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Abstract:

‘Too Good for this World:’ Keanu Reeves, God of the Internet

This essay examines the memefication of Keanu Reeves in 21st century digital remix culture, exploring the cultural investment in an idea of him as being ‘too good for this world.’ To reflect on how Reeves, in the middle-aged period of his stardom, has become a receptacle for good will and positive affect, the essay situates his internet stardom in relation to the rise of the ‘sad man’ meme. Exploring the networked affective processes through which Reeves’s star persona has taken on recharged cultural significance, the essay argues that the surge of internet memes surrounding the actor work to articulate cultural anxieties and desires surrounding male stardom in a post-cinematic, #MeToo era. While the essay explores how the cultural adulation of Reeves wards off deep seated concerns about male stardom as a central site for the reproduction of toxic masculinity, it concludes by sounding a cautionary note about the risks and limitations of such worship.

Key words: networked affect, internet memes, masculinity, stardom, #MeToo

Biographical Note:

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‘Too Good for this World:’ Keanu Reeves, God of the Internet

In July 2019, a video was posted to YouTube in which Keanu Reeves stops an armed robbery in a convenience store. He defuses the situation by telling the robber, ‘listen, whatever is in that register, I’ll triple, and I’ll match that to a charity of your choice’. The onlookers in the store watch in awe (‘he’s so nice!’), as Keanu says he would rather ‘give than receive’.¹

Putting himself in harm’s way, he tells the robber and the man behind the cash register (who has also pulled out a gun) to point their weapons at him instead. Totally selfless and kind to everyone, Keanu offers his sports car to the robber as a getaway vehicle, volunteers to be a hostage, and ultimately disarms and disables the criminal in an extraordinary display of John

Wick's style physical skill, strength, and agility. The video ends with Keanu apologizing to one of his fans for the interruption and signing his autograph.

'Keanu Reeves Stops a Robbery'!, which, at the time of writing, has over 16 million views, is, of course, not real: it is a 'deepfake' video, as revealed by the creators in a follow up video: 'How We Faked Keanu Reeves Stopping a Robbery' (How We).² While we might watch, marvel, and possibly be alarmed at, the extent of such digital wizardry, what the robbery deepfake video distills to great effect is Keanu Reeves's star image as the kindest, most generous man in Hollywood. Indeed, the video is funny precisely because it is not that far off the real-life stories of 'Keanu kindness' that abound on the internet and which are collated into listicles such as: '13 Times Keanu Reeves Was the Greatest Person Ever' (Torres 2019); '27 Awesome Things About Keanu Reeves That Will Make You Fall In Love With Him Even More' (Baliūntaitė 2019); and 'This Is Keanu Reeves' Resumé of Kindness: If You Don't Like It, You Must Be Dead Inside' (kickresume, 2019).

This essay seeks to account for the affective and ideological stakes of the internet deification of Keanu Reeves as 'too good for this world'. It reflects on the memefication of Keanu Reeves in 21st century digital remix culture,³ with a view to better understanding the cultural investment in an image of him as a saintly figure, a beacon of humbleness and goodness in these turbulent social and political times. What is it about this male star, at this cultural moment, that makes him such an exemplar of loveliness?

As star studies has taught us, Keanu Reeves's star image needs to be understood not only in terms of his imagined personal, individual attributes (humbleness, generosity etc.), but as a socially and culturally constructed text that taps into a set of historically located cultural fantasies about idealized masculinity and stardom (Dyer 1986). At this particular juncture of his stardom, Keanu's star persona is centrally rooted in the internet, where it circulates in what Francesca Sobande describes as a 'transnational landscape of connectivity'

(2021, p. 1), in which social media networks transverse national boundaries to generate global ecologies of celebrity and stardom. Whether it is deepfake videos on YouTube, or ‘Legends of Keanu’ on Twitter (in which people recount stories of his kindness), Keanu’s mythologized and commodified status coheres through the affective dynamics of a digital mediascape.

