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Ann C. Hall
University of Louisville, ann.hall@louisville.edu

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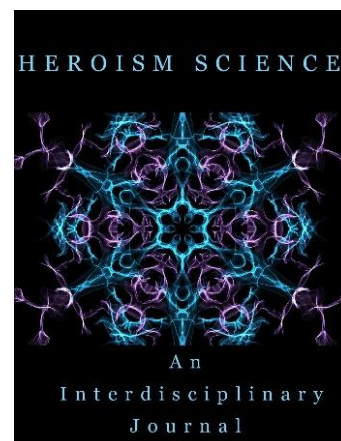
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John Wick: Keanu Reeves's Epic Adventure

ANN C. HALL ¹

University of Louisville

Ann.hall@louisville.edu



ABSTRACT: Three films create the John Wick universe and franchise: John Wick (2014), John Wick: Chapter 2 (2017), and John Wick: Chapter 3, Parabellum (2019). A fourth film is scheduled to be released in March 2023. All are wildly popular, and all are criticized for violence, particularly gun violence. I argue, however, that by examining the visual references that appear in all the films, it becomes clear that the films are defending themselves from such attacks through their allusions to ancient and classical epics from around the world. As Wick battles his way through museums and beautiful cities, the film reminds us that art, all art—fine and popular--relies on violence. Wick follows many of the traditions of the epic hero, and in the end, thanks to the visual cues in the films, he is no different than Achilles or Hector or even *High Noon*'s Will Kane. And if there is a hero, and if there is art, there will be blood.

KEYWORDS: *John Wick, Keanu Reeves, Epic Tradition, Epic Hero, Fine and Popular Art*

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“I sing of arms and of the man.”

--Virgil's *Aeneid*

“I was well versed in Greek literature, which portrayed nothing but passions: death and love and friendship, their hands joined together round a glittering axe.”

--Magda Szabo, *The Door*

1 INTRODUCTION

Three films, with a fourth planned, create the John Wick Universe: *John Wick* (2014), *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017), and *John Wick: Chapter 3, Parabellum* (2019). Simply, they chronicle the adventures of John Wick, a trained assassin with a golden heart. While incredibly popular with general audiences, critics such as Jordan Hoffman have dismissed the films for their gratuitous violence, calling them “hardcore gun pornograph” (2017, 5). Truly, the Wick franchise glorifies violence. The films have so little violence and so much action that they epitomize the Hollywood action film genre. Through the films’ allusions to literature, culture, visual arts, and media, however, the Wick universe not only defends itself against the critics’ “slings and arrows,” but it also aligns the films with the great epics of global cultures. For those who think Hollywood actions films are “low brow,” the Wick films demonstrate that “high brow” art forms are just as violent as these action films and the action film genre deserves artistic consideration as well.

The Wick franchise establishes a contemporary epic culture, founded on the epics of the past, with John Wick, its titular character, as a postmodern epic hero who not only illustrates that underneath the beauty of art is violence, but also that a contemporary and postmodern epic hero may retain his integrity in an unjust and violent world, but in order to do so, the materials available are all he has to work with. There are no new weapons for

Wick to use; he, like Jacques Derrida's "bricoleur" in "Structure, Sign, and Play" (1978, p. 278) must unearth his tools from the rubble of previous adventures. And for Wick, that means weaponry.

2 DEFINING THE EPIC

Defining the epic, like all genres, is fraught with difficulty. Aristotle references the epic and its relationship to tragedy, but "nowhere" does Aristotle define epic. Instead, he "comments on features that usually overlap epic and tragedy, such as plot-structure, recognition, diction, and reversals of fortune" and the way that both forms represent characters who are "noble" or "of quality" (Martin, 2005, 12). Plato, too, dodged the definition by agreeing with Aristotle and describing epic poet Homer as a "proto-tragedian" (Nagy, 2020, 33).

Further, ancient epics did not rigidly adhere to a set of universal standards, as we may have been led to expect. Richard Martin, writing on the genre, notes that epics from Central Africa, for example, included multimedia presentations and performances. They are not merely rhymed verbal poems. He concludes, "the 'epic' must be taken as a total social event including audience interaction, instrumental music . . . not just the text we might want to cull from it" (Martin, 2005, 16). Martin also illustrates the dynamic nature of the genre. It is not dead, but transformative. His description of the African variations on the form, for example, suggests a less rigid definition of the epic, with an even cinematic component.

