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### John Wick & Reinventing the Western Action Film

The martial arts film is an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of narratives and cultural influences. Historically from East Asian countries, the martial arts film has become a globally popular archetype through which many themes, such as rebellion, revenge, nationalism, and discipline, are explored to some extent through training for or fighting with martial arts techniques. The martial arts film had a very strong influence in American cinema in decades past, and emphasis on hand-to-hand combat has become integrated into the typical action film. One of these films is *John Wick* (2014), directed by Chad Stahelski and starring Keanu Reeves. This film is stylistically unique and places large emphasis on combat, either with or without firearms. Admittedly heavily inspired by martial arts influences, *John Wick* combines core elements from various forms of martial arts films with the contemporary American zeitgeist in order to revive the western action film and inspire a new wave of films that are rooted in moral ambiguity and escapism. Namely, the film recontextualizes the Jianghu mercenary underworld from the wuxia film, centers around a ronin-esque protagonist, and emphasizes authenticity. I will be referencing a handful of martial arts films throughout this paper, including *Crouching Tiger: Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000), *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1954), and *Police Story* (Chan, 1985).

To briefly summarize, *John Wick* follows the titular character who has recently retired from a life working as a professional assassin in the hidden criminal underworld. He was infamous for his skill and for being able to escape this world by completing a supposedly impossible mission for his employers. The film picks up shortly after he discovers that his

recently deceased girlfriend arranged for him to receive a dog in her memory. He is immediately threatened by a criminal mob leader, who is unaware of his reputation as a force of death, and this altercation leads to the death of his dog and theft of his car. Wick then dedicates himself to vengeance, literally digging up his past, and reenters the world he swore off in order to find peace in the only way he knows how. In the end, he succeeds in his revenge, but is nearly killed for his trouble, and is still left feeling empty, his vengeance not having brought him any closure.

One of the key elements of this narrative is successful worldbuilding. The typical American action film alludes to a criminally-overrun underbelly to the society that most people live in, but explores it no further than needed in order to establish a villain and the veracity of their threat. In contrast, this underworld (referred to as the *jianghu*) is critical to the *wuxia* film as it acts as the illusory barrier from the audience's reality and the world in which mercenaries fight each other and supernatural abilities are possible. In "Zhang Yimou's 'Hero': Reclaiming the Martial Arts Film for 'All under Heaven.'" Feng Lan discusses the *jianghu*, making note that it physically encompasses those spaces that are open to the public, spaces that take on a new meaning when they are inhabited by those who are aware of this other world. By making the physical setting familiar and accessible to the audience, they are able to relate more to the characters, while enjoying the temporary recontextualization of the space, taking it to be a distant place where conventional norms and customs are no longer the expectation.

The *jianghu* as a societal divider is critical as a component of telling the story of John Wick. Repeatedly we as the audience are able to see that there is order, honor, and control to what should be a lawless and anarchical community. One of the most alluring aspects of *John Wick* is the level of prestige and belonging that everyone who is involved in the operation of its *jianghu* holds themselves to. All of the mercenaries seem to know each other, often on a first

name basis. In the film, we see these people talk to each other about their missions involving death and acts of utter violence as if they were coworkers discussing their day to day. This need to present with a certain notoriety is seen as well in *Crouching Tiger: Hidden Dragon*, when we witness Jen announce herself to a tea house full of mercenaries. At that moment, she is not known to this world, as she has no reputation and has only just decided to abandon her previous life for this one. What follows next is a total display of finesse as she takes down nearly every patron in the house, earning the reputation that she lacked only minutes before.

The film creatively weaves the concept of a believable setting being off-limits to the public into its narrative and to justify the incessant amounts of violence that happen on-screen. In *John Wick*, the divide between the criminal underworld and the rest of society is diegetic: assassins carry gold tokens, which acts as both a currency and a signal that whatever is about to happen should not involve the unaware public. Most fight scenes only occur on the property of criminal magnates, such as the Russian mob that Wick is pitting himself against. The only way that he can justifiably leave behind a trail of blood and bodies is if he is doing so in the mob's exclusive nightclub, where the patrons are likely familiar with the blood trade. There exist mechanisms to hide traces of John Wick's *jianghu*, cleaning companies whose sole purpose is to eliminate any traces of 'business.'

