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From *The One* to *John Wick*: Keanu Reeves and the action genre

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ABSTRACT:

Although there are a number of hybrid tropes and cross-over conventions that relate to contemporary action cinema, broken down to its most rudimentary components, the genre places its cinematic hero in scenes of ritualised violence or conflict, with the intent of showcasing both athletic mastery and aesthetically pleasing physiques for interested and invested audiences. In as much as it is difficult to define the contemporary genre, the role of the action hero is clear in all permutations. Indeed, there is little question or query about who or what makes for a popular and long-standing action star. After all, names such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Statham have become inextricably linked to the genre in question. While there is much to consider here in relation to the muscles and power of these hard-bodied heroes in sweaty vests or form fitting t-shirts, there is another iteration of masculinity, a different and more agile physique, a more refined sartorial code, that has quietly overtaken these macho figures as the site of contemporary action, and that figure is Keanu Reeves. With this in mind, this chapter will examine the ways in which popular media reviewers foreground star image, acting, movement, the body and performance in order to position Reeves as an action star removed from the physical excesses of bulkier, slower and less agile men who continue to perform in the genre around him.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. Keanu Reeves
2. Masculinity
3. Motion
4. Beauty
5. Action
6. Body

From the One to John Wick: Keanu Reeves and the action genre

Luca Mosca/ *The Tailor*: How many buttons?
Keanu Reeves/ *John Wick*: Two
Luca Mosca/ *The Tailor*: Trousers?
John Wick: Tapered
Luca Mosca/ *The Tailor*: How about the lining?
John Wick: Tactical
(*John Wick: Chapter 2*, 2017)

Introduction

Although there are a number of hybrid tropes and cross-over conventions that relate to contemporary action cinema, broken down to its most rudimentary components, the genre places its cinematic hero in scenes of ritualised violence or conflict, with the intent of showcasing both athletic mastery and aesthetically pleasing physiques for interested and invested audiences. In as much as it is difficult to define the contemporary genre, the role of the action hero is clear in all permutations. Indeed, there is little question or query about who or what makes for a popular and long-standing action star. After all, names such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Statham have become inextricably linked to the genre in question. While there is much to consider here in relation to the muscles and power of these hard-bodied heroes in sweaty vests or form fitting t-shirts, there is another iteration of masculinity, a different and more agile physique, a more refined sartorial code, that has quietly overtaken these macho figures as the site of contemporary action, and that figure is Keanu Reeves.

Back in the mid to late 1990s, Reeves gave us the holy trinity of fast paced action in *Point Break* (1991), *Speed* (1994) and *The Matrix* (1999). Since that time, the actor has dominated the genre with *The Matrix* sequels (2003, 2021) and the *John Wick* franchise (2014, 2017, 2019, 2022). This is not to say that Reeves has shied away from romance (*Destination Wedding*, 2018), comedy (*Bill & Ted Face the Music*, 2020), science fiction (*Replicas*, 2018) or children's animation (*Toy Story 4*, 2019), but merely that he appears entirely comfortable in a genre best known for its physicality over characterisation, and stunts and combat over complex plotting. This is not to detract from Reeves' efforts in the genre, far from it, my point is that he is the defining action hero of a generation. With this in mind, this chapter will examine the ways in which popular media reviewers foreground star image, acting, movement, the body and performance in order to position Reeves as an action star removed from the physical excesses of bulkier, slower and less mobile men who continue to perform in the genre around him.

