

00:00:00	Music	Transition	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw. A jaunty, jazzy tune reminiscent of the opening theme of a movie. Music continues at a lower volume as April introduces herself and her guest, and then it fades out.
00:00:08	April Wolfe	Host	Welcome to Switchblade Sisters, where women get together to slice and dice our favorite action and genre films. I’m April Wolfe. Every week, I invite a new female filmmaker on. A writer, director, actor, or producer, and we talk—in depth—about one of their fave genre films. Perhaps one that’s influenced their own work in some small way. And today, I’m very excited to have writer-director Cathy Yan here. Hi!
00:00:27	Cathy Yan	Guest	Hi! Hello, nice to be here.
00:00:29	April	Host	Nice to see you! Uh, for those of you who aren’t as familiar with Cathy’s work, please let me give you an introduction. Cathy was born in China and currently is based in New York. She studied at Princeton University, where she earned her BA, and New York University where she received a dual MFA and MBA in film. An MBA in film.
00:00:48	Cathy	Guest	<i>[Laughs]</i> Well, an MBA at the Stern Business School and an MFA in film.
00:00:51	April	Host	Jesus. That’s, uh. That’s a lot. <i>[Cathy laughs.]</i> Your parents must be proud!
00:00:56	Cathy	Guest	They’re—you know, it was insurance. <i>[Both laugh.]</i>
00:00:59	April	Host	Just in case! Uh, she started her career as a reporter for the Wall Street Journal in New York, Hong Kong, and China, but realized she’d rather be applying her sharp, detailed brain to film. Her debut feature film, <i>Dead Pigs</i> , which she wrote and directed, won Special Jury Award for ensemble acting at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, amongst several other accolades. The film, which is set in Shanghai, came to fruition after she read a news story about 16,000 dead pigs mysteriously floating down the Huangpu River, and presents Cathy’s distinctly dark and humorous tone, which goes on in her newest movie that we’ll be talking about in a second. The success of <i>Dead Pigs</i> , and its subversion of genre, opened some doors for Cathy. Namely, giving her an opportunity to pitch on DC’s <i>Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn</i> . Starring Margot Robbie as Harley Quinn, the film is the first ever female team-up comic book movie, and Cathy is the first Asian woman to direct a superhero film, and only the second female director <u>ever</u> to direct a superhero film.

So, that's fun—

[Cathy laughs.]

—and sad. But happy! But sad. Additionally, Cathy is slated to direct, co-write, and produce A24's film adaptation of *Sour Hearts*, a beautiful collection of short stories by Jenny Zhang. The film will be an autobiographical coming of age story about the immigrant experience from the point of view of a young girl whose parents relocate from Shanghai to New York in the 1990s.

A lot of stuff happening.

00:02:28 Cathy Guest

[Laughing] Yes, indeed.

00:02:30 April Host

Um, so Cathy picked a movie that, when she said it, I was just like, "Oh! Perfect! Perfect!" And I think our listeners are gonna be very happy about it, 'cause the movie that you chose to talk about today is *Mad Max: Fury Road*. And can you give us a little explanation on why this is one of your fave genre films?

00:02:45 Cathy Guest

Well, it is just mind-blowing, I think, cinematically, in every way.

[April responds affirmatively.]

I remember the first time I watched it, it was like, just completely exhilarating and nothing I had ever, ever seen before. And it sort of cycled back to top of mind recently, I think, because um, it's just—it's popped up in so many of the best of, and it was one of those films that I've always loved, and my friends and my husband and I would talk about it. And I actually didn't think it would get so widely critically acclaimed, especially like, looking back.

But then I recently watched it again in preparation for this podcast, and I've seen it multiple times, certainly, and it just feels even more relevant and prescient now. You know, it seems to have this life, this ongoing life that continues to make it even more of a masterpiece, really. I think, from an action movie perspective, it's just unbeatable.

00:03:44 April Host

[April feigns clearing her throat and then speaks rapidly.] Should've won best picture.

00:03:46 Cathy Guest

[Laughing] Yeah, what beat it out that year?

00:03:51 April Host

I don't know. Who knows anymore?

[Cathy responds affirmatively and laughs.]

It was probably something like, really delicate and lovely, but.

In terms of technique and craft, and from a filmmaker perspective, and also from an audience perspective, it wows on both ends. And I think that's something that we're gonna get into throughout the rest of this conversation.

But, for those of you who haven't seen *Mad Max: Fury Road*, what the hell are you doing with your life? Today's episode will give you some spoilers, but that shouldn't stop you from listening before you watch. As always, my motto is that it's not what happens, but how it happens that makes a movie worth watching. Especially for this movie. Still, if you want to pause and watch *Mad Max: Fury Road*, this is your shot.

