

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2017-0072

Athens, 31 July 2018

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The Uses of Art in Contemporary Action Genre Films

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Athens, 31 July 2018

ISSN: 2529-167X

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The Uses of Art in Contemporary Action Genre Films**

ABSTRACT

In reviewing the film *John Wick: Chapter 2*, the critic Margot Harrison notes: “Most American action films would use that fine-art motif solely to establish their bad guy as an effete product of European decadence. But *John Wick: Chapter 2* is a different breed. 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” (“Movie Review: Art Gets as Much Time as Action in ‘John Wick: Chapter 2’,” *Seven Days: Vermont’s Independent Voice*, February 15, 2017, <https://goo.gl/LpNAeZ>). It is not only this film that “lovingly” features art and architecture; rather, a number of recent action films possess scenes that take place in galleries, museums, or famous architectural sites. This essay explores the use of and reasons for the appearance of art in *Skyfall* and *John Wick: Chapter 2*. What is revealed is that art goes beyond acting as mere decoration; art and architecture contribute significantly to the thematic aspects of the films.

Keywords: Art history, film genres, thematic analysis.

Introduction

Art has played a vital role in thriller films for many years. One need only think of Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944), William Dieterle's *Portrait of Jennie* (1948), or Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). In each of these portraits presented are of women, women with whom the main male character falls in love. Art plays a major role in other genres as well, particularly, the heist film where objects are often the objective, or the detective flick in which the art is often used as a MacGuffin. Recently, art has become integral to the action genre. This presentation examines how art and architecture feature in the filmic universes of *Skyfall* (2012) and *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017) to highlight how, in the Bond franchise, British art is an analogue to British empire's wane and renewal through the regeneration of white male protagonist who often bend the rules by engaging in the toxic masculinity of "old school spycraft" into a spy for today; whereas, in the *John Wick: Chapter 2* world art and architecture signify the metanarrative of the clash of the Old World of the "High Table" and the "New World" that discards historical practices, lacks a centralized power structure, and favors individuals untethered from family loyalties and restrictive codes of conduct.¹

A delineation of the adherence to genre conventions and a synopsis of the films' narratives lay the foundation not only for teasing out the thematic strains of the movies, but also for grasping how art solidifies and transmits these themes. Both films are part of larger series: *Skyfall* (2012) is the twenty-third Bond film; whereas, as the title suggests, *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017) is the second movie of a burgeoning franchise (number three is currently being filmed and has a 2019 scheduled release). Both characters are hyper-masculine "lone wolves" who see the world in simple terms; and both in tense relationships with the organizations to which they belong.

¹Indeed in her review of *John Wick: Chapter 2*, critic Margot Harrison notes that the film "is a different breed. 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" ("Movie Review: Art Gets as Much Time as Action in 'John Wick: Chapter 2'," *Seven Days: Vermont's Independent Voice*, February 15, 2017, <https://goo.gl/LpNAeZ>). Harrison's acknowledgment of the role that art plays in film is extremely valuable because there is very little scholarly attention paid to this topic. Film reviewers and bloggers seem to be the most responsive to examining art in film. See Anne Billson, "The Art of Film: Galleries in the Movies," *The Telegraph*, posted January 9, 2015, accessed October 6, 2017, <https://goo.gl/NYi31M>; Jim Gaylord, "10 Things Hollywood Teaches Us About the Art World," *Art in the Movies*, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://goo.gl/XzKPfX>. The topic has been addressed academically by Angela Dalle Vacche in two books: *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); by Susan Felleman, *Real Objects in Unreal Situations: Modern Art in Fiction Films* (Bristol and Chicago: intellect, 2014); and by The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in conjunction with the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, Italy, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Illinois in an exhibition entitled *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors* that traveled to the venues from March 17, 1996 to January 21, 1998.

Narrative Summaries

Skyfall's narrative begins with an action sequence set in Istanbul where things go terribly awry. Upon his return to London, Bond is put through a series of physical and psychological tests (which we learn he failed) before being put back in the field by M. Meanwhile, through a series of encounters with Mallory, the new Chairman of Intelligence and Security Services played by Ralph Fiennes, it is established that M, herself, is under attack from within for her reliance on the old ways of doing things. *John Wick: Chapter 2*'s plot picks up a few days or perhaps a week after the events of the first installment. The film, like *Skyfall*, begins with a chase scene, at the end of which a figure emerges from a muscle car in order to rifle through the pockets of the motorcyclist that he has felled. The figure – who is seen in fragments: shoes and calves, legs, bending down from the back, arms and hands – is then revealed to be John Wick. Later that evening Wick has a visit from an old compatriot where a marker is called in; this sets the stage for the rest of the plot in which Wick has been drawn back into his life as a paid assassin.