Men, masculinity and the hegemonic hierarchy

At the same time as the hard bodies of the cinematic action genre were busy displaying their heroic and Herculean physiques on the big screen, theorists were looking to make sense of the ways in which masculinities were being read and positioned beyond the screen space. Raewyn Connell's seminal work on men and masculinities found that although there are multiple ways of enacting masculinity, there is a clear hierarchy in operation for these different interactions (Connell, 1995; Connell, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Feasey, 2008). Connell looked to Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemonic structures of wealth, class and power in relation to gendered constructs and classifications, coining the term 'hegemonic hierarchy' in order to make sense of the myriad and diverse ways in which manhood can be lived and expressed. Connell made it clear that although there is no such thing as a single, fixed or stable iteration of masculinity, there are preferred and acceptable demonstrations of masculinity, machismo and manhood according to culture and generation (ibid). The hegemonic hierarchy equates successful masculinity with physical strength, stamina, resilience and autonomy; in short, it equates the pinnacle of manhood with predictable, fictional, hard-bodied action heroes. However, although we might look to challenge this rigid hierarchy based on the importance of men as partners, fathers and friends rather than hard bodies and action heroes, these worked-on gym-honed muscular bodies are hard to topple from their lofty hegemonic status.

Male bodies and masculine action

Action cinema, in all of its spectacular hybrids and mutations has, since the 1980s, focused on muscularity and body-built male physiques as sites of viewing pleasure. Although Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Dolph Lundgren have been penned as 'the stars who made the action film famous' (Jeffords, 2019), these hard bodies remain, some four decades later, central to the genre. These 'tough guy' physiques loom large over the *Expendables* (2010-2014) franchise, even as these pensionable-age men are joined by a pantheon of their younger action counterparts (Boyle and Brayton, 2012, p.468). Indeed, the 'hypermuscular' Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Lundgren have spawned a number of commercially successful hard bodied imitators whose iteration of male physical power and potency now stand, ostensibly, as the defining images of millennial male action (Boyle and Brayton, 2012, p.469). From Jason Statham's *Transporter* trilogy (2002-2015) to Vin Diesel's *XXX* franchise (2002-2017) and Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson joining the aforementioned performers in the *Fast & Furious* (2001-) universe, these hyperbolic bodies are routinely circulated and commented on within and beyond the screen space as ultimate action figures. A range of promotion, publicity, criticisms and commentaries routinely encourage audiences to view these men, by way of their bodies, as 'shredded' physiques to emulate and/or adore (Jussim, 2018; Banham, 2015). The off-screen encouragement to be/ be with these hard bodies is echoed in the screen space, but not before they have proved their very masculinity and earned their place at the peak of the hegemonic hierarchy.

Even a cursory glance at the long running commercially successful *Fast & Furious* action franchise makes it clear that the characters of Dom Toretto/Vin Diesel, Hobbs/Jason Statham and Shaw/Dwayne Johnson are all sites of hard bodied spectacle for an invested and interested audience. Diesel is singled out as a ‘musclehound’ for audiences to admire (Eschrich, 2015) while Johnson is swooned over for this ‘square jaw and gorgeous girth’ (Essence, 2011). Indeed, the franchise that is noted as housing ‘three of the biggest, beefiest actors in Hollywood’ (Millar, 2019) is championed for its ‘prodigious displays of musculature’ (Bloomer, 2019) and its accompanying ‘testosterone-soaked action’ (Martin, 2015). From assertive gear changes to more aggressive fist fights and a myriad of physical hullabaloo in between, the bodies of these men are routinely clad in tight vests and muscle shirts, leaving little to the imagination. John Beynon makes the point that although hard and muscular physiques are important to the action hero, it is their ‘strength, determination and resourcefulness to survive’ that sets them apart in the filmic narratives (Beynon, 2001, p.65). This notion of being able to take a beating is crucial to the appeal of the action hero here.

The masochistic spectacle of tortured and tormented male heroes have become the ‘key trope in recent Hollywood action cinema’ (Fradley, 2004, p.239). These hard bodies have to be tested and qualified so as to prove their very masculinity (Neale, 1983/1994). Indeed, the films can be seen to offer a ‘cyclical narrative triad of eroticisation of the male body’ that moves from ‘near-destruction’ through regeneration and eventual remasculinization¹ (Fradley, 2004, p.239; Smith, 1993, p.156) for interested and invested audiences. However, although these hard action bodies might be threatened and beaten in the course of a film’s narrative, these scenes of ritualised violence and conflict are presented in order that these men can come back to prove their powerful, physical, brutal and forceful credentials. Their bodies are beaten but their masculine resolve is never broken. The spectacle of these bodies remains the key draw of the genre. After all, action heroes are ‘constructed almost exclusively through their physicality, and the display of the body forms a key part of the visual excess that is offered in the muscular action cinema’ (Tasker, 1993a, p.35). It has even been suggested that ‘action movies work hard, and often at the expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero’s body’ (Tasker, 1993a, p.79; See also King, 2000, p.115; Neale, 2004, p.71).

