatriarchal system is conveyed visually through the aesthetics of pregnancy in *Fury Road* (2015). This is first evoked when Furiosa and Immortan Joe's wives are confronted with the titular character, Max Rockatansky (played by Tom Hardy), who has also escaped from being held captive by Joe's army (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:34:14-30). This is the first time in the film that the wives are in full view. However, in this moment, the camera zooms in only on the stomach of Immortan Joe's favourite, and heavily pregnant wife, The Splendid Angharad, following her movement across the length of the war rig to give Max water. This shot indicates to the viewer that the womb is a resource like the sources of water and petrol it foregrounds. While the camera draws the viewer's attention to the pregnant stomach, it is the water hose that is centre-frame. Its position and the ejaculation of water from its mouth elicit phallic connotations, reminding us that the petromasculine force who owns this water also has ownership over the unborn child (see Fig 1).



Figure 1: Still from Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2015, 00:34:14-30.

Despite the gender binary necessary in their work of social stratification, the petropatriarchy also designates certain women as neither man nor woman, and employs them to serve as a tool through which the other, fertile bodies can be extracted and consumed. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), the boundaries between the patriarchy and the marginalised women are blurred by the existence of the 'Aunts,' a category of women who are appointed by Gilead to be responsible for indoctrinating and overseeing the behaviour of the handmaids as the 'most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves' (Atwood, 1998, p. 308). The Aunts are afforded special privileges in Gilead like the ability to read and write, which even the higher-ranking wives are not permitted to do. Comparably, in *Fury Road* (2015), Furiosa seems to be the only woman who is allowed to be a part of Joe's army, but is visually

desexualised and defeminised in the process. Her reliance on machines for bodily wholeness with her prosthetic arm affords her a special place in this hyper-masculine ecosystem which valorises and fetishises the fuel-guzzling automobile. The film itself relies on this desexualisation to portray her as a heroic figure alongside Max<sup>7</sup>. When the viewer is first introduced to Furiosa, it is through the seal seared onto the back of her neck, serving as a reminder that although she is not the same as the wives, she is still Immortan Joe's property (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:06:01-10).

### **The Petropatriarchal Fetishisation of Fluids**

The fantasy of petrofuturity—the continued belief in the success of oil, even in the aftermath of fossil-fueled catastrophic decline and ecological crisis—collides with the exhaustion of resources and impending climate disaster in Atwood's (1998) novelistic and Miller's (2015) cinematic depictions of post-Peak Oil<sup>8</sup> futures. However, neither of them depicts the end of oil. On the contrary, oil continues to be omnipresent, and consolidated by the petropatriarchy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander's black SUV affords him the ability to freely move in and out of Gilead and is synonymous with power, while the red 'Birthmobile' is employed for the careful movement of the handmaids as precious cargo. The precarity of the access to the supply of petrol in Gilead can only be inferred through the fluctuating availability of food and produce. Although the scarcity of oil is alluded to in the early stages of *Fury Road*, as Furiosa is meant to be setting off to gather supplies from 'Gas Town,' the fleet of armoured vehicles deployed for the recovery of the wives exemplifies that protecting these 'assets' is worth the mass expenditure of petrol. The deliberate piercing of the water tanker attached to Furiosa's war rig (See Fig 2) and the visual ejaculation of water being wasted in this pursuit further indicates that even water is dispensable in the new hierarchy of fetishised fluids in the petropatriarchal order, despite the crowd clamouring for a drop at the foot of the citadel.

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<sup>7</sup> As the title of Tom Holkenborg's soundtrack 'Brothers in Arms' (when Furiosa and Max unite to fight together) further suggests. See also, Du Plooy (2009).

<sup>8</sup> The impending finitude of oil production (Gautier, 2008).



Figure 2: Still from Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2015, 01:34:30.

