# Hollywood’s Righteous Mayhem Makers

*The superman killing machines featured in some of the most lucrative movie franchises give audiences visceral satisfaction when our collective itch for virtuous violence needs scratching.*

The latest installment in Keanua Reeve’s *John Wick* franchise came out this year and in terms of box office receipts it did not disappoint. The *Wick* series is just one in a long line of franchises in a similar vein that continues to hit paydirt as repeating bankable commodities for the movie industry. *The* *Equalizer 3* starring Denzel Washington landed in theaters recently as well. Closing at the box office on opening weekend with a $42 million take, that makes the latest version of *The Equalizer* the most lucrative weekend haul for the entire series and the second highest-grossing Labor Day debut for any movie. And while the third installment was touted as the finale, there’s talk of a fourth version now. Liam Neeson’s *Taken* franchise also comes to mind. And though not as revenge oriented as the others, The *Jason Bourne* and *Jack Reacher* series also play on themes of righteous mayhem. The genre shows no sign of abating. The latest *Wick* release was already the fourth in the series. With a budget of $100 mil., *Wick 4’s* opening weekend take of $73 mil. nearly paid its production bills in full and the worldwide gross is $440 mil. and counting. Movies like this aren’t likely to fall out of favor with either the industry or its viewers anytime soon apparently. This shit sells.

These surefire hits at the box office are just the tonic Hollywood needs as it tries to find its sea legs after the perfect storm that blew in with COVID, streaming, labor strikes, and other industry woes. Franchises that do especially well in this genre center around cool, calm, and collected ass-kicking instruments of righteous retribution, and all of them are reacting to a similar catalyst that can be summed up as: you messed with the wrong dude when you did wrong, dude. Their central characters are played by guys with respectable acting chops, whoring themselves repeatedly for some serious ka-ching, as they willingly participate in a bit of the old ultraviolence for the superficial and scintillating satisfaction of their audience.

Let’s take a brief stroll down the plotlines of some of these franchises:

Denzel Washington’s *The* *Equalizer* series - A trained killer (Marine) now retired and living a quiet life working in a hardware store must reluctantly return to action to protect a teenage prostitute from members of the Russian Mafia.

Liam Neason’s *Taken* series - A trained killer (CIA operative) wishing only to retire must now rescue his teenage daughter who has been kidnapped by Albanian smugglers.

Keanu Reeves’ *John Wick* – a retired assassin who is forced back into the criminal underworld he had previously abandoned after a group of Russian gangsters steal his car and kill a puppy that was gifted to him by his late wife who was struck down by a terminal illness.

Tom Cruz’s *Jack Reacher*: a retired military cop who doesn’t fit in and drifts through society until he discovers a righteous cause and must engage.

Notice the similarities in just these examples. The most important throughline for these series is the reluctance of the hero. Take our man Wick for example. Just why exactly does he kill so? Well, the bad guys started it when they killed the puppy his wife gave to him before she died! Anyone would snap under those circumstances and turn into a vengeful killing machine at that point. Even Christ Almighty himself would have paused mid-cheek-turning and pondered his baser options if his dead wife’s puppy got snuffed by some malcontents. Of course, that snap for poor Mr. Wick has now lasted for four films so far as well as two spin offs so, I’m thinking that was a pretty bad snap (or a really cute puppy).

America has long celebrated the lone male figure dishing out justice with both fist and firearm. There are all manner of heroes and anti-heroes in popular media ready to get up on their hind legs and teach lessons when pushed too far by the less desirable elements in society. Early purveyors of this brand of movie mayhem commonly referred to as vigilante action thrillers include the *Rambo*, *Dirty Harry*, *Walking Tall,* and *Death Wish* franchises and perhaps numerous lesser-known others of this ilk, each one repeatedly telling the bad guys in one way or another the same message: you messed with the wrong guy. This is a theme in Hollywood that not only refuses to go away but seems to have become even more prevalent, with a new breed of franchise that has taken it to a whole new level of refinement. These more recent versions no doubt have a great deal of talent behind their production, ensuring they sport the right level of polish to pass for legit commercial amusement. And that’s because the money guys who run the entertainment machine know these movies will strike a profitable nerve in the movie-going public’s primal cortex. The trend only intensifies while the industry seeks to increase profits in the international market, attempting to reduce the inherent financial risk of having to put millions on the line with each movie venture. We see more and more movies that while slick on their surface, reside at a basement level of human emotions and behaviors such that they lack all nuance and will translate effortlessly to foreign audiences in great numbers. The unending stream of glossy high-budget comic book blockbusters is but one glaring example of this dumbing down of the art form. But the dark hero genre is equally favored. The Chinese box office is the second largest in the world and action movies with little dialogue tend to fare better in foreign markets. For example, *Wick 4* runs nearly three hours yet Keanu’s character utters only 380 words, many of them being ‘yeah’.