Hard and/or hysterical bodies

The men of the *Fast & Furious* franchise do battle with rocket launchers and robot cars and as such, their ability to withstand pain, suffering, torment and torture is clear and noted. However, while these muscular bodies can be read as sites of male power and privilege, as iterations of confident and

¹ The internet came up with several other examples to show the ways in which actors like Tom Cruise, Jackie Chan and Keanu Reeves get beaten up throughout the run-time of their action movies (Chatterjee, 2019; Ballhaus, 2019).

controlling masculinity to emulate, so too, they have been challenged for their hysterical proportions. There 'is an increasing focus on masculinity as troubled and unsure of itself - never more unsure than when it is shouting its self-confidence via exaggeratedly muscular heroes toting modern weaponry' (MacKinnon, 2003, p.63; see also Creed, 1987; King, 2000). In this way, one might suggest that the hard body of action speaks less of male authority, control and mastery and more of crisis, weakness and loss of social power. Therefore, rather than continue to present hard action bodies as sites of power and potency, the characters of Toretto, Hobbs and Shaw, and by extension, Diesel, Statham and Johnson, can be read more in line with Barbara Creed's notion of anxious, fragile and hysterical masculinity than hegemonic hard-bodied heroes here (Creed, 1987). In a feature entitled 'Why no one in the *Fast & Furious* Films Can Lose a Fight' Stuart Heritage tells us that Johnson and Statham's contracts demand that their characters 'throw equal numbers of punches' (Heritage, 2019). These hard-bodied actors are said to 'have such massive egos that entire scenes have to be stroked and massaged around them' (Ballaban, 2019). Alexander Pan makes this point when he tells us that 'the last few films have 'essentially consisted of trying to not make either Diesel, Johnson or Statham look, ahem, weak' (Pan 2019, see also Paur, 2019). Popular media commentary is littered with jokes, jabs and jocular humour relating to phallic size, strength and stamina, but this chapter is more interested in what these bodies have to tell us about hegemonic hierarchies or castration anxiety (Neale, 1983/1994), rather, it is how they move in the narrative that is of interest.

Masculinity, mobility and movement

From Schwarzenegger to Statham, these stiff, hard bodies are showcased and shown-off, their size, stature and status routinely commented on both in the narrative itself and in the wider channels of media discourse. However, although these powerful physiques are forceful, posed and poised ready for action² the brawn in question is bulky, rigid and anything but graceful. The argument here is that these built male bodies motivate the narrative, they dominate the screen space, but their physicality is neither agile nor beautiful.

If one compares the tough male action hero with his female counterpart, with few exceptions, female bodies are more lithe, flexible, flowing and mobile. Their choreographed stunt work is more graceful, balletic and stylised; these women are able to present a more creative physicality but are no less powerful than their male counterparts. From Lara Croft/Angeline Jolie (2001, 2003) in the self-titled franchise and Mystique/Rebecca Romijn Stamos (2000, 2003, 2006) in the *X-Men* universe to Yu Shu

² In his work on the male pin up, Richard Dyer notes that even in still photography rather than fast-paced, high octane film visuals, male models are imbued with hegemonic potential, their muscles taut and by extension, their bodies captured ready for action. These images are, much like their filmic counterparts, in opposition to the more passive female (Dyer, 1982, p.61-73).

Lien/Michelle Yeoh of the *Crouching Tiger* films (2000, 2016) and the eponymous *Mulan*/ Yifei Liu (2020), these bodies epitomise what Mark O' Day refers to as 'beauty in motion' (O' Day, 2004).