In these petropatriarchies, the anxiety of fertility has eclipsed concerns over the extraction and distribution of oil. The female body is now the fetishised 'national resource' from which blood and milk can be extracted (Atwood, 1998, p. 65). Blood is significant as a fluid for the petropatriarchy, for its symbolic connotations with life and lineage, but also in the physical blood transfusion which takes place between mother and foetus in the womb. The primary means of extraction of blood is through impregnation, a process which is regulated in both texts; through the imposition of chastity belts on Immortal Joe's wives (Miller, 2015), and the punishment of any non-sanctioned sexual acts with handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1998). The handmaids' red attire is also meaningful for its pragmatic function to make them hypervisible, and its symbolic associations with blood and danger. As Atwood explains in her introduction to the novel, the red clothes refer to the 'blood of parturition' to signify their role in society, thereby making the woman indistinguishable from the fluids she provides (p. xvii).

Blood is actively sought after and essential to the existence of the petropatriarchy in *Fury Road* (2015). The future of Immortan Joe's legacy is reliant on the transfusion of blood as both of his adult sons are afflicted with bodily deformities, making him desperate for one of his wives to produce an heir 'perfect in every way' (*Fury Road*, 2015, 01:07:34). While blood is important in the context of pregnancy and healthy bloodlines, it is also vital for the survival of the warboys. Immortan Joe's army consists of 'half-life' dying warboys, who are umbilically attached to their 'blood bags'. This blood transfusion nuances our understanding of the petropatriarchy, as it is evident that it is not only women who are subjected to the petropatriarchal extraction of blood, but also other men who resist the patriarchal order. The heroic depiction of Max (who also represents a petromasculine fantasy of automobility and self-sufficiency) is subverted by the petropatriarchy when he becomes a human blood bag. In being forced



to transfer his 'high-octane crazy blood' to Nux, Max in essence functions as a womb, and the tube is the umbilical cord which extracts his blood for the petropatriarchy's survival.

Closely associated with blood, is the petropatriarchy's fetishisation of breast milk. Although the necessity for the production of 'Mother's Milk' is never fully explained in the *Fury Road* (2015), it is an industrially produced commodity, as illustrated in the disturbing visual of a production line of women pumping milk into machines (See Fig 3). The camera pans across the room where over a dozen placid, veiled women sit rocking seemingly lifeless babies, to Immortan Joe and his son, who sample a bottle of Mother's Milk. The shot is eerily devoid of any sound from the women or children, and all that is audible is the soft hum and drip of the machines. From the glimpse of hay on the ground of the pumping room and the machines which are reminiscent of dairy farms, Miller makes an unmistakable, albeit not very subtle, comment that these women are, for the petropatriarchy, akin to cattle (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:12:46- 13:06).



Figure 3: Still from Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2015, 00:12:49.

Breast milk is fetishised for its nourishing contents and its necessity in the social reproduction of healthy babies. However, as Kleinian psychoanalysis demonstrates, breast milk is also significant for the perception of power and control over the female body. Melanie Klein (1984) posits that while breastfeeding, 'the child sucks the breast into himself [...] thus he feels that he has actually got it there, that he possesses the mother's breast within himself' (p. 291). The production of breast milk, then, is not only extracted as a commodity but also extracted as a means of further controlling the female body. This is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) where, although almost all of the handmaids are forced into roles of surrogacy, the biological inclination of the female body towards reproduction and its bodily manifestations are weaponised to make women desire pregnancy. For



instance, when all of the handmaids are gathered together to witness Janine/ Offwarren's labour, Offred notices that her 'breasts are painful' and leaking 'fake milk' (Atwood, 1998, p. 127). Against her will, her body lactates, complying with petropatriarchy's efforts to manipulate her biological compulsion towards motherhood. This 'leaking,' although desired at this particular moment in the novel, unveils the volatility of the female body which is important to understand another aspect of petrocultures—petromelancholia.