The dialogue aside, it’s the refinement of these franchises that is most galling because it makes it less obvious that we are being sold retreaded plotlines. A high gloss finish obscures the fact that what is really being offered up is formulaic drivel, demeaning to both those who produce it as well as audiences that consume it. A good man with deadly skills is plunged repeatedly back into a dark world where he must not only defend himself but rid the world of very bad men. Consequently, he commences to beat the living bejeebers out of each and every one of them without fail. He is a superhuman caught up in a cycle of retribution and a steady diet of just desserts served with primal relish. I don’t know whether to yawn or shake my head in disgust.

Let’s consider for example the sad tale of Jason Bourne, another elite trained assassin (sigh) in a black ops program for the CIA. He suffers amnesia during a failed assassination attempt and is chased by his own people who believe he’s gone rogue. He kills only because he’s being hunted unfairly and must do so in instinctive self-defense. He doesn’t even know anymore why he’s a perfect machine of death as amnesia has removed his understanding (and conveniently lessened his culpability as well). In the books that the movies were based on, Bourne decides to become an assassin having been enraged by the injustice and randomness of his wife’s death. He may not be a vigilante per se but once again, there’s that earlier trauma trope lurking in the recesses of the original literary version of our pure-souled hero who never would have been otherwise inclined to a life of murder.

In these movies, while guns are often used, and nearly always prominently displayed in promotional imagery, they lack the gratification of watching hand-to-hand brawls. Consequently, for the most part, these movies overly rely on sophisticated fight sequences that feature long, complicated death dances between our hero and however many bad guys can be assembled at one time to jump out of the shadows and add to the collective mele. (And please spare me the twaddle that this inventive fight choreography depicted in a richly stylistic manner with great editing blah, blah-blah is, in and of itself, an art form worthy of our attention. One-dimensional gratuitous moviemaking even when technically impressive does not make for inspired entertainment.)

Just for recent comparison, the movie *Golda* which depicts Israel’s epic fight for its life during the 1973 Arab invasion, enjoyed a paltry $1 mil. at the box office its opening weekend. It too is an unrelenting emotional gut punch, witnessing through the eyes of Prime Minister Golda Maier the all-out carnage of the pitched battles that ensued from the surprise invasion of her country by the combined forces of Egypt and Syria. But this is done without any guts actually being punched in terms of close-up footage. Shot with an unwavering eye on the toll the battles took on an old sick woman who is running her small country like an aging mob boss, the film puts you in the middle of the war, but from a distance. Screams of young men caught in brutal tank warfare can be heard via radio communications but no visuals accompany the horror. Israel manages to vanquish her aggressors but apparently, underdog justice and retribution themes aren’t enough to make obscene profits unless they come with a front-row seat to the violence.

The well-worn adage at work in these movies is, push a good man so far and you’ll soon find out what he’s capable of in response. But the response in these movies, in an effort to outdo the last one, is beyond all norms, venturing into mythic levels of violence. The original meaning of the word berserk was an ancient Scandinavian reference to warriors frenzied in battle and believed to be invulnerable. The Vikings’ term berserker was used to describe a warrior who reaches an almost religious fervor of warfare that improves his chances if slain of ending up in the chosen place in the afterlife seated next to the gods. Those Nordics knew the deep and abiding gratification of seeing one of their own swinging a battle axe and wasting the enemy like there’s no tomorrow (Valhalla, I am coming!). It’s a good concept to describe interminable modern movie scenes where the protagonist becomes a perfect machine mowing down his adversaries with a precision and smoothness like that of a demon-possessed demigod. The modern magnificent killerman has left the normal plane the rest of us exist in and entered into another realm of consciousness that gives their performance super-human levels. And these glorious depictions are watched by today’s mesmerized audiences munching on popcorn and checking their phones during the in-between, dialoguey parts where the semblance of a plot is maintained.

The entertainment industry wouldn’t keep funding these movies unless they were lucrative, so we need to ask ourselves, what is the core appeal of these repeating themes of disquieting destruction? Are these characters simply agents for the change we yearn to see: a strong man fixing the world of all of its perceived ills one brutal fight at a time (“I am your retribution”)?

The initial appeal is undeniable. I admit freely to having a visceral attraction to this ageless tale of good versus evil. There is a universal and timeless cathartic reaction to watching people righting wrongs and addressing injustice by whatever means. Indeed, men it seems are especially receptive to these imaginings in that we often daydream that, with the right amount of goading, we too would relish teaching that bully a lesson, whether he is remembered from our school days or sits honking behind you in today’s traffic. Walter Mitty lives in all of us in one shape or another, yearning to be the most badass guy in the room, pushed a little too far and exploding into action to quickly end all further discussion. It’s more nuanced a fantasy than simple bloodlust. We are perhaps wired to do grand feats. It gives us deep satisfaction to step proudly into the fray and win, whether it be on the playing field, the battlefield, or somewhere in between like the office or local tavern. Instead, our days are spent staring at a screen, shopping, in traffic, the kitchen, bed… always processing and rarely conquering. We are like cats domesticated and bored staring out of the window of our apartments at the birds whom they were born to chase and kill.