While both male and female action heroes display courage, resilience, strength, stamina, resourcefulness and a skilful use of weaponry and/or technology, it is routinely the hard men with hypermasculine bodies that forgo balletic grace in favour of brawn, and elegance of movement in favour of force. These bulky male bodies are shown to be assertive and aggressive, but not necessarily mobile. This chapter is not suggesting that they cannot dominate their spectacular narratives, rather, their bodies are not always fluid, or flexible. Looking at hyperbolic bodies, their sheer size means that they walk, move, fight and fuck in a way that foregrounds their muscularity, but in drawing attention to the hard bodies in question and the clothing that does little to conceal their muscularity, it also draws attention to the restrictions imposed on these bodies. Movements can seem posed and forceful at best, stiff and awkward at worst. Unsurprising perhaps as Schwarzenegger came to film stardom and subsequent fame after success as a professional bodybuilder, and likewise Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson was a professional wrestler, and former American football player prior to more mainstream Hollywood notoriety. But while physical force and hard bodies define professional wrestling, bodybuilding and American football, there is an action star who paved the way for Reeves' more fluid and agile iteration of active, balletic and mobile masculinity

Kinetic Keanu

Patrick Swayze's success and enduring posthumous appeal in *Dirty Dancing* (1987) is perhaps unsurprising. As the son of a choreographer and dance instructor, Swayze was an accomplished ice-skater and classical ballet dancer, and although he performed in a range of film titles and television mini-series during the 1980s, it was his role as Johnny Castle, the dance instructor turned romantic lead in the 1980s musical that catapulted him to international stardom. Swayze's role as the dance mentor, muscled romantic lead and charismatic pied piper of a dance generation encouraged audiences to read his physicality as no less hard or heroic than his action counterparts, but he balanced force with flexibility and power with grace of movement. When it came to the role of the surfing, sky-diving adrenaline junkie Bodhi in *Point Break*, Swayze was given the opportunity to demonstrate both his athleticism and elegance as he moved through the screen space. His shirtless muscles are those of a dancer rather than a bulkier bodybuilder and his movements are energetic and agile rather than forced or laboured. Whether robbing banks or running for his life, Swayze is hyper-mobile, he moves with immaculate posture rather than posing; with fluidity rather than brutality. However, although he moves differently to his bulkier counter-parts in the genre, it is his co-star, the young, lightly muscled and 'athletically lean' (Lemire, 2014) Keanu Reeves who makes an impression, not as a spectacular hard body, but as an elegant and flexible body designed to move.

From *Point Break* onwards, Reeves presents a mobile and flexible body, fluid in movement and performance. This is not about youthful bodies pitted against ageing physiques. Rather, it is about the mobility of a slender, lightly muscled body pitted against its more hard-bodied counterparts. One only has to think of Dwayne Johnson attempting the infamous and much emulated bullet time scene in *The Matrix* to understand the beauty and grace of Reeves' movements here. Like many action stars before him, Reeves was able to showcase an existing physicality³ but also went on to undergo intense training with martial arts choreographers for franchises such as *The Matrix* and *John Wick*⁴. While there is no naivety in position when discussing the importance of stunt doubles, choreographers or post-production techniques to 'lift' the action character/actor, there remains something unique about Reeves' depiction of power and potency in contemporary action. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* refers to Reeves as a 'strikingly chic Prada model of an action hero' (Maslin, 1999), Luca Musca, the costume designer on the John Wick franchise refers to the actor as 'elegant' (Evangelista, 2019) while Jason Kay speaks about his 'acrobatic talent' (Kay, 2014). In her work on 'The Grace of Keanu Reeves' Angelica Jade Bastién makes that point that although Reeves has been mocked as a 'stiff, shallow, fake' actor, presented as the punchline to numerous jokes about wooden performances and emotional range, he has, in her words 'missed his calling as a silent actor' based on his 'purely cinematic' acting style and physicality' (Bastién, 2016). Such commentary is not just foregrounding the physicality of the performer in question, but his graceful mobility.