A recent collection on epic films, films based on ancient myths, heroes, and cultures, also argues for a less restrictive understanding of the genre, as well as making a case for the epic's persistent popularity in many eras including the contemporary. Further, given film's relatively new appearance in the history of fine art, many filmmakers reached to the classical epics for content that would give the new technology more "high brow" art appeal:

The emergence of film came at a time when filmmakers themselves often having been trained in other visual arts, would cast about for suitable topics for film and most likely fall back on the sources most familiar to them. As a consequence, the relationship between cinema and the epic dates back to cinema's very earliest days, in which filmmakers would readily seize on classical plots (Elliot, 2014, 7).

While these examples encourage a fluid interpretation of the genre and its application to contemporary art forms such as film, it is useful to set some boundaries or characteristics to identify this genre. The classic William Harmon and Hugh Holman's *A Handbook to Literature* offers such signposts for the epic, but even they are willing to offer exceptions:

Most epics share certain characteristics: 1) The hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance and of great historical or legendary significance. 2) The setting is vast, covering great nations, the world, or the universe. 3) The action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage. 4) Supernatural forces—gods, angels, demons—interest themselves in the action. 5) A style of sustained elevation is used. 6) The poet retains a measure of objectivity.
(2006, 192)

As the following analysis will demonstrate, the Wick franchise fulfills all but one of these six characteristics. The character of John Wick is legendary, someone of “quality,” having more integrity than the other assassins in the Wick universe. He journeys around the

globe. His courage and abilities in battle are legendary. The Wick world has mysterious rituals, powerful forces, a “high table” that determines the fates of humans. Characters, particularly Wick’s friend and colleague, Winston, speak in stylized ways, using arcane phrases such as “thou,” “thine,” and “excommunicado,” the franchise’s variation on the Latin, *excommunicare*, but which means excommunication from the underworld group as clearly as does excommunication from the Catholic Church.

The only characteristic missing in the Wick universe is objectivity. In addition to linking Wick to the epics of the Mediterranean, ancient Greeks and Romans, Christians, Japanese samurai, Russian folktales and history, and who knows what installment four will bring, the films present Wick positively. Yes, he is a ruthless, cold-blooded killer, and he is not without other faults in character, but as Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals’s *Heroes: What We do and Why We Need Them* (2011) argues, he does not need to be. Not only is the line between good and evil slender, but our understanding of evil can change over time (pp. 137-143). Further and importantly in this film, the film challenges us to identify the hero in an unjust, violence world. Wick may be a killer, like the other assassins, but he is different. Through this difference and many visual cues, the film defines a contemporary, postmodern hero. The film instructs the audience on how to “read” behavior, as well as epics.

3 REEVES’S STAR POWER

The John Wick star, Keanu Reeves, on screen and off assists with this reading, too. His real-life narrative resembles that of an epic hero. Reeves, like many epic heroes, began working and demonstrating his talent and abilities at an early age. He met obstacles, like all epic heroes. In his case, his acting was dismissed as stilted, stiff, and vapid (Dowd, 2017;

Fry, 2019; and Zageris and Curran, 2019). Reeves, again like many epic heroes persisted. He ignored the criticism and continued acting, often experimenting with different performance styles, methods, and films: from the silly teen to an urban version of Henry V to a young Buddha to a hero on a bus to a sci-fi superstar. His repertoire embodies a relentless heroic journey. With his success, audiences and critics began to reinterpret Reeves's acting style. He was no longer a poor performer, but a "cipher," the mysterious means by which the audience entered the movie (Zageris and Curran, 2019, 18) or "inconnu: the figure of someone unknown to others and so free to define themselves" (Harris, 2019, 82). With the Wick franchise, these mysterious qualities are aligned with the heroic.

Reeves's biography, too, includes tales of courage, suffering, and pain that make audiences sympathetic to him in reality and on screen. He experienced great loss, first the death of his close friend and film star River Phoenix, and second, the loss of a child and, several years later, the mother of that child (Robb, 2003, pp. 152-167). Following this period, he also turned down fame and fortune, the chance to star in *Speed 2* so that he could perform as Hamlet in Winnipeg, Canada, a decision he claims placed him in "Hollywood jail," at least with Fox studios, for a period of time (Pappademas, 2019, para. 29). Like many epic heroes, Reeves retreated from the Hollywood battlefield to recover from his wounds and continues to protect his personal privacy carefully. When stories do appear, they depict Reeves as a "considerate man who is aware of his status as a celebrity but doesn't take advantage of it, and who is generous but careful with his presence" (Fry, 2020, 7). Reeves's personal narrative brings the heroic to the Wick franchise: a mysterious do-gooder who persists against all odds.