But most of us understand that, while satisfying as a brief imagining, this is a childish, base, and ultimately unsatisfying fantasy, much less a way to actually interact with the world. It is the very reason perhaps that scripture evolved in the second testament to feature the counterintuitive character of Christ who is never depicted raining down from the heavens on all those bad biblical actors. That just wasn’t the big guy’s style. And this more enlightened approach caught on with the likes of Gandhi and Martin Luther King who sought to shame their opponent into submission by taking the high road. You won’t win in the end by allowing yourself to be dragged into the gutter trying to beat on the other guy. There’s no good end that comes from that debasement, right?

If you do decide to indulge in these fantasies as a form of release from the mundane perhaps, then you should decide how far you want to take this: how many times do you need to scratch that itch? How often do you need to imagine it’s you up there on that screen, someone remarkable, cool, distant, mysterious, and even deadly, if need be, and not just sitting on your ass getting fat on a bucket of extra-buttered popcorn.Like a lab rat pushing for a treat, how often do you want to repeatedly default to the habit of watching the same basic scenario duplicated ad nauseam as opposed to something a little more enriching and thoughtful? Some admittedly talented people are becoming very wealthy by offering a steady diet of another version of porn. It's a free country so by all means do whatever turns you on but consider the fact they’re preying on your base desires for profit. They are repackaging the same scenes over and over again and doing it with such spit and polish that you think it’s better than it actually is. Again, I don’t call out the action thriller genre per se, but more its growing lack of overall imagination. And developing different action sequences with more eye-catching brutality served up with elegant style is not the creativity we need any more of. Shakespeare featured a lot of fight sequences too but so much more.

Of course, you don’t make millions at the box off just one gender, so we have to presume women are attracted to this narrative as well. The alpha male myth and its magnetism is pretty well hardwired into all genders. According to Canadian shock psychologist Jordan Peterson, “The ultimate female fantasy is finding some guy who has the capacity for mayhem but has that under control and who can integrate that into a productive, generous reciprocal relationship.” Hence the common theme in reverse found in these movies: that this was a man who once deeply loved a woman, but she died and now he must return to his aggressive roots to fairly survive and perhaps once love again unconditionally. You need not necessarily buy into that theory, but it sure goes a long way in explaining how these well-worn plots continue to work so effortlessly across all manner of viewership.

These movies may be guilty pleasures for their audiences, but as I’ve already alluded to, to keep any moral discomfort in watching this viciousness to an acceptable level, it seems the plots need to emphasize how little choice our protagonist has in the overall matter. We must have assurances from his circumstances in each such movie that our hero is, after all, pure and not sullied by bloodlust.

Absolution is a common theme in the art of war and mayhem, and it’s been going on for a long time. In Medieval times, European knights, vassals loyal to whatever aristocratic warlord would keep them in shining armor, were handed the perfect opportunity to satisfy their war jones in The Crusades aka ‘Holy Wars’. The Pope in Rome issued special dispensation to all those who joined in the slaughter of the infidels who had desecrated the holy lands (i.e., non-Christians minding their own business in their homelands). He assured all Christian participants in this purge of the Middle East a secure place in heaven and cleansing of all sin that may occur while they spent years vanquishing the lesser mortals by any means necessary.

Today, watching our designated heroes cast their gaze over the smoldering humane carnage they just wrought may give an audience pause for a moment as to whether our collective contentment with such over-the-top violence is okay. But whenever the wanton killing gets to be too much, we’re reminded by the plot line that these are pure souls drawn into ferocious killing scenarios repeatedly because they have no other choice and that the poor fellow still standing in the center of the body pile could not avoid this fate. In this way, the jarring of our moral compass is assuaged by the original catalyst for the hero’s plunge into dark retribution. And a dead young wife’s gift puppy on this front just can’t be beaten with a stick. Moreover, we are assured in all these stories that the guys being mowed down deserve what they had coming or better yet, fit the bill plot-wise as being less than human things whose lives we can greatly discount. They may be something complicated like the human drones sent by the government to dispatch Jason Bourne with extreme prejudice, or just one-dimensional scum meant to be knocked down like so many bowling pins: terrorists, euro-thugs, mobsters, goons, kidnappers, rapists, and dog-offers. They are presented as subhuman, bent on the hero’s destruction, and ready fodder for the grave. Besides, they knew the risks of the game they were playing.