Art, Architecture and the Action Film

Mise en Scène

Although art and architectural signifiers do not permeate *Skyfall* the way they do *John Wick: Chapter 2*, both films do use settings to establish themes. Additionally, in both films, the *mise en scène* of these spaces consists of close and medium shots, severe cropping to focus on partial views, and relatively dark lighting. In *Skyfall* there is a Postmodern pastiche for the spaces of the Intelligence Service that signifies the ways in which MI6 is transitioning from its roots in British Imperialism into a sleek, contemporary, inclusive service. The spaces in which the new breed of spies operate, moreover, is firmly rooted in the present; particularly, in the High Tech and Deconstructivist architectures of such places as Shanghai.²

From the first minute and continuing throughout *John Wick: Chapter 2*, objects and settings establish the Old and New Worlds. The settings of the organizations aligned with, but not identical to, the “High Table” and all those who work for it include: the banks, gun purveyors, tailors, and hotels (called the Continental/Continentale based on geography). The furnishings are old-fashioned: carpeted rooms laden with heavy, wooden furniture, and “Old Master” paintings on the walls. There are also rotary telephones and antiquated equipment (a telephone switchboard, vacuum tubes, and older computers) within these spaces. The two hotels are luxury hotels in the traditional mold: they contain grand entranceways, murals, marble floors and walls, and other signifiers of the rarified environment of the Old World moneyed classes. Wick's house, however, and the

¹On the features of such buildings, see Marilyn Stokstad, and Michael Cothren, *Art History*, sixth edition (Boston: Pearson, 2017), 1134-1135.

settings for the spectacular fights in which Wick engages other “New World” figures take place in sleek, contemporary modern spaces.

The people working in the “High Table” affiliated establishments dress in ways that place them within the traditions; simultaneously, the figures possess some element of dress or style that makes clear they are contemporary, for example, the “pin up” women who populate the “records” and “contracts” offices are heavily tattooed. The result is that the viewer is encouraged to think of these service providers as subcontractors positioned between the old and the new.

Architectural Signifiers

Skyfall opens with a spectacular chase sequence in Istanbul Turkey that includes not only such recognizable places as the Grand Bazaar, but also the rooftops. The sequence functions to remind viewers of the long history of the Old World, as well as the dirty business of spycraft. Upon his return to London there is a scene in which one sees that the façade of MI6 resembles an Egyptian pyramid, whereas, the interior is industrial. This seems to suggest that the British Empire’s secret service rests on colonial appropriation of ancient civilizations; the industrial interiors, likewise, highlight the role of the Industrial Revolution (and concomitant Social Darwinism) in bringing these cultures into Britain’s orbit.

Architecture in *John Wick: Chapter 2* echoes the themes of the entire film. The coronation ceremony for Santino’s sister, Gianna D’Antonio, for instance, that takes place in the Baths of Caracalla.³ One first encounters the setting of the Baths of Caracalla as the camera slowly zooms in from a wide, long, aerial shot of the venue down into the teeming throng of people dancing to EDM played on an electric violin (an Old World instrument with a New World twist).⁴ Despite the fact that Gianna sparkles in her evening gown and white fur coat as she welcomes various dignitaries to the party, the interior is ruinous and ancient and its allure lies in its associations with the past, a past that has fallen into Romantic shabbiness. Her bodyguard Cassian appears and recognizes Wick, as well as the purpose for his presence, and so he steers her away from the festivities. What ensues is a firefight through the subterranean passages of the Baths until Wick makes his way to Gianna’s private realm. The framing of this space includes an opulent bath in the center of the room, as well as mirrors arranged opposite one another, and lamps shaped like grapevines with hanging fruit. Gianna prems while looking in the mirror and talking to Wick whom the viewer sees reflected into infinity; she turns, removes her clothes, steps into the

¹On the filming locations see Sarah Bond, “Five Ancient Greek and Roman Influences in ‘John Wick 2,’” *Forbes*, posted February 13, 2017, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://goo.gl/BaB51x>; Ra Moon, “Where Was John Wick: Chapter 2 Filmed?” *Atlas of Wonders*, posted February 2017, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://goo.gl/iYmEdd>.

