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# **GUNS AND EXPLOSIONS OF COLOUR**

Challenging the Action Genre through Vibrant  
Colour

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Master's Thesis

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Anni Kunnari: Guns and Explosions of Colour – Challenging the Action Genre Through Vibrant Colour  
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Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on ymmärtää poikkeuksellista värien käyttöä ajankohtaisissa toimintaelokuvissa. Toimintagenre tunnetaan tyylistään olla tarkoituksellisesti visuaalisesti ylenpalttinen, mutta samalla genrenä se on kuitenkin tyyllisesti maskuliininen, jonka vuoksi sen värimaailma on lähes väritön. Toimintagenrellä on siis jännittynyt suhde väreihin: ne toimisivat genren visuaalisen ylenpalttisuuden lisänä, mutta olisivat samanaikaisesti genre-normien vastaisia. Tämä tutkielma analysoi värien käyttöä kolmessa 2020-luvulle ajankohtaisessa toimintaelokuvassa, joissa tämä jännittynyt suhde väreihin on keskeinen: nämä elokuvat käyttävät värejä maskuliinisten normien vastaisesti sekä maailman- että hahmojen rakennuksessa.

Argumenttini on, että 2020-luvun naisjohteinen toimintagenre haastaa tyyllisten keinojen, tässä tapauksessa värin, kautta toimintagenren maskuliinisen rakenteen, kun taas tyyppillinen miesjohteinen toimintagenre käyttää värejä toimintagenreä haastamattomalla tavalla. Naisjohteinen toimintagenre siis omaksuu värit omakseen, kun taas miesjohteinen toimintagenre torjuu värien käytön haasteellisuuden käyttämällä värejä vain tietyissä konteksteissa.

Analyysiin valitut kolme elokuvaa ovat *Kate* (2021), *Gunpowder Milkshake* (2021) ja *John Wick* (2014). *Kate* ja *Gunpowder Milkshake* valittiin analyysin kohteeksi koska ne ovat genrelle poikkeuksellisen värikkäitä naisjohteisia toimintaelokuvia 2020-luvulta. *John Wick* puolestaan valittiin analyysin kohteeksi siksi että se on säilyttänyt suosionsa yhtenä toimintagenren ikonisista elokuvista 2010- ja 2020-luvuilla, mutta myös koska *John Wick* käyttää kirkkaita värejä perinteisen tumman maskuliinisen värimaailman lisäksi haastamatta toimintagenren tyyliä.

Tutkielman teoreettinen lähestymistapa yhdistää elokuvatutkimuksen kaksi eri haaraa: elokuva-värianalyysin ja toimintagenre-tutkimuksen. Värianalyysi elokuvissa on jäänyt vähäiselle huomiolle akateemisissa piireissä värien subjektiivisuuden vuoksi. Samoin toimintagenre on usein jätetty huomioitta genre-tutkimuksessa negatiivisen maineensa vuoksi. Näiden kahden tutkimussuunnan yhdistäminen paljastaa suuren aukon elokuvatutkimuksen piirissä: värien käyttöä toimintaelokuvissa ei ole tutkittu juuri lainkaan. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii täydentämään tätä aukkoa.

Keskeisiä käsitteitä elokuvien väritutkimukselle tässä tutkimuksessa ovat optinen väri ja pintaväri. Optinen väri ja pintaväri ovat toistensa vastapuolia – optinen väri viittaa valojen kautta näkyviin väreihin siinä missä pintaväri on esineiden kiinteä väri, joka on osa niiden fyysistä pintarakennetta. Genretutkimuksen keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat toimintagenre ja visuaalinen ylenpalttisuus. Toimintagenren yksinkertainen määritelmä saavutetaan yhdistämällä väkivalta/toiminta genren visuaaliseen ylenpalttisuuteen. Visuaalinen ylenpalttisuus viittaa toimintagenren taipumukseen näyttää suurta ja tarkoituksellisesti liiallista toimintaa ruudulla.

Avainsanat: Optinen väri, pintaväri, elokuvagenre, toimintagenre, toimintaelokuva, naisjohteinen toimintaelokuva, visuaalinen ylenpalttisuus.

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin Original Check -ohjelmalla.

# ABSTRACT

Anni Kunnari: Guns and Explosions of Colour – Challenging the Action Genre through Vibrant Colour

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The purpose of this thesis is to understand the exceptional use of colours in contemporary action films. The action genre is known for its style being purposefully visually excessive, yet at the same time it is stylistically masculine as a genre which is why its typical colour scheme is almost colourless. Thus, the genre has a tense relationship with colours: the colours would enhance the visual excessiveness of the genre, but at the same time they would contradict the genre norms. This thesis analyses the use of colour in three action films topical to the 2020s which centralise the tense relationship with colours: These films use colours in direct opposition to the masculine norms both in worldbuilding and in character creation.

I argue that the 2020s woman-led action genre challenges the masculine structure of the action genre through colour, whereas the typical man-led action genre uses colours in a way that does not challenge the genre's visual norms. The woman-led action genre therefore embraces the use of colour whereas the man-led action genre rejects the challenge posed by the use of colours by using those colours in specific contexts where colour does not challenge the genre.

The three films chosen for this analysis are *Kate* (2021), *Gunpowder Milkshake* (2021), and *John Wick* (2014). *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* were chosen because they are exceptionally colourful woman-led action films from the 2020s. *John Wick*, in turn, was chosen because it has remained hugely popular as one of the action genre's most iconic films in the 2010s and 2020s, but also because the film uses bright colours in addition to the normative masculine colour scheme without challenging the stylistic norms of the action genre.

The theoretical basis of this research combines two strands of film studies: colour analysis in film and action genre studies. Colour analysis in film has remained a topic of little attention in the academia due to the subjective nature of colours. Similarly, the action genre has often been ignored in genre studies because of its negative reputation as a 'simplistic' popular culture genre. Combining these two strands, however, reveals an even bigger gap in film studies: there has been almost no studies on colour usage in the action genre. This thesis therefore hopes to contribute to this gap.

Central concepts in this thesis for colour analysis in film are optical colour and surface colour. They are each other's opposites – while optical colour refers to colour brought in by coloured lights, surface colour refers to the physical colours of objects. Central concepts for genre studies, on the other hand, are the action genre and visual excess. The action genre has proved difficult to define, but a simplified definition can be achieved by combining the prevalence of action/violence with the genre's visual excessiveness. Visual excess refers to the action genre's tendency to show grand and purposefully excessive visuals on screen.

Keywords: Optical colour, surface colour, film genre, the action genre, woman-led action film, visual excess.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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## 1. Introduction – Blasts of Colour in the Dark

The year 2021 saw sudden explosions of colour on screen when *Kate* (2021) and *Gunpowder Milkshake* (2021) entered the action genre market through Netflix. These two films with women leads received mixed reviews, *Kate* gaining a 46% critic score and a 51% audience score on RottenTomatoes.com, while *Gunpowder Milkshake* fared slightly better with a 60% critic score and a 48% audience score. Meanwhile, the staple of the action genre, *John Wick: Chapter 1* (2014), with its iconic assassin lead and still continuing series, has survived the test of time and sports a whopping 86% critic score and an 81% audience score. While the audiences and critics alike seem to have spoken, dooming *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* into the void of mediocrity, these films have something more interesting happening in them than just plain action, something that is remarkably similar to *John Wick: Chapter 1*. All three films have unexpected splashes of colour in them. Though the action genre is typically considered colourless, or at least low key and consistently dark, these three films use bright and vibrant optical colours, and, in the case of *Gunpowder Milkshake*, surface colours as well. While the genre staple *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses bright colour only sporadically, and while *Gunpowder Milkshake* never has a colourless scene, all the films show to share a logic in their colour usage. In this thesis I study the use of colour in the action genre through these three films to see how colour is used and why in a genre that has been typically colourless.

Combining film colour analysis and action genre studies has not been a popular topic in scholarly research. In fact, neither topic has suffered from popularity on their own, either: In the early 2020s, the study of the action genre and the study of colour in film still form two gaps in the film studies field among the other unpopular topics.

That is not to say no thought has gone into the topics. The action genre studies of the 2010s and 2020s have been varied in topics and have formed several anthologies of essays. The topics have focused on representation<sup>1</sup>, the visual aesthetics of the genre (whether it be through the aesthetics of the action scenes and violence,<sup>2</sup> or through other visuals),<sup>3</sup> the technical development of the genre,<sup>4</sup> and its historical development.<sup>5</sup> However, the issue with having the studies divided into varied topics and fields is that the action genre studies has never formed into a comprehensive framework or basis for studying the genre in general. Furthermore, there seems to be little consensus in even how to define the genre of action.

The same is true of colour in film: colour has been studied sporadically in specific film topics, and beyond a quite comprehensive history on the technical developments of film colour, colour analysis has no comprehensive framework in film studies. The focus has been divided into film colour's "microhistories" on "individual aspects of color": "technological histories, aesthetic histories, anecdotal histories [...], didactic histories [...], period-specific histories, country-specific histories, process-specific histories" and so forth (Misek 1). It is easy to find, for example, numerous texts on colour in silent films,<sup>6</sup> as well as on colour in other

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lisa Purse's chapters "Action Women" "Action Men", "Race in the Action Film", and "Homosexuality in the Action Film" in her book *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011), as well as James Kendrick's *A Companion to the Action Film* (2019) that also tackles the political and social issues of the genre.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Action Aesthetics: Realism and Martial Arts" by Kyle Barrowman and "Killing in Equanimity: Theorizing *John Wick*'s Action Aesthetics" by Wayne Wong.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "The Perpetual Motion Aesthetics of Action Cinema" by Nick Jones.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Drone Age Cinema* (2016) by Steen Ledet Christiansen.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "A Genre of Its Own: From Westerns, to Vigilantes, to Pure Action" by James Kendrick and "Origins of the Action Film: Types, Tropes, and Techniques in Early Film History" by Kyle Barrowman.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *The Colour Fantastic : Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema* (2018) by Giovanna Fossati, *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* (2019) by Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe, and "Introduction: Early Colour" by Kim Tomadjoglou).

specific film areas such as British cinema,<sup>7</sup> or even Chinese black-and-white cinema.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, there have been interdisciplinary studies on film colour.<sup>9</sup> A possible reason for academics steering clear of colour beyond descriptive historical analysis is that colour in itself, and how it is perceived visually, is highly subjective and therefore, so are the argumentative analyses made of it. A subject of analysis that rejects universalisations is not often seen as very fruitful.

Yet the most distinct gap in film studies reveals itself when we combine film colour analysis and action genre studies: there are no studies on only colour in the action genre. Colour would situate itself in the genre aesthetics, yet existing analyses on aesthetics have paid little attention to it. Beyond brief side-note references to colour when discussing other aesthetics-related topics, the action genre is treated as if it was completely colourless, and this is why I want to contribute to this gap: the action genre is not colourless.

I chose *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* for analysis because they are among the most colourful action films to be released in the 2020s. Yet because they are so colourful, and also because have women as leads (which is still unfortunately rare for action films), the analysis requires a comparison point which is more akin to the norm of the convention-following action genre. *John Wick: Chapter 1* was chosen for this role, because it is as relevant to the genre currently as *Die Hard* was in the 1990s, and because among its dark colour scheme it also presents sporadic uses of colour which challenge the genre's colour norms at points. I will therefore contrast and compare the colour usage of *John Wick: Chapter 1*, *Kate*, and *Gunpowder Milkshake*.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *British Colour Cinema: Practices and Theories* (2013) by Simon Brown et. al..

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, "Discoloured Vestiges of History: Black and White in the Age of Colour Cinema" by Jie Li.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Tracking Color in Cinema and Art: Philosophy and Aesthetics* (2017) by Edward Branigan.

This comparison is done through theory that combines the two aforementioned topics from film studies: action genre studies and film colour analysis. I begin more generally with film genre studies, considering what genre in film actually is, before turning my focus on how to define the action genre. Finally, I also examine the effect women leads have on the action genre so as to understand how *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* differ from *John Wick: Chapter 1* on the basis of the protagonists' gender alone. On the side of colour analysis, I first consider ideas on colour more generally, with a focus on cultural impact and on what colour is, before turning to colour in film and how it has been analysed in the past. Finally, I discuss the only research I found that studies both colour and the action genre in combination, though even in this case action was not the sole genre of the research.

With the provided frameworks of action genre studies and film colour analysis, I turn towards the chosen films. The order for analysis has *John Wick: Chapter 1* first, followed by *Kate*, and *Gunpowder Milkshake* as the last. This order was chosen on the basis of the colour usage in the films as well as how influential *John Wick: Chapter 1* has been on the genre in the almost ten years since its release. *John Wick: Chapter 1* proved to be the least colourful of the films, which is not surprising considering what the action genre is like generally and how typical the film is in that regard, yet the film also proved to have a distinct logic when it uses colour. The second film, *Kate*, is more colourful than *John Wick: Chapter 1*, but not as colourful as *Gunpowder Milkshake*. Like *John Wick: Chapter 1*, *Kate* relies strongly on optical colour and also has a distinct logic for its colour use, but the colour use is also at points non-diegetic, unlike *John Wick: Chapter 1*. The final film, *Gunpowder Milkshake*, is the most colourful of the three, and it uses optical colour as well as also surface colour unlike any of the other films. When compared to *John Wick: Chapter 1*



and *Kate*, *Gunpowder Milkshake* is different in that it has several logic systems for the colour use taking place at once. Whereas *Gunpowder Milkshake* and *Kate* have not yet received any scholarly attention, because they are still relatively new, *John Wick: Chapter 1* and the rest of its film franchise have received a lot of interest from scholars. Such sources include articles such as Rebecca Feasey's "From *The One* to *John Wick*: Keanu Reeves and the Action Genre" which focuses on Keanu Reeves's role as an action star, as well as a very recent anthology by Stephen and Caitlin Watt that compiles several articles together, titled *The Worlds of John Wick: The Year's Work at the Continental Hotel* (2022). The articles in the anthology discuss the films from various fields, such as architecture, economics, gender, philosophy, and so forth. Nevertheless, despite these works, even those discussing the aesthetics and identity issues of the films, none have studied specifically colour in the *John Wick* franchise. The colour analysis of all three films, therefore, tread new ground in the field of colour analysis in the action genre.

I argue that *John Wick: Chapter 1*, *Kate*, and *Gunpowder Milkshake* use colour in a distinct and logical way, which does not merely play into the genre's tendency of visual excessiveness because the colours are central to the constructions of the worlds and the characters of the films, but instead the colours are used as challenge to the genre norms in the case of *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* whereas *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses colours in a way that does not break genre-norms. My argument is three-fold: *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses colour to separate the everyday from the criminal in both the location (New York City) and its protagonist (John Wick). In this film, the colourless 'everyday' and the colourful criminality co-exist. Second, *Kate* uses colour to transform its location (Tokyo) and its characters (Kate and Ani) from everyday stereotypes into Japanese culture inspired, more contemporary versions of

themselves. The colourful therefore replaces the colourless. Finally, *Gunpowder Milkshake* is a thoroughly colourful film from beginning to end, and the colours are used to highlight the unreality of the location (an unnamed metropolis) and to signal character relationships, roles, and choices rather than change. The colourful, in this film, does not have to replace the colourless or co-exist with it; the colourless never exists. These three films, therefore, show three different ways colour can be used in the action genre that progresses from the typical colour scheme where the use of colours does not present a challenge to the genre (*John Wick: Chapter 1*), to moderately genre-challenging (*Kate*), to a complete diversion from genre colour norms (*Gunpowder Milkshake*). The use of colour is therefore tied to the new direction taken by women-led action films whereas the masculine, genre-normative action film tries colour only to reject it in the end to not challenge the genre.

## 2. Theory – Action, and Colour, but No Colour in Action

To discuss colour in an action genre film, we must first understand what is meant by the action genre and by colour analysis in film. This section is therefore dedicated to theory on the subject, discussing genre first, with separate sections for the action genre, and for women in the action genre, and secondly discussing colour, with sections for colour in a cultural sense, colour in film analysis, and colour specifically in the action genre. The term film genre is complex and multi-layered, and action genre similarly proves to be difficult to define comprehensively, but by combining the visual excessiveness of the genre with the prevalence of action sequences we close upon a working, simplified definition. Understanding the genre also relies heavily on knowing the conventions of its predecessor genres: the western and *film noir*. Furthermore, when women star in the action genre, the genre itself is challenged, since women working within a masculine genre and against gender stereotypes requires the use of containment strategies to limit the women. At the same time, the action woman proves to be a very specific type of woman. Meanwhile, colour in film remains a subject of little study, with issues such as the chromophobia of the Western culture and the subjectivity of colour analysis limiting interest. This ignorance of the topic becomes extreme when considering colour in the action genre. Colour in the action genre appears to be characterised by a tense relationship, or at times by a tense contrast, between the masculine and dark colour scheme so typical of the genre and its visual excessiveness. It causes colour to become more visible when combined with other elements that already challenge the genre conventions, such as women leads, and more subdued when presented in strictly genre-normative action films.

