



## Keanu Reeves, *John Wick*, and the myths and tensions between star brands and franchise properties

Sarah Thomas

To cite this article: Sarah Thomas (2022): Keanu Reeves, *John Wick*, and the myths and tensions between star brands and franchise properties, *Celebrity Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2022.2063405](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2063405)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2063405>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 17 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 86



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Keanu Reeves, *John Wick*, and the myths and tensions between star brands and franchise properties

Sarah Thomas

Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article examines Keanu Reeves' role in the John Wick franchise, studying the tensions that lie between studio-managed intellectual property networks and star brand. A valuable star vehicle, John Wick embedded Reeves' star persona within its filmic fabric, reinvigorating his star status beyond the digital memes that characterised him as the twenty-first century unfolded. John Wick was swiftly franchised, becoming an important media property in its own right, in dialogue with but also separate from Reeves' own stardom as it expanded into a transmedia multiverse. The franchise therefore reflects wider intersections and negotiations between celebrity, star power, business strategy, and licensed properties in contemporary media industries. This article traces the production and reception around the three released John Wick films, along with their marketing and paratextual materials and multiplatform adaptations, which increasingly deviate from using Reeves as a central star figure. It investigates the value of stardom within Hollywood franchise texts, focusing on the transformative effect of John Wick on Reeves' image and brand, the different ways in which stars stand as authenticating figures in franchise cultures, and how Reeves' own star status is simultaneously challenged and affirmed by the franchise that has come to define his later screen career.

### KEYWORDS

Keanu reeves; John Wick; Lionsgate; transmedia franchising; Hollywood; star branding

The surprise success of the 2014 film *John Wick* (dir. Chad Stahelski) heralded a resurgence in the screen career of Keanu Reeves. As other articles in this issue have explored, Reeves had found himself in a cultural comeback since the early 2010s as the focus of memes, gossip and other digitally circulated celebrity discourse. However, it was not until *John Wick* – an action film anchored around Reeves' presence as the eponymous character out for revenge after mobsters kill his dog and steal his car shortly after his wife's death – that this attention translated once more to his onscreen work and bolstered his status as a bona fide, culturally resonant film star. Somewhat of an anomaly in contemporary Hollywood genre production through its position as an original property amidst a sea of remakes, reboots and adaptations, *John Wick* was shaped into a coherent vehicle for Reeves, and significantly exceeded industry and audience expectations. Cited as reinvigorating the contemporary action film and Reeves' career, the relatively low-budget

**CONTACT** Sarah Thomas  [s.k.thomas@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:s.k.thomas@liverpool.ac.uk) 

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(\$20 million) star vehicle subsequently underwent a swift and intense franchising, with film sequels, gaming and comic book adaptations, and spin-offs all being licensed and produced. The sequels *John Wick: Chapter 2* (released in 2017) and *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* (released in 2019) were even bigger hits, exponentially raising the profits associated with the franchise and turning Keanu Reeves' *John Wick* into a cultural and financial phenomenon.

Through these transmedia extensions, *John Wick* has become a standalone intellectual property in dialogue with, but also independent from Reeves' star brand. In its ongoing life, *John Wick* intersects with two established media systems – the star system and the franchise system – and negotiates between these competing modes of identity and product differentiation. Tara Lomax notes 'these systems [may] converge, but they do not easily coalesce' (Lomax 2021, p. 188) partly because, as Derek Johnson suggests, 'franchises . . . typically favour branded character properties over celebrity' (2008, p. 217). The increasing dominance of franchise properties in contemporary Hollywood production means that in many cases, 'the star brand is no longer of central importance to Hollywood's marketing strategy or creative development' and that stars are under pressure 'to support franchise storyworld development, not supplant it' (Lomax 2021, p. 188). By contrast, star vehicles are 'constructed around star presence' where 'character and star [become] mutually reinforcing figurations' and 'characters [are] written to fit the star's persona' (Glitre 2019, p. 37). Whilst the identities of 'John Wick' and 'Keanu Reeves' are inherently connected as one, illustrating that 'in the contemporary moment, the management of star image and intellectual property are necessarily intertwined' (Johnson 2008, p. 229) this article will explore how, as the franchise has evolved, they are also in tension with each other.

Reeves' screen stardom has long been associated with franchise texts, including his breakthrough role as Ted in 1989's *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, continued in the 1991 and 2020 sequels and the 1990 animated TV spin-off. Most significant is his role as Neo in the iconic franchise *The Matrix*, defined by Henry Jenkins as 'a phenomenon of transmedia storytelling' representative of 'entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium' (2006, p. 97). *The Matrix* hangs heavy over *John Wick*: Laurence Fishburne was cast in the latter's sequels alongside Reeves, and Wick's story increasingly mimics that of Neo, becoming another resurrected Christ-like figure by the end of *Chapter 3: Parabellum*.

Franchises such as *The Matrix* and *John Wick* emphasise an integration of entertainment and marketing, containing strong economic motivations for the continuation of the texts across various iterations and platforms, with *The Matrix* in particular being 'shaped by a whole new version of synergy' through its cross-production, intertextuality and world-making (Jenkins 2006, p. 106). Derek Johnson suggests that in Jenkins' work (and in wider studies of *The Matrix*), the concept of franchising has often been 'overshadowed and synonymized with transmedia', leaving less attention on examining franchising as 'an industrial structure, set of social relations, and cultural imaginary' (2013, p. 31). Stardom too is an established mode of multimedia convergence and the coherent integration of text and marketing, and looking at a star-driven franchise like *John Wick* illustrates how stars can be seen – apart from transmedia – as one of the *other* 'cultural trajectories and industrial formations [that remain] entangled in franchising' (2013, p. 32). As a successful film property that refocused attention back onto Keanu Reeves, *John Wick* represents the

transformation of the Reeves star identity into a coherent Hollywood brand, but beyond this, the series sits at the intersections of the inherent contemporary tensions between industry, star labour, brand, transmedia storytelling, identity and franchising.