²The band Nostalgia play “Plastic Heart” and “Fool” at this party. Other song titles include “Man of Focus,” “Razor Bath,” and “Mirror Mayhem.” The song playing during the second Museum sequence is “Presto Museum Battle” that transforms Vivaldi’s “Summer” into an EDM anthem. See the soundtrack for more information, as well as numbers fourteen and twenty-six in Rob Hunter, “30 Things We Learned from the ‘John Wick: Chapter 2’ Commentary,” *Film School Rejects*, posted June 7, 2017, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://goo.gl/5QEnN4>.

bath, and slashes her wrists. Her death takes place in the bath itself and the camera is positioned above her as her slashed wrists turn the water red; as the camera zooms in Wick walks over and shoots her in the head.

The excess of the party and decadence of the furnishings of Gianna's private domain encourage a reading that links the extravagance of the displays of the crime families of the High Table with Late Roman Imperial excess and intrigue, as does the original patron of this building and his history. Caracalla, who commissioned these baths, was the eldest son of Septimius Severus founding emperor of the Late Imperial period. The younger son, Geta, became co-ruler with his brother upon Severus' death in 211 CE, and ancient historians recount that the two fought constantly and attempted to assassinate one another from the beginning of their joint rule; in 212 Caracalla succeeded when his men killed Geta while both were visiting with their mother, Julia Domnia. Five years later Caracalla's Praetorian Prefect Marcus Opellius Macrinus – hearing that Caracalla was preparing to have him murdered – made the first move.⁵ Caracalla's story, in other words, is one of scheming and betrayal among family members that is echoed thematically in *John Wick: Chapter 2*'s use of this building as a space for a major narrative sequence.

The Gallery Trope

A common trope in terms of art in genre films is the “sitting in the gallery in front of a work or works of art.” For *Skyfall* this is the main way in which art is incorporated into the thematic fabric of the movie. It is not subtly done; in fact, it is so on the nose as to be almost ridiculous. The short scene, which runs from 38' 30" to 41' 24", opens with Bond making his way to the National Gallery of Art. The frame is constrained; although the viewer can sense that the building is large and located in a square, the shots are severely cropped so that the spectator feels boxed in, as if the museum is not a place of expansiveness, but of oppression. The next shot is of Joseph Mallord William Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (indicating that Bond has entered Room 34: Great Britain 1750-1850. Bond then sits down and Q enters and sits a moment later. It is at this point that a conversation begins. The shots frame the two characters with Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) and Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. William Hallett (The Morning Walk)* (1785) visible, but blurred behind them. While the conversation focuses on Turner's painting, the paintings behind the two figures are also important in terms of the themes of the film (and, one could argue, the direction of the franchise as a whole).

Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* represents one of the twenty-seven ships involved in the Battle of Trafalgar (October 21, 1805) and the conversation in which the pair engage while ostensibly staring at it is in no way nuanced; however, it is effective in laying out the core tenets of the theme that Bond is a

⁵Patrick Hurley, "Caracalla," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified October 2, 2011, accessed October 8, 2017, <https://www.ancient.eu/Caracalla/>. In addition to summarizing Caracalla's life and reign, this encyclopedia entry contains citations to ancient texts.

dinosaur in a changed environment. After Q sits and both face Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, Q opens the conversation with "Always makes me feel a little melancholy: grand old warship ignominiously being hauled away for scrap. The inevitability of time, don't you think? What do you see?" Bond, "A bloody big ship." Then the two banter about old school and new school techniques, as well whether in-field or support personnel are the most effective team members. Q disperses Bond's tools to him, gets up and leaves with the parting statement "Good luck out there in the field. And please return the equipment in one piece." To which Bond replies, "Brave new world."

Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) and Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. William Hallett (The Morning Walk)* (1785) are behind Q and Bond respectively. The Wright painting depicts a scientific experiment in which the "natural philosopher" as they were then called, controls oxygen to the bird. The metaphor – Q's, and by extension, the entire British intelligence services – is obvious: Bond is a puppet at the hands of the Crown. Gainsborough's work is a bit more ambiguous in terms of the message that is sent by having Bond sit in front of this object. Is this painting projecting the idea of Bond as an upholder of the elites' social position? Or is Bond the signifier of all the problematic aspects that underlie Britain? Or, is this positioning indicative of both?