First it is important to specify what is meant by a genre film and film genre in academics. In a very simple sense, “genre movies are those commercial feature films that, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations” (Grant xvii). Genre films are purposefully similar and recognisable as part of the genre, although they are often criticized for their similarity to each other. Leger Grindon, on the other hand, describes film genre, meaning the basis of what genre films are built of, as “a flexible story formula based upon a body of conventions intuitively shared by the audience and the filmmakers” (46). The flexibility of the formula and the collection of conventions can account for the differences between films within a single genre, yet the idea that the formula and the conventions are ‘intuitively’ known by all participants seems problematic – it does not account that genre formation is a continuous process where conventions and plot structures change. Instead, it seems to suggest that genres are categories that are ‘out there’ and that a viewer would be able to understand the conventions of a particular genre without ever having seen another film of the same genre. A simple understanding of genre in film does not work.

Genre in film is, in fact, an immensely complicated term, as Rick Altman describes it as “a complex concept with multiple meanings” (14). He recognises four meanings for genre in film (genre as blueprint, as structure, as label, and as contract), out of which genre as structure is the one of interest here. Genre as structure refers to genre “as the formal framework on which individual films are founded” (14), and this is of interest here, since I study how the films fit into the action genre framework, or how they defy it. Altman notes that “film genres are by definition [...] industrially certified and publicly shared” (16), which works as the basis for the framework, yet the construction of the genre framework is by no means unproblematic. As Altman

points out, “film genre theorists have preferred to trace a direct path from industrial origins to generalized audience acceptance of generic existence, description and terminology” (15), which means that theorists tend to un-problematise the process of how genres are formed. It is important to acknowledge that a genre never stops changing. A genre’s “constitution process” does not stop when it first is recognised (Altman 77), but instead continues in a similar cycle from which it was formed.

What also defies the simplified understanding of genre is that none of the films in this thesis are ‘pure’ action genre representations, but instead they all represent multiple genres combined: *Kate* and *John Wick: Chapter 1* are action *thrillers* while *Gunpowder Milkshake* is an action *comedy*. Genre theory, however, does not want to account this fact. Despite the prevalence of genre mixes, “genre studies have too great a stake in generic purity to pay overmuch attention to history” (Altman 16) – genre theory requires films to be recognised clearly as a single genre only to make a valid study of the genre instead of acknowledging the complicated history of the genres themselves. Therefore, to categorise the films to a single genre, the so-called ‘dominant genre’ must be recognized, because “mixed genres are usually classified according to a ‘dominant’ genre” (Altman 126). The dominant genre of the films in this case is action, and out of the films *John Wick: Chapter 1* is the most genre-accurate or norm-following action genre representative, while *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* challenge the genre framework more overtly. However, there is further layer to this three-film compilation and genre, and that is subgenre. The choice of subgenre helps to manage the diversity of the action genre, as Altman says that “[a] method of assuring genres that are neat, manageable and stable is simply to subdivide broad genres into smaller units” (17). Since *John Wick: Chapter 1* is considered at the most typical action film here, the chosen subgenre came to be that of *John Wick*’s: the

assassin film. Very generally put, I consider assassin films to be those action films where the protagonist is an assassin and where the plot revolves around their professions, and as such, both *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* have as their protagonists assassins, namely Kate and Sam.

### **Nothing Beyond the Visual? – Defining the Action Genre**

After considering the definition of genre in film, and how problematic it can be, I turn my attention to the specific genre of action in film. As we will see, the action genre has been a disregarded subject for much of theory, and its accurate definition is difficult to pinpoint due to the genre's vast variety in visuals, settings, topics, and so forth.

The action genre has not suffered from popularity in academic discourse, and, instead, it has been generally neglected from study. That is not to say there have been no studies of the genre – there have been studies on the genre's identity politics and representation issues, as well as the genre's history – but overarching studies of the genre are missing, and some topics are completely unstudied. This is due to the genre's negative image in the academic and art circles. Yvonne Tasker recognizes the action genre as “quintessentially popular cinema, generic in the least acceptable sense (simplistic, conservative), and thus outside the aesthetic discourses of value that have developed around Hollywood Cinema” (*Hollywood Action* 45, brackets original). Similarly James Kendrick observes that action is “considered a ‘low culture’ genre” that “appeals to the lowest common denominator of the mass audience” (8). Even further, Kyle Barrowman notes that the action genre is considered to belong to the “realm of ‘mindless entertainment’” instead of “‘serious art’” (11). It is no wonder that with such a low opinion being held of the genre, studying it is often not seen as

worthwhile. Yet, the problem of upholding the low-brow belief is that it does not help anyone understand the genre or its nuances.

First, we must understand how the action genre formed. Compared to more historical genres, “[t]he modern action film is a relatively new development, having taken shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Kendrick 3). Eric Lichtenfeld argues that the action genre formed from combining some of the conventions of the western with some of the conventions of *film noir*, eventually “[reconciling] two genres that would otherwise seem starkly opposed to each other” (xv) into a single, new genre. Likewise, Kendrick acknowledges the genre’s roots in the western, but also crime films beyond mere *film noir* since it “[fuses] the moral landscape of the Western with the urban settings of crime thrillers and police procedurals” (3). *Film noir*’s own basis was the “popular hard-boiled crime fiction that was written [...] for the masses” (Landau, Ch. 12), and thus the urban landscape of *film noir* is the same city of the hard-boiled crime fiction. This city of *film noir* can be characterised as such: “the overwhelming majority [of *noir* films] are set in major cities where the pressures and angst of modern life and the sense of alienation, paranoia, and violence are intensified” (Spicer “The City” 45). The city is presented through “the dark, wet nighttime streets that glisten with reflected neon lights” (Spicer “The City” 45), and it is this kind of city that we will meet later in *John Wick: Chapter 1*, for example.

The action genre still has visible roots in the western and *film noir* because of the consistent visual and thematic references back to those genres, references such as the city. Meanwhile, both the western and *film noir* have become more or less historical genres. Something can be said about the ability to change: the western and *film noir* appear quite consistent as genres (visually, thematically, in plot), while the action genre is more prone to changes, as Lichtenfeld notes: “The [action] genre

comprises different trends. As a synthesis of other genres, it has certain and few tropes one can point to as being consistent throughout its evolution” (xviii). This, of course, affects how the action genre can be defined because the definition has to recognise the prevalence of trends.

It is due to these trends that the action genre remains exceedingly difficult to define accurately. The genre “has no clear and consistent iconography or setting” (Tasker, *Hollywood Action 2*), and as it is, “[action] can be comic, graphically violent, fantastic, apocalyptic, military, conspiratorial and even romantic” (Tasker, *Hollywood Action 2*). There is no specific place, like the frontier of the westerns, nor a specific character, like the detectives of *film noirs*, which can be used to differentiate action films from other genres. Yet the genre does have one consistent feature that is even in its name: Action.

Lichtenfeld offers a very general summary of the genre through the convention of action: “The films showcase scenes of physical action, be they fistfights, gunfights, swordfights, fights against nature, risky escapes, and so on” (xviii). Likewise, Kendrick argues that “[a]ction is not a characteristic, but *the* characteristic” of the genre (2, italics original). Yet summarizing the genre only through action leads to an interpretation that is too general and wide. Lichtenfeld similarly recognizes the problem: the inability to separate the action genre from other films and genres (xviii). To correct his summary, Lichtenfeld offers a definition for the action genre film he calls the “action film formula” (17) which he bases on the action genre archetype *Dirty Harry* (1971). Yet it proves equally problematic, because it is suited well only for the action style of the 1970s. Within the action film formula, the only universal action convention proves to be, yet again, the violent encounter which is “the film’s (and the genre’s) most persistent and defining structural feature” (Lichtenfeld 18,



brackets original). Vincent M Gainé, however, importantly argues that mere violence is not enough as a qualification, but that “the characters must also resist the violence inflicted upon them” (291). Thus, it is not enough to have violence inflicted upon the protagonist, but they have to resist, because without resistance continuous violence is more a representation of BDSM than action. Thus we can agree that one characteristic for defining the action genre is violence/action that the protagonist resists.

Yet the genre is not only violent – it is a violent visual spectacle. Lichtenfeld recognizes another consistent convention in the genre to be its “visual excessiveness”, whether it be visual effects or the physicality of the protagonist (163). The visual excessiveness is also what Steen Ledet Christiansen argues for as the central building block of action, except he coins its current state “a full frontal sensory assault” that results from “the immensity of audiovisual spectacles” that overwhelm the viewers (Ch. 6). With these two conventions, we can draw a simplified definition of the action genre as comprising of films with consistent, and resisted, violent encounters combined with overarching visual excess.

With knowledge of the genre’s origins and with a general understanding of what the action genre is, we can turn towards the genre’s more recent history to understand how the action genre has changed in last few decades. Lisa Purse argues that “contemporary action cinema [of the late 2000s] displays a self-conscious knowingness that proceeds from the popularisation of irony as a postmodern media practice” (7). The action genre of the 2020s seems to have taken two simultaneous but contrasting directions to this irony: on one hand, films such as *Gunpowder Milkshake* purposefully make fun of the genre and rely on irony, while on the other hand, films such *John Wick: Chapter 1* are serious in tone and mood. The current genre seems to be able to maintain both strategies without preferring either. The

action genre has overall remained prevalent through the decades because of its theme of empowerment. Purse argues that because action films are empowerment stories, “their appeal rests at the base of the nature of everyday human existence” (45). But because human existence is not limited to men, women’s empowerment is of equal importance, and this has begun to be reflected in the action cinema as well. Films like *Gunpowder Milkshake* and *Kate* irony the action genre to show how ridiculous the genre-normative masculine action genre is while at the same time they empower the women of the film to offer an alternative for the empowerment stories usually depicted by the genre: women can also be strong action protagonists. The genre, therefore, is going into two directions with empowerment: the empowerment of action men in serious, masculine films, and the empowerment of action women in more ironic and self-reflexive films.

### **That One Kind of Woman – The Limited Representation of the Action Woman**

Women’s empowerment in action is not unproblematic, however. What Purse importantly observes is that the action genre overall is a very masculine genre:

[A]ction cinema is traditionally masculinist, heavily invested in reinforcing dominant constructions of masculinity as active, physically strong, rational and powerful, values which, as we have seen, are predominantly embodied in the figure of the white heterosexual male. (133)

This has not changed much over the years. *John Wick: Chapter 1*, as the nucleus of the genre in the late 2010s and early 2020s, is visibly masculine in its visuals and its namesake hero is a typical serious, white, straight male.

Despite its masculine nature, there are women in the action genre. It is, thus, important to see what the representation of the genre’s women is like to understand

how placing women at the centre of the genre challenges the genre norms and how their role is negotiated in the usually man-centric genre. Women as protagonists in action films are unfortunately not common even in the 2020s. There certainly have been women in action cinema and some actresses have claimed fame from it, such as Angelina Jolie in the 2000s with the *Tomb Raider* series (2001-2003), *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), *Wanted* (2008), and *Salt* (2010). Nevertheless, it is not surprising that Purse recognises women being “interlopers-in-action” because of the double standard afforded by gender in the genre (76).

One of the reasons why women are treated differently in the genre is because, as Neal King and Martha McCaughey explain, when a woman commits a violent act on screen, “somebody will imply that such action, because done by a woman, falls below standards of human decency” (2). They offer two explanations to this: first, because we see women commit much less violence on screen than men, and second, because “cultural standards still equate womanhood with kindness and nonviolence” (2). In addition, some consider “violent-woman movies [...] uselessly unrealistic” (King and McCaughey 12). Carol M. Dole similarly indicates that because there is a “clash between generic expectations and gender assumptions, Hollywood has had trouble creating an action heroine with universal appeal” (79), but that the most successful attempts “emphasized their hero’s resourcefulness and courage, rather than [...] physical dominance” (102). Therefore, women are held to a much higher standard of realism in action than men, as well as being viewed through a stereotyped lens.

To challenge the stereotyped image of women, women initially entered the action genre in the 1980s and early 1990s with the so-called “warrior women [...] who foregrounded their bodily exertions and their physically capable bodies” (Purse

77). It is not surprising that the early women of action were masculine because they followed the pre-existing, masculine conventions of the genre. Yet even with time women struggle to fit in, as Purse argues that “women are somehow out of place in action cinema, outside the binary constructions of gendered behaviour, able to proceed only under special conditions” (77). The 1990s did introduce “more conventionally feminine-looking, less muscular, but no less serious, action women” (Purse 78), and this trend has survived alongside the more masculine women, but it has its own issues – whereas the warrior women were deemed too masculine, the feminine action women might seem immediately less believable because of their often petite physique. Furthermore, women still enter the action genre with special conditions in place. Purse argues that “in the action film the relationship of the hero’s feats to real-world laws of physics and physiology runs along a continuum between highly naturalistic and radically non-naturalistic” in a “credibility continuum” (79), and that women are usually “at the non-naturalistic end of this continuum” where their feats are emphasised as fantastical (79-80). In this sense, for example, the impossible leaps of Beatrix Kiddo in the *Kill Bill* franchise remind us that she is not real.

Likewise, comedy is another way to emphasise the non-naturality of the hero. “[P]lacing the female action hero within a comic frame allows the film and the viewer the freedom to position her acts as implausible elements” (Purse 80). Considering this, the fact that Sam in *Gunpowder Milkshake* has a sarcastic sense of humour that is prevalent throughout the film seems to be a way to make it easier for the audience to believe she is able to kill dozens of men at a time. Yvonne Tasker also argues more generally that “the broad move to a lighter tone in American action movies has allowed a space for female characters to take on more central action roles” (*Working*

*Girls* 73). Placing “powerful women in an explicitly comical and/or fantastical setting” is a way to distance the “culturally disturbing possibility of female agency and physical power” from the everyday (Purse 80-1). The special limiting strategies for women, aka. the non-naturalistic action and comedy, are what Purse calls “containment strategies” (81), which also include the strategy of “a [woman’s] movement into, or a return to, the heterosexual couple, to marriage, or to the family unit (or all three)” (Purse 84, brackets original). Women’s entry into the action genre is by no means simple and unproblematic.

Yet the women allowed into the action genre, however, are not just any women. They are very much artificial as are the masculine white, straight male leads. Action women are “predominantly white, heterosexual, sexualised, affluent, normatively feminine and usually contained [...] within a heterosexual union or family unit” (Purse 85). They are the “sanitised versions of female physicality, the biological and psychological realities of physical exertion, stress and violence elided” (Purse 85). With the theme of empowerment so consistent in action, the women of action described above are “the ‘acceptable face’ of female empowerment” in a postfeminist Western culture (Purse 85). It is therefore not surprising that the protagonists of *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* are white and thin, conventionally beautiful, and able-bodied, with thematic interest in family (Sam has a troubled relationship with her mother while Kate wants a family of her own). Whatever genre-challenge they provide, their physical and thematical selves are nevertheless limited to what the genre allows the leading women to be at this time. Unfortunately, even when women are allowed to partake in the action genre, it is limited to a very specific type of woman.

## **Colourless Culture, Colourless Action – The Struggle with Colour**

Now that we have a better understanding of the action genre, we can turn towards colour, both how it is perceived in general and what it is as a film studies topic. Brian Price notes that “unlike the major areas of investigation within film studies [...], color remains an area of inquiry significantly less well heeled” (1). This is partly because colour analysis is very subjective, which is caused by “the uniquely sensuous nature of color, whose elusiveness makes it difficult to name, gauge, and analyse chromatic phenomena” (Brinckmann, “Preface” 7). It is not only a matter of the “radical subjectivity of color vision” (Price 5), but also a matter of the “problem of color naming” (Price 5) because even agreeing on colour names is a matter of conflict. Colour is not only subjective in regard to the ability to see, but it also necessarily “demands an especial attention to cultural specificity” (Price 5) because culture affects how we see and understand colour. Edward Branigan similarly notes that “color, in fact, is pre-eminently a cultural phenomenon” (170). Even further, if we were able to agree on all the previous subjects, “we may not be able to agree on what the color is meant to signify” (Price 5). The major problem of colour analysis, indeed, is trying to choose one subjective interpretation over another when every question is difficult to agree on: “How can we agree on anything like an intersubjectively verifiable interpretation if we cannot agree on a particular connotation of color?” (Price 129). Colour is, therefore, a difficult subject for analysis since it is individually and culturally subjective and since there is no agreement to be reached in most terms.