Perhaps what most audience members find most appealing from the film is the protagonist himself. John Wick is portrayed as a man capable of incredible feats of violence and resolve, but also as one who is emotionally hurting and who is going to these lengths to seek what he deems as justice. In this way, Wick is an archetypal *ronin*, one masterless warrior who fights against an establishment that endorses a position he has fallen from. Normally samurai, *ronin* are successful as protagonists to their national audience due to the culture's appeal to *mono*

*no aware*, as discussed by David Desser in his article “Toward a structural analysis of the postwar samurai film.” In these films, the protagonist’s story is a fight towards, or against, the inevitable. Either indirectly or through the *ronin*’s decisions influenced by duty and morals, he ends up defeated or alone in some irreconcilable way. It is usually necessary for the samurai to fail in some way or another as it emphasizes their desire to do right rather than to work in self-interest. Samurai are romanticized in this way as their struggle against irrelevance during the end of the Edo period, when most *jidaigeki* films were filmed, is ideal for directors and audience alike to self-insert for their seemingly insurmountable life struggles.

A prime example of this forsaken samurai phenomenon is Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954). This film concerns seven *ronin* who become involved in a plan to protect a village from raiding samurai. They are originally without purpose, as they are masterless and have not taken on disciples, but working alongside other skilled and morally founded soldiers for the common good of innocents breathes new life into them. While they are ultimately successful in their mission to repel the bandits, their fight is not without losses. Three of the samurai are lost in the battle, and their remaining brethren are the only ones to feel their pain and mourn their loss, as the villagers are already cheerfully rebuilding. The *ronin* once again are left as outcasts, no longer belonging amongst the villagers, and now without their fledgling brotherhood.

John Wick embodies this insurmountable struggle in the nature of his conflict, as well as his way of dealing with it. Wick is a character that from the start of the movie is damaged beyond repair. The first scene in the film shows Wick, beaten down under pouring rain, watching recordings from his last date with his girlfriend before she passed away. His single victory, having successfully escaped the criminal underworld of the assassins, is taken from him when he is reintroduced to the mob’s rashness. The moment that Wick commits to his revenge ploy and

re-enters this world, he has invalidated the struggles he endured to escape it, as it could either end in his death, which is a failure he has managed to elude thus far, or, like in the film, he successfully gets his revenge on those who have wronged him, and discovers that it is not what he truly wanted. While the *ronin* embodies a sweet sadness at the end of their film, relishing in their valiant efforts to do good, John Wick must grapple with the fact that his need for revenge implicated people he cared about into a situation which ended in their downfall.

John's struggle is also futile in the sense that he is in essence fighting against the entirety of his world's *jianghu*. As soon as he makes it known that he will seek revenge, a team of mob muscle is dispatched to attempt and preemptively strike him down. After this group is dealt with, a large bounty is placed on his head, drawing the attention of any mercenary that wishes to cash in. Understanding the code that they live by, John knows that anyone he might potentially have called upon for aid may ultimately betray him. Ironically, it is through his former mentor, the lack of which defines a *ronin*, that John is saved from otherwise fatal situations. After the loss of his mentor, John's only purpose is to take down the mob boss and enact vengeance for his fallen teacher, and after this act, he is seemingly without direction as a *ronin*.

The film is lauded for its attention to detail, style, and especially the combat. *John Wick* is famous for sparking a resurgence in 'authentic' action films. This is surely inspired by globally renowned kung fu movies originating from Hong Kong cinema, who expressed a shift to more relatable and modernized stories, as well as prioritizing "authenticity" and its several interpretations within the martial arts film, as discussed by Leon Hunt in *Kung Fu Cult Masters*. The issue of authenticity is one that can be argued at length for any film that lays claim to the label of 'martial arts film.' Of course, to what extent the film is maintaining authenticity is a different question, and many films that are undoubtedly 'classics' fail in some interpretations of

the term. Hunt discusses three forms: ‘archival authenticity,’ whether a film is true to form in using ‘real’ martial arts; ‘cinematic authenticity,’ where what the audience is seeing is really what the actors are doing; and ‘corporeal authenticity,’ which concerns the actual body performing the martial arts.

