



The dangerous pornography of death

ABOUT FIVE years ago I saw a fascinating short called *Violence in the Cinema*, directed by a certain Dr Miller. Simplicity itself, the film depicted that aristocratic actor Arthur Dingham delivering a speech on the dangers of cinematic brutality. As he declaimed, Dingham was assaulted, attacked with an axe and, finally, blasted with a shotgun. Eventually the elegant lecturer became little more than a bloodied piece of meat. Yet, with admirable stoicism, he insisted on completing the text.

Watching the film I had a sense of *deja vu*. Then the penny dropped, along with the axe. Dingham was reading a speech that I'd given, a few months earlier, to an international psychiatric congress. And though uncertain about Dr Miller's motives in the film (was it a piece of criticism, surrealism or satire?) I went into print and described it as a masterpiece.

Now, just as Dr Miller mutilated me, I feel duty bound to return the compliment.

We heard nothing more from the good doctor until, last year, he produced a script called *Mad Max*, a blend of *A Clockwork Orange* and any number of car-smash movies turned out by Roger Corman. I advised a few investors against participating on three grounds. First, the film called for stunts beyond the technical capacity of Dr Miller, or

for that matter, anyone in the country. Second, the film seemed anachronistic — for five years our drive-ins had been chocka with those blood-soaked, auto-wrecking epics. And third, the film made me feel morally queasy. Like a lot of Corman, Peckinpah and Siegel movies the violence was made contemptible as well as gratuitous through a cynical plot in praise of "law and order". That had been a mystifying phenomenon — a whole succession of fascist films that were cheered to the rafters by left-wing trendies.

Well, those would-be investors have every right to sue me as *Mad Max* is doomed to make a great deal of money, both here and overseas. Through sheer brilliance, Dr Miller has not only revived a geriatric genre but, yes, he has brought off the impossible. In 90 minutes of warfare between motorbikes, police cars and semi-trailers, we see perhaps a score of the most extraordinary stunts ever filmed. But while I didn't expect *Mad Max* to make *A Clockwork Orange* look like *Bambi*, I was right about the script. Dr Miller's epic has all the moral uplift of *Mein Kampf*.

(Am I walking into a trap organised by Roadshow's ingenious publicist, Al Finney, in even admitting to the wretched film's existence? When I say the film will be a special favorite of rapists, sadists, child-murderers and

incipient Mansons and Calleys, he'll run that proudly in his ads.)

The film is set at some time in the not too distant future, in the desolate flat lands between Melbourne and Geelong. Society has broken down and every highway is a front line for an endless battle between drug-crazed bikies and a group of equally maniacal police. Miller's script is designed to maximise the opportunities for pack rape, the deliberate barbecuing of trapped, injured police and the mowing down of five-year-old kids. He is ably assisted by artist Ivan Durant, the Hans Heysen of mutilation (he's the one who wanted to butcher the cow outside the National Gallery) who provides his director with a variety of dismembered limbs and the most horrific wounds since Hiroshima. The stunts were provided by an authentic bikie gang, some Kawasaki'd kamakazi called the Vikings.

I saw a preview of *Mad Max* one Friday morning and was still feeling shaken with revulsion 12 hours later. My first reaction was to ring Ken Watts at the Australian Film Commission, for fear there may have been government money in this diabolical opus. But it turns out that Byron Kennedy, Miller's producer, wouldn't have a bar of the bureaucracy and raised his entire budget privately. Well, at least that'll save the industry the most embarrassing questions in the House since *Bazza*.

I've been arguing about *Mad Max* with a friend who founded Australia's first film school, and he says I'm getting all het-up over nothing. He insists that film's aren't about what they seem to be about which, in the case of *Mad Max*, is a celebration of everything vicious and degenerate. He argues that ballet is not really about dying swans, but about dancing just as opera is not really about artists starving in Parisian garrets, but about singing. And as a motion film, *Mad Max* is not really about carnage, but about motion. Hence Miller had a responsibility to liberate his audience from the boring conversations of television by cramming the screen, from edge to edge, with the exhilaration of movement. That's why Max Sennett filled the frame of his hand-cranked cameras with the manic energy of his Keystone Cops and why, ever since, there's been a strong relationship between visual vitality and commercial success. Look at the response to surfie movies, to *Star Wars* and *Jaws*. And most of all, look at 30 years of Westerns



A scene from *Mad Max*: all the moral uplift of *Mein Kampf*