In the end, your God, Earthmother, Cosmic Muffin, or whomever else you answer to would be okay with this semi-divine reprisal. And so too your own conscience if that’s all you’ve left yourself for guidance. We are assured that these cave shadows on the screen that we stare at are righteous and good, or at least, not completely sick amusement. But don’t we deserve to entertain ourselves better and where exactly are we headed with this stuff?

One franchise along a similar vein, *The Kingsman* series, offered up one scenein particular that took cool kill choreography to ridiculous and abhorrent heights. It’s where Colin Firth’s character in the first film of the series (and yes, a fourth was recently announced!) executes an entire church congregation in a single continuous take that amounts to a Bible-belt battle royal, berserker dance.

How exactly is one supposed to take this scene?

First, let us acknowledge the righteous qualifier up front. How could our beloved protagonist go about performing a mass shooting in a church and we are expected to embrace this spectacle? Well, it’s because the congregation is conveniently presented as mindless death zombies triggered by a signal from the arch-villain that makes them murderously violent. This plotline is intended to rid us of all guilt otherwise associated with the pleasure of watching a one-man massacre of folks gathered in a place of worship. And besides, it’s not just any church but a rural American church lousy with bible-thumping zealots who embrace right-wing notions of intolerance and bigotry. Hmm? Putting the absurd triggered-zombies plot development aside, the scene ironically appears to cater to urban educated progressives, serving up a bizarre message of contempt for American intolerance and hatred. Disturbingly, it seeks to resolves that contempt through gratuitous violence. And what’s particularly galling is the whole thing is orchestrated by British movie makers.

As a reasonable American, I too have grown embittered at mindless church-going deplorables from the flyover states who seem to have lost their sense of humanity, much less any kind of accurate understanding of the moral and legal underpinnings of the nation they live in, much less the tenets of their own damn faith. But even if you saw nothing objectionable about formulaic manipulative franchises like this, the fact that it is a British-made movie only serves to add to its questionable motives. And I’m not just referring to the fact that *The Kingsman* features Englishmen who form a secret organization of world-savers, but because it was written and directed by Matthew Vaughn, a British filmmaker who made his name in movies like *Kick-Ass, X-Men and Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. If anyone feels it necessary to gratuitously depict the much-deserved slaughter of zombie rednecks, I’d prefer it be done by Hollywood and not the likes of some elitist limey from a country that has been looking down at our culture ever since we were a colony. I mean even the soundtrack they use to fuel this thinly veiled cultural rampage is from a beloved Southern Rock Band who tried to defend their regional honor in their hit 1974 *Sweet Home Alabama*. The song used in this instance, *Freebird* is almost a second national anthem and the makers of *The Kingsman* have thrown it right back at us in mocking reverence to the combustive power of its rave-up ending.

The message of this lurid long take is readily apparent to anyone with half a brain. It’s offensive to have cinema imagery coming from across the pond that displays our inbred red state base symbolically erased by some Brit super-killer who performs the very same level of butchery that is imagined in the worst minds of America’s mass shooters. The scene’s point is not well taken since it engages in mindless carnage to somehow show how the worst human stuff of our country’s violent underbelly should be dealt with. Clearly, the premise, that these parishioners are rendered worthy of slaughter because they’ve been death zombie triggered is lame and a thin excuse for what’s really going on. The real and very discernable message for the audience is, aren’t you so sick of those dead-headed American fundamentalist that you’d love to open fire on every one of them in their very own weird church and, just for good measure, do it to the soundtrack of a country-fried hillbilly anthem like *Freebird*? Don’t think for a minute that sentiment was lost on folks like me. We don’t appreciate the dark side of America any more than you do, but don’t go darkly imagine obliterating it in some visually obscene cleansing act that gets your holier-than-thou patronizing British rocks off.

(OK. Catching my breath. Hard to transition from that.)

Perhaps nothing I’ve said here will likely have a practical effect of lessening this entertainment phenomenon. I just saw a trailer for the latest John Statham movie which will depict “how one man’s brutal campaign for vengeance takes on national stakes after he is revealed to be a former operative of a powerful and clandestine organization known as the ‘Beekeepers’”. This isn’t letting up anytime soon).  It is what it is, as someone is fond of saying, and folks certainly dig it and hey, nobody’s being very thoughtful these days anyway. But if some of us don’t call it out for what it is, a major cop-out by the movie industry and a demeaning form of entertainment for the bread and circuses crowd, then we allow it to be normalized. Sure, love stories are formulaic too and firmly rooted in scratching a universal itch. I still see way more thoughtfulness and nuance in the average rom-com than I see in this pablum we’re being fed a steady diet of. It’s not just about the violence; it’s the lack of imagination, which can be deadly to a culture as it appears poised to descend to Roman level degradation.

Have a nice day.