Yet some theorists do discuss colour despite the difficulties, but they tend to either describe colour’s past as an overall view<sup>10</sup> or, in the case of film studies,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* by John Gage.

colour's history in film<sup>11</sup>. They are more descriptive than analytical approaches, and can more easily produce universalizable conclusions than if one compares subjective readings of specific colour uses. This, however, does not help film analysis tackle the issues of colour analysis – if there is an aversion towards discussing and comparing subjective readings, the overall theory base cannot develop beyond describing history and how colour is technically made in film.

Colour analysis in film is rare, yet the academic circles tend to forget how central colour is in film. It is important to challenge the aversion of studying colour when one considers how much work and design go into colour in a film:

Colour is not simply a choice a filmmaker makes at the level of film stock; rather, having selected color [instead of black-and-white] [...], color becomes a constructive element of the mise-en-scène, one that works alongside of lighting, sound, performance, camera movement, framing, and editing. Color is thus no incidental characteristic of film stock; it is an element carefully considered by set designers, cinematographers, and directors, all of whom must remain sensitive to the way in which color can create meaning, mood, sensation, or perceptual clues. (Price 2)

Colour is, therefore, an integral part of not only the mise-en-scène and the finished product, but also the film-making process. It is part of the process at every level and that is why it simply cannot be ignored in film analysis, no matter how subjective the readings eventually are. Simple description is not enough to account for colour as a whole in film – it has to be searched for meaning.

Yet, as was stated earlier, reading colour is a cultural activity, not merely subjective. Then, to be able to read colour in this, or any, work, we must understand

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Colour* by Richard Misak.

how the Western culture treats colour and therefore unavoidably affects the reading. David Batchelor critiques the Western use of colour as he argues “that colour has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture” (12). To quote Batchelor at length, this is how Western’s cultures “chromophobia”, aka. the fear of colour, works:

Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. More specifically: this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. (12-3)

To read colour in film when coming from such a colour-averse cultural basis is not unproblematic – it has necessarily affected most of Western academia. Yet there is no way around this issue beyond acknowledging that there is a cultural bias towards rejecting colours’ value. Seeing colour as foreign and superficial is common, and this is another factor, in addition to subjectivity, which deters academics from doing colour analysis.

To turn to the issue of analysing colour in film, I find it important that Batchelor argues “colour has always meant the less-than-true and the not-quite real” (25). He refers to the “ambiguity of make-up”, how it can “confuse, cast doubt, mask or manipulate; [...] produce illusions or deceptions” (25). Film colour is designed to create a certain kind of reality, to deceive the audience, and in that regard it is purposefully deceptive and artificial. In the current cinema we never see the colours that were originally filmed, because colour is edited and changed multiple times over



during the process of film-creation. Yet we can push the argument of illusion further: film is, in fact, just colour and sound, because as Batchelor poignantly says, “behind the dancing coloured light, there is just another flat screen, a monochrome-in-the-world of which we are reminded at the beginning and end of every movie” (29).

Films are seen in a dark room, on a white flat surface, and the film itself is just a mass of ‘dancing coloured light’ with audio.

From ‘dancing coloured light’ to more concrete colour analysis, when analysing colour it is essential to remember how contextual colour analysis is in addition to being subjective. Theo Van Leeuwen contends that “the same colour can express many different meanings and the same meaning can be expressed by many different colours” (15), so there is no simple technical way to decode colour, not in films nor in general. As it is, “the perceivable, material characteristics of colour have to be interpreted for their meaning potential – that is, for their *possible* meanings, rather than their actual meanings, because the latter can only be determined in context” (Van Leeuwen 57, italics original). Colour, therefore, must always be analysed in context, and not only in the context of one colour in the film, but also in the context of the other colours present in the film as well, because “colours rarely come to us in isolation” (Van Leeuwen 57). Branigan poignantly notes that “color is capable of connecting to various points in a text and helping to make patterns” (178). The meaning potentials of colours “will only be narrowed down, made more specific, in specific cultural and situational contexts” (Van Leeuwen 28). Overall, this is why my analysis of specific colour meanings in specific films cannot be universalized – they are strongly contextual.

In the context of my analysis, there are two important colour term pairings: optical colour – surface colour and modulated colour – flat colour. The difference

between “optical color (color as light) and surface color (color as pigments)” (Misek, 23, brackets original) in film is that surface colours are a matter of the physical sets, character clothing, etc., while optical colour is the colour that is brought in by light, such as artificial lights (neon lights, lamps, etc.) or natural lights (sun or moon light, etc.). Both *John Wick: Chapter 1* and *Kate* rely on optical colour, especially neon lights, while *Gunpowder Milkshake* uses both surface and optical colour, but with an emphasis on surface colours. At the same time, modulated and flat colours exist in a scale, instead of a contrast, “that runs from fully modulated colour [...] richly textured with different tints and shades [...] to flat colour, as in comic strips” (Van Leeuwen 64). The films I analyse can be placed onto this scale: *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses the most modulated colours, *Kate* is in the middle with both modulated and flat colours, and *Gunpowder Milkshake* has a distinct reliance on flat, bright colours.

The colours of the films also tend to be diegetic, meaning there is a reason for the colour to exist in the film’s world. Generally cinema is against non-diegetic optical colour “[b]ecause colored light draws attention to itself and thus to its source” (Misek 164) and that is why “in any form of moving imagery that has not entirely abandoned its reality effect [...] optical color still needs to be justified” (Misek 164). More generally, Van Leeuwen notes that in film as in many other fields, “important uses of colour [...] are still judged by naturalistic criteria of verisimilitude [...] rather than on the basis of what colour communicates” (22). So, even when playing with colour, the films tend to stick to a relatively natural and realistic colour schemes. Even the most dramatic experiments with colour in *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake*, for example, do not disturb the actresses’ features (such as skin or hair colour). Instead, experiments are left for clothing, décor, and lights.

However, even with this attempt to remain realistic and diegetic, there is something more cunning going on in film colour. There is, despite the common belief that photography and film copy the colours of reality exactly, in fact, “no one-to-one translation of natural color values, no mimetic reproduction of color” (Brinckmann, “Color as Likeness” 11-2). What this means is that even the most realistic colour schemes are artificial. There is no contemporary film where the colours accidentally correspond to reality because “even if the palette of a film seems rather authentic, it has often been created with great care and artifice” (Brinckmann, “Color as Likeness” 15). That is why *John Wick: Chapter 1*’s realistic colour scheme is as interesting as the more noticeable colour schemes of *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake*: all the colour schemes are artificial. Colour can, in fact, “adapt the image to the natural world [...] as realistically as possible; or it can doctor and alienate the image” (Brinckmann, “Tension of Colors” 66). While *John Wick: Chapter 1* plays towards the natural world, *Kate* and *Gunpowder Milkshake* present us with almost alien worlds through colour.

As was discussed earlier, colour analysis in film studies is still relatively rare with a focus on descriptive historical work. This rarity translated directly into a difficulty to find any real theory on the subject of colour in the action genre. In fact, there seem to be no academic work that focus solely on the action genre’s colours. However, there is a technical study on colour in five different film genres (romance, comedy, horror, science fiction, and action) conducted by Chen et. al. They successfully found different trends in the genres, with their main point stating:

[P]atterns of coloring could be divided into two groups—one comprised romance and comedy, and the other horror, sci-fi, and action. Colors in romance

and comedy tend to have higher contrast and brightness and are rich in red and yellow while in horror, sci-fi and action it is the reverse. (1)

The action genre, therefore, has a tendency to be low in contrast and brightness, as well as being low in red and yellow. The division of the five genres does not come as a surprise, since the colour schemes of comedy and romance seem, even to the casual viewer, starkly opposite to the more gritty and dark horror, science fiction, and action. Chen et. al. found particularly that “action movies get the lowest rank in contrast variations” (14), which does come as a surprise, because “[g]iven the quick pace and the often turbulent plots of this genre, one would expect action movies to be more dynamic in terms of contrast” (14). Yet it is also very possible that the action genre is, in general, low in contrast because action films are typically set during the night in grey cities. Chen et. al. also found that the most clearly “discriminating feature for classifying film genres” is the comparison of warm and cold colours. The distinction is between two groups: comedy and romance that are “rich in warm colours”, and action, science fiction, and horror that are “weak in warm colors” (12). More generally, “comedy and romance are high in contrast, and have bright warm colors. Sci-fi, action, and horror are low in contrast and have dark and cold colors” (16). Therefore, the central features of the action genre film in colour are that it is low in contrast and brightness, and that it prefers dark and cold colours instead of warm colours such as red and yellow.

As a conclusion, it is safe to say that colour in the action genre remains a subject of tension. While the genre overall relies on a masculine, dark and gritty colour scheme, it comes in direct contrast to the visual excess the genre is so well known for. It would seem that beyond grand explosions the size of the entire screen that so many action films repeat, nothing would ‘pop’ from the background when

everything is dark and lacks colour. At the same time, it is precisely because the genre rejects colour that when an action film uses colour, it pops even more strongly than any explosion. The genre, therefore, struggles with its self-set restrictions in colour to stay masculine and gritty and with its desire to be increasingly visually excessive. This is also why, when the genre presents films more deviated from the norm (such as films with women leads or films that combine action with comedy), the genre can ease up on its rejection of colour – it does not endanger the genre as a whole. Colour, therefore, appears in the action genre and becomes visible when combined with genre-challenging conventions. This is how gender and colour, for example, intersect in the action genre – a woman lead allows colour to be used more freely. Yet at the same time, the newly visible colour does not seem play for mere visual excess, as we will see in the following analysis chapters. Therefore, it is now time to look at the colour use of the three aforementioned action films, *John Wick: Chapter 1*, *Gunpowder Milkshake*, and *Kate*, to see what their colours do.

### 3. Criminal Blasts of Colour – *John Wick*'s Colour Associations

From at first glance it might seem that there is nothing about *John Wick: Chapter 1* (2014) to warrant analysis on its colour scheme – it is a very typical action genre representative down to its colours. Since the film prefers a more masculine colour scheme with dark tones of blacks and blues focused on the classic New York City silhouette and the iconic, suit-wearing protagonist, when colour does appear in the film it is more noticeable and even aggressive to the eye. The colours during those scenes are strong and vibrant optical colours brought on by bright lights that often flash. At the same time, the ‘masculine’ colour scheme is nuanced and has different sides in the film – the action genre’s typical colour scheme reveals to be not as simple as it might seem at first glance.

As the icon of the action genre in the 2010s and the 2020s, and a part of the ongoing *John Wick* film franchise, *John Wick: Chapter 1* is nevertheless a very typical action film as it does not overtly break genre conventions beyond the blips of colour. The film series has been “one of the most successful action franchises of the young twenty-first century”, because even in monetary terms “each of the first three films in the series earned nearly twice as much as its predecessor” (C. Watt & S. Watt 1). The film, as well as the franchise, have received increasing academic interest in varied topics.<sup>12</sup> The *John Wick* franchise is part of the currently popular “‘aging action star comeback’ subgenre” (C. Watt & S. Watt 2) because of its star, in addition the assassin action film subgenre. The first film of the franchise, *John Wick: Chapter 1* was directed by Chad Stahelski and David Leitch and stars Keanu Reeves as an

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<sup>12</sup> I am referring to the essay anthology *The Worlds of John Wick: The Year's Work at the Continental Hotel*, edited by Caitlin G Watt and Stephen Watt mentioned in the Introduction.

assassin called John Wick. In the film, John takes revenge on a Russian mobster's son Iosef (Alfie Allen) because he killed John's dog Daisy (Andy) that John had received as a gift from his deceased wife Helen (Bridget Moynahan). The revenge plot forged by John causes Iosef's father Viggo (Michael Nyqvist), the head of the Russian mob, to try to take out John to save his son, but John succeeds, after several failures, to kill both Iosef and Viggo. *John Wick: Chapter 1* is not drastically inventive with neither the plot nor the protagonist. John Wick as a character is a type of the action genre heroes popularised after the 1980s, the "more 'common men' heroes, played by 'legitimate' actors" (Lichtenfeld 119), and the plot is a run-of-the-mill revenge story.

Yet the film does show its colours eventually and reveals its more creative side. With its inventiveness with sudden colours, I claim that *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses different colour schemes to construct two sides to both New York City and the protagonist John. The city and John both have two distinct colour schemes: the city is either dark and almost colourless, or dark and brightly colourful, while John and his world are either light and colourless, or dark and colourless. These colour schemes differentiate between the everyday and the criminal which is central to a film that claims there is a hidden world of assassins in the middle of New York City. First I will analyse the New York City of the film to show how the two colour schemes connect to the everyday and the criminal. Second, I will analyse how John Wick as a character has similarly two colour schemes and that the criminal life of the city is infringing on John's life with its colours. Finally, I argue that John's empowerment at the end half of the film is the cause behind the colour scheme of the film changing to a constant darkness, since John becomes victorious over the other criminal world of New York City.

## **The Two-Sided City – Colourless and Colourful New York City**

The main location of *John Wick: Chapter 1* is New York City, as it is central to the plot and hosts the criminal underworld of the film world, although some parts of John's story do take place in his New Jersey home. The film is aiming for a quite realistic New York City at first glance with its reliance on panoramic shots of the night-time city skyline and its consistent use of diegetic and realistic colours. The colours are not edited to appear different than they would in real life – only the darkness is made slightly darker. The film focuses on the upper class side of New York City as well as its industrial side, featuring both expensive apartments and hotels, and construction sites and loading docks in its plot-central locations. The buildings that are brought into focus, such as the Beaver building that doubles as the Continental hotel in the film world, are architecturally neoclassical and classical. What are missing from the city is the commercial side of the city with Times Square, the more postmodern architecture which would contrast with the classic buildings of the film (such as the Lipstick Building, the Westin Hotel, or 8 Spruce Street) and, most notably, the crowds and busy streets. The typical New York City of the film is void of both people and colour. However, this is only one side of the city. *John Wick: Chapter 1* uses colour to differentiate the criminal locations in the city from the everyday aesthetic. Both sides of the city rely on night and city lights, but the criminal locations sport bright optical colours.

The everyday New York City is made up of the luminescent white and yellow colours of the windows covering the massive skyscrapers. The skyscrapers dominate the many panning shots of the city that are filmed during the night, which makes the windows cover most of the screen during these pans. Though these optical colours are proportionally small compared to the screen, most of the screen is covered in the



night time darkness which turns the tiny windows into the salient colours on screen. These windows reveal the city that would otherwise be lost in the dark of night. They also reveal the life in the city that is missing from the streets. From the thousands of lit windows in every panoramic shot we can see there is a lot of life in the city. It creates a disconnect between the everyday and the criminal in the film: the everyday people are home for the night while the criminals such as John adventure on empty streets. This is also why the film relies on multiple shot of the sun setting behind the city skyline – the film is focused on the criminal side of life and for them the sun setting is the beginning of the day. This can be seen, for example, when John arrives to the city to take revenge over his dog Daisy’s death. He is drives into the city across a bridge, with the sun starting to go down, and while driving between the buildings on the streets of the city, John crosses from sunny streets to the dark streets shadowed by the skyscrapers. When he arrives at the Continental Hotel to plan his revenge minutes later, the sky has turned grey and the sun is gone, and when he later leaves the hotel to start his plan, it is already night. Sunlight, on the other hand, spoils the criminal plans. First, John fails to kill his dog’s murderer Iosef in the bright sunshine of a warehouse yard, but manages it easily in the darkness of the warehouse itself. Later, when faced with Iosef’s father Viggo, John quickly loses a fight against him in a construction yard in bright daylight only to easily defeat him at the end of the film during a midnight thunder storm. The night-time darkness is requirement for successful crime in *John Wick: Chapter 1*.

The dark city present in the film is a convention strongly connected to the action genre’s ancestor *film noir*, as was discussed earlier. Connecting to the idea of the everyday side of New York City is the trend of “postwar realism” *film noir* used, where scenes were actually filmed on the streets instead of sets (Schrader 268) – in a

similar manner, the film here embraces the actual locations of New York City, instead of just sets, and we can see John move in the city streets. The film's New York City fits with the *noir* conventions of "the dark, wet nighttime streets" (Spicer "The City" 45) as well when the rain begins at the end of the film, and also how *noir*'s "majority of scenes are lit for night" (Schrader 271) as are the city scenes in the film. The city in *John Wick: Chapter 1* is, in fact, so prevalently dark that it seems to devour both characters and action. In one shot, the mobster Viggo is visually lost in a building behind him because the building is dark and Viggo is dressed in black, while in another shot, John is overshadowed by a huge bridge column so much so that he seems like an action figurine rather than a grown man. When people escape the Red Circle club after John has a gunfight with the security, the people quickly disappear into the night, devoured by the darkness. The darkness makes it difficult to separate the city from the criminals and vice versa, which is something John uses for his advantage as we will see later on. *John Wick: Chapter 1* is, thus, embracing the *film noir* style in presenting its version of New York City, especially through the dark.