### **Petromelancholia and the Leaking, Transgressive Female Body**

While the petropatriarchy fetishises the fluids of the female body, Jules David Law (2010) posits that fluids are inherently objects of simultaneous fetishisation and fear, due to their instability and unruliness (p. 3). As a result, the petropatriarchy's fantasies of the 'infinite fungibility' of fluids are also fantasies of control (p. 2). In the aftermath of the rupture of the oil fantasy in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and *Fury Road* (2015), the desire for extraction without entropy is directed towards women. The inability to acknowledge the end of oil has caused, according to Stephanie LeMenager (2014), a crisis of 'decoupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it' (p. 104). In order to acknowledge this condition as a form of grief over the dwindling of oil resources and the unsustainability of oil, LeMenager coins the neologism 'petromelancholia' (p. 102). The gradually diminishing grasp on oil futurity and the failure to actualise its success perpetuates a melancholic condition, due to the alloying of masculinity with the extraction of fossil-fuels, which renders the petropatriarchy unable to supersede the dialectic of extraction. In this light, petromelancholia can be understood as a condition which is perpetuated by the tension between the petropatriarchy's efforts of extraction and the leaking, unruly female body's refusal to be subsumed.

According to Adrienne Rich (1975), 'the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of dependence on a woman for life itself' (p. 11). Underpinning the petropatriarchy's 'haunted' and melancholic relationship with the female body is the inability for the patriarchy to disentangle and liberate itself from the maternal entity, or what Julia Kristeva (2018) would refer to as the 'abject'. According to Kristeva, 'abjection' is a reaction of disgust or horror elicited by the blurred boundaries between the subject and the object, or self and other, and the source of this revulsion is the 'abject' (p. 68). She recognises the mother, or 'maternal entity' as the first confrontation with the abject, from whom the child attempts to extricate itself from the moment of birth (Kristeva, 2018, p. 70). Submitting to her fate in Gilead, Offred says, 'I resign my body freely, to the uses of others [...] I am abject' (Atwood, 1998, p. 286). In recognising herself as the abject, however, what Offred fails to realise is that 'abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship' (Kristeva, 2018, p. 71). It is precisely this condition that is evinced in petromelancholia. The petropatriarchy cannot detach itself from the maternal body and her

associated fluids because of its chronic dependence on the very same fluids for reproduction. In the context of the post-apocalyptic crisis of fertility, the petropatriarchy is reliant on the woman for their very existence—yet at the same time repulsed by her.

The connection with the abject reminds the patriarchal, masculine subject of his own fragility and bodily incapacity, which is reconciled with further attempts to control and contain the female body. According to Kristeva (2018), as 'a deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines— for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject— constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh' (p. 71). Hyper-masculinity and hyper-regulation of female bodies then can be read as a sadomasochistic response to the petropatriarchy's own abjection. That is, 'a desire to overpower others that is aroused by, and at the same time stymied by, one's own sense of impotence' (Dagget, 2018, p. 36). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the petropatriarchy's anxiety over the loss of their virility leads to the projection of infertility as a women's issue: 'There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law' (Atwood, 1998, p. 61). Similarly, in *Fury Road* (2015), Immortan Joe covers up his physical fragilities with symbols of hyper-masculine strength. The metallic ventilation device he has to wear to aid his breathing is designed in the shape of a skull with large teeth, to incite terror. Similarly, the oozing spores on his torso are covered by a protective plate which has been made to look like armour and adorned with medals, evoking the conventional association of medals as the military symbols for the recognition of bravery in war (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:06:26-07:38). These ostentatious displays of masculinity, and the 'guzzoline' and firepower expended despite their scarcity, similarly exposes the petropatriarchy's desperation to cling onto their perception of control over the female body. Making a para commentary on the extreme lengths Immortan Joe goes to recover his 'breeding stock' in *Fury Road*, The Bullet Farmer retorts, 'all this for a family squabble?' (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:52:51-55).