There are important cultural and contextual factors that produced fertile conditions for the online spreadability of Keanu-as-meme across the internet in 2019, the most significant being the 2017 public exposure of Harvey Weinstein as a longstanding sexual predator. The Weinstein sexual assault charges reverberated across Hollywood and the wider world, as the #MeToo movement revealed the extent of sexual exploitation and abuse in the entertainment industry (and beyond). As journalist William Hughes bluntly puts it, ‘our current collective obsession with Reeves is fuelled, at least in part, by his meeting the very low bar of just being a famous male actor who simply doesn’t seem to be a piece of shit’ (2019). Add to this, the political context of Trump’s America, where the figure of the white male supremacist monster loomed large (and tweeted regularly) and the explosion of memes around Reeves’s saintliness in 2019 (and beyond) can be explained as fulfilling a deep psychological and cultural yearning for there to be male A-listers who represent goodness and decency.

Reeves’s deification needs to be understood as a raced and gendered phenomenon. As celebrity studies scholars have shown, gendered and raced discourses intersect to determine which celebrities are adored and in what kinds of ways (York 2018; Sobande 2019). To be revered as ‘nice’ in the kind of unadulterated, unproblematic, and hypervisible way of Keanu Reeves is to inhabit an unquestioned position of ‘gendered and race privilege’ (York 2018, p. 3).⁴

And yet what makes Reeves so interesting as a star text is how he both embodies privilege and undoes it. Reeves is ‘white’ but he is also not white. He is biracial, with a white,

English mother and a father who is of Hawaiian, Chinese, Irish, and Portuguese descent. Reeves is 'straight' but he is also somehow queer. He has starred in touchstone homo-erotic films (*My Own Private Idaho*; *Point Break*) and has responded to rumours that he is gay (at one point in the 1990s there were whispers he was married to David Geffen) with affability and a strong anti-homophobic stance. Reeves is 'hot' (to use internet parlance) but there is an androgyny to his beauty and physicality that disturbs a dominant hetero-masculinism. Finally, Reeves may be an iconic 'American' star, but he is also, notably, a Canadian citizen.

This unsettling of binary oppositions and identity categories is what has arguably facilitated his memetic veneration on the internet. Additionally, Reeves's much-discussed 'default blankness' as an actor (Suderman 2017), which has frequently been chalked up to poor acting skills, is what encourages cultural projection onto his image and makes him such an ideal meme. To fully understand the cultural stakes of Reeves's digital anointment as a celebrity Jesus and the 'internet's boyfriend', this essay considers how his perceived star qualities of purity, innocence, and kindness have mobilized attention in a networked economy of celebrity. Reflecting on how Reeves, in the middle-aged period of his stardom, has become a receptacle for good will and positive affect, the essay situates his internet stardom in the wider context of the memefication of male stars in twenty-first century digital media culture, with a particular focus on the rise of the 'sad man' meme. Examining the networked affective processes through which Keanu's star persona has taken on recharged cultural significance, I argue that the surge of internet memes surrounding the actor serve as a key site for the public articulation of cultural anxieties and desires surrounding male stardom in a post-cinematic, #MeToo era. Finally, at the risk of raising the ire of Keanu fans everywhere, I conclude by sounding a cautionary note about the investment in him as a failsafe emblem of goodness.

Sad Keanu

The origins of Keanu Reeves's memefication as an internet divinity can be traced back to May 2010, when, during a 'quiet time' in his career (Bryant 2019), a paparazzi photo appeared of the then 46-year-old actor looking forlorn and downcast as he ate a sandwich by himself on a park bench (Figure 1). According to Know Your Meme, within days of the photo being published, 'sympathy for Keanu spread virally across Reddit,' and 'Sad Keanu' became an internet phenomenon, proliferating with abandon across social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter (Sad Keanu).

The 'Sad Keanu' meme struck a cultural chord because it tapped into key aspects of Reeves's star persona, specifically the tragic details of his personal life and an already prevalent sense of him as a lonely, melancholic figure.⁵ As Daniel Warren and Kate Palmer suggest, the Sad Keanu meme 'was effective because it played with and amplified pre-existing perceptions of Reeves', feeding into his star image as the 'moody emblem of Generation X in films like *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), or the reluctant hero of *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis, 1999)' (2019, p. 131). But Sad Keanu – and the subsequent Keanu-is-too-good-for-this-world collection of memes that emerged almost a decade later – are of interest not only for how they amplify the actor's individual celebrity persona but for how they operate as collective, networked expressions of affect.