### **John Wick : a star vehicle to resurrect and consolidate Keanu Reeves' star brand**

The franchise's first film, *John Wick*, consolidated the sense of 'Keanu Reeves' as an important standalone star brand more thoroughly than many of his previous screen incarnations, including *The Matrix*. Whilst that 1999 film certainly informed Reeves' stardom, becoming a career-defining role, its significance lies as transmedia innovator rather than singular star text. Although *The Matrix* contains isolated self-reflexive moments that amplify the exceptional status of its star's performance (see McDonald 2012, pp. 66–67), it was not conceived as a Reeves star vehicle, with many A-list stars being offered and turning down the part of Neo before his eventual casting (Dawn 2020). It is only really from the 2010s (and working in collaboration with the ongoing digital celebrification of Reeves' off-screen identity) that Reeves achieves a meaningfully coherent star brand – culturally and economically. *John Wick's* merging of the economic and cultural around Reeves embodies 'the symbolic commerce of stardom' whereby the 'star is a person-as-brand, a symbolic vehicle used to create a set of impressions deployed in selling a particular film experience' (McDonald 2013, p. 41). By necessity, films conceived at the production stage as star vehicles are more likely to embed the meanings of one individually fixed star-brand within the formal and narrative fabric of the text, rather than (as with *The Matrix*) overlay important but isolated referents onto a film's surface – easily removable or addable, depending on which star is ultimately cast.

*John Wick* was characterised through star labour and capital, with Reeves seen as the main context for positioning the otherwise unknown property. He 'shepherded [the film] to production, having become involved at the level of the original screen play and working on its development' to move it beyond the 'B-movie heritage' of the original screenplay (Arnett 2020, p. 113). Written by the relatively inexperienced Derek Kolstad, Reeves sent the script to stunt coordinators Chad Stahelski and David Leitch, whom he worked with on *The Matrix*, hoping to spark their interests in directing (Lewis 2014). During pre-production Kolstad's script was renamed from 'Scorn' to the more identity-focused, and therefore star-driven, 'John Wick'. Made independently by Thunder Road Films, the US distribution rights were picked up by Lionsgate in a deal brokered by CAA, who also represented Reeves at that time, and released through their Summit label. *John Wick* aligns convincingly (more so than *The Matrix*) to the intersection between identity and brand that characterises a star vehicle, where the 'actor-signifier is foregrounded over the character-signified' in an emphasis on 'who is acting over . . . what is acted' (McDonald 2012, p. 66), a strategy that aids and extends in the communication of the individual star brand. Reeves' status as primary signifier can be seen in the film's theatrical poster which – compared with the group shot of the four main actors/characters that was used for *The Matrix's* original poster – emphasises the interconnected singular identities of Wick/Reeves. Reeves is framed alone from the waist upwards in a pose looking directly at and holding a gun towards the camera/viewer, where the muzzle of the gun aligns with the 'O' in the title and character's name. This heightened awareness of the performer as

signifier 'is essential towards making the star a defining, enduring and stable component of the film product' where 'the star-signifier serves to differentiate products in the marketplace' (2012, p. 62).

Prior to release, trade press framed *John Wick* exclusively through Reeves' career trajectory and star power within the industry – which were not seen as strong (with a number of underperforming films during that decade) or mainstream (with the star carving a niche out in independent productions). Reeves had an uneasy and intermittent relationship with mainstream studios reluctant to consider him a viable investment, rarely offering him significant roles (Gajewski 2014), with one exception, the 2013 Universal flop *47 Ronin*, leaving his career in dire 'need of a win' (McClintock 2014b). Reports outlining his independent productions downplayed *John Wick* in favour of Reeves' 'passion project' *Passengers* (which he had been developing since 2007) with articles from the 2013 Cannes Film Festival naming the latter as 'one to watch' and only noting the former as an afterthought. Thought to be a more attractive package deal, *Passengers* was bought by The Weinstein Company for distribution after first Reese Witherspoon and then Rachel McAdams signed on to the project, but after both A-list actresses withdrew, The Weinstein Company pulled out and it left Reeves' hands (Brzeski 2013) (It was later made in 2016 with Chris Pratt and Jennifer Lawrence). The major studios were similarly averse to investing upfront in *John Wick*, with Lionsgate reportedly being the only studio to offer a deal to distribute the independent film (Clark 2019).

Despite the industry's tentativeness around the property, the ongoing value of star-capital – especially to foreign markets – motivated investment strategy, with Reeves named specifically as a major marketable force abroad (McClintock and Kemp 2013). In an increasingly lean film market, *John Wick* was a typical fare, since financiers were focusing on 'projects which have established or emerging directors ... matched with proven stars' (McClintock 2014a). It also marked the first investment in Hollywood by Chinese production company Huayi Brothers as part of their move into Hollywood and other markets through star-driven properties (Coonan 2014). As part of the deal with Thunder Road Films, Huayi Bros. was due to distribute the film in China, although failing to pass state censorship it was denied a release. A later lawsuit between the companies saw Thunder Road contend that the Chinese distributors used the censorship provision as a pretext to renege on their deal, fearing the film would flop 'after the poor performance of two other Keanu Reeves films, *Ronin 47* [sic] and *Man of Tai Chi*' (Maddaus 2020). Despite the concerns and/or disinterest around the star vehicle, it opened strongly and performed better than anticipated throughout its run, eventually taking over \$88 million, with 51.4% of its overall sales from foreign markets (Bean 2019). This success gave '[Reeves'] star power a boost' (Siegel 2014) and reinvigorated worldwide public interest in his screen work and star image.