The female body, while fetishised for its extractive potential, furthers the petromelancholic condition as it is a source of revulsion in its leaking and secretory nature. To the petropatriarchy, the reproducing body is abject because 'as the devalued processes of reproduction make clear, the body has the propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf' and generate 'deep ontological anxiety' (Price and Shildrick, 1999, p. 3). In the texts, leaks occur on multiple levels to destabilise the petropatriarchal order. In both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and *Fury Road* (2015), women's efforts to actively resist extraction can be understood through the metaphor of 'leaking' out of the petropatriarchy's control. However, it is women's biological and involuntary leaking, like menstruation, that is particularly relevant to understand the abject and the petromelancholic condition in these texts.

The duality of the female body as simultaneously an object of desire and the abject is most clearly elucidated in the female body's leaking of blood. Despite being a fetishised fluid for the petropatriarchy, blood is also associated with menstruation, and thereby loss. According to Levi-Strauss, 'women's periods, their uncontrolled flow' are 'too close to nature and therefore threatening' and 'hence, perceived by culture, by men who take on its value as disorder' (qtd. in Cixous and Clément, 1986, p. 28). While bleeding for women usually signifies the ability to bear a child and fertility (as opposed to menopause), it also elicits fear in its manifestations as a sign of an unfulfilled pregnancy. Offred explains the connection between menstruation and loss when she says, 'each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure' (Atwood, 1998, p. 73). In Gilead, monthly periods are a ticking time bomb, a 'gigantic, round, heavy [...] omen' that marks the passing of time until the handmaids who fail to produce children are declared 'Unwoman' and sent to the colonies (p. 74). The association of blood with loss in its allusions to miscarriages and failed pregnancy further problematises this dichotomy. *Fury Road* (2015) also dramatises this tension when it foreshadows the loss of Angharad's baby, when the skin on her leg is ruptured by Max's bullet. 'Of all the legs you had to shoot, that one was attached to his favourite,' says Furiosa, recognising the implications of the bleeding body for the petropatriarchy (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:38:15-30). The close-up of the blood trickling down her leg establishes a nexus with menstrual blood or a miscarriage, and punctures, both visually and in the plot, the petropatriarchal fantasy of ownership and extraction (See Fig 4).



Figure 4: Still from Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2015, 00:38:25.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), the body's leaking and secretory nature also manifests regularly through the unruly emission of bodily odours. Cixous and Clément (1986) explain that women's odours have been

historically associated with unruliness and transgression in relation to witchcraft, in the belief that 'contagion spreads through the bits of body waste and through odors' (p. 35). Unlike blood, the involuntary secretion of odour from the female body is a form of leaking which cannot be extracted and does not have any utility. On the contrary, the leaking woman's body threatens to implode the tightly regulated and repressed system the petropatriarchy has designed. Although the Commander's wives are supposed to be model women who support and bolster the patriarchal theocracy of Gilead, they cannot control the smell of 'envy' that they secrete when the handmaids go into labour (Atwood, 1998, p. 126). Offred also notices a 'scent of prepubescent girls [...] of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood' in Serena, the Commander's wife's room. This observation implies that the infertile woman has regressed back to childhood (p. 80). In the novel, the secretions also act as a language that is only perceptible to women, and threatens further unruliness. For instance, the nuns who have recanted, giving up their vows of chastity have an 'odor of witch about them, something mysterious and exotic,' indicating to Offred that underneath the veneer of compliance, a trace of dissent 'remains, despite the scrubbing' (p. 220).

The leaking of the female body also occurs psychologically, as there is a temporal leaking when the past haunts the present, disrupting the petropatriarchy's ability to seamlessly absorb women into their systems of control. Although Furiosa was part of Immortan Joe's army, it emerges that she has been counting the days since she was separated from her people, the Vuvulani, and seizes the opportunity to liberate the wives and return to the place she was born, the 'Green Place of Many Mothers' (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:38:28). Offred, similarly, is haunted by involuntary and jarring reminders of the past. The linear narrative of the novel is disrupted when she is arrested by sudden flashes of memories of the past, triggered by seemingly innocuous objects like the dish towel in the kitchen (Atwood, 1998, p. 48). The awareness of the threat of reminders of the past is factored into the architecture of Gilead when 'they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation' (p. 25). Despite the attempts of the petropatriarchy to strip the buildings in Gilead of any reference to the past, their efforts are futile, as the shadows of the past continue to leak into the present.