There are two sequences, set in the "New Modern, NYC" (filmed at the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rome, Italy), in *John Wick: Chapter 2* that best encapsulate the struggles between the Old World and New World, as well as the manner in which recognizable works of art function thematically in the film. The first occurs early when Wick seeks out Santino in order to accept responsibility for the marker (it is in this scene that he learns that Santino wants Wick to murder Gianna at her coronation celebration); the other is toward the end of the film when Wick returns to the museum and rampages around it on a killing spree. In the first sequence, Wick enters the museum, walks past Arnaldo Pomodoro's 1963 *Sphere No. 2*, strolls through a gallery of statues (Left Wing, Room 2, called the *Sala dell' Ercole*), and concludes his promenade in a gallery where Santino sits in front of Giovanni Fattori's *Battle of Custoza* (Right Wing, Room 4, called the *Sala di Giordano Bruno*).⁶ Wick walks up to Santino and stands in profile, completely ignoring the artwork; Santino sits with his back to the viewer and stares intently at the painting. The camera pans around and closes in on Santino as he says: "This was my father's collection. I see little more than paint on canvas of course [pausing, he turns to look at Wick], but I do find myself here." This statement against the backdrop of the painting underscores how, although Santino believes himself to be a new breed, he is deluding himself; he is transfixed by his family's power. It is too bad that he does not pay more attention to the canvas' subject; this battle occurred during the Third Italian War for Independence in 1866 and resulted in a coalition of the Austrian Imperial and Venetian armies defeating the Italian army even

¹Alexandra Massini, *Art/Shop/Eat. Rome* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2004), 128-130.

though the Italians had the numerical advantage as Santino does in comparison to Wick.

The second occurs when Santino puts out a hit on Wick after Gianna's murder while standing in the *Sala dell'Ercole*; specifically, he stands in front of Canova's *Hercules and Lichas*. In book nine of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Hercules' servant Lichas is transformed into a stone. In the narrative, Lichas has unwittingly brought the poisoned cloak from Deianira that kills Hercules who, in his dying throes, blames Lichas and hurls him far away; as Lichas flies through the air he hardens into stone and when he finally comes to ground it is as a rock.⁷ The themes of the narrative are betrayal and murderous revenge, an obvious comment about the consequences of Santino's betrayal of Wick. As the viewer, who has heard Abram Tarasov's recounting of Wick's past deeds and has seen the frenzy with which Tarasov attempts to shut down his business after his nephew's ill-conceived actions knows, Santino is unwittingly ensuring his own destruction.

A final episode of the film that features art heavily occurs directly after the Bowery King sequence and is set at the opening of the exhibition "Reflections of the Soul" that Santino is sponsoring. In the main reception area is a copy of Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* from the Loggia del Lanzi of the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Commissioned by Cosimo de Medici for this site and unveiled on April 27, 1554, this work joined Michelangelo's *David*, Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus*, and Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* and was perhaps meant to create a resonating intertextual narrative of the triumph of the underdog and resistance to tyranny between the works.⁸ When Wick arrives and the violence begins there are long and medium shots of the henchmen and Wick running through the galleries fighting. They move past the older art so quickly it is hard to recognize more than the fact that the artworks are nineteenth century paintings and sculptures. Blood spatters on walls and floor, always just missing works of art.⁹ Then Wick and the camera stop in front of Gaetano Cellini's *Humanity Against Evil* (1908) whose base is inscribed with the couplet "Thus I'll extirpate using my teeth and nails / the eternal pain that stings my heart" which seems to sum up Wick's behavior throughout the film.¹⁰

²Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, book nine, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, *et al.*, <https://goo.gl/BKPSng>.

¹Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, "On Pedestals: Michelangelo's David, Bandinelli's Hercules and Cacus and the Sculpture of the Piazza della Signoria," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 20 (1983): 377-415; Christine Corretti, *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa and the Loggia dei Lanzi: Configurations of the Body of State* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), *passim*; Corinne Mandel, "Perseus and the Medici," *Storia Dell Arte* 87 (1996): 168-187; John Shearman, "Art or Politics in the Piazza?" in *Benvenuto Cellini: Kunst und Kunsttheorie im 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alessandro Nova and Anna Schreurs (Köln: Bohlau, 2003), 28.

²The paintings on the walls are copies; the originals were in storage during filming. See number eleven in Rob Hunter, "30 Things We Learned from the 'John Wick: Chapter 2' Commentary," *Film School Rejects*, posted June 7, 2017, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://goo.gl/5QEnN4>.

³Italian Ways, "Gaetano Cellini and the Fight of Man Against Evil," *Italian Ways*, accessed October 6, 2017, <https://goo.gl/JTeRd2>. Cellini exhibited the work at the Milan Expo of 1906.