Prior to *John Wick*, Reeves' image had provoked fascination, but was difficult to harness as a coherent and valuable star brand. Mutable and evolving, his star image was most often interpreted through a perceived sense of 'lack' that enabled his roles to explore shifts in contemporary struggles with identity and morality. This defined Reeves with a mythic and malleable persona that invited others (auteur-directors, audiences and so on) to use it as for their own ends, with his performative and cultural blankness taking on a tabula rasa-eque quality (see Rutsky 2002, Netzley 2006, Giarratana 2002; also Govil this issue). Jeanine Basinger argued that Reeves used this cultural position to challenge

typecasting, suggesting that he had worked 'steadily against persona to the point where no one has a clear idea of who Reeves is onscreen anymore' (2007, pp. 542–3). What *John Wick* therefore (finally) achieved was the realisation of that economically unstable (but highly resonant) cultural image into a tangible branded identity, coming to represent 'the perfect part' for Reeves (Spiegel 2019).

*John Wick* is a film of ellipses, and whilst critics identified this stripping back as a breath of fresh air, the authenticity of Reeves' stardom – and its mythic qualities – is partly the transformative tool used to fill the film's gaps. The sparse script holds Wick at a distance where 'Stahelski's technique remains outside of Wick's mental state' and 'we enter the oneiric [state] *with* him, not *through* him' [my emphasis] (Arnett 2020, p. 119). *Through* Reeves, audience expectations around blankness, surface and silence have the potential to construct these textual elements as connective signs – knowable content not detached lack, presence not absence – as we recognise these elements from other encounters with Reeves. As they have done before, Reeves/Wick's innocence, superficiality and vagueness serve wider themes around identity, identification, and the mutability of image. Whilst, as one review acknowledges, 'there are no good guys in *John Wick*' (Debruge 2014), Reeves' inter- and extra-textual status as a conduit of decency anchors his character as more than the brutal unemotional hitman and elevates the believability of the dead-dog-inspired murderous rampage into coherent and authentic moral action. As Lisa Coulthard and Lindsay Steenberg suggest, 'Wick's action ... is tied to the body and star persona of ... Reeves. [His] body in action becomes a kind of compressed celebrity symbol that enmeshes Wick with Reeves, endowing the film character with the mixed-race background, tragic romantic past, single-minded athleticism, professionalism, and understated likeability associated with Reeves' star persona' (2022, pp. 41–42). Reeves' physicality comes to stand in for the film's claims towards authenticity, with the fight choreography 'foreground[ing] Reeves' physical adeptness ... and dance-like movements' that enables 'fans and critics alike [to] stress the authenticity of the action, Reeves' skills and the realism of the violence' (Coulthard and Steenberg, 2022, p. 42). Wick's noir-inspired existential struggle with identity, technology and place is thematically consistent with Reeves' screen and off-screen persona – from *The Matrix* to memes; struggles that viewers have long-wanted him to emerge victorious from.

The ephemeral, elemental nature of Reeves' star image invokes and interrogates the mysteries of Wick's mythic creature. Whilst earlier cultural discourse never shied away from constructing Reeves as a mythic figure, as other articles in this special issue have shown, this has only intensified in the twenty-first century through the star's digital celebrification. In *John Wick*, that status is enveloped back into a cinematic narrative dependent on establishing its own myths of the exceptional individual, with the premise of the film resting upon the convincing construction of Wick as the 'boogeyman' – an impossible foe of oral folklore. Whilst Wick himself is a mutable, intangible image, his certainty is created because he occupies the same space and identity as Reeves' own flickering, transformable – yet known – star myth. Whilst the film needs a mythical star to authenticate and anchor its own fairy-tale, in that moment, it also reworks Reeves into a distinct, coherent focus of attention and symbolism, becoming the 'icon/legend' that GQ's 2019 profile describes. The transformative effect between star image and film text (where star serves character and character serves star) was acknowledged in review discourse, with one commenting that although 'Reeves isn't nearly as tough or

intimidating as your typical revenge-movie antihero ... his star persona helps to make the film more fun – or at least a lot less bleak’ (Debruge 2014), and another suggesting whilst ‘Reeves is dialled in to his own particular set of skills here ... it’s [a] scruffier, more charmingly stoic version of the once-awkwardly robotic star’ that we see (Abele 2014). With the embedding of Reeves’ stardom within the filmic fabric, coupled with the increased cultural familiarity of the star away from the cinema screen and his own film history, *John Wick* represents the stabilising of a previously transient star image into a fixed locus. A more grounded site than the passivity of the digital memes and celebrity gossip or the disparateness of his earlier roles and personae, *John Wick* – and responses to it – solidified the tabula rasa-esqeness and economic uncertainty of Reeves into an identifiable viable status as star capital. As *Forbes* commented in the wake of *Chapter 3: Parabellum*, ‘no series – and yes, that includes the Matrix films – have exemplified [the Reeves] asset better than the John Wick movies’ (Bean, 2019)