00:04:25	Sound Effect	Sound Effect	<i>[Brief clip of dramatic movie score.]</i>
00:04:26	April	Host	And now that you're back, please let me introduce <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> with a quick synopsis. Written by George Miller, Brendan McCarthy and Nico Lathouris, and directed by Miller for release in 2015, <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> stars Tom Hardy as Max Rockatansky, an apocalyptic survivor who's captured by the War Boys and brought to the mountain lair of Immortan Joe. Meanwhile, Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, is sent off with a war rig to collect gas and ammunition. But it's not long before Joe realizes his five breeding brides are missing.
00:05:00	Clip	Clip	Immortan Joe: "Where are they?" Miss Giddy: "They are not your property!" Immortan Joe: "Miss Giddy!" Miss Giddy: "You cannot own a human being! Sooner or later, someone pushes back!" Immortan Joe: "Where is she taking them?" Miss Giddy: "She didn't take them, they begged her to go!"
00:05:16	April	Host	The chase is on now to retrieve the breeding brides. One of the War Boys, Nux, played by Nicholas Hoult, goes on the pursuit, taking Max with him to supply him with a constant stream of fresh blood. Max escapes and restrains Nux, and finds Furiosa repairing her broke down rig. Max tries to steal the rig, but only Furiosa knows how to start and drive it—
00:05:41	Clip	Clip	Imperator Furiosa: "Kill switches. I set the sequence myself. This rig goes nowhere without me."
00:05:48	April	Host	—so they all have to leave together. Nux does his best to kill Furiosa while she's driving, but he's eventually tossed out, and picked up by Joe's army. As they all pass through a narrow canyon, a biker gang turns on Furiosa and blows it up, but they make it through, not before Nux, again, boards the rig and tries to kill Furiosa. Unfortunately, a pregnant falls off the rig and is crushed by Joe's army—
00:06:11	Clip	Clip	Capable: "Tell him to turn the rig around!" Imperator Furiosa: "Did you see it?" <i>[Sound of Capable weeping.]</i>

Max Rockatansky: “She went under the wheels.”

Imperator Furiosa: “Did you see it?”

Max Rockatansky: *[More solemnly]* “She went under the wheels.”

[Capable sobs.]

Imperator Furiosa: “We keep moving.”

Capable: “No!”

Imperator Furiosa: “We keep moving!”

Capable: “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”

00:06:28 April Host

—and Nux is distraught at his failure. A bride finds him hiding on the rig and consoles him. Furiosa says they’re heading to a green place she remembers from her youth. When the rig gets stuck in the mud and Nux realizes he’s now a target for Joe’s army, since he’s jumped on this rig, he helps Max push them out.

They reach the green place, inhabited by a dirt bucking—by dirt biking women, but the clans there tell Furiosa that the green place was the spot where they actually got stuck in the mud. The green place no longer exists.

00:06:59 Clip Clip

Imperator Furiosa: “I can’t wait for them to see it.”

Keeper of the Seeds: “See? See what?”

Imperator Furiosa: “Home. The green place.”

The Vuvalini: “But if you came from the west, you passed it.”

The Dag: “The crows. The creepy place with all the crows. The soil.”

Keeper of the Seeds: “We had to get out.”

The Vuvalini: “We had no water.”

Keeper of the Seeds: “The water was filth.”

The Vuvalini: “It was poisoned. It was sour.”

Keeper of the Seeds: “And then the crows came.”

The Dag: “We couldn’t grow anything.”

Imperator Furiosa: “Where are the others?”

Keeper of the Seeds: “What others?”

Imperator Furiosa: “The Many Mothers.”

Keeper of the Seeds: “We’re the only ones left.”

- 00:07:39 April Host Max convinces them that they need to go back to Joe’s citadel, the one place with water, and take it back.
- 00:07:45 Clip Clip **Max Rockatansky:** “At least that way, you know, we might be able to, together, come across some kind of redemption.”
- 00:07:55 April Host On the way, they engage in a fight that sees Furiosa killing Joe, Furiosa getting mortally wounded, Nux sacrificing himself, and Max giving Furiosa his life blood before they enter and retake the citadel, delivering fresh water to the cheering masses.
- [Exhaling]* Woo. Yeah. Okay. There’s a lot of stuff, but—
- [Cathy laughs.]*
- you know, I think that something that is really lovely about this is that um, he is keeping the story actually quite simple. There’s not that much kind of going on. I mean like, yeah, there’s a lot of points of like, yeah this happens, then this happens, then this happens. But he is keeping the story pretty simple, and—
- 00:08:38 Cathy Guest Mm-hm. It’s a chase story.
- 00:08:39 April Host Yeah, and that allows him to focus specifically on the action and trying to get emotion out of the action, as opposed to putting it in through dialogue or other means. Um, and I really appreciate that. But I was hoping that maybe we could talk about the simplicity of the story, because he said, quote, “You pick up what you can about the plot on the way. You pick it up in the design or a word here or whatever. That was the exercise.”
- I mean, it might look simple, but there lies a lot of complex work. But that was the idea, just to go on the ride and get to know what you could and pick it up on the way.
- 00:09:13 Cathy Guest I love that. I mean, for me, it’s so cinematic. It’s the definition of cinematic, or cinema, because there’s almost no dialogue. It’s like the symphony. It is just—it obliterates your senses in the best way possible. It’s extremely visual, and then he uses sound design and music in such a powerful way, and just comparing it to a play, right? Like, there’s certain movies that feel like plays, and that’s okay. That’s what they are. But if we are to define cinema as this big, you know, brash, extremely video, audio sensory overload, there’s nothing like *Mad Max*, and he just does it brilliantly.
- 00:09:51 April Host Yeah. It has this, um, it’s a combination of, you know, all filmmaking techniques, and you call tell that he’s like, he’s really actually quite patient in the way that he makes things.
- 00:10:03 Cathy Guest Totally. And the way he shoots, too, is very—like, I was focused on that the last time I watched it, because so many action movies are sort of cut, cut, cut. Um, and he just lets it linger and these shots are extremely complicated. And I’ve seen behind the scenes footage of it, and it’s remarkable how much of it is actually just practical. Like,

the guys that are on the cat poles—

[April responds affirmatively.]