To mitigate against the leaking female body, the petropatriarchy attempts to install mechanisms and protocols to prevent the loss of their control over fertility and its associated fluids. In *Fury Road* (2015) this manifests as the surveillance and physical restriction of the wives with chastity belts to prevent any threats to Immortan Joe's lineage, as well as the constant monitoring of the women pumping breast milk. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), there is a sophisticated system in place of protocols and procedure, most notably revolving around the 'ceremony' of insemination. Offred notes, 'I will not be able to wash myself, this evening, not afterwards, not for a day. It interferes, they say and why take chances?' (Atwood, 1998, p.

65). What is unforeseen, however, is the transgressive woman who disrupts this process. Serena, the Commander's wife, who is supposed to be an example of the ideal woman, becomes unruly and engenders the loss/leaking. 'She's supposed to have me rest,' Offred notes, 'with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances' (p. 95). The loss of her own fertility and the reliance on a handmaid strips Serena of her only viable role in this social structure as a mother, causing her, paradoxically, to incite leaking as Offred feels 'the juice of the Commander' running down her legs when, disgusted by her, Serena forces Offred to leave the room (p. 95).

Although the petropatriarchies in both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and *Fury Road* (2015) necessitate women to be totally disenfranchised and repressed for their extractivist systems to function, the patriarchal figures are plagued by the knowledge that the women are unwilling participants in their schemes. In creating systems of control, the patriarchal figures only exacerbate their sense of melancholic lack, as beneath the authoritarianism and repression lies an unfulfilled desire for connection and intimacy. This tension is evident in Immortan Joe's reaction when he first realises his wives are missing. He is unable to recognise his wives were not kidnapped but had desired to escape from his grasp: 'Where is she taking them?' he asks, assuming that his wives were taken against their will (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:14:28). He continues to be unable to accept the reality of their departure, and instead externalises his 'furious vexation' towards Furiosa (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:35:21). This melancholic longing is made explicit in *The Handmaid's Tale*, when the Commander asks Offred to kiss him as if she 'meant it' (Atwood, 1998, p. 140). He is not satisfied with simply owning and using the female body, he wants what is forbidden and impossible for the woman to provide—genuine connection and intimacy. Offred recognises that behind his displays of affection is a deep sadness, as 'he wants something [...] some emotion [...] some acknowledgment that he too is human, is more than just a seedpod' (p. 262). The melancholic longing reveals a paradoxical situation in Gilead where, to solve man's 'inability to feel,' the petropatriarchy tightened their control over women to ensure that each man could have a child (p. 210). However, they ended up only furthering their own melancholic longing. 'What did we overlook?' the Commander asks Offred, and she replies with the one thing that the petropatriarchy has made impossible for themselves to ever achieve: 'Love' (p. 220).

It is this awareness of the petromelancholic longing behind the hyper-regulation of women's bodies which ends up threatening to undermine the petropatriarchal order. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when the Commander begins to open up to Offred she recognises that 'to want is to have a weakness [...] It's like a small crack in the wall, before now impenetrable' (Atwood, 1998, p. 136). This recognition of weakness elicits violent thoughts in her head: 'I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands' (p. 136). In this moment, the logic of the

petropatriarchy is reversed as Offred envisions the Commander himself as a leaking, unruly entity. Even though Offred does not act on any of these impulses, because the Commander has exposed his melancholic longing for intimacy, she becomes a potential threat to his power. Although Offred's fate is ambiguous and it is unclear if she was rescued or walked into a trap at the end of the novel, Offred's potential leaking out of Gilead unveils the fragility of the petropatriarchy as it elicits fear in the Commander that she will divulge that he broke the rules to gain her intimacy, by giving her magazines and smuggling her out of Gilead to the Capital. The threat that the leaking woman poses to the Commander demonstrates the futility of the petropatriarchy's efforts of control, and moreover, demonstrates that it is petromelancholic, as even the men at the helm of the petropatriarchy are not immune to its vindictiveness.