### From ‘Reeves’ to ‘Wick’: Franchise escalation and intertextual expansion around *John Wick: Chapter 2*

Whilst solidifying Reeves’ star brand, *John Wick*’s subsequent franchising and expansion of its universe (‘the Wickverse’) nevertheless began to challenge the ongoing value of the Reeves asset to the realisation of the transmedia property. In *John Wick: Chapter 2* (and around its surrounding cultures) there is a distinct emphasis away from Reeves onto Wick, where the sequel moves beyond the first film’s construction of Wick as ‘symbolic embodiment’ of Reeves’ star image towards delineating the character and his asset value firmly as ‘studio property’. In marked contrast to the apparent disinterest of mainstream studios to *John Wick*, industry discourse now foregrounded a clear sense of ‘ownership’ over and investment in the property by Lionsgate, redefining it from an independent production to one embedded within the strategies of its primary producer-distributor. Building much of their post-2000 success on film franchises with *Saw*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, Lionsgate’s escalation of the *John Wick* narrative fit its broader business model, and the series’ cultural move from independent Thunder Road production to major studio asset reflected Lionsgate’s own industrial shifts as it transformed from ‘marginal independent to vertically integrated mini-major’ (Perren 2013, p. 108). The studio had identified the property as a focus for long-term investment and profit-making, with Lionsgate’s CEO Jon Feltheimer announcing ‘we see John Wick as a multiple-title action franchise’ (McNary 2015). For Lionsgate, *John Wick* became a flagship asset with which to explore ambitious contemporary intertextual multiplatform franchising during a period where the studio implemented a diversification strategy across different platforms (following the studio’s notable transmedia marketing campaign for *The Hunger Games* franchise). This aided its transformation ‘from film and television studio into a diversified global content machine, developing, producing and owning the rights to intellectual property ... monetized across [our] multiple platforms’ (Feltheimer quoted in Vlessing 2017).

Reeves too occupied a place in Lionsgate’s multiplatform expansion but in a different way, with a number of Reeves’ post-*John Wick* vehicles distributed mostly through Lionsgate’s Premier sub-division, launched in 2015 to specialise in direct-to-video-on-demand films. One film, *Exposed*, generated controversy when the studio (approached to partly finance the film to completion after Reeves’ own funding source fell through)



insisted it be recut from a female-led original version that explored Black and Latino communities into a Reeves-focused crime-thriller, with the film's producer Mark Downie accusing Lionsgate of failing to 'see past ... this A-list star in this secondary leading role' (Belton 2015). However, whilst the studio considered star assets as important to establishing the viability of this new division (even modifying original films into star vehicles), it did not invest in Reeves' career beyond this through major theatrical releases.

Instead, Lionsgate focused on the John Wick asset, especially around digital marketing and convergence between film and gaming through its newly-formed Interactive Ventures and Games sub-division, with a remit to increase their revenue in the gaming market. As early as 2013, they partnered with Overkill Software, Starbreeze and 505 Games to develop intertextual *John Wick* content for the video game sequel *Payday 2*. This introduced Wick as a downloadable digital playable character to that franchise, creating generic continuities to sell the (then unknown) film's particular aesthetic to gaming audiences. In 2017, to supplement and publicise *Chapter 2*, an additional 'John Wick Heists' pack for *Payday 2* was released, and the studio developed a virtual reality (VR) gaming experience with Starbreeze, *The John Wick Chronicles*. Lionsgate had identified new modes of VR media as vital to growing its interactive digital entertainment division, and to minimise the financial risks of VR they looked to adapt existing holdings into this format, using *John Wick's* now-established popularity to generate interest in their speculative VR projects. Further marking *John Wick's* shift from 'hard-to-sell' indie property to mainstream phenomenon, Lionsgate secured a TV spot for the sequel during the 2017 Super Bowl. In 2021, the studio used *John Wick* to engage again with new media technology, launching a partnership with Autograph – a platform built around Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) – to experiment between film IP and NFTs.

What many of these digital versions of *John Wick* promised was a first-person interactive experience where the game player *could become* Wick himself, engaging in the physical and sensorial experience of the extreme gunplay seen elsewhere only on cinema screens and *through* the body of Reeves. The first-person shooter aesthetic favoured by these adaptations established an authentic recreation of the film world in game form, emphasising the close combat visuals and stylistic continuities. In doing so, though, the playable content of these interactive media extensions removed the tangible presence of Reeves-as-Wick, distancing the star brand from the overall property. Even the 2019 strategy game *John Wick Hex* (Good Shepherd Entertainment/Lionsgate) which used Reeves' likeness distances the user from the star through gameplay that only offers a small Wick figure to manoeuvre from above and no input from Reeves himself. This is in stark contrast to Reeves' appearance in the 2020 game *Cyberpunk 2077* (developed and published by the independent Polish company CD Projekt) which, through his voice acting and motion capture, digitally reconstructed him as the secondary character Johnny Silverhand to create a much-hyped 'authentic' digital version of the star for players to interact with.

Instead, for the *John Wick* games, the films' supporting actors became the authentic indicators of the universe, with figures like Lance Reddick (Charon) and Ian McShane (Winston) providing voice and digital likeness. The video games emphasised a broad narrative connection to the Wickverse via these characters, using the setting of The New York Continental Hotel (a base from which the assassins operate, run by Winston with Charon as Concierge). Through its Global Consumer Products division, Lionsgate also



developed the *John Wick* comic (in partnership with Dynamite Entertainment) which explored the younger Wick's initial entry into the assassin underworld. First published in 2017, the concept artwork was released as part of *Chapter 2*'s publicity campaign in December 2016 and placed the star as the dual key indicator of its connection to the films (along with its kinetic style) with artist Giovanni Valletta – according to the comic's writer Greg Pak – 'nailing Keanu Reeves' likeness while creating emotional, dynamic, exciting action' (McMillan 2017). These paratexts reflect the star's shifting liminal status around the franchise, where the star essence of the 'real' Reeves is an important visual and emotive or connective presence for *some*, but not *all*, with other markers of authenticity increasingly coming to the fore.