Only closer shots reveal the strange colours that cover parts of the city, and these are where the film most noticeably steps away from *noir* to the current day. The strong and bright optical colours are used only in the locations used by criminals in the city. This contradiction between the dark everyday city and the colourful locations helps create the suspension of disbelief needed to believe that New York City hosts a hidden criminal underworld. The film uses optical colour to create alternative criminal spaces out of the old classical buildings by colouring them different. And because the colour is made by light, the criminal underworld is only visible in the night-time city, easily hidden with a flip of a switch.

The criminal locations of *John Wick: Chapter 1* lit with colour are the secret club in the Continental Hotel's basement (the 'Continental Club' from this point on), the Red Circle Club, the Orthodox Church, and the building under renovation. Continental Club is where John meets the owner of the hotel, Winston (Ian McShane) and asks where to find Iosef. Getting his information, at the Red Circle Club John chases Iosef through the building, but Iosef manages to escape, and John must fight to escape with his life from all the henchmen. At the Orthodox Church John aggravates Iosef's father Viggo by blowing up Viggo's secret money stash in the church's cellar to force Viggo to draw Iosef out of hiding. Finally, at the building under renovation, Viggo has captured John and is torturing him, but John escapes.

The Continental Club scene is the beginning of the colourful criminal underworld as the first truly colourful location. There is a stark contrast between the classically muted colours of the hotel itself and the drastically bright colours of the club. John arrives to the Club by walking across an almost black-and-white hallway and through a black door, only to be blasted with colour the moment he enters. The Club is lit by vibrant green and red lights that cover everything, including John as he moves from green to red and back to green. The scene follows John move through the Club, accompanied by the film's iconic theme music, until the camera stops to look at the jazz singer. This fades out the non-diegetic music and the sounds of the club take over, yet the colours remain. John's discussion with the bartender Addy (Bridget Regan) is filmed in medium shots and close-ups which further strengthens the colours in the scene. John and Addy are entirely bright green for their entire discussion, which is rather ironic since they are discussing John's professional past that is not certainly a work of someone who is green (new at the job). This unexpected blast of colours makes the club appear surreal as well as full of contradictions since red and

green are complementary colours.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the club is stylistically from another era, with its jazz singer, red booths, and old-fashioned lamps. So not only the club is disconnected from reality, but it is also disconnected from the current day, which makes the criminal world seem even more far removed from reality. The *John Wick* franchise, overall, plays with era-referentiality in connection to the criminals throughout the films – the Continental Club is only the beginning, with later films showing, for example, the assassin network that works with typewriters and old switchboards overseen by 1950s pin-up styled women. In the case of *John Wick: Chapter 1*, the strong disconnect that creates a clear division between the everyday New York City and the film’s fictional, or even surreal, criminal side is brought on more strongly by the use of colour, rather than the later era/style play.

An immediate pattern is then created with the colourful criminal locations since the Continental Club scene continues directly to the Red Circle Club scene. In fact, the change of place can almost be missed because the vibrant optical colours continue and we have not seen them in other locations yet – the Continental Club scene ends with the bright greens and reds and the Red Circle scene suddenly begins with its flashing blues on the rave dance floor.<sup>14</sup> The Red Circle scene is truly an overall attack on the senses, befitting Christiansen’s idea of a sensory assault that is common to action cinema,<sup>15</sup> with its blasting music and constantly flashing bright optical colours. Yet unlike the Continental Club, hidden by the respectable front of the Continental Hotel and its classical colour scheme, the Red Circle Club is not hidden from the public view. When we are eventually shown the outside of the club as John

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<sup>13</sup> An interesting thing to note here is that in Finnish the term ‘complementary colour’ is called ‘vastaväri’, which literally translates to ‘opposite colour’. The club is therefore full of opposites.

<sup>14</sup> Beyond colour, the Red Circle Club scene has attracted some academic interest. For an analysis focused solely on the fight scene at the Red Circle Club, see “Red Circle of Revenge: Anatomy of the Fight Sequence in *John Wick*” by Lisa Coulthard and Lindsay Steenberg.

<sup>15</sup> Discussed in Chapter 2.

arrives, we see that, ironically, the usually law-upholding Surrogate's Courthouse is the now face of the club preferred by criminals. Yet at the same time the courthouse-turned-club is now far from the normal since it is lit by red, green, and blue lights. The closer John walks to it, the more colourful the building becomes, and the more it stands out from the gloomy darkness of the night. At the same time, the hectic and unsettling rave aesthetic continues from the inside to the outside with the second floor of the courthouse sporting a constantly flashing white light. This combined with the logo of the club, which unsurprisingly is a red circle, seems to paint the location as a very visible target. It should be visible to everyone in the city, but because the streets are empty, the criminal location remains hidden in plain sight.

With a hidden, colourful criminal place and a plainly visible, colourful criminal place, the film is certainly playing with the visibility of the criminal network. To further this, the film also has a colourful criminal place that is also a public space. This is the case with the Orthodox Church that Viggo uses as his money stash, as it is described to John as a front. On the outside, it is still daytime, the white church is dyed orange by the slowly setting sun, and all is seemingly normal with calm organ music reaching us, but on the inside things are strange: beyond the shaded interiors and the rows of wooden pulpits, there stands an altar that is glowing orange, and the walls behind it are mint green. The men praying have tattoos on their hands and suspiciously eye John while the priest tries to throw John out, but it all devolves into gunfire. This way of colouring the location fits with the church being a front – it is normal only on the outside to not attract attention. Yet at the same time any unsuspecting citizen could walk in and end up face to face with the criminal underworld. What makes the church scene different from the previous two colourful scenes is that the scene takes place during the day and the daylight would necessarily

hide the colours from the outside since sunlight overpowers colourful lighting by being so bright that the colours become faded and disappear. During the day, then, the criminal underworld can only exist hidden inside the church.

From the church and John's blowing up Viggo's money hidden in the church, we are thrust into the final colourful criminal location of the film when John is captured by Viggo. Viggo brings him to a building under renovation and straps him to a chair in front of huge yellow windows. While the sun still shines on the outside, inside it is dark, and the only light is tinted bright yellow by construction cardboard covering the windows. The building is hidden from daylight by the cardboard, like the church was, and the yellow is, in fact, so strong that at points both John and Viggo are mere silhouettes against it. This scene is where John finally declares to Viggo that he is in fact back from retirement, a question that has been posed to John several times in the film by this point. This intensely colourful scene is the changing point for John's success since after this he will succeed in his plans to kill Iosef and Viggo. What is interesting is the choice of yellow coinciding with John's change of luck. Yellow is, in fact, more thematically tied to John than anyone else, and also the only colour that is connected to John in any way: it was the colour of his deceased wife Helen's favourite flower daisy. The yellow-centred, white-petalled daisy is a repeating motif in the film, as it is, for example, on Helen's coffee mug, her bracelet, the card she sends John that is delivered after her death, the dog's collar, and very literally in the dog's name (Daisy).<sup>16</sup> It is the colour that connects John back to his lost domestic life and his wife. For the scene dominated by the strong yellow to be the scene where John announces he is back from retirement, and for yellow to never

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<sup>16</sup> For work discussing Helen and Daisy's connection in the first film more deeply, and more generally on the meaning of the repeating figures of dogs in the franchise, see "John Wick's Multiply Signifying Dogs" by Karalyn Kendall-Morwick.

appear again after this point, shows how John's return to work marks the rejection of his past domestic life. Yet the yellow being so strong also shows that John's strength to make the decision to go back to work, and his empowerment against his enemies, comes from the memory of his wife – Helen is very much present when he makes the final call, but he must also forget her after his return so the yellow disappears.

Therefore, in addition to signalling a criminal location, the yellow also signals how John gains the final advantage over his enemies and his eventual victory. After this blaring yellow, the film's colour scheme turns to a consistent dark that is the colour scheme connected to John's superior assassin persona for the rest of the film, because in essence he has already won by declaring his return and leaving his memories of yellow daisies in the past.

### **A Demon in the Dark Is Innocent in the Light – John Wick's Colours**

This consistent dark turns out to be a feature of John's character and how he is as two-sided as the city is. John fits the *noir*-styled dark city because he is similarly a *noir*-styled character: He fits the role of “the existential protagonist [that] is trapped [...] in an alienating, lonely world, usually the nighttime city, where he faces the threat of death” (Spicer “Existentialism” 88). At the same time, his everyday side does not fit the dark despair of a *noir* world. John, in fact, proves to have both a criminal and an everyday side like the city, but with his criminal side connected to the consistent colourless dark and the everyday side connected to a light colour scheme. To be able to differentiate between the city's consistent dark and John's own dark, we must first understand how his colour schemes contrast and how drastic the difference is between John at home and John at work. While Andrew Battaglia and Marleen Newman argue that there is a contrast between the “poetic modernist house” John

lives in and “the historical styles” of the buildings in the city that plays into the contrast between John and the criminal underworld (242), I argue that there is an even more general contrast in the colour schemes between John’s domestic life and the life of the city. This contrasts with how Owen R. Horton argues that John is a liminal character because “while John Wick is both a husband and an assassin, he is also neither of those things fully” (341). However, Horton does not consider the colour aspect of John’s identity. When we look at John’s colours, we can see two distinct Johns at different times. These Johns do not mix styles nor roles – they are not liminal.

The domestic side of John is only visible in his New Jersey home environment. There he consistently wears either grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt or jeans and a brown leather jacket. His outfits are so plain that he becomes almost anonymous. He also lives in a characterless, plain white-and-grey concrete house with an open plan. The house says as little about John as his outfits. In fact, nothing really reveals anything about his character. Furthermore, when John watches videos of his deceased wife on his phone, the videos are equally characterless and plain – Helen and John have some slight banter, but otherwise it is just Helen standing on an empty beach in plain clothes. The lighting is cold, and Helen is a small, distant figure in a wide shot. Furthermore, the view we have is a shot of John holding the phone on which the video plays, which makes us doubly disconnected from Helen and John’s domestic life: we see, on screen, John’s screen which is playing out the beach scene from the past. John’s everyday side is, therefore, so ‘everyday’ that it does not say anything about him, and so far away that we cannot connect to it. John’s scenes of domestic life are also mostly tinted into a cold blueish tone that sucks out the rest of the colours from the shots. It shows both how characterless and anonymous John’s domestic life



was with Helen, and how empty his life in mourning is because light tones make everything look emptier. When contrasted with the darkness of his criminal life, however, this light colour scheme reveals that in his domestic life John is not a terrifying ‘demonic’ assassin, but instead he exists in the light and lives an extremely normal life. It is the contrast of good/light versus evil/darkness.

The domestic life is separated into three days by each day beginning with the chime a six am alarm clock. This chime marks a border between night and day that is central in the city when separating the criminal and the everyday, because in the city the colourful criminal world can only exist in the dark and disappears when the sun rises. In New Jersey, the alarm clock similarly separates John’s domestic life (daytime) from what would have been his assassin life (night-time), but since John is not working at the beginning of the film, John wakes up at six am and lives a normal day twice. The three-day cycle shows the day of his wife’s funeral/wake and how he receives the card and the dog in the mail, the next day when he goes out driving with Daisy and runs into Iosef for the first time, and the third day that is drastically different: by the morning of the third day, John has been attacked, his car stolen, and his dog killed by Iosef. It is the day he returns to work and goes to New York City, and it is also the first day that begins at midnight instead of six am. The third morning’s alarm rings for twenty minutes before John can turn it off, which shows how the line between his domestic life and his criminal life has begun to blur, and how the criminal world of New York City is starting to infringe on John’s domestic life.

The next attack at New Jersey, during the late night of the third day, shows John embracing his former criminal side, because instead of going to bed, John dresses up and readies himself for Viggo’s men. The attack scene is preceded by a

dress-up montage where John changes from the characterless domestic clothes to a black suit with a black shirt underneath. It begins with John showering with his back to the audience, revealing the many large tattoos he is covered in while a menacing tune plays. The montage then turns slower in pace but remains equally unnerving when all other sounds are muffled and only Viggo's quiet singing accompanies the menacing tune in the background. The montage cuts back and forth between John dressing and Viggo singing. Viggo's song warns about the Bogeyman coming which is interspersed with John sliding on his black belt and black tie. Finally, Viggo's song ends, and, from the bedside table, John picks up his gun that was next to Helen's bracelet and Daisy's collar. Picking up the gun cues the franchise's iconic theme music with singular, strong piano notes. This montage builds John's iconic outfit that will symbolise his assassin persona throughout the film.<sup>17</sup> When the men come at night, the house is dark, and for the first time in the film John attacks the men by appearing from the darkness. This is John's criminal/assassin side – a black-dressed figure that appears from the darkness of the night. From this point on, John appears from the shadows multiple times, for example, when he kills the henchmen in the Red Circle dressing room and when he tracks Iosef down in the warehouse and kills him. He becomes one with the shadows and very much embodies the demonic characterisation the characters in the film give him: the 'Baba Yaga' or the 'bogeyman'. At the same time, he becomes an epitome of a *noir* character, because "in film noir, the central character is likely to be standing in the shadow" instead of being "accentuated by a [...] shadow" (Schrader 271), but taken to the extreme – John becomes the shadow. He merges with the *noir* styled New York City and uses its darkness to his own advantage, that is, the darkness of the everyday city. The

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<sup>17</sup> For more on John Wick's style in later instalments of the franchise, see, for example, "Style and the Sacrificial Body in *John Wick 3*" by Stephen Watt.

criminal city and John's criminal side remain separated by colour because John cannot blend into the darkness when surrounded by colours. Instead, John uses the darkness of the everyday city at night, where there is no colour to disturb him.

But returning to his assassin self makes the colourful criminal underworld infringe on John's colourless house. After killing the men Viggo sent after him at his house, John hears the doorbell. When he goes to answer the door, the entire hallway is lit blue-red by flashing lights behind the opaque glass wall. Jimmy, the police officer whose car is throwing the lights on the walls, is a mere silhouette behind the same wall, so that he is an anonymous, abstract figure representing the law. For a moment, the colours are a warning signal for the audience – John has been caught with bodies all over his house by the police. But the scene reverses its expectations when John and Jimmy are revealed to know each other, and Jimmy completely disregards the bodies he sees. Instead, he merely asks John if he is back at work. This, in turn, makes the police a part of the criminal underworld and so their bright, flashing optical colours also become a part of that world that is trying to push itself into John's house and life.

The colours are pushing into John's life because John's criminal world is dark and colourless, and therefore different from the city's colourful criminal world. He is an unwelcome character, not only because he left the work for a normal life, but also because he refuses to work in the colourful world and instead uses the everyday darkness for his own gain. He is terrifying to the others because he is the one sent to kill other assassins, but even more terrifying in his lack of noticeable colour because he can suddenly appear from the everyday dark. John does not play by the colour rules. And that is why John seems out of place when he visits the Continental club and similarly he is out of place at Red Circle and at the church. Caitlin G. Watt argues

that “the contrast between the colourful implausibility of the world and its brutal violence” turns the world of *John Wick* into “an anti-fairy tale” which is “an appropriate milieu for John to assume the role of monstrous hero” (197), yet I would argue further that it is, in fact, not the brutal violence, but instead John’s own colourlessness contrasted with the ‘colourful implausibility’ of the criminal world that allows John to become the monster/demon more clearly – he is a black-dressed demon in a fairy tale of colours. In addition, John’s colourless ability to blend into the dark does not work when the world is covered in colour, because he cannot blend to it. Instead, it makes him stand out, and this is why the aforementioned, yellow-dominated torture scene is so central to John.

As was mentioned earlier, the yellow scene empowers John and ends the colourful scenes in the film. What this does is allow his dark criminal world to dominate the film’s colour scheme: he gets the upper hand and in the darkness he is easily able to defeat both Iosef and Viggo. The two colour worlds are fighting for dominance as are Viggo and John. Since the film contrasts the criminal colourful world Viggo and the other villains inhabit, and the criminal dark world John works in, it forces the audience to choose a side, and the winner is also chosen by the film since John is the sympathetic protagonist who lost his wife and dog. Though morally grey and more of the “monstrous hero” C. Watt described him as (197), John is made into the hero of the story and therefore the colourless world is the hero’s world. Again, as Batchelor argued about colour being made into the property of something foreign to enforce chromophobia (12-3), colour in *John Wick: Chapter 1* is made, for the most part, into the property of the villains who are also literally foreigners since they are a part of the Russian mafia. Therefore, the film is enforcing the chromophobia of Western culture through the colour worlds’ battle for dominance,

and, unsurprisingly, the colourless wins and the colourful foreigners lose in the end. In this way *John Wick: Chapter 1* remains faithful to the action genre while using colour – it renounces the colours.