4 JOHN WICK (2014)

John Wick (2014), the first in the franchise, distinguishes itself from the usual action film at the outset by presenting a “spoiler.” Battered, beaten, barely alive, our hero, John Wick, arrives at a warehouse. No matter what happens in the film, we know that Wick will survive, and this strategy is consistent with ancient epics whose stories audiences knew well and would love to listen to them to hear them repeatedly and with various flourishes and changes by the teller or writer. Given the reality of contemporary culture, where there are few stories, events, details held in common, the Wick strategy is an effective reproduction of the epic universe, creating that epic pleasure from the process, not the outcome, the how, not the what. Ancient audiences knew the outcome of the Trojan War; now we, too, know the outcome of the Wick battles.

In a montage scene reminiscent of the animated classic *Up* (2009), the Wick film presents Wick’s marriage and his wife’s subsequent death from a terminal illness. Wick’s wife, moreover, is appropriately named Helen, a reference to the “face that launched a thousand ships” in *The Iliad*. Through a low angle shot from the grave to the black-clad and rain-soaked mourners, the film emphasizes the emptiness that not only Wick experiences but the void that creates the entire series—ironically, Wick’s grief over his wife’s death, her absence, creates the Wick universe.

A puppy, ordered for Wick by his wife prior to her death, creates a connection between the couple beyond the grave. The film, for example, reinforces this perspective in an early scene at a local gas station. Here Wick meets the film’s antagonist Ioseph Tarasov. While Wick fuels his contemporary chariot, a 1969 Ford Mustang, Tarasov offers to buy the car because, as he says in Russian, “everything’s got a price, bitch.” Hero that he is, Wick cannot be bought. While the two trash-talk, with Wick behaving more nobly than Tarasov,

the camera reveals the back seat of the Mustang. It is filled with dog toys and supplies. The hardened Wick has a heart of gold. He is going to care for the puppy his wife left him.

He is not, however, impenetrable. Following the interaction with Tasarov, he takes the Mustang out. In an abandoned lot, he races to what appears to be his death. For Priscialla Page, Wick is a Byronic hero, a dark, brooding, sneering, even depressive rebel without a cause (2019, 23-24). And while he certainly expresses some of these characteristics, this scene demonstrates that he is different from such a hero. We see that he is so overcome with grief that he considers suicide. Wick is not hardened; he has great depths of feeling. Most importantly, at the end of the scene, he chooses life. Wick's loss, grief, and subsequent decision to continue life through his pain aligns him to an epic hero, not a free radical.

When he does sneer and brood, too, it is not a result of self-pity or cynicism, it is towards injustice and corruption, the kind the Tasarov family represents. The film quickly puts the two world visions in contrast. The Tasarovs cannot take no for an answer. What you will not give, they take. Ioseph breaks into Wick's house, attacks Wick, kills his dog, and steals the Mustang. Again, because contemporary culture has so little common texts, artifacts, history, the death of the puppy unites the audience against the Tasarovs. It is a brilliant strategy and establishes our allegiance to Wick throughout the film and franchise.

With the battle initiated, it is clear that Ioseph has underestimated his opponent. His father, Viggo, explains, "That Fucking nobody is John Wick." True to epic conventions, too, the hero does not sing his own praises; instead, here his enemies reveal his abilities. As Viggo says, Wick is "a man of focus, commitment, sheer will." He is not the boogey man but that man you send to kill the boogeyman.² We learn, too, that Wick is not only treacherous

² According to Georgy Manev, the film may be mistaking two terms, one that references the bogeyman and one that references an elderly woman, a babushka. The films, however, make it clear that the bogeyman is a significant threat (2019, para. 2-4).

and brutal but that he escaped from the Rusca Roma, the Russian crime syndicate, to marry Helen, so he is a trained assassin. To highlight the veracity of Viggo's tales, the film juxtaposes the tale with images of Wick silently but determinedly unearthing his weapons of mass destruction which we know he is going to use to avenge, not the theft of his car, but the death of his dog, the only connection he has to his wife, Helen.