Within the filmic text of *Chapter 2*, whilst present, the star spectacle of Reeves is also challenged by the sequel's greater investment in the spectacles of location, action, and intertextuality, where the expansive myths of John Wick supersede the myth of Keanu Reeves. This shift is marked by the conclusion of Wick's assignment in Rome, where the film's antagonist Santino (Riccardo Scamarcio) opens a \$7 million contract on him, ending Wick's personal narrative of the 'blood oath' and revealing new institutional and cultural structures that shape the assassins' universe. On his arrival back into New York, Wick is targeted by numerous unnamed assassins, all of which he despatches swiftly. This violent action is intercut with a speech to Santino from Winston that refers explicitly to Wick-the-myth; as 'the devil' whose 'temple' Santino 'burned to the ground', forcing him back for revenge. When Santino argues 'He was already back', Winston's response ('He came back for love, not for you') removes associations that Reeves' stardom – with its moral certainty and tragic histories – brought to the first film's personal vendetta. Wick's acts of violence engage with the character's myths, showcasing his relentlessly inventive killing techniques. A signature feature of the first film's set-up of Wick as the boogeyman, his ability to kill 'with a *fucking* pencil!' is repeated again at the start of *Chapter 2* and then enacted here in 'reality', providing the viewer with unfettered access to the authenticity of Wick's legend. Additionally, whilst the first film contained the ultra-violence of the assassins' world in 'hyper-real' self-contained underworld spaces primarily occupied by those figures (The Continental, the clubs and hideaways owned by the mobsters, the empty dock at the climax), the sequel opens out into wider 'real' public locales such as the streets of New York. That the assassin-led violence gains relatively little attention from crowds suggests that this hyper-reality and its myths are more enmeshed in the everyday world than the first film suggested that the Wickverse *is* reality. Moving away from Reeves' distinct status in *John Wick* as a star-driven anchor between reality and hyper-reality, Wick now stands as an ordinary/extraordinary star legend (and property) in his own right, competing against traditional star identities for cultural and market dominance.

The expansion of the onscreen Wickverse in *Chapter 2* introduced textual expansions that added depth to the storyworld, including the High Table structure, the Roman branch of The Continental run by cult star Franco Nero, and the Bowery King and his gang of beggars. Sitting 'Under the Table', the Bowery setting constructs intertextuality as a significant marker of the rigour and stability of the escalating film universe. Whilst partly referencing the 1931 German film *M* with its own parallel underworlds of criminals and beggars, through the casting of Laurence Fishburne as the King it emphatically re-connects Wick to *The Matrix*, not merely through the boundaries of Reeves and his star image, but through the latter's exemplary status as transmedia text. Very much a cameo in

*Chapter 2*, Fishburne's bombastic presence and performance are part publicity device designed to drive attention towards the film (with reports circulated during filming about the 'exciting' *Matrix* reunion, and Fishburne's central reveal in the film's trailer), and part textual referent to the well-established transmedia experience that *The Matrix* symbolises, and that – through *Chapter 2* – the *Wick* franchise promises to become. This intertextuality is not driven by Reeves' position as a standalone star brand or identity (this is not about making embedded connections between *Wick* and *Neo* necessarily), but by his and others' status as component parts in a wider transmedia machine, articulated through the overlay of associated elements between the two franchises that Fishburne's/*The Bowery King*'s interactions with Reeves/*Wick* connotes. In *John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum*, this self-reflexive veneer is taken further through *Wick*'s repetition of *Neo*'s iconic line 'Guns, lots of guns'. In doing so, these elements work in service to ground the sequels as sustainable multiverse properties that exist in conjunction with, but not wholly defined by or dependent upon Reeves himself as individualised star property.

### Rebalancing the absence/presence of stardom for the transmedia franchise: *John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum* and beyond

To support its ongoing life as an extensive film series and multiplatform entity, the *John Wick* property must rely upon *and* dismiss the central star identity of Keanu Reeves. This reveals a duality between franchise and star dependent upon absence and presence, a dichotomy that *Chapter 3: Parabellum* (and its surrounding cultures) engages with and (partly) attempts to re-stabilise, through Reeves and also narrative routes and platform extensions that direct attention towards other familiar star figures. So, whilst the importance of Reeves' own star status is often simultaneously challenged *and* affirmed by the franchise, nevertheless stardom itself remains a strong feature throughout the filmic and transmedia expansion as a symbol of authenticity and address.

Increasingly constructed as an epic narrative, moving through global locations, symbolic identities, and detailed backstories of supporting characters, *Chapter 3* and its transmedia adaptations increase the scope and scale of the *Wickverse*, connected through – but independent from – *Wick/Reeves*. This is communicated by the film's expanded reliance on intertextual star spectacle through the presence of recognisable actors in new or larger featured roles. Fishburne and (reflecting their use in other *Wick* paratexts) McShane and Reddick all have increased screen time and narrative action, and Halle Berry was cast in a new role as former assassin Sophia, placing a star of equal stature to Reeves in the story. A smaller role than off-screen attention would suggest, nevertheless – reflecting Berry's star status – Sophia and *Wick* are presented with continuity and equality, with Sophia's backstory of 'losing' her daughter, the impressiveness of her physical and fighting skills, and her explosion into violence after her former boss Berrada (Jerome Flynn) shoots her dog. Other supporting roles are populated by figures familiar with cine-literate audiences from television and film, including Anjelica Huston, Asia Kate Dillon, Mark Dacascos, Jerome Flynn, Saïd Taghmaoui, and Jason Mantzoukas.