Santino, his right hand woman Ares, and some of his minions take off toward the “Reflections of the Soul” exhibit. Wick follows and as he disembarks from the elevator a woman’s voice welcomes the visitor to the exhibit with the following thirty-four second monologue:

Welcome to reflections of the soul at the New Modern NYC. Within this exhibition the interplay of light and the nature of self-images coalesce to provide experiences, which will highlight the fragility of our perception of space and our place within it. We hope with this exhibit that we can provide new insights into your understanding of the world and just possibly lead you to deeper reflection of into the nature of self.

This introduction reveals how pretentious and simplistic the exhibition is and, when the camera follows Wick as he enters, it is revealed how little it resembles an actual exhibition. In the context of the film, however, it makes perfect sense as the place where both Wick and Santino are forced to confront their essential selves; in Wick’s case this means running amok destroying everything in sight while being both multiplied in and fragmented by the mirrors thus asking him to reflect not only on who he is in his “soul”, but also his place within the world he tried to leave behind. As Wick moves through the space a fiery, lurid red is reflected behind him as he dispatches Santino’s henchmen and then his main bodyguard, Ares (played by Ruby Rose).

In the fight scene mirrors surround Wick and Ares and the reflected light is cool and bluish silver signifying, perhaps, that Wick at this point is not consumed by a fiery rage; rather, he is a precision killing machine. The camera veers wildly around with angles from below and above until the climactic moment when Wick thrusts a knife into Ares’ heart. As Wick stalks Santino into the main hall a red light flickers behind him; in contrast, the light behind Santino is consistently blue or silver. It is at this point that Wick and Santino finally face off.

This scene gains its thematic potency from the allusions to iconic scenes from *Enter the Dragon* and *Lady from Shanghai*. The homage to *Enter the Dragon* is straightforward: both *John Wick: Chapter 2* and *Enter the Dragon* take place in a setting where objects are on display, both involve the protagonist facing off against his nemesis, and both develop the physical superiority and ultimate defeat of the villain by the underdog.¹¹ The resonance with *Lady from Shanghai* is, perhaps, more significant in terms of theme and can be summed up by the words that Orson Welles’ Michael O’Hara utters to Rita Hayworth’s Elsa Bannister as they stand in a mirrored space: “One who follows his nature keeps his original nature in the end, but haven’t you heard ever of something better to follow?” It seems that the mirrors of the exhibition are revealing to Wick his “original nature” and asking him the same question that O’Hara asks Bannister. And, like her, Wick’s ultimate answer is “No” when he storms out

¹¹Bryan Bishop, “The Story Behind John Wick: Chapter 2’s Best Action Scenes,” *The Verge*, posted February 15, 2017, accessed September 24, 2017. <https://goo.gl/i12pi2>; Hunter, “30 Things.” Although in this film the defeat is delayed until the next scene.

of the exhibition after Santino, catching up with and eventually shooting him in the head in the Continental Hotel, a “neutral zone” where assassins are forbidden from “conducting business” directly.¹²

Intertextuality

Amedeo Modigliani’s *Woman with a Fan* (1919) and Thomas Buttersworth’s *HMS Victory Heavily Engaged at the Battle of Trafalgar* (1825), which appear in two separate office scenes in *Skyfall*, bear examination because the works reveal how the film fits into the overall Bond narratives, as well as hint at future directions for the franchise. Modigliani’s *Woman with a Fan* was stolen from Paris’ Museum of Modern Art in 2010. This work shows up in the next Bond film, *Spectre* (2015), thus linking the two films and making clear that the themes of *Skyfall* continue into this next installment. It also follows a tradition of the display of stolen artworks that began with *Dr. No* (1962) in which Francisco Goya’s *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* that was stolen from the very museum where Q and Bond first meet, is seen in Dr. No’s lair. Buttersworth’s *HMS Victory Heavily Engaged at the Battle of Trafalgar* is interesting in the way in which it plays intracinematically against *The Fighting Temeraire* for both ships played a part in the Battle of Trafalgar; in fact, the *HMS Victory* was Horatio Nelson’s lead ship. In this version of the battle, the *Temeraire* – as it was then called – is positioned just behind the *Victory*. It is during this scene that Mallory as the new M reinstates Bond and presents him with a new mission. The implication is clear; there is a place for a renewed and restored version of the old school spy in the British Secret Service. Does this also imply, therefore, that there is the possibility of a new and better British Empire?