When you actually watch the behind the scenes footage, they're just literally like, on the cat poles, and they're all just driving through the desert together, and he's got like, you know, whatever equipment he's using to try to shoot. It's just remarkable, I think. The technical achievement of it is really remarkable.

00:10:46 April Host At the same time, I mean, you're bringing up these—the poles, and the thing is that when he's designing these things or he's writing them in, he doesn't know what's going to work, and he's hoping that it will work on practical. And he said, "You know those guys on the poles?"

[Cathy laughs.]

"I never thought—never thought—we could do that safely. I never thought we'd do it. I thought we'd put the poles on the vehicles, then we'd compliment with CGI. And one day I looked up, and there were eight of them coming out of the desert, and I choked up. It was so safe. We got Tom Hardy up there. He told us, 'I'm scared of heights!' And I said, 'Well, I'm scared of heights, too.'"

00:11:22 Cathy Guest Wow, I love that.

00:11:24 April Host I mean, thinking about this, how you feel like something like this movie uh, affected you when you were going into making, like uh, a movie that has a bunch of stunts in it, you know? Because you look at him, and he's just like, "Okay, well, I don't know what's gonna work, but I'm gonna dream big." You know? So what does that do for your process? Can you—does it like, open it up where like, "I can try it," or—

00:11:48 Cathy Guest Totally. I mean, I think that was really inspiring. This was a huge reference for action in our movie, too, because partially just the type of action where it was very grounded, but at the same time extremely heightened. So you have something like—I'll use the pole cats as an example, or again, or the guy that's on the guitar—

[April making guitar riff noises with her mouth.]

—which I just looove! I love him so much! It makes no sense whatsoever!

00:12:13 April Host *[Laughing]* Oh, god, it's so good.

00:12:14 Cathy Guest It's so good! And these—sort of these little details that heighten it and speak to the world and you understand that this is not, you know, gritty and real, but at the same time it is so real, and it so visceral, and it's so practical. And so that combination was something I think we tried to achieve in *Birds of Prey* too, because it's Gotham, it's a heightened world, it's colorful and it's obviously, you know, inspired by the comics. But at the same time, like, we wanted the action to feel grounded and real and really, really practical.

So we didn't use that much V effects for any of our action sequences. Most of it was hand to hand, most of it was actually just done extremely practically with our actors, who spent like, months and months training for it.

- 00:13:00 April Host I mean, was that like a—did you find that it seemed like a positive experience for them to be like, so physical with these roles?
- 00:13:07 Cathy Guest Yes. I really think so. I think it had really profound—and the women have spoken about it before, but really profound impact on them. Like Jurnee Smollett-Bell, who plays Black Canary, she had just given birth two years ago, but still, she was a new mom, and she trained like, every day for several months.
- And she probably had arguably the hardest one, because we gave her all the leg work. So she was a major kickboxer and um, muay thai. And that was really, really hard, and she said it just completely changed her body after, you know, what is a difficult time for any woman to go through, and like kind of having to re-assess what your body can do. And it was very empowering for her.
- And then simultaneously we had Rosie Perez, who played Renee Montoya in the movie, and she's a woman of a certain age. And she felt—she had knee issues, and was very—
- 00:14:04 April Host As you do.
- 00:14:06 Cathy Guest As you do, yeah! As you do. And she was really nervous about it, and I remember it flared up a few times on set. But like, at the same time I think she found such strength in being able to do it, and I'm sure it wasn't easy to like, have, you know, have several fights with women who are younger than her and actually train for all that, but it made her feel really, really like, good and strong and empowered from it.
- So in a way that was part of the strategy, too, was like, I wanted to work with a stunt coordinator and an action company, 87eleven, who are known for these practical—
- 00:14:46 April Host Very, very famous. *John Wick*.
- 00:14:49 Cathy Guest *John Wick*, exactly. And I wanted to make, like—I wanted to get women to do it, because I wanted to show off how strong they really are. And I felt like it would be a really interesting way to empower the actors themselves, so that it creates their character.
- 00:15:04 April Host You had brought up, you know, the kind of effect it has on the actors. Charlize Theron, when she was making this, um, she was happy that George Miller did not sugarcoat what it was going to be like, right?

[Cathy responds affirmatively, saying "I'm sure".]

She said, "He did not make it easy, but was very honest with us right upfront what he wanted to achieve. I think that was part of what excited all of us to want to be a part of it, that it wasn't going to

be some kind of green screen, just do it kind of situation. We were really going to try to do something that made it a little harder and trickier. We all had to dedicate a year of our lives to this, in the middle of what felt like a dirty ashtray.”

[Cathy laughs.]

You know? Like, that was like, their lives, but they lived that character. And he told them upfront, you know, you’re gonna have to do all these stunts, you’re gonna have to do all of this, so get ready.

00:15:54 Cathy Guest Absolutely. And he—you have to commend him so much, I think especially in the context of the industry now, that he was able to pull off something so wholly original. I mean, certainly there were the Mad Max’s before, but that was so many years ago. And I wouldn’t even call this really a sequel or a reboot. I mean, it is almost its own, weirdly original thing, and I’m not sure how many Mad Max fans from like, two decades ago, that were really able to carry over. So, I’m always so pleasantly surprised that he managed to do it.

00:16:33 April Host And um, he was saying also—I mean, you thought of—you were saying that this is like, not necessarily like, a sequel. Like, it’s hard to quantify it.