The increased scope of the supporting cast and the attention given to their presence in the narrative world effectively positions the performers as 'significant' and 'spectacular' in some way, filling in gaps with their own diegetic story and intertextuality. Berry's entrance is one driven by delay and anticipation before a reveal that lingers on her extravagant

costume and glamorously styled appearance; Fishburne has the first great ‘star’ moment of the film delivering an intense speech to camera that arrests attention onto his performative entity; Huston conveys the weight of Hollywood history and her own imperious countenance in her abridged performance of an intriguing maternal figure from Wick’s childhood, and so on. With the knowing exceptionality of these figures, the star-spectacle of Wick/Reeves himself recedes somewhat into the background. Still a character of astounding action, as the opening sequence shows with Wick traversing New York before the ‘excommunicado’ deadline that will expel him from the High Table is up (ensuring his dog’s safety, battling assailants on a horse, and stitching up his wounds), the film only lingers on the stillness of Wick/Reeves when he speaks to other stars (Huston, Berry). In those moments, they hold attention not him, and – in a distinct shift from *Chapter 2* to *Chapter 3* – their stories construct the myths of the High Table more than they reinforce the myth of Wick himself; Wick is characterised less as the boogeyman and more as a pawn battling an unflinching corporate structure.

The ongoing presence of stardom (expansive beyond Reeves alone) serves the world-building of the universe, and the sequels establish active relationships as the means to move the franchise forward in future instalments. Whereas the most meaningful relationship in *John Wick* was the unattainable one between John and his dead wife Helen (leaving him a lone and lonely challenger), by *Chapter 3* new alliances and ongoing contracts have been established, connecting Wick to – rather than alienating him from – other characters. Actions like the reappearance of Fishburne’s presumed-dead Bowery King at film’s conclusion (where he asks Wick ‘Are you ready for war?’ or the shifting loyalties demonstrated by McShane’s increasingly ambiguous Winston, create the splintered structure of the third film and reveal new motivations that will drive *Chapter 4*. In bringing different antagonists and allies to the fore, infinite possibilities of where the story could spin out from are suggested, albeit contained within the universe’s particular boundaries. As Robert Arnett suggests, Wick’s ‘violent resurrection’ at the end of the third film ‘becomes a sentence to eternal sequels, living variations of the same nightmare over and over’ (2020, p. 117).

The absence of Reeves’ stardom continues in the wider transmedia world of the franchise, but what is also present is a movement away from the central mythic presence of Wick himself. Whilst in their digital realisation of Wick’s actions video game adaptations removed only Reeves, other iterations of the franchise increasingly look beyond the titular character to extend engagement with the multiverse, building on the richly detailed account that *Chapter 3* showcases, and broadening out the text to other stars and their associated images. The second sequel’s glimpse of the Russian Ballet academy that trains students to become assassins is the focus of a female-led film spin-off entitled *The Ballerina* directed by Len Wiseman (known for another female-led franchise, *Underworld*) with Chloe Grace Moretz named as a possible star (Dela Paz 2020). A television series prequel exploring a younger Winston and the New York Continental has been put into development for the Starz network. (As Lionsgate owns Starz, this marks the continuation of the studio’s horizontal integration strategy around the property.) Although ‘Reeves [was] expected to make an appearance in the series, but will not star’ (Goldberg 2018), it was later reported that Mel Gibson had been cast in a starring role (Fleming Jr 2021). Both established action stars, Gibson’s earthier, complex and controversial star image is far removed from the moral decency and ethereal qualities of Reeves,

suggesting a deliberate shift from the Wickverse being defined through the qualities of Reeves' mythic star persona. This opens out the text to envelop, utilise – and potentially reinvent – other equally famous (or infamous) star presences in service of the continuing franchise.

Whilst these developments suggest Reeves' individual value is diminished by the franchise in service of expanding the Wickverse, *Chapter 3* also makes a distinct claim to the importance of the pleasures of Reeves' star image and star acting – within the film and in other important paratexts – suggesting that stardom remains an integrated textual absence and presence for the franchise. Within the film, though obvious parallels exist between Sophia and Wick, the script also reinforces a connection between Wick and Mark Dacascos' skilful assassin, Zero. Although Zero repeatedly states that he and Wick are 'the same', through a series of oppositions, the viewer is encouraged to place Wick/Reeves above Zero/Dacascos. Whereas Wick is silent (playing to Reeves' performative strengths), Zero is excessive in his chatter even as he lies mortally injured; Wick's face remains absent and obscured (by low lighting, Reeves' shaggy hair style, and the emphasis on his full physicality), whilst Zero's face is repeatedly rendered highly visible (*too present*), highlighted by framing and bolder lighting that plays off Dacascos' bald head. With extratextual associations around Dacascos coming predominantly from niche television with *Iron Chef America* and *The Crow: Stairway to Heaven* and films like *Brotherhood of the Wolf* and *Cradle 2 the Grave*, he is resoundingly a cult figure, whereas – as *GQ* magazine bestowed at the time of *Chapter 3* – Reeves has attained a grander 'iconic' star status. In one sequence, Dacascos' Zero also becomes 'fan' to Wick's 'star' by unexpectedly breaking into excited adoration that disrupts the existing tone (markedly different to the more integrated professional respect Wick/Reeves gains in the fight sequence with Zero's henchmen). These sustained oppositional positions reaffirm the star value of Reeves himself with his star presence occupying the absences or 'lacks' that Dacascos' performance of Zero creates. Elsewhere, the middle finger Wick raises to Fishburne's Bowery King in the final sequence echoes the dry humour that Reeves brought to the first film, just as Wick's response to the King's question of whether he is 'pissed' enough to go to war – an emphatic, growling 'Yeah!' showcasing Reeves' familiar low, guttural voice and framing his well-lit bloody face in close-up – clearly locates a major attraction of *Chapter 4* to be the ongoing anticipation of Reeves' star-spectacle. Therefore, Reeves continues – at certain moments – to remain a valuable brand identity to, and marker of the authenticity and pleasures of, the continuing Wickverse.