John Wick: Chapter 2 is rife with instances of intertextuality that film critics link to the conventions of the action drama. This layering of texts not only conforms to the genre’s stylistic conventions, but also enriches the film thematically.¹³ At the simplest level names and actors allude to classic American films, for instance, Santino is James Caan’s character’s name in *The Godfather* and Franco Nero, a figure known to any fan of Spaghetti Westerns, appears as the manager of the Continental in Rome. The opening and general style of the coronation sequence resembles the opening of *Blade*. The stylistic homage leads the viewer to think more deeply about *Blade’s* themes, especially that of the struggle between the old and new regimes and, thereby, deepens the reading of *John Wick: Chapter 2* from nearly the beginning. The Bowery King scene could be a callback to the relationship between Morpheus and Neo (played by Laurence

² Which the spectator learns from an earlier scene when Wick and Cassian crash through the doors of the Continental in Rome and are forced to delay their fight and have a drink in the bar.

¹³ Laurent Bouzereau, *Ultraviolent Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino* (Sacramento: Citadel Press, 2000), *passim*; Barna William Donovan, *Blood, Guns and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 35-59; Mark Gallagher, “I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film,” in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 199-226.

Fishburne and Keanu Reeves respectively) in the *Matrix* movies for the director, Chad Stahelski, was Reeves' stunt double for the trilogy. If this is accepted, then the religious imagery becomes more than just a gloss; it is transformed into subtext: as in the *Matrix* films, Laurence Fishburne is a surrogate father (God) and Keanu Reeves "the One" or Jesus. This idea is reinforced by John Wick's line "You have a choice; do you want a war, or do you just want to give me a gun?" that suggests the Bowery King is sending his "son" to be sacrificed. A last, noteworthy allusion is the homage to the Western that appears as the second museum sequence begins. When Wick enters the museum and he and Santino lock eyes, the crowd opens up to create a space between the two, and each reaches for his gun mimicking a classic Western duel trope.

In addition to the intertextuality, there is a telling motif that runs throughout the film: the mirror. A mirror first appears when Wick is getting outfitted at the syndicate's tailor. The shot is a medium one that shows three Wicks reflected. Is this indicative of Wick's ambivalence about honoring Santino's marker? One part of him, the old Wick, stands ready to become embroiled in the complicated, feudal world he left years before; one part of him, the present Wick, calmly prepares for the bloodbath he knows he will unleash; and one part of him, the future Wick, is uncertain as he looks at himself half-kitted out. In the scene in which Wick kills Gianna there is also a mirror. As she prepares herself for death she stands at the mirror, looking at herself while simultaneously addressing and observing Wick, whose reflection she – and the spectator – sees looming behind her because she has positioned two mirrors across from one another. It is as if she sees her own future lurking right behind her; that is, she realizes that the feudal ways of the Old World are threatened and will be consumed by the New World future.

Conclusions

Art and architecture in these films are not only stylistic devices used to demonstrate that the art world's denizens are ambitious, striving for prestige and legitimacy, and tied to their pasts, but also the spaces, places, and objects amplify the theme of the struggle between Old and New Worlds, empires and individuals.¹⁴ The interaction in the new M's office in *Skyfall* and one of the final shots of *John Wick: Chapter 2*, in which the viewer looks down from above and over the shoulder of Emma Stebbins' *Angel of the Waters* sculpture (1864) that is located at the Bethesda Fountain in New York City's Central Park visualize this premise.¹⁵ Both films end with the promise that the battle of

¹See especially numbers one and four in Jim Gaylord, "10 Things Hollywood Teaches Us About the Art World," *Art in the Movies*, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://goo.gl/XzKP fX>.

²Curbed NY, "Unraveling the History of Central Park's Bethesda Fountain," *Curbed NY*, posted July 16, 2014, accessed October 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/D2BTN7>; Sara Cedar Miller, *Central Park, An American Masterpiece: A Comprehensive History of the Nation's First Urban Park* (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 36-69. A pamphlet published for the 1873 dedication of the fountain linked it to chapter 5, verses 2-4 of the Gospel of John in which the pool is described as one that heals. At the end of this film, however, Wick is not healed; he is cast out. It appears that the Old World is triumphant. Wick is given only a one-hour window before his excommunication from the

old and new continues. In *Skyfall*, M gives Bond a new assignment; likewise, *John Wick 3* is currently being filmed, and the glimpses of dossiers, maps, and plans in the Bowery King's lair suggest that a large-scale war between Old and New that will "provide new insights into your understanding of the world and just possibly lead you to deeper reflection into the nature of self" may be coming.

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