But Miller had said, “They’re not really connected in any very strict way. They’re another episode in a saga of a character who is pretty archetypal. The wanderer in the wasteland basically searching for meaning. This is something we see in the classic westerns and samurai stories. You can’t really put a chronology of the Mad Max films together. They were never conceived that way, and after I made the first one, I had no intention to make a second. The second was ultimately an attempt to do the things I couldn’t in the first one and so on. They were all standalone films in many, many ways.”

Thinking about that as a director who’s working within a sequelized environment, I mean, what does that mean to you? That’s—there’s a bit of freedom when he says right away, “I’m gonna make this a different thing.” Like, you guys just have to know, and maybe you’ll be able to connect the lore, but—I mean, for a DC movie, however, you’ve got a lot of fans who are like, “You must fulfill these things.”

00:17:38 Cathy Guest Sure. I mean, that and so—I find that so relatable, because we had an—we’ve had a challenge with *Birds of Prey*, defining what it is, too. Because it’s not really a sequel, it’s not a spin-off in really any other way except that we have Margot Robbie playing Harley Quinn again. But what was great about it was I was able to really create a new world, and so our Gotham feels different, it feels different than *Suicide Squad* Gotham, it feels different than the Batman Gothams.

And so it is—it does sit in an equally undefinable position. And because of that, I think, you know, I really empathize with everything he was thinking of in terms of either just categorizing what *Mad Max: Fury Road* is, and I think similarly we’re like—we are a standalone film. That’s what we are, *Birds of Prey: And the*

Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn is a standalone film.

[Both laugh.]

00:18:35	April	Host	Um, we're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, we're gonna talk a little bit about Miller's process of writing long backstories for characters. We're gonna talk about some Tom Hardy uh, uh tidbits. And also the idea of, you know, keeping a mood on a set while also being professional. We'll be right back.
00:18:55	Music	Transition	"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.
00:19:01	April	Promo	<p>Hey, listeners! Let's say that you are Cynthia Rothrock, and you're looking at your closet, and you're trying to figure out what you're gonna wear on your day of ass-kicking. Well, what do you think Cynthia Rothrock would do? Would she pick just regular dress pants, gross, kind of cinching at the waist too much? Or would she pick yoga pants?</p> <p>Well, what if she had something that was somewhere in the middle? With Betabrand, you never have to sacrifice comfort or function for style. These are dress pants that are as comfy as yoga pants. No one's gonna know that these are the dress pants that are comfiest.</p> <p>Betabrand's dress pant yoga pants are super comfy, perfectly stretchy, and stay wrinkle-free. Choose from dozens of colors, patterns, cuts, and styles, including premium denim with the same flexibility and comfort as yoga pants.</p> <p>Right now our listeners can get 20% off their first order when you go to Betabrand.com/switchblade. That's 20% off your first order at Betabrand.com/switchblade. Millions of women agree, these are the most comfortable pants you'll ever wear to work. So go to Betabrand.com/switchblade for 20% off.</p>
00:20:11	Music	Transition	"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.
00:20:17	Promo	Promo	<p>Music: Upbeat rock plays in the background.</p> <p>Announcer: <i>Dead Pilots Society</i> brings you exclusive readings of comedy pilots that were never made, featuring actors like Patton Oswalt—</p> <p>Patton Oswalt: So the vampire from the future sleeps in the dude's studio during the day, and they hunt monsters at night. It's Blade meets The Odd Couple!</p> <p><i>[Audience laughs]</i></p> <p>Announcer: —Adam Scott and Jane Levy—</p> <p>Jane Levy: Come on, Cory. She's too serious, too business-y. She doesn't know the hokey-pokey.</p> <p>Adam Scott: Well, she'll learn what it's all about.</p>

[Audience laughs.]

Announcer: —Busy Philipps and Dave Koechner.

Dave Koechner: Maybe this is family.

Busy Philipps: My Uncle Tal, who showed his weiner to Cinderella at Disneyland, is family. Do you want him staying with us?

[Light audience laughter.]

Dave: He did stay with us, for three months.

Busy: And he was a delight!

[Audience laughs harder.]

Announcer: A new pilot every month, only on *Dead Pilots Society* from Maximum Fun.

00:21:06 Music Transition “Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:21:13 April Host Welcome back to *Switchblade Sisters*. I’m April Wolfe, and I’m joined today by Cathy Yan, and we are talking about *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

[Cathy cheers once.]

Um, so, a few things. There’s so much to get into with this movie. Um, one that I had forgotten before is the fact that this film is reliant so much on central framing, and it’s something that is uh, you know, it’s very simple, very genius, very elegant and sleek for a movie that is quite busy.

And Miller said, “With something moving so quickly and with so much action, it can become like visual noise. Not disorienting, but annoying, really. There has to be a strong, casual relationship between one shot and the next. It’s just like when you’re composing music. There needs to be a real strong connection in many ways in the structure of the music. So central framing helps you to do this in the visuals. On the big, wide screen you can predict where the eye will be going a lot of times. It’s particularly important when you’re doing a stereo conversion for 3D release. That’s the key to it.”

00:22:11 Cathy Guest Mm-hm. That is so brilliant. I noticed that. Uh, what I love with *Mad Max* is that it’s cut very jazz-like. There’s all these like, long shots that, you know, just keep moving. And the way that he’s able to use time and space in that way, there was a lot of camera work in which like, the foreground changes, things pass by the camera, camera goes under the vehicles a lot. And I’m always like, “How the hell did he do that?”