Other transmedia paratexts (that help define the multiverse as much as the filmic experience) also work to rebalance the tensions between the absence and presence of stardom for the franchise, where Reeves' own extratextual celebrity status comes to the fore over the character of Wick. In doing so, this transforms some of the authentic elements of the first film that were derived from Reeves' persona, remediating them in alternative contexts to retain and extend the connections between the property and the authenticity of his star image. Some of the viral moments surrounding the pre-release of *Chapter 3* were a series of YouTube videos on the Taran Tactical channel<sup>1</sup> which showed Reeves (and Berry) practicing tactical manoeuvres and training. Whilst similar to the myriad of DVD/Blu-Ray extras that showcase the star's talent at gunplay and martial arts, these videos lack the gloss of the professionally produced extras (and the film itself), effectively offering an 'unmediated', uninterrupted

perspective on the 'reality' of Reeves' skills that are seen elsewhere in lavish glory on the cinema screen. It is a striking yet – as might be expected from Reeves – low-key spectacle with the star going up against the clock, shooting with different hands, moving through multiple weapon transitions, and achieving an uncanny accuracy that impresses even the professional trainers – heard to exclaim 'that was awesome', 'that was beautiful', 'so cool!'. Reeves responds with a familiar humility and shyness, saying 'I had a little stumble', before thanking every trainer by name at the end of the video. As an emblem of the authenticity of Wick's world – the realism of the stunts and the realism of Reeves' ability to perform them – and of Reeves himself as star figure – a man long perceived to embody humble, kind, generous elements, the videos demonstrate how important Reeves still is to the film property. Although – to ensure their own longevity – the sequels move further away from the purer forms of his screen stardom, he still acts as a conduit through which the franchise's claims to authenticity and realism are realised, even if how those claims are conveyed on the cinema screen has evolved beyond the mechanisms utilised by the first film's engagement with his star image.

## Conclusion

As important as *John Wick* has been to the maturing of Keanu Reeves' star brand, it is obvious that Reeves himself – as Tara Lomax suggested – continues to work in support of the franchise property rather than to wholly supplant it, even as his brand and myth has reached their own cultural zenith. Despite this tension, Reeves continues to work closely within the franchise concept, with the success of *John Wick* marking a re-investment and return to his earlier notable series with 2020's *Bill and Ted Face the Music* and 2021's *The Matrix Resurrections*. Whilst his *Bill and Ted* co-star Alex Winter was adamant that the upturn in Reeves' screen career ushered in by *John Wick* had little impact on the final realisation of that long-mooted sequel (Davids 2020), the contemporary brand value of Reeves – informed through Wick and his off-screen celebrity – was an overt feature of the marketing around the new *Matrix* film, where the first-release trailer presented an initial version of pained, soulful and isolated Neo prompted back into action very much akin to *John Wick's* Wick. Reeves' star identity has certainly been employed in support of these and other franchises, and he remains a distinctly individualised figure within those filmic and trans-filmic structures. Even the 'new' multiverse par excellence, the Marvel Universe, which has increasingly populated its ongoing properties with so many established star figures that each individual's spectacular standing is severely diminished, is long rumoured to have been courting Reeves. Industry analysts partly attributed *John Wick's* success to filling a void craved by audiences overwhelmed by Marvel's type of superhero action (Clark 2019), so it may be that Marvel are looking – to some degree – to the star as emblem of *John Wick's* breath of fresh air to hold the attention of potentially saturated audiences. The rumours of Reeves' casting sparked intense online discussion (drawing on his status as one of 'the internet's boyfriends'). This discourse suggests that Reeves' cultural value exceeds that of other contemporaneous star casting in the Marvel's universe, with hints that the star's fame might, albeit briefly, supplant that of the franchise that seeks to contain him.

Economically too, Reeves has made important alignments between his own brand and that of the properties that now help define him. Although only paid between \$1 and \$2 million upfront for *John Wick*, and only rising to \$2.5 million for the sequels (a drop from his late 1990s rate of \$15 million upfront plus percentages but commensurate with contemporary industry star salary trends), following the first film's success and reflecting his close hand in its development, Reeves negotiated an ownership stake in the overall *John Wick* property. This means that he still benefits from the text even if, as the development of further transmedia extensions are advocating, he is fully removed from its multiverse. This strategy was described as a 'smart and modern' route that works across studio and independent contexts, taken by 'top stars to bet on themselves' often in their work on continuing franchises (THR Staff 2016), placing Reeves at the cutting edge of star-labour negotiations within the industry. Despite this, Reeves' standing as star-capital worthy of sustained investment remains as tentative as it had been previously. Away from Lionsgate, the only major studio to release a Reeves film post-*John Wick* has been Walt Disney, and only as a result of his supporting voiceover role in 2019's *Toy Story 4*. Although he has made numerous non-franchise films in the last decade, few have generated much public scrutiny or above-average profit-making, with his cameo in 2019's *Always Be My Maybe* seemingly generating the most interest. Arguably his fortunes remain intrinsically tied to franchise culture, and his career and continued engagement with *John Wick* (either through appearances in or ownership of) reflects important convergent structures that characterise the entertainment industry, with star labour and the brand value of star-capital remaining only component parts of a much larger machine. What Reeves' post-millennial career – with its iconography of digital memes, humble celebrity and new model action star – also reveals is the ongoing and increasingly complex interplay between multiplatform screen cultures, integrated marketing and participatory practices, where boundaries blur more and more between franchise text, viral image, cultural labour and individual brand construction.