Beauty in motion

Mark O' Day foregrounds the relatively recent inclusion of 'beautiful, sexy, and tough heroines' to the action genre, or what he reframes as 'action babe cinema' (O' Day, 2004, p.201). Picking up on franchises such as *Tomb Raider*, *Charlie's Angels* (2000, 2003, 2019) and *X-Men*, he notes that central female protagonists can unsettle or usurp the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity as their strength, resilience, courage and resourcefulness lines up against or alongside their slim, strong and unabashedly sexualised physiques. And although both male and female action heroes are held up for our viewing pleasure, we are reminded that men are tested in order to be proved worthy of their heroic status, while women are routinely investigated and found wanting (Neale, 1983/1994). In short, spectacular male bodies are routinely a reminder of male potency and action while their female equivalents are routinely contained and tamed as erotic, if not passive objects (Tasker, 1998; McCaughey and King, 2001). Figures such as Lara Croft and one might add, more recently, Katniss

³ Keanu Reeves was a skilful ice hockey player before injury, and he was able to combine both his physical and performing skillsets when he was cast as the goalie in *Youngblood* (1986) (Kay, 2014).

⁴ For the *Matrix*, Reeves, like Neo, trained in a myriad of martial arts, including Jiu Jitsu, Wushu, Boxing, and Krav Maga, continuing his training long after the first instalment of the franchise (Blunden, 2016).

Everdeen (*The Hunger Games* 2012, 2013, 2014), Diana Prince (*Wonder Woman* 2017, 2020), Domonika Egorova (*Red Sparrow* 2018) and the cast of *Charlie's Angels* (2019) could be charged with 'gender thefts' as they look to negotiate the binary oppositions that account for much work within the field of feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975; O' Day, 2004). However, while some female figures are seen to reconfigure gender binaries, Keanu Reeves is performing beyond such binary oppositions, his power and grace is reminiscent of what Barbara Creed refers to as a 'hybrid' figure within the action canon (Creed, 1987; see also Hills, 1999). However, while Creed cites Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* saga (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) as a hybrid character, Reeves' performance, irrespective of film or franchise, maps onto such a liminal figure. After all, the ways in which Reeves' characters move, from Johnny Utah (*Point Break*) to John Wick seem to be more 'transgressive both/and figure[s] rather than the oppositional either/or figure of traditional gender codes' (Hills, 1999, p.45)⁵. Irrespective of whether he is surfing, in combat or eluding capture, Reeves moves in a way that is strong and elegant, powerful yet agile, more akin to Angelina Jolie's wire work in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* than the physical rough-housing of the *Fast & Furious* franchise.

My argument here is simply that Keanu Reeves imbues his action performances with a mobility of movement that looks both stylish and stylized. His grace and poise does not detract from his physicality, nor its accompanying masculinity, rather, it adds to the power and prowess and the possibilities of mobility for the characters in question here⁶. This is not about being hegemonic, all powerful or omnipotent, after all, like his hard-bodied predecessors he is shown to feel pain, experience physical torture and the effects of bodily aging in long running franchises, but he continues to move differently through these films than his more rigid, stiff and hard bodied counterparts. Reeves does not need to rely on the "excessive bodily performances" (Albrecht, 2015, p.1) that have come to dominate the action genre from the 1980s to the present day, rather, he is relying on aesthetics rather than excess, flexibility over force, and mastery over masochism in terms

⁵ Although I am talking about Reeves' ability to depict beauty in motion, to combine power and elegance in his action performances, a range of commentators have picked up on the way in which the actor 'marries typically masculine and feminine qualities' (Bastián, 2018).