### **Conclusion – The World is Divided into Two**

*John Wick: Chapter 1* has a diverse colour world maintained by a clear logic. The film separates not only the everyday from the criminal but also the different sides of the criminal from each other through colour. The everyday and criminal are present in both the film's central location New York City and its main protagonist John Wick. The city is divided into two colour schemes: the everyday as almost colourless and dark, the criminal as optically colourful dark night. The colours of the criminal underworld are either hidden indoors or hidden in plain sight outdoors, while the everyday city is the city skyline with the good people home for the night, only visible in the thousands of tiny lit windows. The everyday city is the one familiar from *film noir*, with a reliance on night-time shots and grey tones. This, in turn, makes the criminal side with its colours pop strongly from its grey backgrounds. There is a tension between criminality usually connected to darkness, or how it thrives in the dark, and how *John Wick: Chapter 1* paints the criminals with colours. The film highlights how rampant the crime is in this New York City by making it colourful, and how the normal people seem to disregard it completely, almost as an ironic joke.

John Wick himself is similarly divided into two with two colour schemes: the domestic life represented by a colourless, light, and plain world tinted blue and the assassin/criminal life represented by a pervasive and all-encompassing darkness that is also colourless. John's criminal life is different from the criminal life of the city which causes the criminal city's colour scheme to infringe on John's domestic life

back in New Jersey. In fact, John's assassin colours use the darkness of the everyday city for his advantage because he can blend into the colourless darkness. At the same time, though, John's own criminal darkness is darker, or more accurately blacker, than the city's since the darkness John blends into at his house is almost pitch black.

The two criminal colour schemes battle for dominance that John finally gains at the end half of the film, which in turn changes the colour scheme to a consistent dark. John being connected to the dark and colourless world causes the film to reject colour in the end by having John win, which in turn upholds the genre's reluctant attitude towards colour and the Western culture's chromophobia. Despite the genre embracing the visual excess, its masculine style refuses to embrace colour to further the visual attacks – colour can only be tied to the criminals and to the foreigners. To use colour in the action genre, *John Wick: Chapter 1* shows one must also reject the colour eventually. In the Wickverse, colour cannot win.

#### 4. Bright Pink Action – *Kate's* Colour Breaking Stereotypes

Far from a battle for dominance, the next film's colours appear with an action-stopping crash: a bright pink street race car is made into mush by Tokyo concrete and there is no going back. The film in question is *Kate* (2021), an American action thriller directed by Cedric Nicolas-Troyan. The film comes in the wake of the popularity of the *John Wick* film series, and although the film's lead is a woman which is still rare, the film is genre-typical. Nowhere near a blast of colour, *Kate's* beginning is so plain that there seems to be little of interest in it. The film's plot is centred on revenge, another typical action convention, and Kate herself, played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead, is almost stereotypical as an action protagonist. But the genericity does not last. *Kate* is, in fact, a film that first establishes a typical action genre world and protagonist to challenge them later through the use of colour.

*Kate* follows the film's namesake assassin Kate, who works with her mentor Varrick (Woody Harrelson) to kill a member of Yakuza in Osaka. When a little girl witnesses the assassination, Kate becomes morally troubled by it, and she agrees to do one more job to earn her retirement. The job, however, fails as Kate becomes sick mid-mission, and she crashes the car she escapes on. Waking up in hospital, Kate learns that she has been fatally poisoned and will die within 24 hours. Kate goes on a furious mission to take revenge on the Yakuza men and to finish the job she failed. She kidnaps Ani (Miku Martineau) to get to her target Kijima (Jun Kunimura), but the girl, incidentally, is the same girl who witnessed her father's assassination in Osaka. However, when Kijima's men try to kill Ani as well (although Kijima is Ani's uncle), the two young women team up to kill Kijima. Kate faces Kijima, and she learns that it was in fact her mentor Varrick that betrayed her leading to her

poisoning, and that Kijima's men were not following order when they tried to kill Ani. Meanwhile, Varrick manipulates Ani to turn against Kate. Ani shoots Kate and leaves with Varrick to live an assassin life, but with Kijima's help Kate goes to save Ani from her mentor. Kate eventually kills Varrick and saves Ani but dies from the poison in end.

The film's colour scheme is twofold: The world and its characters are colourless before Kate crashes her escape car, while after the crash the colour scheme of Tokyo dominated by pink and the characters also change their colours to fit the new world. The bright pink covering the streets of Tokyo is connected to the figure of a large neon-sign *maneki-neko* that appears for the first time in Kate's flashback during the car crash. Furthermore, when Tokyo gains colour through pink, Ani and Kate change their styles and abandon their stereotypical colours of an innocent little girl and a dark-clad assassin. Therefore, I will first show how Osaka and Tokyo, as well as Kate and Ani, are all stereotypes at the beginning of the film. Then I will analyse Tokyo's change after the pink is introduced into the city and why the choice of pink is so meaningful in a Japanese context. Finally, I will show that Kate and Ani are challenged as stereotypes and turned into action women embracing the Japanese street fashion and 'cute' culture. While Ani's change is more simplified as it happens off-screen, Kate tries different styles throughout the film. I argue that *Kate* uses strong and vibrant pink to create a surreal version of Tokyo where the city's soul is represented by the repeating figure of the *maneki-neko*, and that this pink Tokyo changes the central women of the film, Kate and Ani, from stereotypes into modernised 'cute' culture embracing action women. The film uses pink to turn the first established genre-typical action world 'on its head' and through that challenges the masculine genre.



### **‘Vanilla’ Osaka, ‘Vanilla’ Assassin – The Plain Beginning**

*Kate* begins with a tracking shot of a pink advertisement van driving on a highway on the outskirts of Osaka. The sun is shining, and the city seems quiet as there is no one in sight. Among the colourless concrete, crisscrossing roads, and large industrial sites, the van is blasting a song repeating ‘vanilla, vanilla’. And the song is right: for an action film’s first scene, a van driving in Osaka is very plain, even if it is pink. In comparison, *John Wick: Chapter 1* begins with John crashing his car into a concrete wall and then falling out, apparently dead. Meanwhile, Kate and her mentor Varrick calmly arrive to an industrial site in their van, Kate packs up her gear, and then goes out to take out some security guards. Only when Kate assassinating her target is interrupted by appearance of a little girl does the film present something interesting, but even then Kate does her job, and the film continues to Tokyo. Osaka is made into Tokyo’s counterpoint: instead of the modernity and commercialism of Tokyo, Osaka is a city of empty roads and large industrial sites. It is the very essence of everyday in the film – it is daytime, Kate does her job, and in the end none of the locations are particularly noteworthy or rememberable. This everydayness is reflected in the plain colour scheme consisting of nudes, concrete greys, and white in bright sunlight. The only spot of colour in the city is the bright pink van Kate and Varrick have, but it is pink only on the outside – inside it is completely black.

In the darkness of van’s insides sit Kate and Varrick – an assassin and her mentor – who are both dressed in black, getting ready to work. The song is still appropriate since Kate and Varrick are so plain tropes that they are stereotypes. Kate is the tough girl assassin and Varrick is the sarcastic mentor – they are notably ‘vanilla’ in a genre where memorable or special is the key for main characters. Kate

begins the film as a blank slate assassin since she is dressed in black from head to toe with her long hair on a ponytail and a duffel bag on her shoulder. She is characterless, like Osaka, but also like John Wick, though whereas John was characterless as a grieving husband at home and a demon at work, Kate is characterless as an assassin at work. This, in fact, does make Kate an exceptionally good assassin because she is so forgettable, but it is a problem for the film since the protagonist cannot be forgettable. This is why it is central to note that during the course of the film, Kate also struggles with her identity being nothing else but the black-dressed assassin ever since she was a child taken in by Varrick. When the film goes from Osaka to Tokyo, we see Kate on her free time jogging through the dark streets of Tokyo and she is still wearing all black – there is no difference between her work style and her personal style. Yet her struggle is also present: Kate stops to look at a white pencil-skirted dress in a shop window, and her attention is then caught by a mother and daughter playing with a toy next to the shop window, her gaze longing. To understand how desperately Kate wants to be something else than a black-dressed anonymous assassin, we need only look at the scenes following the shop window: In the very next scene Kate tells Varrick she wants to retire, the one after that shows that Kate has bought the white dress, and the third scene has Kate already wearing the dress at a bar.

The desperation to change, however, is already present on the more general film level even before Kate arrives in Tokyo. The fact that the film begins with a *bright pink* van driving on the colourless streets of a plain Osaka is a hint towards the future. Pink will be the prevalent colour later in the film and also thematically most important. The pink van blasting ‘vanilla, vanilla’ is almost laughing at how the film

begins – it is mocking how plain everything is before it changes into the chaos of the night-time metropolis splashed with the pink of ‘Japanese Cute’.

### **Not a Vanilla City – Tokyo as Osaka’s Opposite**

To say that the film changes into something else entirely is not to say that Tokyo is immediately something drastically inventive or new. Instead, Tokyo is established as a dark and crowded night-time metropolis. It resembles the New York City of *John Wick: Chapter 1*: even their establishing shots are similar panoramic, panning shots of a night-time city skyline. The film has changed to emulate a different kind of action genre style that is familiar from films like the aforementioned *John Wick: Chapter 1*, whereas Osaka resembled more the action films of Jason Statham, such as *Transporter* (2002), *Crank* (2006),<sup>18</sup> and *Mechanic* (2011), that are set during the daytime in the fringes of metropolises and on highways. The film is trying on another style after the plainness of Osaka, but still fails to differentiate itself from the film masses.

At the same time, the difference between Osaka and Tokyo is stark, like day and night, because whereas Osaka is bright and empty during the day, Tokyo is dark and crowded during the night. Tokyo’s presentation is focused on the very centre of the city with its commercial streets full of shops and neon signs. Tokyo is almost claustrophobic since it is made up of narrow alleyways that are crowded to the brim with people. Tokyo resembles *film noir* in style, unlike Osaka, because the city in *film noir* is “an urban jungle, a bewildering labyrinth and a trap” on the level of “the actual physical maze of streets and alleyways” (Spicer “The City” 46), and Tokyo in

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<sup>18</sup> Inspiration goes beyond the visual since *Kate* (2021) also has an interestingly similar plot to *Crank* (2006) – both films have a poisoned protagonist with a limited amount of time to finish what they started.

*Kate* is definitely a maze. Tokyo's colour scheme, as well as being the opposite of Osaka, also further emphasises the small, labyrinth-like, and claustrophobic feel of the city. *Kate*'s Tokyo is edited in post-production to appear much darker than it is to such a degree that the city is almost black at street level. The narrow and crowded alleyways become immensely more claustrophobic and chaotic with the looming darkness, and the city feels much smaller, almost as if it were condensed down. Comparing *Kate*'s version of Tokyo to the version of Tokyo in *Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* and *Furious 7*, for example, one can see that Tokyo is typically presented as very crowded. *Furious 7* even speeds up the footage of people walking the streets to further emphasise the chaos. Tokyo is also usually filmed at night since almost all *Fast and Furious* Tokyo scenes are set during the night, but *Kate*'s Tokyo is much darker than the *Fast and the Furious* series'.

In addition, *Kate* purposefully distorts the neon signs whereas the *Fast and the Furious* franchise leaves the neon signs as they are, that is, readable and not blindingly bright. *Kate*'s Tokyo's many neon signs are distorted in colours and brightness so that the signs lose their colours completely and become so bright one cannot say what the signs are meant to say. They can no longer colour the dark alleyways. The neon signs of the city become just bright shapes on the walls, like postmodern art pieces in a chaotic metropolis. The city in *Kate*, therefore, appears to pander to Western stereotypes of Tokyo: night-time chaos, never-ending crowds, walls full of bright signs you cannot understand. In this sense, Tokyo is an understandable continuation of what Osaka begun – Osaka was a stereotype of an industrial city during the day, and Tokyo is a stereotype of the chaotic night of an Asian metropolis.

## **A Pink Cat is Set Loose – Tokyo Changes Colours**

Yet stereotypes rarely last. In *Kate*, Tokyo is changed drastically only about ten minutes later. After Kate fails her job in Tokyo, she escapes Roppongi Tower by foot from her target Kijima's henchmen, and then in desperation steals a car. However, it is not just any car: it is another bright pink car. More than that, it is a clear reference to *Kill Bill*'s famous 'pussy wagon' that the Bride steals at the start of *Volume 1* since both cars are obnoxiously colourful and ridiculous which makes them stand out. Kate's car even has the word "bride" written on the passenger seat, which sets her side by side with the action genre icon. Kate's 'wagon', with its pink undercarriage lights, pink paint, pink fur seats, and blasting j-pop, is as out of place in Tokyo as the pink van was in Osaka. It stands out like a sore thumb – a bright pink spot in the middle of the pitch-black city. The high-speed car chase Kate goes on to escape from a police car ends in her crashing the car and rolling it many times over before the car slides to a halt on its roof. Right after the crash we see Kate's memories flash on screen interspersed with pink colour. The flashbacks are dominated by an image of a large neon sign cat, namely a pink *maneki-neko* (more commonly known as a 'lucky cat') that smiles at the camera. When the cat appears, Varrick's voiceover from the memory flashback states, "Here's the start of the rest of your life", as if it was the cat telling Kate so. What the audience does not know at this point, however, is that the *maneki-neko* is not part of Kate's memories – instead, it is a flash of the future, because the first time we see the cat in the film's world is at the very end when Kate dies. The pink car crashing into the city itself, scraping its paint on the streets, and Kate's subsequent flashforward of a pink cat triggers a momentous change in the film: Tokyo's new colour scheme begins to be dominated by a non-diegetic, bright, optical pink.

Before going any further, it is important to note that decision to use pink in Japan is not a choice done in a vacuum. Connecting Tokyo and Japan to pink is by no means a new invention – in fact, there is a strong cultural trend originating in Japan called the ‘Japanese Cute-Cool’<sup>19</sup>, or more simply, the ‘Japanese Cute’ as named by Christine Yano (681),<sup>20</sup> which refers to the Japanese youth trends, especially in fashion, which have become popular globally. They are at the forefront of “a pink globalization”, referring to “the widespread distribution and consumption of Japanese cute goods and aesthetics to other parts of the industrial world” (Yano 683). Pink is a central aspect of the Japanese Cute culture and at the forefront of the *pink* globalization, and therefore when an action film set in Tokyo uses pink as its central colour, it shows the film is heavily inspired by the Japanese Cute. This is, of course, not unproblematic – the critics of the ‘cute culture’ point out that “the new cultural capital in youth-oriented, feminized cuteness trivializes Japan as infantile and superficial” (Yano 684). *Kate* is treading dangerous ground as an action film since it is in danger of similar critique. Yet the film embraces the challenge of using pink and makes it thematically important instead of having it as superficial visual excess. Whether the use of pink in Japan plays into the Western stereotype of Japanese culture in *Kate*, arguments can be made in both directions. I, however, argue that it does not since the film does not use pink just for ‘cute’ Japanese-styled visuals.

The drastic change from just darkness to darkness with dominating non-diegetic pink changes Tokyo – the city loses its ability to seem real, and instead the city becomes surreal. Non-diegetic colours are not typical in film, as they are part of the “radical experiments with colour in [photography and film]” that remain rare (Van

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (2013) by Christine R. Yano p5.

<sup>20</sup> The term ‘Japanese Cute’ is a translation of the Japanese term *kawaii* (Yano “Wink on Pink” 1).

Leeuwen 22). At the same time, whereas *John Wick*'s New York City had specific alternative or unreal criminal locations created with optical colours, *Kate*'s Tokyo becomes unreal more comprehensively because the pink is not tied to specific locations. Examples of these non-diegetic pinks in the film are numerous: When Kate chases after Ani, trying to kidnap her, the chase ends with Kate firing her gun in the air in an alleyway that is, for no diegetic reason, bathed in pink light. A long shot of the same alley moments later, in contrast, shows that the alley is pink at roof level where a cat is watching the argument and blue where Kate and Ani are standing. Later, when Kate and Ani decide to work together to kill Kijima while sitting at a restaurant, Ani hands Kate a pair of sunglasses and Ani's face is bathed in pink light. Kate's regretful memories of the past, as well, are always connected with Kate's face being lit with pink light. Pink is therefore present whenever Kate regrets her past and whenever she is spending time with Ani outside the action. The pink, thus, is both a reminder of the past and a desire for the future: When Kate remembers her tragic past, the pink reminds us of the chance for a normal life and family that was lost, and when Kate sees Ani bathed in pink light, the pink reminds us of the possibility of a family sitting right in front of her, a would-be dream come true. And even when the pink is seemingly just visuals, as when Kate chases Ani to the alleyway, there is a reason – a cat is watching the argument, since, like the *maneki-neko*, the film connects cats to the pink.