## Note

1. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xii9\\_oWQ7HY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xii9_oWQ7HY).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Sarah Thomas* is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Liverpool, UK. She is the author of the monographs *James Mason* (BFI Film Stars, 2018) and *Peter Lorre – Face Maker: Stardom and Performance between Hollywood and Europe* (Berghahn, 2012), and co-editor with Kate Egan of *Cult Film Stardom* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



## References

- Abele, R. 2014. 'Review: 'John Wick' brings A game to violent business of revenge', *Los Angeles Times*, 23rd October.
- Arnett, R., 2020. *Neo-Noir as post-classical Hollywood cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Basinger, J., 2007. *The star machine*. New York: Vintage.
- Bean, T. 2019. Keanu Reeves' 'John Wick' Franchise Eclipses \$580 million at box office. *Forbes*, 30th July.
- Belton, D.C. 2015. Exposed: how Keanu Reeves' newest film got whitewashed. *The Root*, 23rd December.
- Brzeski, B. 2013. Cannes: Weinstein Co. Picks up Reeves-Witherspoon space romance 'passengers'. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 21st May.
- Clark, T. 2019. How 'John Wick' spawned a hit franchise from a low-budget action movie almost every studio passed on *Business Insider*. 22nd May.
- Coonan, C. 2014. China's Huayi brothers Join Johnny Depp, Keanu Reeves movies. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9th May.
- Coulthard, L. and Steenberg, L., 2022. The red circle: anatomy of the fight sequence in *John Wick*. In: C.G. Watt and S. Watt, eds. *The worlds of John Wick*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Davids, B. 2020. Why Alex Winter isn't convinced 'John Wick' made ultimate difference in getting 'Bill and Ted Face the music' the green light. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 2nd September.
- Dawn, R. 2020. 'Brad Pitt reveals he turned down 'The Matrix'', *Today*, 23rd January.
- Debruge, P., 2014. Film review: 'John Wick'. *Variety*, 16th October.
- Dela Paz, M. 2020. 'Ballerina: Chad Stahelski reveals new details on Len Wiseman's John Wick Spinoff', *Coming Soon.net*, 1st June
- Fleming, M., Jr 2021. 'Mel Gibson first star set for 'John Wick' origin series 'the continental' for Starz and Lionsgate', *Deadline*, October.
- Gajewski, R. 2014. 'Keanu Reeves: 'it sucks' not getting more studio offers', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21st October
- Giarratana, C., 2002. The Keanu effect – stardom and the landscape of the acting body: los Angeles/Hollywood as sight/site. In: A. Ndalianis and C. Henry, eds. *Stars in our eyes: the star phenomenon in the contemporary era*. Westport Connecticut and London: Praeger, 61–84.
- Glitre, K., 2019. Character and the star vehicle: the impact of casting Cary Grant. In: J. Riis and A. Taylor, eds. *Screening characters: theories of character in film, television and interactive media*. New York and Oxford: Routledge, 37–54.
- Goldberg, L. 2018. "John Wick' TV series in the works at Starz (with Keanu Reeves attached', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12th January.
- Jenkins, H., 2006. *Convergence Culture*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Johnson, D., 2008. A knight of the realm vs. the master of magnetism: sexuality, stardom, and character branding. *Popular Communication*, 6 (4), 214–230. doi:10.1080/15405700802377824
- Johnson, D., 2013. *Media Franchising*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Lewis, H. 2014. 'Keanu Reeves, 'John Wick' directors on how their 'matrix' past helped with assassin film, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 24th October.
- Lomax, T., 2021. Cruising stardom in hollywood franchising: Tom Cruise as Franchise Star in the *mission impossible* and *dark universe* storyworlds. In: S. Redmond, ed. *Starring Tom Cruise*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 187–208.
- Maddaus, G., 2020. John Wick' producer ordered to Pay Huayi Bros. Over axed China release. *Variety*, 30th March.
- McClintock, P. 2014a. 'Cannes: fewer Star-Fueled Projects Are Coming to a Lean Market. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 9th May.
- McClintock, P. 2014b. 'Box office: 'Ouija' tops Friday with \$8.3M; Keanu Reeves' 'John Wick' No. 2. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 24th October.
- McClintock, P. and Kemp, S. 2013 'The 21 surprising Hollywood actors whose names sell movies overseas. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 12th September.



- McDonald, P., 2012. Spectacular acting: on the exhibitionist dynamics of film star performance. In: J. Sternagel, D. Levitt, and D. Mersch, eds. *Acting and performance in moving image culture*. Transcript, 61–70.
- McDonald, P., 2013. *Hollywood Stardom*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- McMillan, G., 2017. John Wick' comic book launch will reveal character's origin. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 20th June.
- McNary, D., 2015. Lionsgate planning 'John Wick' Sequel. *Variety*, 6th February.
- Netzley, R., 2006. Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven', Is that it?: ethics, apocalypticism, and allusion in *The Devil's Advocate*'. In: L.L. Knoppers and G.M.C. Semenza, eds. *Milton in popular culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 113–124.
- Perren, A., 2013. Last indie standing: the special case of Lions Gate in the new millennium. In: G. King, C. Molloy, and Y. Tzioumakis, eds. *American independent cinema: Indie, Indiewood and beyond*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rutsky, R.L., 2002. Being Keanu. In: J. Lewis, ed. *The end of cinema as we know it: American film in the nineties*. London: Pluto Press, 185–194.
- Siegel, T. 2014. 'AFM: Keanu Reeves to star in Sci-Fi Film 'Replicas'', *The Hollywood Reporter*. 28th October.
- Spiegel, J. 2019. 'Why 'John Wick' stands out in the age of cinematic universes. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 17th May.
- THR Staff. 2016. Hollywood salaries 2016. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 29th September.
- Vlessing, E. 2017. Lionsgate posts sharply higher fourth-quarter earnings, beats expectations. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 25th May.