*Fury Road*, however, presents an alternative to the hegemonic patriarchal extractive mode, in the sacrificial transfusion between Max and Furiosa towards the end of the film. Tending to the injured Furiosa, Max temporarily resumes his role as a human blood bag, connecting them together with his tubes in order to save her (*Fury Road*, 2015, 01:48:10-49:12). In completing the arc from self-interested lone ranger to sacrificial hero, Max's act of voluntary fluid exchange disrupts the petropatriarchal unidirectional flow of fluids towards the avaricious colonial and patriarchal figure. Up until this point, Max has also been plagued by a melancholic haunting of the loss of his family and his inability to save them. In reversing the direction of the flow of fluids, Max provides a blueprint for overcoming the petromelancholic condition by breaking the cycle of extraction. This alliance also enables the petropatriarchy to be successfully toppled by the end of the film, as they return to the site of oppression and defeat Immortan Joe. The symbolic unleashing of the water supply by the newly liberated mothers who produced Mother's Milk for the regime incites hope for a new matriarchal or egalitarian system of power. While the endings of both *Fury Road* (2015) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) forge the possibility of a break from the masculine-dominated extractivist logic, they too rely on the automobile for this liberation, in the form of Furiosa's '2000 horsepower of nitro-boosted war machine,' the Vuvulani's fleet of motorcycles, and the van which is waiting for Offred (*Fury Road*, 2015, 00:40:36). As this suggests, the work of imagining transgression and a post-apocalyptic future that is not reliant to some extent on extraction may prove impossible.

## Conclusion

Despite endeavouring to provide a literary and cinematic mediation of the ways in which the petropatriarchy's economy of extraction survives beyond the apocalypse, both Atwood (1998) and Miller (2015) also become complicit in the logic of extraction in two ways. First, oil continues, unproblematically and without scrutiny, to be the apparatus of freedom in both texts, as the pathways to female liberation they provide are reliant on an oil future. For Furiosa to either drive 160 days across the arid

wastelands, to drive back to the Citadel, or for Offred to be rescued and smuggled across the border to Canada, each necessitates an encounter with oil. Second, both texts reinforce the essentialist trope which views women's bodies in relation to planetary possibilities of birth, fertility, and restoration. In creating proximities of women's work with ecological fertility, for instance in the associations of fertility represented by the Vuvalini's 'Green Place' and the 'keeper of the seeds' in *Fury Road* (2015), or the orienting the work of gardening and planting as women's work in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), both texts implicitly equate women's fertility with fertility of the soil and earth, thereby reinforcing that the work of care and planetary restoration is the work of women.

Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and Miller's film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) depict what Fedrick Buell (2012) recognises to be the cycle of 'exuberance' and 'catastrophe' embedded in oil culture (p. 273). The catastrophic rupture of a petroculture built on a fantasy of the possibility and surplus of oil facilitates the creation of another system built on the extractive possibility of women's bodies and reproduction which, in turn, is disrupted once again by the unruliness and uncontrollability of women. The depiction of the re-emergence of this pattern in these texts bears significant relevance in the contemporary consciousness. As abortion rights are highly contested, with the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022, and anxieties over declining birth rates increase globally, the implications of these anxieties for women's bodily autonomy elicit concern. This article reveals that the patriarchal systems which fetishise milk and blood are inextricably linked with other extractive and exploitative systems. Therefore, as long as there is no break from extraction, the concentric and melancholic mutations of this system are bound to lead repeatedly to the same catastrophic end.

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