⁶ In his seminal work on masculinity in contemporary fiction film, Brian Baker talks about a 'growing critical interest in the intersection of representations of gender, in particular, masculinities, and the burgeoning field in sociology known as mobility studies' (Baker, 2015, p.1). By starting with an expert analysis of movement within the James Bond franchise, specifically in relation to the kinetic aesthetics of *Casino Royale* (2006), the excess of mobility in *Quantum of Solace* (2008) and a consideration of both mobile subjects and the mobile gaze in the on and off-screen world, the book considers the ways in which mobility is politicized and controlled and suggests that throughout a range of historic and more recent works of literature, film and television, masculinities are, have been and continue to be alienated and disenfranchised across diverse cultures and locations. However, while Daniel Craig's Bond is referred to as a 'strutting, hypermasculine and hyper-mobile articulation of ... global power' (Baker, 2015, p.22) Keanu Reeves moves with more fluidity, and as such, could be understood as a useful case study for further research on global power and/as mobility in this regard.

of his mobility in the screen space. While his hard-bodied contemporaries continue to parade their seemingly spectacular bodies ‘in advanced stages of both muscular development and undress’ (Tasker, 1993, p.91), Reeves continues to showcase his physicality via his agility. Irrespective of whether he is wearing a wetsuit or something more formal, the clothing allows Reeves to move, they are less about showcasing muscularity and more about enabling mobility. Earlier iterations of action men routinely sported the ripped, increasingly dirty vest in the manner of John McLane (*Die Hard* 1988, 1990, 1995, 2007, 2013) while more recently, hard bodied heroes within and beyond the action and adventure genre have donned the tight muscle t-shirts as repeatedly showcased by Luke Hobbs in the *Fast & Furious* spin-off *Hobbs & Shaw* (2019), and although these items do allow for movement, they are with few exceptions primarily about showcasing the spectacular male body. When Reeves takes on an action person it is the movement of his body rather than the muscles that are the spectacle on offer here.

‘I don’t do stunts, I do action’: the reading and reception of the agile action star

An academic analysis of Reeves as a popular and long-standing action hero is of significance when understood in relation to existing debates on the spectacular male body as a site of hegemonic, hard-bodied performance and display. With debates around muscularity as action in mind it is important that we understand Reeves as a different, alternative iteration of male power, performance and physicality. That said, it is useful to consider the ways in which review media, alongside extant literature from the field of film and/or gender studies positions the action body in question here, and to consider the ways in which popular commentary either adheres to or negotiates this reading of Reeves as a beautiful, elegant and graceful physicality rather than hard body in motion. Indeed, a consideration of extra textual materials that surrounds screen media, or what Martin Barker refers to as ‘ancillary materials’ (Barker, 2004) is an important part of the analysis due to the fact that media texts are not experienced in isolation from cultural commentaries or popular debates. Rather, they are consumed amongst a myriad of wider entertainment titles, information channels and networks. Rather than challenge the reading of Reeves as a more graceful, agile and mobile interaction of contemporary action than the hard-bodies that have dominated the genre since the 1980s, a number of publications have been seen to foreground the ways in which Reeves stands as a more physically agile, and powerful iteration of contemporary manhood.

Writing for *Screenrant*, Jack Beresford comments that Reeves is ‘agile ... in all-action mode’ (Beresford, 2021), Italian *Vogue* picks up on the grace, agility and adrenaline of the actor in motion (Vogue, 2014) while Marjorie Liu draws attention to the ‘poetic physicality’ of the action star in question (Liu, 2019). Elsewhere, Gerhard Popwell makes the point that ‘Reeves doesn’t depict a fight as a series of enigmatic blurs, camera jerks and jump cuts’ as is routine with his hard bodied predecessors and bulkier contemporaries, but rather, that you see the actor’s whole body in motion

(Popwell, 2017)⁷. Indeed, we are reminded that his physicality and agility allows for ‘balletic cinematography and seamless wide shots’ which are at odds with more muscular frames and brute force routinely associated with the genre in question (Pierce-Bohen, 2020). While Jason Bailey writing for *Flavorwire* refers to Reeves’ performance as John Wick as a ‘graceful ballet of mass bloodshed’ (Bailey, 2017), Valerie Complex echoes such commentary, foregrounding the performance as ‘graceful, limber ... balletic’ (Complex, 2019). Eric Betts of *Looper* sign-posts Reeves as ‘both balletic and brutal in his fights’ (Betts, 2020), so too Travis Andrews foregrounds the ‘pure, beautiful, balletic action’ (Andrews, 2019) Reeves performance. Robert Ebert echoes the voice of a number of commentators when he states that Reeves ‘can deliver ... a graceful yet powerful physicality’ (Lemire, 2014) whereby a ‘balletic combination of fistfights and shootouts’ sees the actor ‘reinforc[ing] his action hero credentials’ (Moviehouz, 2021).