This surreal pink remains connected to the mystical figure of the *maneki-neko* throughout the entire film. The *maneki-neko* repeats itself in the constant references to cats in the film: In the club that Kate tries to first kidnap Ani, people are wearing cat-ear headbands. In the pink alleyway where Kate finally catches Ani, there is a cat watching them and meowing. And Ani's jacket is revealed to have a tiger on it. The

*maneki-neko* itself appears in the midst of another flashback Kate has after Ani shoots her. And the *maneki-neko* is also present at the end of the film: appearing after Varrick is dead, it is the last thing Kate and Ani see before Kate dies. It is the size of a skyscraper's wall as it is projected on one, and it is surrounded by pink cherry flowers. To adapt the classic *maneki-neko* into a pink, smiling neon sign the size of a wall, the cat is made part of the 'Japanese Cute' culture, among figures like Hello Kitty (Yano 682). The city follows suit after the cat's first appearance and turns pink, and since the *maneki-neko* figure was, in fact, originally created in Tokyo when the city was still called Edo (Parhad 32), the city and the cat become strongly tied to each other. In essence, the *maneki-neko* is Tokyo's soul made visible since it reveals another side of the city when it shows itself to Kate. The *maneki-neko* and the pink with it appear because Kate is dying – the city's mythical persona shows Kate a chance at redemption and family, which would have gone unnoticed had Kate kept working, by splashing surreal pinks on the things that connect to the dream of family. The pink appears like a hallucinogenic vision, one that no one seems to notice or point out, not even Kate herself. One could argue that there is a connection between how sick Kate is from the poison and how surreal the city is with the pink and the cats: that Kate is imagining all the strange aspects in her drugged state. But the film does not engage with the idea of a drug/psychedelics theme or plot, unlike some other films such as *Lucy* (2014) do, so the aspect remains unexplored. The pink cat, nevertheless, remains more mythical than imaginary since it does actually appear in the city in the end – a surreal pink cat for a surreal pink city.

Yet this does not mean that all of Tokyo changes into surreal pinkness. In fact, the old historical Tokyo and the contemporary commercial Tokyo become even more disconnected when pink is introduced into only the contemporary side. While New



York City's old spaces were lit with coloured light and thus turned into alternative criminal spaces in *John Wick: Chapter 1*, the old spaces of Tokyo remain distinct and separate from the colourful post-car-crash Tokyo. The two old Tokyo locations present in the film, the Black Lizard club and Kijima's 'old family house', are both low and large buildings surrounded by walls and lit with orange-toned lanterns. They are houses with paper walls and sitting mats, and the Black Lizard club even sports both a geisha and a Kabuki performance. The geisha and the main performer in the Kabuki do both wear light pink, but the Black Lizard club is itself so colourless and so cold in lighting that it washes the colour out of the scenes overall. Meanwhile, at Kijima's old family house there is no hint of pink and the classical colour scheme of dark gardens, warm lights and wood floors disconnects us from the pink Tokyo. They appear to come from a wholly different stylistic trend in action, those of historical martial arts films. Kate's visits to these locations seem like jumps in time to Japan's history, because the scenes are edited so that there are no transitions: we do not see Kate arrive at or leave the Black Lizard club, and we only see Kate's arrival at Kijima's house with Ani, but not her leaving.

The momentary returns to the past happen also in the colour scheme since the film switches the surreal, pink-dominated colour schemes back to the dark, grey-toned colours it had before the car crash at certain moments in the film. This is because the pink of Tokyo is non-diegetic which necessarily challenges the audience's suspension of disbelief. Thus, when there are scenes where Kate and Ani must face the hard truths about themselves, which require the scenes to look very realistic to have the maximum emotional impact of an unwanted honest truth, the film cuts the coloured lights out. The scenes are, in fact, almost colourless compared to the rest of the film, and the colour scheme emphasises a gritty and gruesome tone with

dirty colours. These scenes consist of Kate undressing and tending her wounds in front of Ani in a dirty public bathroom where Ani has to face the gruesome truth of what action does, Ani screaming at Kate about how her family hates her after almost being killed by them, and Ani telling Kate about how she never knew her mother in a cab on the way to Kijima's house. These three scenes are colourless and gritty realistic – they do not decorate the gruesome subject matters nor the characters, and because of the contrast with the pink unreal Tokyo, they hit that much harder.

### **New City, New Me – Ani and Kate Change**

Hard-hitting truths, though, are rarely a topic for stereotypes. Although Kate is very much a stereotypical assassin at the beginning of the film, the stereotype does not survive Tokyo turning pink. Stereotyping also applies to Ani, who is similarly present for the events in Osaka – Kate assassinates Ani's father Kentaro in front of Ani. At that point Ani is still a stereotypical little girl both in her style and manner, yet her stereotype also breaks with Tokyo's transformation. When we meet her again after Kate's crash, Ani's style has drastically changed. Therefore, Tokyo's change spreads into Ani and Kate as well, changing them – the pink has long-reaching claws.

In her first scene in Osaka, Ani is a little girl with immaculate hair and braces, wearing a light pink duffel coat and a white beret. She is very much the picture-perfect stereotype of an innocent little girl, which makes Kate hesitant to shoot since her only rule is “no kids”. Yet Kate does shoot her target and Ani is sprayed with blood. The Osaka scene ends with Ani hysterically screaming over her father's dead body like a terrified child. Had this been it for Ani in the film, she would have remained a stereotype, but some twenty minutes later the film reintroduces her as she is, accidentally, the girl Kate must kidnap to get to Kijima. This time very little of the

innocent girl is left – instead, Ani has changed into an arrogant teenager in the little time that has passed. She has dyed her hair blue and painted her nails all different colours. Her braces remain, but she wears a light pink baseball jacket and a red pleated miniskirt with black knee-high socks. Her outfit is inspired by Japanese edgy streetwear in the colours, but the Japanese Cute is present in the girly aspects: In a skirt, knee high socks, and basic shoes, she is half-dressed in a Japanese girl school uniform. Even where some of the innocence is retained, that is, in her jacket still being light pink, there is an edge to it since the baseball jacket's back has a huge tiger on it. Instead of innocent, Ani is better described now as naïvely arrogant in her pink-blue-red-black outfit. Her outfit, a mismatch of streetwear and 'cute', does not show a direction in life. Instead, it is confused, going in all directions at once, while Kate battles with the opposite: She is stuck in one direction.

Kate's struggle with being stuck as an assassin comes out in her clothing, because she tries on different roles throughout the film through clothing. As was discussed earlier, Kate's all-black assassin garb is a part of her assassin stereotype in Osaka – it is a plain and characterless outfit that makes her forgettable. It does not last long, however, after she arrives to Tokyo. First, she tries to pass as a normal person wearing the white dress she coveted. Sitting at a bar, Kate is a picture-perfect image of the classic Hollywood beauty in the fitted dress and immaculate wavy hair, sipping on a glass of wine. She tries to appear innocent in all white in comparison to her assassin black, but it fails: As Kate later realises, the man who poisoned her was the man she picked up in the bar – Stephen (Michiel Huisman) knew who she was all along.

Incidentally, it is from Stephen's girlfriend Kanako (Mari Yamamoto) from whom Kate gets her second set of clothes. Allowing Stephen and Kanako to live

instead to taking revenge on them for the poisoning, Kate is rewarded with a set of clothes to replace the hospital scrubs she used in her escape. The outfit Kate gets from Kanako takes Kate into another role. The new army green jacket is very reminiscent of Ripley's (Sigourney Weaver) uniform from the original, 1979 film *Alien*, which situates Kate among the strong action women of the early 1980s, similar to how she was situated with the Bride of *Kill Bill* earlier. At the same time the rest of her outfit consists of jeans and a white t-shirt, which is very much a plain outfit, which shows her change is gradual. The jacket survives action, like Ripley has survived to this day as an action woman icon, but the t-shirt does not stay white for long. By the time Kate has teamed up with Ani, it is covered in blood and grime.

Outfit and colour changes are not over, however, as Kate's next and final outfit abandons the plain for Japanese Cute inspired flair. The outfit is Ani's creation: keep the jeans, lose the jacket, swap the shirt, and don a pair of pink sunglasses. The new grey tank top has a grinning face on it with pink round cheeks. Kate's new style takes the Japanese Cute aspect so prevalent in the film, but also shows constraint in its incorporation to the action protagonist since the outfit overall is still toned down compared to Ani, for example. What the outfit does is physically connect Kate to the prevalent pink through the sunglasses and the grinning face's cheeks: she is now wearing the pink. Despite Kate's initial hesitation about wearing even just the grinning shirt, Kate eventually embraces the Japanese Cute flair, in the same way she embraces Ani's admiration in the end – this embracing happened through the pink that was imposed on her, not only in non-diegetic light, but also in small spots in her outfit. When entering Varrick's hideout to save Ani from Varrick's grooming, Kate plays into the idea of how Ani called her "a Terminator": she walks on the scene with a cigarette in her mouth and guns in armpit-holsters, and when she takes the

sunglasses off, her right eye is blood red from a burst vein, referencing Schwarzenegger's Terminator's red eye. At the same time, the 'cute' aspects, aka. grinning face on her shirt and the big pink sunglasses, separate her from the Terminator: Kate is ridiculous as well as intimidating, though she does not seem to notice. She has embraced the Japanese Cute in a cool manner, in parallel to playing with another action icon style. What is also noteworthy is that the style she embraces has her wearing grey – instead of finding a place in the assassin black or the innocent white, Kate ends up in the grey. It goes with Kate's struggle: she cannot be wholly innocent (white), but she also does not want to be an assassin (black), so she takes the middle road (grey).

### **Conclusion – The World is Upside Down**

In this case, pink changes the world. *Kate* (2021) establishes a very plain and stereotypical action genre world as well as a stereotypical protagonist in the beginning which is done to contrast it to the new world when the world does change. When Kate crashes her pink car into the street, Tokyo turns pink: the city becomes surreal with non-diegetic pink, and though it momentarily abandons the pink to remain faithful to the colour schemes of the past and the gritty realistic scenes, Tokyo is irreversibly changed. At the same time the city is connected to the figure of the pink neon-sign *maneki-neko* that Kate has flashforwards of. The *maneki-neko* proves itself to be a part of the city, or rather its soul, as it appears on a skyscraper wall at the very end of the movie as the very last image the audience and Kate see. The *maneki-neko*, nevertheless, is continuously present in the film, not only through the pink, but also through the other several cat references, and the pink as well as the cat are connected to family in meaning.

With the change of Tokyo, Ani and Kate also abandon their stereotypical clothing styles, and while Ani abandons her innocence for arrogance and innocent girly style for a mix of streetwear and Japanese Cute, Kate tries on different roles, both those familiar from the action genre and those connecting to her colour choices between black, white, and grey, while embracing some of the pink so prevalent in her surroundings.

The film establishes a stereotypical world and characters, therefore, to later challenge and change them, and what began as a forgettable action genre film turns into a surreally pink action film. *Kate* refuses to neither remain muted in colour, nor use diegetic colour sporadically, and it refuses to keep its action heroine looking serious. It presents a world that is feminised with a Japanese Cute inspiration and two action heroines that fit into it. It is an action world not fit for male heroes. It challenges the man-centred action genre by presenting a sudden and drastic alternative: the originally established norm-following action world is abruptly turned on its head, and the new femininely pink world is dominated by a Japanese Cute wearing action heroine, a bright pink city, and a big smiling cat.

## 5. Only Guns Are Grey Here – *Gunpowder Milkshake*'s Abundant

### Colours

Whereas *John Wick: Chapter 1* created alternative criminal places within New York City, and whereas *Kate* replaced the contemporary Tokyo with an alternative pink Tokyo, *Gunpowder Milkshake* (2021) never has a real world to change. In fact, colour is used to abstract everything in the film's world from the locations to the character relationships and to the choices they make. A contemporary action comedy directed by Navot Papushado and starring Karen Gillan as an assassin called Sam, the film is the strangest in colour of the three films I analyse. It is also the most colourful, using both optical and surface colours. Part of this can be explained by genre: since the film is a mix of action and comedy, it can diverge from the action genre norms more than a serious action thriller could. The comedy aspect allows the film to have a lighter and more colourful world in accordance with the comedy genre, unlike *John Wick: Chapter 1* which requires a dark mood in par with its two serious genres, action and thriller.

*Gunpowder Milkshake* begins with an assassin called Sam gunning down an entire herd of gangsters. She has been given bad intel and she accidentally guns down a son of a well-known gangster Jim McAlester (Ralph Ineson), but still unaware of this, Sam is sent on another contract to retrieve money that was stolen from the Firm and to kill the thief. Sam fails the contract as she discovers that the thief's daughter Emily (Chloe Coleman) has been kidnapped and as she rescues her, she loses the stolen money in the process. Nathan (Paul Giamatti) who runs the infamous Firm that Sam works for, sells Sam out to McAlester which forces Emily and Sam to flee to a near-by safe-house simply called the Library. There she and Emily, with the help of

Sam's mother (Lena Headey) and three 'aunts', attempt to fight off McAlester's gangsters. The plan fails and Emily is kidnapped again, but Sam and the others mount a rescue and succeed, gunning down McAlester. In the end, Emily and Sam threaten Nathan, who betrayed them, to leave them alone and gain their freedom from the Firm. The movie ends with Sam, Emily, and the others driving off to the sunset.

The world of *Gunpowder Milkshake* is purposefully made to look like a compilation of disconnected set pieces that come from different colour schemes and styles of the different eras and genres. By refusing to contain itself to a specific genre and era, *Gunpowder Milkshake* not only places women throughout action film history, but also emphasizes the artificiality of the film's world, while the humour in the film similarly ironies the action genre norms. Through genre stereotypes the film explores what women in the roles of the *noir* detective and the western gunslinger would be like. Yet the film does even more with characters and colours: the film uses colours to abstract the characters' relationships to each other by using colour to signal a family unit before such unit exists, as well as making a character's choice visual by siding the different options with different colours.

I will analyse the unreal world *Gunpowder Milkshake* presents through its use of colours first. The main focus is on the disconnect between places due to colour, not only in the film's genre and era referentiality that uses different, contrasting colour schemes one after another, but also in how the film emphasizes the unreality of the world through flat and bright colours. Second, I will show how the film uses colour in relation to its three central women (the assassin Sam, her mother Scarlet, and the little girl Emily): how different roles are tried through colours and other genres' conventions, and how relationships are abstracted visually through colours. The women are placed in a colour scheme of their own, in addition to Sam and Scarlet



initially being stereotypical genre characters straight from *film noir* and the western. Finally, I will look at the film's anomalous colour use, referring to how the film visually abstracts Sam's choice between the assassin life and family through the use of colour. I argue that *Gunpowder Milkshake* uses colour to challenge the action genre, both through a disconnected patchwork world, and through characters playing with genres and colours, which reveal the constructedness of the typically colourless, masculine genre. This challenge of the genre results with the film offering an alternative to it.

### **“An Absurd World to be Living In” – Colour, Unreality, and Disconnect**

*Gunpowder Milkshake* differs from *Kate* and *John Wick: Chapter 1* in that the film is not set in a real world city – instead, the film opts for a compilation of locations stereotypical to different eras that do not connect into a coherent and realistic world. Instead of a city, the film's world is like a patchwork quilt where at one moment we are in the 1950s at a diner and the next in the 2000s in a bankrupted video store. Yet the film is not about time travel – it is an action film about revenge and empowerment. The film resists to remain in a single era and in a single genre – instead, it moves through different eras and genres by going through different era-accurate locations with different genre-accurate versions of the characters in the lead. I will show that by using the colour schemes of the different eras and genres, *Gunpowder Milkshake* creates a purposefully mismatch world to emphasise its constructedness.

The film begins in a *film noir* styled setting: a dark, dishevelled room that is colourless, save for two coloured windows discussed later, with a thunderstorm in the background. The *film noir* style in this scene consists of the genre's typical “low-key,

high-contrast [...] lighting”, “claustrophobic framing devices including [...] windows” and how “conventional establishing shots are often withheld” (Spicer “Visual Style 313): We are suddenly taken, without any establishing shot outdoors nor indoors, into a room, framed by two windows on either side of the room, where the protagonist is hidden in the pitch-black darkness that contrasts strongly with the lit corners of the room. A cold-blooded murder takes place in the darkness during a melancholy voice-over from the protagonist that tells the audience what is happening. Voice-over is also “one of the most familiar devices of *film noir*” (Haacke 10), which strengthens the *noir* style of the scene greatly by going from just visuals into audio as well. The room itself is one of the most realistic places in the film, since it is just a dilapidated room with some colourful windows, and it helps to misguide the audience at the very beginning into believing that the film will be dark and gritty. This is what *Kate* did as well with its ‘vanilla’ beginning as well – it established a genre-believable world so it could challenge it later. Yet in *Gunpowder Milkshake*’s case, the beginning is from a different genre. It is a jump into the action genre’s past, and a short play with *film noir* conventions and characters before the film changes settings and eras drastically for the first time.