[April responds affirmatively.]

And then he’ll cut into this crazy wide that’s very static. So he uses all the different tools, but what I find interesting is when he does cut,

it is so fast and furious and it's aided by the fact that you have the central framing. Because we've all been, unfortunately I think, stuck in like, the first two rows of a movie theater. I watched *Avatar*, I remember, on the first row, and it was excruciating, and you don't know where to look, and you're trying to enjoy the movie.

And I think for him to consider all of those things is—such a pro, I mean, he's just such a pro.

00:23:12 April Host I mean, one would never say like, think that when they look at that movie, be like, "Wow, this is the most thoughtful film."

[Cathy laughs uproariously.]

But it is full of thought. Everything is thought out.

00:23:22 Cathy Guest So full of thought, yeah.

00:23:23 April Host And, you know, you're mentioning like, the cameras, where they're going. And um, you know, he comes from that world of exploitation movies of the 1970s where people were just, kind of pushing each other. There were no safety organizations back then. So like, every director, every, you know, they were just like, "Oh, we're just gonna put a camera here and see what the hell happens."

[Cathy responds affirmatively.]

"Mount it to the hood of a car," you know?

00:23:45 Cathy Guest Which is still like China today.

[Both laugh.]

00:23:47 April Host In China, they've got some very interesting, you know, films that come out.

Um, I think he said, Miller said, "To come back after doing animation—" 'Cause he was working with other tools. "—to come back after doing the animation and apply what I learned from animation, you know, the freakiest thing I learned:

Roman Polanski said there's only one perfect place for the camera at any given moment in a movie, and when you do digital films, when you have the same performance, the same lighting, the same dialogue, everything is the same. But you can manipulate the camera.

Sitting in front of the camera, it's amazing how much you can influence the story and change the story, depending on the camera. So there's only one perfect place for it. To be honest, it made me feel afraid to some extent, because you do not have time to think about it too much while you're shooting.

It's a little bit like if you play a football game, you don't have time to think about what movie you're going to do. It has to be reflexes, in a way. But I had a great cameraman in Johnny Seale, who came out of retirement. It was like the Rolling Stones getting back together.

We are all gray-haired.”

- 00:24:44 Cathy Guest I love that so much. I love that quote. Thank you for finding it, because, I mean, I love Polanski as well, but that’s sort of my approach to camerawork as well. Because I think there is this overreliance sometimes on getting coverage, and then letting the movie get made in editing.
- And what I found so great about *Mad Max* is that it was the opposite of that. Like, every shot was designed to a T. He never, almost never, especially with any of the dialogue, like he never cuts into a single and then another single. You know? It doesn’t work like that. He has these really elegant shots, it’s composed, and you realize you don’t need it. You don’t need those singles. Like, that amount of coverage for a movie like that would’ve just felt odd, and I think would have felt very pedestrian. You know, and it’s just so nice to know that that level of filmmaking and thought was behind what is considered a Blockbuster.
- [April responds affirmatively.]*
- Because often times, there’s a lot of pressure to do the thing that everyone else is doing, which is coverage.
- 00:25:53 April Host You had mentioned also before, the editing, and so I wanted to see if maybe we could get deeper into that.
- 00:25:59 Cathy Guest Was that his wife? I think it was—
- 00:26:02 April Host Was it his wife? I mean—
- 00:26:04 Cathy Guest Don’t quote me on that.
- 00:26:05 April Host Well, Casey will look it up for us.
- [Cathy laughs.]*
- He’s our trusty information man. Um, when he was talking about the editings, he said, “The great thing about new digital filmmaking is that you can adjust the image exactly how you want to and find the exact spot you need for the eye to go to at any real moment. In a scene where you’re not required to cut very quickly from one shot to the next to the next, you can compose however you like. It’s just during the very, very fast action. The average shot in this movie was 2 seconds and 9 frames.”
- [Cathy mutters “wow”.]*
- “This means that there were shots that were three, four, five, six, seven, or eight frames long. Eight frames is just a third of a second. Those shots are the ones where you use central framing.” He returns back to that. And I thought that was really interesting. He’s, I mean, working with that precise, tiny, tiny increment of time is um, it’s on a different level.
- 00:26:57 Cathy Guest Totally, and that’s what I was saying about the jazz, too. I think that it’s got this like rat-tat-tat-tat beat and then you have these long

shots, and then it goes back to cut-cut-cut-cut, and then these long shots. And I think it creates this like, extremely energetic mood that you just, you know, there's no moment where you're like, "Ah, let me just breathe and settle for a little bit."

[April responds affirmatively.]

Two hours just goes by like that.

00:27:23 April Host It just—and also Casey said it is his wife.

00:27:26 Cathy Guest Oh, yay!

00:27:27 April Host Um, and the thing is there are moments, you know, that are heightened emotionally because he's allowing them the longer shots, and because they're juxtaposed with those, the quick rat-tat-tat of the action. And I'm thinking specifically of like, Charlize Theron's character, when she's in the desert and she feels like there's no hope, and she just kind of collapses into the sand, and it's really beautiful. There's so much beauty in that, and I'm just so happy that she was able to find a performance in all of that action, too.

[Cathy responded affirmatively.]

There's something really meaningful that's happening that's kind of like, all hope is lost, you know? Which we've seen before in every fucking like, hero's journey story, but for some reason it feels new and fresh here.