Keanu Reeves can be understood as a new interaction of masculine power and potency in the action genre, standing outside of the routine hard bodied performers that have dominated the American action cinema since the 1980s. His athletic frame and grace of movement can be read as embodying a quiet potency rather than a more overt/visible, possibly hysterical iteration of male power. By drawing attention to the power and physicality of Reeves as an action hero removed from bulkier performances, the beauty in motion being presented is reliant on agile and elegant choreography. So, while Reeves prides himself on learning a myriad of martial arts that add to the authenticity and credibility of a performance (Pierce-Bohen, 2020), it is the skills of fight choreographers such as Jonathan Eusebio and Chad Stahelski who create and indeed craft those balletic sequences being held up for our viewing pleasure here (Arabian, 2019; Ebiri, 2019). In an interview with Stephen Colbert that draws attention to Reeves’ ‘extraordinary agility and physical capability’ (*The Late Show* 2019), Reeves makes it clear that he does not do ‘stunts’ and that what he does instead is his own ‘action’ and this could be seen to speak to the differences in performance, physicality and accompanying choreography here between the smooth balletic power and grace of Reeves in opposition to the broader muscular, masculine performance of his action cinema predecessors and contemporaries.

Conclusion

From *Point Break* to the forthcoming Wick and *Matrix* instalment, this chapter has looked to reposition the actor as a quintessential figure of action, in a literal, mobile, sense of that word. Reeves moves with extraordinary grace and subtlety, a flexible elegance rarely witnessed in his hard-bodied action counterparts. Indeed, while it is the more muscular bodies who are said to embody the anxieties

⁷ Nick Jones refers to the perpetual motion aesthetic of action cinema in a recent anthology dedicated to the genre in question (Jones, 2019).

of contemporary masculinity, Reeves' more agile physique is able to swiftly side-step charges of anxiety, fear and hysteria. In short, while the more predictable muscular bodies of the action genre are deemed hysterical, Reeves' performances from Johnny Utah and Jack Traven through Neo and Wick, are merely powerful.

While the hard bodies of the contemporary action genre can be read as an excessive parody of masculinity, or as a bulky figurehead for a gendered crisis, Reeves is in his more streamlined and agile form, can be said to have single-handedly reinvented the ideal iteration of masculine action. Hard bodies can now be seen as outliers, relics of a bygone era where masculine physicality was central to labour and leisure (Jeffords 2019). What remains to be seen here is whether Reeves' iteration of lightly muscled, lithe and liminal action masculinity can look to break the seemingly inextricable link between hard bodies, hegemonic masculinity and Hollywood action. Alternatively, this more agile iteration of manhood could simply be said to stand in as the pinnacle of an ever-shifting hegemonic hierarchy. After all, hegemony is neither fixed nor stable, but rather, defined in relation to specific places and periods of time (Beynon, 2001, p.16.; see also Kimmel, 1994; Connell, 1995), and at this moment in time Reeves stands as a unique Hollywood icon in terms of movement, mobility and mannerisms. Indeed, Reeves appears unique in his ability to transcend hard bodies in favour of a more agile iteration of hegemonic masculinity for a mainstream Western audience. Although performers ranging from Angelina Jolie to Gal Gadot have been seen to combine beauty, grace and power in the action cinema, few men have successfully negotiated this combination outside of Asian action⁸, and future work should consider if Reeves' Asian ancestry affords him more flexibility within and beyond the confines of his physicality to enact an alternative iteration of strong, powerful male action in Hollywood.

⁸ While Paul Bowman examines the significance of martial arts in contemporary fight choreography (Bowman, 2019), Barna William Donovan considers the influence of Asian action cinema on mainstream Hollywood productions (Donovan, 2019).

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