*John Wick* cannot be considered to exhibit archival authenticity. The martial arts style that is used by Wick in the film is referred to as “Gun Fu,” which incorporates three real forms of martial arts and gunplay, namely Japanese and Brazilian jiu-jitsu as well as Judo (Newman). That being said, this film does in fact display cinematic authenticity. There are no ‘tricks’ employed to deter from the action happening on-screen. The moves seen are performed in full, and in fact many of the fight scenes are done in long takes, which gives the audience a better spatial grasp on the scene. Cinematic tricks, such as the ‘glimpse,’ employed in many of King Hu’s films, such as *Come Drink With Me* (1966), use cut-editing that gives the audience the impression of faster-than-eyesight movements, and incredibly precise sleight of hand maneuvers that should not be realistically possible to achieve. The film is also corporeally authentic, as Keanu Reeves, the actor who plays Wick, performs all of his own stunts, and in fact is famous for having done so throughout his acting career.

A good example of another film that is ‘authentic’ in all the ways outlined by Hunt is Jackie Chan’s *Police Story* (1985), which stars Chan as the protagonistic detective, who also happens to be taking down a crime organization, and features a gamut of action and stunt sequences. Chan’s film is one of the better early examples of prioritizing the long shot during action sequences. Showcasing many dangerous stunts, such as in the mall with shattering glass panes and in and on top of moving vehicles is the main driving force of this film. The action on screen is authentic, but there is still an aspect of performance that cannot be understated when

critically analyzing the film. Some of the fighting scenes are played for laughs; there is an absurdist humor in watching people being attacked by someone when that person is so skilled they seem to be enjoying themselves. This sort of light-hearted tone is not present in *John Wick*. The film has a dark and gritty atmosphere, starkly lit and often moving to the rhythm of fast-paced music. The context in which Wick is fighting, that being ruthlessly seeking revenge through his grief is partially at cause, but the use of guns removes the ‘slapstick comedy’ component that Chan’s fight scenes are known for. Wick’s fighting choreography can be described as almost desperate. He seems to be sporting some mortal wound in nearly every fight after the first encounter, and his kills are either one-shot executions, or bloody chokeholds wrangled to the ground. There is very little to laugh at here.

To make an understatement, this film was a success. *John Wick* captures a deeply rooted desire to lash out against the world at injustices that are out of one’s control. The criminal *jianghu* serves as a justification and endorsement of this violence, as long as one adheres to this code. More directly, *John Wick* is one of the first successful action films to feature a morally ambiguous protagonist that the audience is able to sympathize with, as he is originally presented as a person suffering from the same strife that any normal person might struggle through as well. The *jianghu* itself simultaneously serves as an allegory to an unforgiving society, which is apathetic to the qualms of any single person, treating everything as ‘just business.’ John’s initial success in escaping the society he was strictly coded to, only to inevitably fall back in, speaks to the desire of escapism that many Western films attempt to capture.

The success of this film inspired a new generation of movies conforming to the uncharacteristically realistic films centered around protagonists working in their own *jianghu*. The struggle is often centered around a begrudging hitman seeking escape from their line of

work, having to balance this work with their loved ones and usually going to great lengths to keep those loved ones far away from harm's way, and experiencing a staggering defeat that almost invalidates the effort taken to arrive there. Two very recent examples of films that fit this description are *Nobody* (Naishuller, 2021) and *The Gray Man* (Russo & Russo, 2022). That they are so close in plot and character description is more telling of *John Wick*'s success as a film rather than a rediscovery of these themes in film, but their proliferation and general acceptance by audience signify that these ideas resonate within the American zeitgeist, appealing more to the common man than a morally clean, heroic protagonist.

*John Wick* embodies many ideas across different martial arts films. It is successful in adapting these ideas to a narrative, and introducing those ideas into western pop culture. It embodies core setting, choreography, cinematography, and narrative tropes from these films, and uses them to tell a story that is similar in form but resonant to an audience seeking something different. The use of martial arts-inspired combat, an unforgiving world full of mercenaries and blood dealings, and a narrative in which the protagonist cannot win is ideal for exploring those commonly felt themes of grief, vengeance, and freedom.



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