00:28:13 Cathy Guest Yeah, and I really appreciated it, because I think if we start talking about the theme of the movie, I like that there is no green place. I like that there is that twist. And I can't help but feel like this movie is ever more prescient, you know. Like, it was made in 2016, right? And—

00:28:33 April Host Er, 2015.

[Both stammer.]

I think it was released in 2015? Yeah, released in 2015.

00:28:39 Cathy Guest Which is five years ago, but um, since then I think the conversation around climate change has really escalated, and—

[April responds affirmatively multiple times while Cathy speaks.]

You know, and like it's such an Australian movie, and I—the last time I watched it, I kept thinking about the bush fires, and climate change, and just like, how accurate he was about all of this stuff. And what I took away from it was, you know, there is no green place. Like, you can't—there's no Mars. Like, what are—like, you know what I mean? There's no bunkers.

00:29:09 April Host You can't escape it. You just have to face it.

00:29:10 Cathy Guest We can't escape it. Yeha, we actually have to try to do something

about it, as opposed to either like, stick our heads in the sand, or like, build an ISS station to go to Mars. Like, that's—colonizing Mars is not the answer to climate change.

00:29:23 April Host I think that—

00:29:25 Cathy Guest Elon Musk.

[Both laugh.]

00:29:26 April Host Yeah, when you're listening to this! Um, he's definitely a huge fan.

[Cathy laughs.]

Um—

00:29:32 Cathy Guest *[Stage whispering]* There's no green place.

00:29:34 April Host The thing that, you know, I feel like you're talking about is kind of infusing like, your personal interests, your personal um, kind of ethos onto films, even if it doesn't seem like that's something that is compatible.

And Miller had said, "When I made the first *Mad Max*, I didn't have kids. And then when kids came along, all I ever saw in the cinema were family movies. So, my mind is alert to those. When I read the book of *Babe*, the sheep-pig, I was reading books to my kids, and I was like, 'Oh, this will make a really interesting film if we can make the pig talk.' And then my kids grew up, and now I don't watch family movies anymore. I'm watching more adult movies. I have teenagers now. Just beyond teenage sons. It's that simple. So I'm doing *Mad Max* again."

[Cathy responds delightedly.]

And so it's just like he's following that interest and those pursuits and just being like, "Oh, I can do *Mad Max* again. Shit's fucked up. It's time for him to return." You know?

00:30:30 Cathy Guest I also like, can we just talk about the filmography of George Miller for a second? Because it is wild. I mean like, *Happy Feet*, *Babe*, *Mad Max*? It's just a—like, it's such a delight.

00:30:39 April Host *The Witches of Eastwick*.

00:30:40 Cathy Guest Yeah. *[Laughs.]* It makes no sense, but it makes all the sense in the world. I just love it.

00:30:46 April Host Yeah. It is so strange that it makes perfect sense, when you're like, "Oh, I get it. I get it. There's an ethos."

And I have to say, I mean, like, let's look at the filmography of Cathy Yan as it continues, right? 'Cause you're gonna—like, *Dead Pigs*, dark, funny, strange. Um, comic book, superhero movie. And now you're gonna do a sensitive kind of personal introspective kind of autobiographical thing, however you decide to adapt it. Not telling you how to adapt it, Cathy.

[Cathy laughs.]

But you know, that's how I had read the book—

00:31:19 Cathy Guest

Mm-hm. Absolutely.

00:31:20 April Host

These are very different, but they're all gonna be Cathy, right?

[Cathy responds affirmatively.]

So how does that—I mean, how do you kind of maintain that integrity of, “This is who I am”?

00:31:29 Cathy Guest

Totally. I mean, I think that's part of the fun of filmmaking. Um, I think there are certain directors that like, love to do that thing, and you know what, you know, and they deliver it, and that's what you get. But I actually, you know, I find like, the George Millers, the Steven Soderberghs, like, the Ang Lees, those directors very, very interesting, because they play with genre and they play with form in a way. They keep themselves sort of challenged, and everything super interesting, and so yeah.

Like, for me, I think the things that like, I always gravitate to are character-based, heightened realities, worldbuilding, complicated female characters, some sense of humor. I mean, even with *Mad Max*, there's a real sense of humor to the movie, and I love that. I love that. Like, it's just wild and crazy, and I think that for me it's like, pushing the form of cinema in some way. Like both technically, like what can we do next that's interesting, but also, you know, what sort of defies expectations and genre and how do you play in um, the, you know, the box that they're giving you, but push it and do something really special with it.

And again, I go back to *Mad Max* because he managed to make something wholly original within, you know, a studio movie.

00:32:51 April Host

Yeah, is there anything—I mean, I'm curious, like when you were approaching *Birds of Prey*, was there anything where you're just like, “this is me”? You know, like uh, a scene or something that you felt like you had to add in, or something like a moment where you could recognize like, “No, this is definitely me.”

00:33:07 Cathy Guest

Well, actually I think I got very lucky in the way that the script was already quite me. It was quite different. There's a fantasy dance sequence in the movie, there are like, very funny moments, I thought like, you know, Harley Quinn being a very interesting, complicated female character. So it was nice in the sense I never—I didn't feel like I really had to like, stretch it that much.

But then I think, as a director, it's inevitable that it becomes you. Because when you're on set, you're just making decisions, all the time, and you're just trusting your gut and your instincts of what feels right.