If we are concerned about Wick's decision to use what he knows to address the problems with the Tasarovs, the film gives us something to read about Wick—his body. On his tattooed body is the Latin phrase, *Fortis Fortuna Adiuvat*, which, loosely translated means, "fortune favors the strong ones" and appears in several ancient texts including Virgil's *The Aeneid*. Wick is literally marked and connected to the ancient epic past. Other body imagery includes the Russian-Orthodox cross and the wolf which according to Priscilla Page is a reproduction of Durer study of Mary finding the empty tomb (2019, 4). The image references the brutality of the crucifixion, a Christian epic, but it also suggests a resurrection, an unearthing or power, which is exactly what is happening at this moment. John Wick, Russian assassin, returns to right a wrong.

To further humanize Wick, he, like many heroes, does not want to return or resort to violence. He also thinks that he may avenge the dog, retrieve his car, and return to his non-assassin life. The first film suggests such a conclusion. Wick has defeated his enemies, demonstrated that he has good and loyal friends, and now, battered and bruised as in the first scene, he will return to his home with a new dog and a new life of peace and non-violence.

5 JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 2

The second film, *John Wick: Chapter 2*, dispels this conclusion quickly. Wick must return a favor to a fellow assassin, Santino, who helped him escape to marry his wife years ago. As Winston, the proprietor of the Continental makes clear, Wick has no choice but to return the favor. There is honor among assassins.

Before the violence begins, however, the film self-consciously defends itself, its medium and content. First, it is called chapter 2, a reference to printed texts, not film sequels, which suggests its connection to classical printed literary or “high brow” works. Second, as the exciting opening crane shot makes its way to the streets, stunts from early films are projected on the buildings. This technique appears in *John Wick: Chapter 3*, as well, where there is no mistaking the performer, Buster Keaton, who also performed many physically challenging feats for the cinema and is now considered a film artist. What we are about to see, the opening images suggest, is art, not merely action.

The allusions to film and art continue with such frequency and specificity that the film could be retitled *John Wick: The Western Artistic Tradition in the Visual Arts*: “From its scenes backdropped by New York’s great bridges to its gunfight in the Roman Baths of Caracalla, the movie is as much in love with art and architecture as it is with ass -kicking” (Harrison, 2020). The art itself depicts violence, war, and grand passions, while the art industry, the mechanism by which the art is presented, is corrupt. Here, it is controlled by Santino’s Camorra family, a ruthless Italian mob that began in the seventeenth century.

As the film works to distinguish itself as art, not action, it also works to establish Wick as hero, not assassin. During an early meeting between Wick and Santino, for example, Santino asks for Wick’s help to assassinate his sister. Wick, whom we have seen assassinate

many people in the first film, says, “I’m not that guy.” Santino, however, says, “You’re always that guy.” Santino, like many of the critics and perhaps audiences misreads Wick.

The film corrects the misreading visually. The scene takes place in an art museum. Wick walks by *Hercules and Lichas* by Antonio Canova, a sculpture referencing a moment of betrayal for the epic hero Hercules. Wick and Santino later sit in front of *The Battle of Custoza* by Giovanni Fattori which commemorates a battle that the Italians lost. Another sculpture, Gaetano Cellini’s *Humanity Against Evil*, symbolizes Wick’s relationship to Santino, with Wick being humanity, the good (“The Significance,” 2020). Wick is not like other assassins. He avenged the death of his dog against hyperbolically evil opponents. He is not a sociopath. He is a contemporary hero.

Until this point, Wick has functioned as a kind of Hercules or Achilles, a man of action, performing great feats in battle. In this film, however, he displays a kind of strategy generally associated with Odysseus. Wick has to manage a difficult assignment, assassinating Santino’s sister, again something he does not want to do, but the code of honor among assassins requires him to do so. As he prepares, he visits an arms curator who offers him a menu of weapons, including a “desert knife,” which Wick hides and then uses at the end of his battle. The details shows that Wick’s success is based on skill and strategy, not brute force and luck.

As the events of the film progress, Wick needs both strategy and strength to survive because Santino, as suggested by *Hercules and Lichas* earlier, betrays Wick and sets the entire underworld of assassins against Wick. The world of the “high table,” the organizing structure of the contract killers, hides in plain sight, and they are now all after Wick.