After a brief visit at Sam’s nondescript apartment, the film moves to one of the film’s central locations that is the 1950s diner. The move from *noir* to the diner is dissonant even when it passes through Sam’s apartment, because Sam’s apartment is so stylistically plain that it is immediately forgettable, whereas the 1940s styled *film noir* beginning, and the 1950s colourful diner are each other’s opposites. Although diners are usual locations for *film noir*, this diner is not sleazy and moody enough to fit a *noir* film. Instead, it is its opposite: clean and bright. This purposeful contrast makes the audience stop and reorient themselves to the new era since the film jumps

in style from the 1940s to the 1950s in a matter of minutes. Central to this jump is colour: The 1940s colours were typically less chromatic than the 1950s colours, meaning more centred around greys and whites than colours such as reds, blues, and yellows (Stansfield & Whitfield 239). The 1940s colour scheme was also blacker than the colour scheme in the 1950s (Stansfield & Whitfield 239), which here creates the strongest disconnect between the *film noir* styled dark beginning and the sudden bright diner. Meanwhile, the 1950s colour trend consisted of “pastel colour objects with bichromatic schemes” (Valan 56), bichromatic referring to two different colours within a single object, and the decade was “characterised by the use of light and very intense colours” (Valan 56). In this 1950s manner, the diner is dominated by bright, strong, and flat pastel colours that are mainly white and turquoise, reflecting the bichromatic pastel trend, in direct contrast to the darker and greyer 1940s *noir*. The server is similarly dressed in a bright turquoise 1950s waitress uniform. Furthermore, every surface in the diner is clean and glossy to the point of being almost sanitary, which creates an artificial mood. When the film suddenly flashes back to Sam’s past by fifteen years, the artificiality becomes even stronger because everything is *exactly* the same except Sam: the server is the same and in the same uniform, the colours are the same, the milkshake in front of Sam is identical to her current one. Only Sam is younger, which makes the diner appear stuck in time. It is timeless and unchangeable and therefore unable to connect with the earlier *noir* or the later eras the film goes to. Furthermore, it is not only the inside of the diner that is disconnected: the outside of the diner is, in fact, disconnected from reality altogether. The sky behind the diner is bright pink, and the diner itself is in the middle of nowhere, with no other buildings or roads to be seen, like the diner was cut from reality and placed in an empty spot like a set piece.

However, that is not to say that the film does not backtrack this sudden era jump. Very quickly after the diner scene Sam is back at work and arrives at the un reputable LeBonBon motel where she shoots Emily's father. The motel is distinctly *film noir* like, with its gloomy and sleazy mood: the dilapidated, dark rooms are decorated in an overtly romantic style, with heart neon signs and red bed sheets. The motel feels morally reprehensible, but it is also where Sam awakens to her own moral corruption. It is the last place that is distinctly *film noir* in style.

To understand how disjointed the world of *Gunpowder Milkshake* truly is, we need not look further than the subsequent places Sam visits after the backtracking in the motel. From the jarring change of eras back and forth between *film noir* and the diner, the film suddenly jumps forward in style when Sam arrives at the bowling alley called Gutterball Bowling to save Emily. There Sam is forced to abandon her *film noir* trench coat and she changes to an orange baseball jacket that glows like a videogame collectible when Sam first looks at it. The bowling alley itself is dominated by strong and artificial primary colours: optical reds and blues take over most of the screen since the bowling alley's backwall sports a huge pixel-screen. The primary colours combined with the bowling alley aesthetic, Sam's baseball jacket, and its video game reference has transported the film in time to the 1980s. At the same time, the film makes a reference forward in time to the 2000s: With Sam's orange jacket with stripes running down her sleeves combined with an intricately choreographed fight scene in front a pixel-wall that turns everyone into silhouettes, the film is referencing the Bride's fight against the Crazy 88 in *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. Therefore, even when the film sets itself into a single era, the pixel wall and the orange jacket take the audience on a simultaneous trip to film history. A 2020s film references the 2000s in a scene that is stylistically in the 1980s is almost a condensed

version of the entire film. *Gunpowder Milkshake* offers this miniature collage of its era and style referencing trend within a single scene, emphasising how the film's disjointed experience is built out of simultaneous references to different directions in time.

From the chaos of the 1980s, the film again jumps forward in its era style – this time, after running out of the bowling alley, Sam arrives at a closed mall called the Westfield Mall. There she follows instructions to exchange the money she has for Emily and arrives at a bankrupt “Video Beast”. This is a reference to the video store chain “Blockbuster” that went bankrupt in 2010, which means Sam has jumped eras now to the late 2000s. It is an era strongly within “the age of irony [...] when the parodic itself has become [...] marketable and [...] predictable” (Harries 21). In par with the ironic meta-humour, the villains at “Video Beast” are actually dressed as beasts: Dracula, Wolfman, the Mummy, and Frankenstein are holding Emily captive. After exchanging the money for Emily, Sam chases after the beasts and dramatically kills Dracula with a stake to the heart to the tune of a distinctly horror-genre styled music, spoofing on another genre. The scene at the mall is the most indistinct in colour scheme – nothing really stands out beyond the “Video Beast” sign being the same blue as the Blockbuster sign was. Perhaps this is due to the late 2000s and 2010s still being so close to the current time that their colour schemes have not been clearly separated from what would be the colour scheme of the 2020s. The dead mall seems almost normal and ‘everyday’, so the film is clearly infringing on the current day.

One could assume that the era and genre jumping would end in the present day with the film, considering how realistic the feel of the Westfield Mall is, but that is not so. Instead, in the very end, after some more time jumping between the 1950s and

the other already presented eras, the film opts for a 1970s styled end title card. The text repeating the name of the film is white and orange, and the letters are soft around the edges. The background is a slow pan of the women driving the van and then of the sunset over the sea behind them, with a continuous warm orange tone dominating the scene's colour scheme. The 1970s colour scheme is characterised by "colours with medium to low saturation" and "areas of warm hues" (Valan 57-8), and this is the case with the end scene of *Gunpowder Milkshake*: the orange tones are not high saturation like they were in the Gutterball Bowling alley, but instead toned down and lower in saturation, and the scene is dominated by warm colours. The 1970s is also ideologically present in the women forming a family of their own and being liberated from the man's world (in this case, Nathan's Firm) by driving off to the sunset, since the 1970s had witnessed the rise of feminism in the 1960s and the Women's Liberation Movement that was active in America between 1960s and 1980s.

The film's disjointed reality goes beyond the era jumping as well. There are two locations in the film that are timeless, as in not specifically stylized to a distinct era: The dentist's office and the library. The dentist's office resembles the diner in its colour scheme being dominated by white: the dentist's office is so strangely bright and flat in its green-white colours, and also so sanitarily glossy in its surfaces, that the place is surreal. Furthermore, we never see anyone arrive there beyond people suddenly appearing from the elevator, so we do not know where the office is or what it looks like from the outside. The place is completely cut off from reality – not only in location, but also in that the dentist's office is not actually a dentist's office, but a secret hospital for the assassins. The dentist's office comes closest to repeating the criminal colour connection that was prevalent in *John Wick: Chapter 1*.

In the same manner, the library is not really a library, though at first it seems so. The building itself is an old and historical, and on the inside, it looks like a normal library. It has shelves of books, two fantastically themed reading rooms (the Never-Ending Ocean and the Enchanted Forest), and a quiet and muted colour scheme. But the library, where Sam's 'aunts' Florence (Michelle Yeoh), Anna May (Angela Bassett), and Madeleine (Carla Gugino) work, is also a place for professional assassins to buy and sell guns. In this sense it is strongly reminiscent of *John Wick: Chapter 1*'s Continental Hotel and how it also hid underneath the normal-looking exterior in an old historical building. But unlike the Continental's hidden high-class assassin establishment, the library proves to have a strange, feministic, and humorous assassin fantasy land under the surface: As we see through the fight scene at the library, most books (especially those with women authors) have guns, ammo, weapons, and money inside their covers, such as the Virginia Woolf book Sam is handed that contains a pistol, and the classic minivan that is parked in the basement has a mounted machine gun inside it. Madeleine, Florence, and Anna May are strongly feminist, but also strange: These seemingly sweet librarians dressed in Powerpuff Girl colours (red, blue, green) are in fact professional killers that serve only feminist assassins and at times speak nonsense ("Fudge your hunches, if you pardon my French"). They have also botched the Powerpuff Girl colours, because though they have picked the right three colours, the personalities are wearing the wrong colours. The muted, under-the-surface strangeness of the library compared to the bright green strangeness of the dentist's office brings chaos into the criminal underworld of *Gunpowder Milkshake*: The dentist's office and the library do not connect into a cohesive world, and instead even the criminal underworld of the film is

a mismatch patchwork world. The criminal underworld is disconnected from its surrounding world, but also from itself.

The film's entire world is therefore constructed of these era and style changing locations that never connect to a whole. The film even directly points to the fact that the world is unreal. When Emily and Sam drive from the mall to the dentist's office, in the only scene that we see the characters move through the essentially non-existent city, the night-time city outside the car is surreally bright and shines in a distorted manner. The buildings in the background are so generic that there is no way to recognize which metropolis the outside is meant to be. At the same time, the song (Stereolab's "French Disco") playing from the radio points it out, as its chorus goes: "Though this world is essentially/ An absurd place to be living in." Absurd, or abstract, is certainly the intended effect.

### **"John Wick with Chicks" or a Pride of Lions? – Colouring Relationships**

Considering the absurdity of *Gunpowder Milkshake*'s world, it is increasingly interesting that the film has been accused of 'ripping off' the dark and serious *John Wick* franchise. It is true that the library of *Gunpowder Milkshake* is reminiscent of *John Wick: Chapter 1*'s Continental Hotel, as was discussed earlier, but even then the library is meant to be humorous while the Continental is stylish and high-class. Wendy Ide, a film critic for The Guardian, however, goes even further with the argument, claiming that *Gunpowder Milkshake* is, in fact, just "John Wick with chicks". Not only is the argument demeaning to women with the choice of 'chicks', but it also falls flat – beyond the library and a hidden assassin/criminal world, the films have little in common. This is reflected especially in character styling, because whereas John Wick had two colourless colour schemes, Sam and those that surround



her are markedly colourful throughout. The colours Sam and the others wear signal their relationships to each other as well as make them fit into the disconnected world through colour – in colourful places, more colour does not stand out. But whereas the world is disconnected through colour, Sam, Scarlet, and Emily are connected through colour. Colour in the film is therefore able to do two things opposite things at the same time: take apart and bring together. I presently turn my attention to the ‘bringing together’ in *Gunpowder Milkshake*’s characters through colours, with the main focus being on the central characters of Sam, Scarlet, and Emily.

Since the film begins with a distinctly *film noir* styled scene, it is very fitting that Sam is also styled in a *film noir* fashion. In the first scene we witness a murder taking place seemingly out of nowhere, before it is revealed that in the middle of the almost pitch black room, there is someone standing with a gun. This figure, a silhouette in the dark, is wearing a black fedora and a black trench coat. “One of the most recognizable male characters in film noir” is characterised through the trench coat and the fedora: the private eye (Spicer “Private Eyes” 246) or the detective. Yet the problem here is that the private eye is a man’s role, and Sam is not a man. A sudden gust of wind steals the fedora off of the figures head and her long red hair is revealed: this detective is a woman. Since Sam was placed in the role of the detective, the reveal of her gender shatters the perfect image. And although she recovers the hat, another sudden gust of wind takes it from her later on when she has broken the amoral nature of the *film noir* character and decided to save a man. The film’s world fights against her keeping the historical role, and Sam loses: a later scene forces Sam to abandon the trench coat, and the *film noir* is lost from her character from good.

Meanwhile, Sam’s mother Scarlet is presented in the film as a western gunslinger. The historical reference is apparent: the western preceded *film noir* in the

film history, as Scarlet precedes her daughter. At the same time, the western and *film noir* is what combined to create the action genre<sup>21</sup>, so having two characters that represent the earlier genres in an action genre film highlights the constructedness of the action genre itself. Scarlet is most distinctly a western character in Sam's flashback of the past: When Scarlet arrives at the diner with her back to the camera revealing only the warm brown leather jacket, the server calls her a stranger. Then, as Scarlet walks to Sam's table, she walks in slow motion accompanied by sombre music. In fighting she is western as well: later in the film she uses a Winchester 1982 model called "Mare's Leg" that is a reference to Steve McQueen western tv-show *Wanted Dead or Alive* that ran in the late 1950s.

Had the film done just that with the characters, both Sam and Scarlet would have remained genre stereotypes much the same fashion as Kate and Ani were stereotypes in the beginning of *Kate*. Yet *Kate's* stereotypes did not last, nor do the stereotypes in *Gunpowder Milkshake*. It appears as if the action genre requires its women to begin as stereotypes before they change to be acceptable. In *Gunpowder Milkshake*, the genre referentiality gives way for abstract and symbolic use of colour. The film abstracts the characters relationships with each other through colour – before Sam, Emily, and Scarlet form a family unit, it is already visible in their colour scheme. This colour scheme is the combination of yellow, orange, and red formed into a generational family system – yellow represents the child, orange the mother, and red the grandmother. At the same time, the yellow-orange-red system also signals their work: the yellow is the apprentice (as Emily does call herself Sam's apprentice), the orange is a proficient assassin, and the red is the legend.

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<sup>21</sup> See chapter 2.

The yellow-orange-red connection is slowly built during the course of the film. Past some minor blips of orange tones here and there, the first of the colours is presented in Sam's flashback. The title card that takes us back in time is the size of the entire screen and it is yellow, signalling that we will be travelling into Sam's childhood. Fifteen years in the past, Sam's younger self is wearing a red-and-yellow striped shirt and holding a stuffed tiger while waiting for her mother at the diner. The fact that she wears the red-and-yellow striped shirt signals Sam's two sides: yellow for the fact that she is a child in the flashback, and red for the fact that she is now an assassin looking back. And although warm tones in flashbacks tend to be associated with nostalgic memories, Sam's flashback reverses those warm expectations since the flashback is where her mother abandons her. The colours of red-orange-yellow are then absent for a while, until Sam abandons her *film noir* aesthetic and decides to rescue Emily. On her way to Gutterball Bowling, she calls Nathan to tell her plan and at that moment the tunnel in the background is such a bright yellow that it almost visually overpowers the whole scene. The yellow then continues when we first see Emily at VideoBeast: she is wearing a bright yellow coat that will last her the entire film. At the same time, Sam has been forced to swap clothes at Gutterball Bowling, and she is now wearing a bright orange baseball jacket. When Sam and Emily escape the mall together, they form a duo of orange and yellow. Despite there being no hint at their future relationship yet, since Sam intends only to return Emily to her father, the two have formed a unit already.

However, Emily's father is dead, and Sam and Emily must escape McAllister's men, which leads them to Sam's long-lost gunslinging mother Scarlet. Since Scarlet is always dressed in mute and earthy tones such as dark green and brown, she does fit the colour unit visually. However, her name is Scarlet, a homonym of the fiery red

colour, and this in turn makes her fit the unit perfectly. The three characters form a colour progression from yellow/child to orange/mother and finally to red/grandmother long before the true family unit forms: at this point Sam is still reluctant to keep Emily around, and Sam and Scarlet's relationship is rocky. Brinckmann argues that "color sometimes anticipates what is coming in order to express, for instance, that two people belong together" ("Cinematic Color as Likeness" 18). This is the case in *Gunpowder Milkshake*, because the colour combination of yellow-orange-red anticipates a family unit. This family dynamic is present in the colours, even when it is still a joke in their lives, as Scarlet, in shock, asks whether she is now a grandmother when she sees Emily for the first time, to which Sam exclaims an unnecessarily loud "No! Oh God no!".

Yet there is also an aspect of Scarlet and Sam's work in their colour dynamic. As was argued earlier, the yellow-orange-red can also signal the characters' professional status in addition to the family unit. Considering this, it is interesting how Richard Allen recognizes that in Hitchcock's films the "bright, saturated, and solid yellow, orange, and red either individually or in sequence or combined in the same image [...] indicate progressively greater degrees of danger" (131). This reading also works for *Gunpowder Milkshake*'s colours if one considers the professional aspect instead of the family aspect: the redder the colour, the more dangerous that person is as an assassin. In favour of danger signalling, there is also the fact that Emily's yellow jacket keeps getting stained with blood throughout the film. First someone leaves some bloody fingerprints on it, and later it has a huge bloody handprint on it, which shows Emily is losing her innocence and becoming corrupted by the crime.