And so, it becomes you, in the sense that like, the little things, the very subtle things like the pacing of something, you know, how you frame it, the way that the characters engage with each other. And I

think it's about creating that atmosphere for um, actors to do their best work. And I think that different directors have different approaches to all of that. But I think my approach to—especially working with actors in a way that like—I like to kind of keep it, um, a little bit more loose. That will stay with me no matter what movie I do, even if I change the way that I shoot something, you know.

But it's funny because I'm just starting out, too. So there's a part of me that's also like, "Ah, I'm probably gonna be able to connect the dots of what makes a movie a Cathy Yan movie, like, later in my life?" *[She laughs.]*

00:34:39 April Host Well, yeah. We'll do a retrospective in like ten years and be like, "Ah, I see, I see. Yes."

00:34:44 Cathy Guest Yeah, exactly. When the MOMA does one.

00:34:47 April Host Yes!

Um, so we're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, we're gonna get into some stuff about production design and costuming and all these other fun, colorful things. We'll be right back.

00:34:57 Music Transition "Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:35:03 Promo Promo **Music:** Cheerful banjo music plays in the background.

Biz Ellis: Hi! I'm Biz.

Theresa Thorn: And I'm Theresa.

Biz: And we host *One Bad Mother*, a comedy podcast about parenting.

Theresa: Whether you are a parent or just know kids exist in the world, join us each week as we honestly share what it's like to be a parent.

Biz: These are really hard questions!

Theresa: They are really hard questions!

Biz: *[Voice getting louder and more agitated]* I don't have any answers for that!

Theresa: I don't either!

Biz: *[Yelling]* Sack of garbage!

Theresa: I know!

Biz: *[Yelling in frustration]* Ahhhh! Ughhh! *[Laughs wildly.]* Ahhhh! The end of the show will just be five minutes of Biz—
[Theresa giggles.]

Biz: —and Theresa crying and screaming until the outro is played. So join us each week as we judge less, laugh more, and remind you that you are doing a great job.

Theresa: Find us on MaximumFun.org, on Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts!

00:35:48	Music	Transition	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw.
00:35:54	April	Host	Welcome back to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i> . I’m April Wolfe and I’m joined today by Cathy Yan, and we’re talking about <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> . Okay, so the production design, costuming, the choices of make-up and style, all of it, it feeds into the story and its mythic proportions. So, you know, we have to spend a certain amount of time on that. So, the production designer, Colin Gibson, he had worked with George Miller quite a bit, and he said, “George did not want to repeat himself. That was his greatest fear. That imagery he’d done 30 years prior had been devalued and cliched, and had been beaten around the head a little too much. So he was desperate to avoid the same thing. Basically, he wanted to have a really strong underpinning of logic and truth, so instead of looking at the previous films, we really envisioned the story as a fall back toward fascism and feudalism as civilization fell apart.”
00:36:47	Cathy	Guest	<i>[April responds affirmatively multiple times while Cathy speaks.]</i> Mm-hm. You can really feel that. You can really, really feel that. I mean, one of the most interesting moments in the movie for me is when they look up and they’re like, “Oh, that’s a satellite.” And then you realize, oh, right, it’s meant to be in the future, and yet there’s still something so raw and feral about it. But it also, I think, is such a great statement about like, what happens in anarchy, you know, when we’re fighting for resources. It’s so overtly masculine in that way, too. <i>[Laughs]</i> We should talk about the feminism that’s in <i>Mad Max</i> , for sure. But yeah, I think he just did such a remarkable job in all of the detailing and in the costume design and the production design. I mean, I just love the little details of production design, like in um, the—in the war rig, and there was the painted arm of Furiosa, the one that she doesn’t have, right, that’s on the left side of the door. I mean, just those little, like, just everything makes so much sense. Or like, the odd, like, the costume design where they like, cut a hole for the nipples, and he’s like, touching his nipples. I mean, it’s just—it’s so layered that it all helps create this like, just this really weird, unsettling like, rebellious, feral, crazy world. I mean, all of it just like, comes together so nicely.
00:38:16	April	Host	I think um, you know, we should talk about the costuming, because it’s, you know, fucking insane. But the costumer said, “We made everything, and in fact we had all the stuff they’d made previously.” ‘Cause the shoot was like, pushed back, pushed back, there’s another story, we can talk about that. But, “Even more importantly,

we had all the junk they'd collected. Old car parts, old cutlery. So I got from Australia something like 200 boxes of junk. Old goggles, old bits of ammunition, just stuff.

And we set up a work room. We found materials like vellum, which I'd never worked with before. It's disgusting, it's raw leather, really. But it made marvelous masks. Not only did it have to look amazing, they had to be able to work in it. They had to have safety built into it. Everyone had to wear goggles in the end because of the sand, and you know, racing through the desert, churning up the sand was dangerous."

00:39:07 Cathy Guest Yeah, I love that, and I think we actually applied a similar ethos to our costuming as well. I wanted to make sure that the women could do their stunts in the costumes provided, and not be in these like, crazy high heels or whatnot.

00:39:20 April Host Yeah, 'cause you weren't gonna have doubles for some of these things.

00:39:22 Cathy Guest No, we don't—we didn't have doubles for a lot of things, and you know, all the costuming had an element of practicality to it. And what I had told Erin Benach, our amazing costume designer, like, I also want to have a hand—sort of like a hand-made quality to it. Much like *Mad Max*, actually, when you just—you can tell that these people have nothing, and so they just, you know, scavenge and put together whatever it is to make it look cool and interesting and practical and useful.