So, in a world where things are not what they seem, where assassins are everywhere, and there is little rule of law, the film stages the final battle in yet another museum, this time

in a hall of mirrors, an artistic installation called “Reflections of the Soul.” It is, in many ways, symbolic of the postmodern condition. The effect and message are disconcerting. The mirrors undercut our ability to see and the camera’s ability to show. If this is a reflection of the soul, it is a complicated one. There is no foundation, no stability, only moving glass, only misleading appearances. Santino challenges our interpretation of Wick, psychologically assaulting him and referencing other epics: “You think you’re Old Testament. No, John. Killing me will make it so much worse . . . I think you’re addicted to it, to the vengeance.” But the film challenges us to remember Wick. We have read him. We know that he has integrity, that he is our hero. In this hall of mirrors we call contemporary culture, we know he is not like the others. He is a “man of focus, commitment, and sheer fucking will.” He is our hero on a mission to save the city from Santino’s greed. He will not be distracted by the illusions of the hall of mirrors. His aim is true. And ours should be, too.

The conclusion to the film supports Wick’s heroic status and in some ways excuses his violence of the last several hours. A true hero has a willingness, and often needs, to break the rules. According to Allison and Goethals, “The bottom line is that doing the right thing requires much more than good values and a willingness to help others. It also requires an ability to overcome easily overlooked social and psychological obstacles that can lure people into doing the wrong thing” (2011, 122-123). Like Theseus, Wick emerges from the museum’s labyrinth, but unlike Theseus, he still needs to kill the Minotaur, Santino, who has retreated to the Continental where assassins are welcome but not permitted to exercise their profession in the hotel. Wick ignores the rule and quickly dispatches Santino. Winston, then, banishes Wick according to the rules. He allows Wick one hour to set his affairs in order before the onslaught of killers.

The brief respite suggests a kind of affirmation for Wick’s actions. Earlier, Winston has made it clear that he does not like Santino and his plans for world domination. Wick and

Winston seem to have a higher purpose, at best, an understanding, at least. Second guessing, concerns over appearances, these lead to the spectacular labyrinth. Wick succeeds through action. Wick knows who he is, and he knows his mission. Santino is evil, and there is no other way to stop him. When asked what he will do when they come after him, his response is succinct and clear, without ambiguity, "I'll kill them. I'll kill them all." In a postmodern world where truth is elusive, such clarity of purpose is refreshing.

6 JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 3

If *John Wick: Chapter 2* could be subtitled "the Western Artistic tradition," *John Wick: Chapter 3* could be subtitled "the Origins of Civilization." Folklore, myth, and legend, from Russian folktales to the Sahara desert to Japanese samurai dominate this installment. The cultural references and lack of dialogue certainly assist in foreign sales of the Wick films, but they also continue to defend the franchise's use of violence by representing the great works of art that have equally violent subjects. Buster Keaton reappears here, a reference to early films' contributions to art and entertainment. The "Director's" office is filled with art, including Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, a depiction of the story of the Judith seducing and betraying the Syrian general. The version is particularly brutal because it occurs at the moment of decapitation. But, like much of the art in the other films, this work has a message. Wick, like Judith who killed to save the Jewish people, is out to save many people from the powers of darkness.

The film underscores its reliance on history, art, and culture in the opening scene. Where does Wick head with only moments before his banishment, his *excommunicado*? Well, first, he takes care of his dog, giving him to Charon, the concierge at the Continental, whose name references the Greek mythological ferryman who takes souls to the underworld. After that, he goes where all epic heroes go for answers, the New York Public library. He

heads to the stacks and opens Alexander Afanasyev's *Russian Fairytales*. The hollowed-out book contains a marker, a rosary, and a photo of Wick and his wife Helen. Once again, Wick's expertise as a strategist, not a mere fighter, is emphasized. He has prepared for this day.

Ironically, he is attacked by a giant who begins the battle with a passage from Dante: "Consider your origins. We were not meant to live as brutes but to follow virtue and knowledge." The reference is an unusual one, coming from Wick's enemy. Perhaps it is meant to remind us of Wick's true purpose or to highlight the close relationship between good and evil. Whatever the case, a battle ensues, and Wick overcomes his opponent by beating him with the book. Peter Sobczynski says the moment "of true inspiration comes next when he goes back and replaces the book on the shelf where he found it. This detail works not because it is funny, but because it fits the character so perfectly that it would almost be weird if he didn't do it" (2019, 1). Wick may be a killer, but we have to respect his respect for knowledge and the Dewey Decimal system.

If there is any doubt that the history of civilization was built on bloodshed, Wick then enters an antique store displaying weaponry from across cultures and ages. From knives to swords, to axes, to pistols, and rifles, all are used in this scene. A painting of a confederate soldier hangs on a wall, while Wick stabs an opponent in the eyeball, perhaps a reference to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Andalusian Dog* (1929) to highlight the violence of art yet again. As the violence moves out into the street, the film invokes the wild American West. Wick rides through the streets of New York on a horse. His destination is the "Director's" school where children are trained as either ballerinas or assassins, both of which are equally painful and brutal under the Director. As she says, the children come here to find "a life free of suffering. Art is pain. Life is suffering." There is no escape. Art or battle. It is the same.