Overall, however, the family unit reading of yellow-orange-red is stronger than the professional reading, since the colour combination is linked to other family units in the film: that of great cats. The film continuously has tigers, lions, and other large felines referenced on screen. The first instance is the aforementioned stuffed toy tiger Sam has with her in the flashback when her mother abandons her. When Sam later changes to the orange baseball jacket in the Gutterball Bowling Alley, it is noteworthy that the jacket has a huge tiger on its back accompanied with the text “Rollin Roars”. The ‘Rollin Roars’ tiger is also, after the stylised end credits, the last image of the film as it moves slowly up with the rest of the credits. Meanwhile, Emily shows a similar interest in great cats. For example, in the background of the scene at Scarlet’s house Emily is watching a Discovery Channel documentary about lions. A moment later, she changes to another documentary, this time one about lynxes. The documentary references Sam’s newfound role as Emily’s future caretaker when the voiceover says the lynx mother now has “the additional burden of needing to care for her twelve-month-old daughter”. In other visual great cat cues, there is also the huge painting of a lion family in the back wall of the library, and Sam has a duffel bag that says in orange letters “I <3 Kittens”. All the great cats in the film are notably shades of orange and yellow, with the other coloured great cats missing (such as black panthers or snow leopards). This already connects the cats to the family unit Sam, Emily, and Scarlet form. In addition, the cats themselves are often presented in family formations, as in the documentary and the painting, or in family contexts, as in Sam’s stuffed toy animal and her choosing the tiger jacket for Emily’s rescue mission. The lions, lynxes, and tigers seem to signal that the characters will form a family and that they are as dangerous as the great cats. Women are often connected to cats in Western culture, as Clea Simon says that cats and women are “bound to each other”, and that

“women and cats are so closely identified as to be, in our descriptive language at least, almost interchangeable” (Ch. 1). But Simon also argues that women, through their connection to cats, “are feline” and “epitomize sensuality” (Ch. 1), and this is where the great cats of *Gunpowder Milkshake* separate from the stereotype. The women of the film are not sensual – far from it, in fact. The film’s ‘women are cats’ connection is that of power and danger, because the great cats are dangerous beasts, not household pets. The film creates a new layer of empowerment to the cats-women connection: if women are like cats, women are like tigers. And Sam does resemble a tiger in her orange coat and red hair – she does not just wear a tiger patch on her jacket, she is a tiger.

### **Take the Blue Pill, It’s the Right Choice – Blue and Red**

By now we have looked at how *Gunpowder Milkshake* uses colour in its disconnected world building and its character designs in accordance with how the previous analysis chapters looked at colour usage. However, *Gunpowder Milkshake* does something more with colour that neither *John Wick: Chapter 1* nor *Kate* did – this colour usage, anomalous to the other films, is how the film contrasts blue and red to show a character’s choices visually. This is because Sam’s new family does not just suddenly form to replace her assassin life – in fact, it is created from Sam’s deliberate choices of choosing family over work. This family-work contrast is represented by the blue-red contrast, where blue corresponds to family and red to work.

For most the question of blue versus red is familiar from the film *Matrix* (1999). In the film, the protagonist Neo (Keanu Reeves) is made to choose between knowing the truth about humanity (red) or continue living in the matrix in a lie (blue). Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) tells Neo: “You take the blue pill, the story ends.

[...] You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland.” Neo then chooses the red pill and learns of the horrors of humanity, but the film frames the red pill as the right choice, and the blue pill as the wrong choice. Sam is making the same choice in *Gunpowder Milkshake*: You choose the blue options, your assassin story ends, and you live a normal life. You choose the red options, and you stay in ‘Assassin Land’. But in contrast to the *Matrix*, *Gunpowder Milkshake* frames the blue option as the right one and the red one as the wrong one.

*Gunpowder Milkshake* does not rely on a single scene and two pills to frame this choice between the two. Instead, the film has several scenes that contrasts bright blue and red colours side by side, and depending on which side Sam is standing, it is the choice she is making. In addition, some scenes have only one of the colours, either red or blue, signalling that Sam’s choices have led there. Also, in direct contrast with the *Matrix*, Sam chooses more than once over the course of the film: in the beginning she makes red choices, but towards the end the choices are turned towards the blue.

In the first scene of the film, we are introduced to the *film noir* styled dark room, which in fact has two windows, one on either side of the room. The window on the right is blue, while the window on the left is red and there is a man sitting in front of it. The overall composition of this first scene is reminiscent of a scene in the musical *West Side Story* (1961). In *West Side Story*, the coloured windows appear as Maria (Natalie Wood) and Tony (Richard Beymer), two lovers from rival gangs, wonder whether they will have a future together after a murder takes place. The windows are next to each other, and the colours are mixed (both windows have blue and red squares), and whether Tony and Maria choose love (the red windows) or family (the blue windows), their arguments leads them to move in front of the

respective windows in Maria's room. Eventually Tony and Maria embrace and fall into the red window's side and then off screen. The choice of red love unfortunately leads to Tony's death in the end.<sup>22</sup> Something similar is taking place in *Gunpowder Milkshake*. In its blue-and-red windowed room, it is revealed that Sam has been standing in the middle of the room, in the dark, unbeknownst to the audience. Sam shoots the man in front of the red window without hesitation, situating herself with the now murder-connected, and therefore assassin-connected, red. Later, when Sam goes to kill Emily's father, she shoots him in a similarly red room.

The film, however, keeps posing the choice despite Sam's quick choice of red. When Sam realizes Emily has been kidnapped and decides to go save her, Sam's car is distinctly blue on the inside. This is the first time she is choosing to go against Nathan and the Firm, and her work as an assassin as well as the first time the dominant colour of a scene is blue. At Gutterball Bowling, the choice is posed again when Sam faces off against Nathan's men sent to recover the money from Sam: the huge pixel-wall behind her is red in the middle and blue on the sides, and so Sam is stuck in the middle, stuck in the red fighting Nathan's men, while she is in a hurry to save Emily by escaping through either blue end of the room. After rescuing Emily and running into Scarlet, Sam and her new companions must escape yet again, this time from Scarlet's house. Now the red is not posed in contrast – instead, it appears alone at the end of the hallway they are running down as a bright red infinity-mark shaped neon sign. It is like a warning sign that the assassin life cannot be escaped because it is infinite since at this moment things seem hopeless. Yet in the end, Sam

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<sup>22</sup> There has been academic work on the colour use of *West Side Story* (1961), connecting colour, race, and chromophobia in the film, which shows that colour is an important part of the design of the film. See Lauren Davine's "'Could We Not Dye It Red at Least?': Color and Race in *West Side Story*" (2016).



and Emily gain their freedom, and when they drive off into the sunset, they are in a blue minivan in accordance with Sam choosing blue.

Sam saving Emily, aka. choosing blue, lead her to become free from the Firm and created the family unit she now has. Colour is therefore used to abstract Sam's choices in a visual manner. At the same time, the driving off into the sunset plays with the convention of the cowboy riding into the sunset at the end of the film done by both westerns and western parodies (Turner 231), but whereas the cowboy rides off alone, Sam drives off with a family. The lone hero does not exist at the end of *Gunpowder Milkshake*. The facts that Sam chooses the blue in opposition to the *Matrix*'s red, and that she drives off into the sunset with a family instead of alone, places the women of *Gunpowder Milkshake* in opposition to the choices and conventions of the traditional masculine versions of the genre. Sam choosing blue does not limit her in a family unit, as Purse argues with her containment strategies<sup>23</sup>, but instead frees her from being controlled by the men of the Firm. The women's family unit, therefore, is a liberating choice and an alternative to old genre conventions.

### **Conclusion – A Patchwork World of Colours**

*Gunpowder Milkshake*, overall, uses colours in many different ways: it is used to make the film's surreal world feel even more unreal and disconnected through flat colours and continuously changing colour schemes that correspond to different genres and eras. The film first appears to be moving forward in time since the eras follow each other in order (1940s, 1950s, 1980s, 2000-2010s), but in the end the film reverses the time progression and ends with a 1970s styled end title. It is a final

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<sup>23</sup> See chapter 2 for Purse's containment strategies which include the family unit.

reversal of expectations from the film and a jump back in time to give Sam a second chance at having a normal life. *Gunpowder Milkshake* leaving the current 2020s untouched also leaves the future open for action women – we do not get to see what their life would be like now, but instead an idealised driving into the sunset ‘back’ in the 1970s.

The different colour schemes of the film include the dark of *film noir*, the flat pastels of the 1950s, the bright neon colours of the 1980s, the light and ‘colourless’ colours of the 2000s in accordance with the then newly popular minimalism (Valan 59), and the warm tones of the 1970s in the end. Yet the film also uses its colours to anticipate a future development – the family unit of Sam, Scarlet, and Emily. This is created by combining yellow, orange, and red into a system that corresponds to generations in a family (yellow/child, orange/mother, red/grandmother). The colours are the colours of Emily and Sam’s coats, and that of Scarlet’s name. This system is present long before the family unit is actually established at the very end of the film. These colours are also connected to the great cats, such as tigers, lions, and lynxes, in the film to show what kind of a family they will create and what kind of women they are. Finally, the film also uses colour in a distinctly anomalous manner to contrast Sam’s choice between family and work visually by contrasting blue and red. Blue corresponds to family and red corresponds to work. In the beginning, Sam makes choices connecting her to the red, but when she decides to go against the Firm, the blues appear as an option.

*Gunpowder Milkshake* using such abundant colour is a clear challenge to the action genre norms and conventions, as is having a woman as the protagonist. While the comedy can be seen as a way to make Sam more believable as an action star,

since comedy is a containment strategy for women,<sup>24</sup> it is also a way to make fun of the masculine genre. The patchwork world created by the film allows Sam as an action woman to exist in the different eras of action, even those inaccessible to lead women during their times, such as *film noir*. The film shows great awareness of the genre's origins and conventions through the disconnected world which it uses to highlight the genre's constructedness and to show how ridiculous it is. Yet the film also transforms the genre through creating an alternative, colourful women-led action trio (Emily, Sam, Scarlet). This new trio combined with the constructed-to-be-unbelievable world recreates often demeaning women's stereotypes in new empowering forms: the connection between cats and women is turned into a connection between the dangerous beasts of the great cats and dangerous assassin women. The family unit is not a limitation for the woman, but a freeing all-women unit that rejects the man's world. The film therefore argues for a new version of the action genre and action women.

Yet at the same time there exists a kind of ambivalence: the rejection of the normative action genre ending by getting a family turns into a rejection of the action overall – Sam chooses her new blue family over the red life of an assassin. It rejects the alternative world the film created, because it seems that in the end there is no place for women in action, and that it must be abandoned to be free. This ambivalence could not be overcome, had the film's final image not been the 'Rollin Roars' logo from Sam's jacket. After the happy, actionless ending we see the dangerous tiger again, which serves as a reminder that the women do not stop being dangerous and capable of action even if they leave the action life. The women do not stop being tigers, they just choose a different life. Meanwhile figures such as John

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<sup>24</sup> See chapter 2 for Purse's containment strategies.

Wick cannot choose, nor can they leave: John is hunted for three additional films despite trying to escape the assassin life. *Gunpowder Milkshake*, therefore, empowers its action women by giving them the possibility of choice.

## 6. Conclusion – Explosions of Colour Tear Down Masculine Norms

I began this thesis by arguing that when colour is used in the action genre, it tends to fall to the women-led side of the action genre, whereas the man-led action films remains faithful to the original masculine colour scheme. This in turn makes the different direction taken by these women-led action films visible: they overtly fight against the genre norms through colour and try to challenge the genre by offering alternative, colourful action worlds. Furthermore, I argued that the use of colour in the films was not used merely to further the visual excess of the already visually excessive genre, but rather to construct the films' world and characters because the colours are added to these films according to a logic, not piecemeal as visual splashes.

*John Wick: Chapter 1* connects its use of bright and vibrant optical colours to the antagonistic criminals and their underworld which is in direct opposition to John himself. Through this connection the film is able to use colours that do not follow the action genre's colour norms without challenging the genre itself: when John wins and the antagonists lose, John's colour scheme begins to dominate the film, which in turn cancels out the bright colours of the criminals. This means that colours lose in the film through their connection to the defeated antagonists, which in turn can be interpreted as a rejection of colour by the film that is in accordance with the genre's norms. At the same time, both sides of John as a character are distinctly colourless, and his assassin side is reliant on the darkness that is common to the action genre, which means that John as a hero is a colourless hero appropriate to the genre. When he is connected to colour, referring to the yellow-dominated torture scene at the end half of the film, even then the colour yellow is more strongly connected with John's wife Helen than John himself, and John must reject that colour (and his domestic life

in the process) as well to win. Thus, rather than only relying on the defeat of the antagonists in the film sufficiently showing the film's rejection of colour, the film also has its protagonist personally reject colour in favour of his assassin dark. Therefore, *John Wick: Chapter 1* 'gets away with it' when it comes to colour usage, because in this case the colours are antagonistic.

*Kate* begins in the same fashion as *John Wick: Chapter 1*, by presenting us with an action genre norm following world and characters, yet taking it further to a point where everything becomes plainly stereotypical. In fact, the film's beginning is purposefully plain and uninspiring, because it must work as the point of contrast when the film presents its alternative world inspired by Japanese Cute. This alternative world is created by non-diegetic pink, which is a bold choice in a colourless genre, not only because non-diegetic colour is rare in all film genres, but also because pink is so distinctly connected to women. In a masculine genre, pink is the furthest diversion from the norm a film can take, and this combined with having two leading women creates a new, feminine version of the genre. The pink alternative Tokyo, having been undone as a stereotype by interference from the pink figure of the *maneki-neko*, is then used as a way to undo the character stereotypes of the two lead women as well. *Kate* therefore uses colour in a way that directly challenges the genre: it presents action genre stereotypes and then eradicates them through the change inspired by the use of pink. However, what is especially interesting about *Kate*'s colour use is not that it uses colours, but that it intentionally misdirects the audience in the beginning so that they believe the film is another typical, 'run-of-the-mill' action film before reversing the direction. Since *Kate* is doubly different from the normative action genre (aka. has a woman protagonist *and* uses bright colours), this kind of division into two might ease the audience into the film: introduce the leading

star first and make her believable, then change the colour scheme. The film therefore presents an indirect challenge to the genre, one that can be thought of as either deceitful or cunning: reversing audience expectations suddenly might be critiqued heavily, yet at the same time a direct challenge might not be the most successful strategy when attempting to lure in an audience that is accustomed to the typical action genre.

*Gunpowder Milkshake* is one that embraces the direct challenge to the genre wholeheartedly since the film's worlds and characters are colourful from the very beginning to the very end. Because the film has no comparison point for the typical action genre visual aesthetic within the film itself, unlike *John Wick: Chapter 1* and *Kate*, the film must rely on its own world and characters to challenge the genre overtly. *Gunpowder Milkshake* therefore builds a disconnected world that resembles a collection of set pieces by relying on contrasting colours and styles connected to different eras and genres. Through this disconnected and unreal world the film highlights the constructedness of the action genre, but to not alienate the audience, the constructedness is shown with a lens of comedy that makes a point of how ridiculous it all is. Yet the film does even more through colour: to challenge the genre further, the film uses colours to signal the three leading women's relationship to each other by creating a family unit through colours before such unit exists, and these family colours are simultaneously connected to the repeating figures of great cats in the film. The film therefore connects its action women into an all-women's family made up of great cats, thereby updating the 'women are like cats' stereotype into 'women are like dangerous tigers' as well as making the family unit a liberating rather than a restricting choice for women. Furthermore, the film visualises Sam's choice between the new family unit and her assassin work through the use of colour by connecting the

different options to different colours (blue and red). *Gunpowder Milkshake* not only challenges the genre by showing the artificial nature of action worlds through its own patchwork world, but also updates the genre by providing an alternative action world where women form a dangerous family of tigers.

In conclusion, I have explored the exceptional use of bright and vibrant optical colours in the typically dark and cold-toned, almost colourless action genre through these three films, and in conclusion, the genre's aberrant colour usage has proven to be more than mere play with visual excess. It has shown that the action genre's tense relationship to colour can be navigated in two ways: either by respecting the genre's visual and stylistic norms by associating any use of colour with the antagonists of the film, thus making a negative association to colours, or by using bright and vibrant optical colours in direct opposition to the genre's stylistic norms, thereby both highlighting the genre's stylistic choices' constructedness (as well as the genre's constructedness as a whole) and creating alternative, women-led action worlds. Style-norm breaking colours in the action genre are not mere visual excess – instead, they provide a way to challenge the genre. Therefore, when the action genre's persistent visual norm is a masculine darkness, explosions of colour create space for new worlds and new ways of being.



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