And similarly on *Birds*—so, Harley's confetti jacket is made out of caution tape. You know, her—like, her final jumpsuit is leather, actually, and my thinking around that was, okay, well it's like a workman's jumpsuit, you know? It's like, thick, thick leather, so that she can fall and get hit and get cut and it just kind of like, protects her a little bit.

00:40:17 April Host Yeah, and I want to go back to something that you had actually brought up earlier in the episode, um, which is that the folks who were working on *Mad Max*, they had like, character names for a lot of their objects. And I wanted to talk a little bit about something that um, Colin Gibson had said to bolster that.

He said, "We salvaged parts of 350 cars to custom build the vehicles. We call them characters. They had names. They were 88 distinct characters, but we built about 150, because we needed doubles and sometimes triples of things that had to do specific stunts, like when they're hurtling through the air while on fire. You generally need a couple of those at that time."

[Cathy laughs.]

But I thought that was lovely. I mean like, they're—they know these vehicles and this machinery intimately, because they are building it from scratch and they are forging and they are scavenging for it in the same way that any character in this movie might. And I love that they kind of become attached to these vehicles and to this

machinery, and that the production designers and stunts people are like, "Yes, I know you. I know who you are," and it's a car.

- 00:41:31 Cathy Guest Totally, and the sort of individualism, but also the group. But you can take a step back and be like, oh, this is one thing, you know? So like the different gangs clearly had their different aesthetics, right? Um, and like, the War Boys all looked a certain way, but then if you actually zoom in and look at them, they all had their different markings, they all looked slightly different.
- And that's actually really funny, because on *Birds*, we had gangs. Like, a lot of it is about gang consolidation and the different gangs of Gotham, and that was an approach we took, too, where we're like, we want it to feel haphazardly like a gang and not so much like, uniforms per se. But everyone has their individuality, but at the same time like, when they stand together, you actually understand that they're of a whole.
- So *Mad Max* was a really good reference for that, as was *A Clockwork Orange*, actually.
- 00:42:24 April Host Totally. Did you ever look at *The Warriors* for it?
- 00:42:27 Cathy Guest Of course.
- [April laughs.]
- And *The Warriors*. Of course. You can't get away with trying to do a gritty Gotham/New York and not look at *The Warriors*.
- [Both laugh.]
- 00:42:37 April Host [Sing-song] Warriors!
- Um, I wanted to kind of finish up the interview with a quote from the costume designer again, because I think it says a lot about women working with women in these areas.
- She said, "When Charlize Theron came for her fitting in Namibia, she put one on and said, 'This feels really great.' And it had to be a sort of corset, because she had to put this harness on top of it. I went all sort of English and coy and said, 'Oh, well, you know, we've been trying to make it.' And she just said, 'Take the compliment, bitch.' And George Miller literally elevated about a foot in the air. He sort of jumped. She's just very straight talking, and I just loved it, so I've been taking the compliment, bitch, ever since."
- 00:43:19 Cathy Guest [Laughing] Oh, I love that. I love that so much.
- 00:43:23 April Host Isn't that beautiful? I thought that was a nice thing, that that's the kind of dynamic on the set where just like, there's a kind of like real talk between women and just being like, "Take it, you work hard. This is yours." I like it. Don't hedge.
- In the same way that I'm sure that George Miller is very precise, you know? In all these interviews, all the actors are like, "He's very precise. He's extremely patient. He knows what he wants and then

he gets it, so why can't we?"

00:43:50 Cathy Guest Absolutely, and, you know, it's—I look back on *Mad Max* too, and it was before me too. It was before the sort of like—it was starting to happen, but like when, I guess, even telling female stories was in vogue, if you will. It kind of came out of nowhere, and I've described it as like, a Trojan horse movie where like, you think you're watching this like, big bro movie, action spectacle—

00:44:14 April Host *[Deep, enthusiastic tone]* Yeah, *Mad Max* is back!

[Cathy laughs.]

And then you're like, "What?"

00:44:16 Cathy Guest Yeah, and you're like, "Wait, what's going on? Why is it about—oh, okay." And the secret feminism of the movie and like, it makes sense, right? It makes sense, everything that like, you've read about how George Miller thought about the movie and how supportive he was of, you know, the female costume designer and everyone else. But like, that, I think, is really remarkable, too, that he managed to really like, incept a profoundly, profoundly feminist story in this like, big spectacle.

00:44:52 April Host Mm-hm. I've forever appreciated it. Um, Cathy, it's so great to talk with you. I'm very excited to see *Birds of Prey*. When is that coming out?

00:44:59 Cathy Guest February 7th.

00:45:01 April Host February 7th. Wow, wow, wow, wow. It's so soon! Um, uh, we wish you the best of luck and congratulations on everything. Thank you so much.

00:45:09 Cathy Guest Thank you. This was so fun.

00:45:11 April Host Thank you for listening to *Switchblade Sisters*! If you like what you're hearing, please leave us a five-star review on Apple Podcasts. If you do, we'll read it on air.

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Our producer is Casey O'Brien. Our senior producer is Laura Swisher, and this is a production of MaximumFun.org.

00:45:41 Clip Clip **Miss Giddy:** "Sooner or later, someone pushes back!"

00:45:44 Speaker 1 Promo MaximumFun.org.

00:45:46 Speaker 2 Promo Comedy and culture.

00:45:47 Speaker 3 Promo Artist owned—

00:45:48 Speaker 4 Promo —Audience supported.