Through his interactions with the “Director,” we learn that Wick’s own childhood was like the young people we see in her studio. His real name is Jardani Jovonovich. He is “a child of Belarus,” an ancient Slavic community that became part of the Russian empire. He asks the director to accept his “ticket,” the rosary and symbol of his membership in the Rusca Roma, the community of Russian gypsies, in exchange for transportation to Casablanca. The “director” agrees, and again references Dante: “the path to Paradise begins in hell.”

Initially, it appears that Wick is running from the “high table” and its legion of killers, but as the film progresses we learn that Wick seeks the center of the “high table” universe, the elder. He claims that he will ask for forgiveness and reaffirm his allegiance. The journey takes him to the cradles of civilization, the Middle East and the African Sahara Desert. Thanks to the assistance of Sophia, a woman who owed Wick a favor and to whom he presents his marker, he finds the elder and reaffirms his fealty because he wants to live to mourn his wife’s death and serve as a living monument to their love. Forgiveness does not come without a high price. The elder agrees but demands complete loyalty, as well as Wick’s wedding ring and finger. He also gives Wick a seemingly impossible task—to kill Winston, his friend, who the elder believes has become too independent and powerful.

Wick’s task serves to reveal his true character further. As Wick makes his way through numerous obstacles, including a “high table” member who seeks to unseat Winston, he finally appears in front of his friend and mentor. It is unclear what Wick will do. Instead, the film has Winston offer Wick a choice: Wick may die as a slave to the “high table” or die as a man who loved and was loved. Wick chooses love unreservedly, and assists Winston in overcoming the coup attempt on the Continental. The choice illustrates Wick’s character. He is motivated by a sense of love and integrity, not mindless loyalty to authorities or an enjoyment of violence. Once again, to highlight the difference, the film offers a battle between Zero and Wick. Zero calls them both “masters of death,” but the film makes it clear

that Wick is not a soulless killer. He, for example, during a battle, ceases to protect innocent bystanders.

The film ends with a riddle and a reason to return to the Wick franchise. While Wick and Charon successfully defend the Continental, it appears that Winston betrays Wick by shooting him and leaving him to the street. Wick escapes, and he is taken in by the “Bowery King,” who hopes to join forces with Wick against the “high table.” Wick’s response is open-ended. The film ends with questions. Both men are angry, but will they work together? Has Winston betrayed Wick?

7 THE WICK FUTURE

The answers may lurk in the film’s subtitle, *parabellum*, the second half of a Latin phrase, *si vis pacem, para bellum*: if you seek peace, prepare for war. Winston uses the phrase before the battle over the Continental, but it might also be a hint at the franchise’s fourth installment. The latin reference may not be about the battle over the Continental. It may reference the battle between the Wick camp and the “high table.”

While it is a perfect way to conclude a film that has a planned sequel, the questions also reproduce the world view of the film—postmodern, relativistic, uncertain, frightening, violent. The response to this world during the last three films has been simple, John Wick. The films have shown us that Wick is a hero for our era. He is a man of integrity and purpose, but he is not a slavish adherent to authority or rules. He has accepted the path of love, and while it may not meet our expectations on what this path should look like, the film has told us that to prepare for peace, to journey the path of love, we must prepare for war. The films have also illustrated Wick’s similarities to heroes in the past in order to help us redefine heroes in the present. The films have also resulted in a new appreciation for Keanu Reeve’s celebrity and performances in this franchise. Alex Pappedemas’s recent piece on

Reeve links the star to mythology by titling the feature, “The Legend of Keanu Reeves,” and concluding the online essay with a photo essay entitled, “Keanu Reeves is Immortal.”

Clearly the character and star are merging, but as Pappedemas notes in the essay, “being underestimated was probably the best thing that could have happened” to Reeves (2019, para. 76). He is underestimated no longer and has gained new audiences and fans. The film franchise has illustrated the effectiveness of his acting style as effectively as it has illustrated the fine art status of Hollywood actions films. The final film may leave us with questions, but the conclusion is clear: for the time being, we need an epic hero like John Wick to help us out of this hall of mirrors we call contemporary life. We need “a man of focus, commitment, sheer fucking will.”

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9 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.