As a prominent form of online communication, internet memes exemplify Susanna Paasonen's notion of 'networked affect' as 'the spread, attachment, amplification and dissipation of affective intensities' (2018, p. 283). An affective understanding of media practices and digital technologies as 'carriers of mechanisms that articulate, direct, intensify, and orient feeling within context-specific social and political configurations' (Rentschler 2017, p. 12), is central for thinking through the cultural work of celebrity memes. Though they might appear to be funny, light, and inconsequential (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017, p.

484) – a form of ‘snackable’ media as it were – celebrity memes serve as conduits for ‘powerful feelings’ (Rentschler 2017, p. 12) and are part of a wider digital media ‘face culture’ (McBean and Dineen 2018, p. 124) which transmits social ideals and messages. As John Mercer and Charlie Sarson note, ‘Celebrity in the age of social media is increasingly predicated on, and in fact demands, virality and memeability; a compression, simplification and multiplication of messages and this tendency has become a feature of the discourse of celebrity more broadly’ (2020, p. 11). Most significant for my purposes, is Mercer and Sarson’s observation that: ‘Memes and memeability work on the basis of a facility to summon up a mood, an attitude or shared cultural sensibility’ (2020, p. 9). I am primarily interested in the kind of ‘mood’ and ‘cultural sensibility’ evoked by Keanu-as-meme and the ways in which that mood enables the cultural expression of a particular set of ideals regarding masculinity and stardom.

In order to unpack the particular pathos of ‘Sad Keanu’, and the role it played in cementing the actor’s status as a god of the internet, it is useful to consider its relationship to the genre of ‘sad man’ memes. Indeed, Sad Keanu is not an isolated phenomenon. In 2009, the year before Sad Keanu, there was Crying Jordan, in which a video clip of basketball superstar Michael Jordan crying profusely during his Basketball Hall of Fame induction speech went viral and was turned into a meme ‘frequently used by sports fans to convey sadness in reaction to the defeat of their favourite teams’ (Crying Michael). However, as journalist Kenzie Bryant suggests, the over-the-top emotion provided by Crying Jordan is not the same as the more controlled and ambivalent sad man memes that emerged in 2010 and ran throughout the decade. As he writes: ‘The emotion evoked in the sad-man memes is one withheld. It’s steely and it’s existential, a despondency that comes long after crying. The farce of male grit hilariously laid bare’ (Bryant 2019). Since Sad Keanu appeared, there have been memes of other sad male A-listers, including Sad Affleck⁶ and, more recently, Sad Will

Smith. These memes, which afford internet users the opportunity to directly play with images of male stars, reiterate, expose, and at times call into question, dominant cultural tropes of masculinity and emotion.

Sad Affleck is especially interesting as a point of contrast to Sad Keanu. The Sad Affleck meme emerged in 2016 when Hollywood actor Ben Affleck gave an interview about his superhero film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. When the interviewer asked Affleck and his younger co-star Henry Cavill about the lukewarm reviews the film was receiving, Cavill answered in a jovial, animated manner, while Affleck looked sadly off into space. As explained on Know Your Meme, that same day a YouTuber remixed the interview footage, overlaying it with a collage of headlines from bad reviews of *Batman v Superman* and an audio track of Simon and Garfunkel's 'Sounds of Silence', and the Sad Affleck meme was born ('Sad Affleck').

Though at least one meme quipped that 'Sad Affleck was the new Sad Keanu', there are notable differences. Ben Affleck's star image is of an alpha male, a throwback to an older style and era of masculinity: he is depicted as resolutely heterosexual; a heavy drinker and smoker; and, in the wake of his split and eventual divorce from Hollywood actress Jennifer Garner, a womanizer. His 'middle-aged-white-male sadness' is largely a source of mockery for the internet (Fry 2019). Memetic humour is derived from juxtaposing Affleck in relation to his younger, fitter, and more agile male co-stars. By contrast, Sad Keanu's version of middle-aged ennui evoked fervent internet affection and an outpouring of sympathy; as *Time* magazine reported, there was even a 'Cheer Up Keanu Day' declared on June 15, 2010, with fans offering 'to give money to cancer research, donate bone marrow or organize charity walks in the actor's name (Reeves' sister has been diagnosed with leukaemia, hence the interest in cancer charities)' (Suddath 2010). In her widely circulated 2019 *New Yorker* piece, 'Keanu Reeves is Too Good for this World,' Naomi Fry suggests that: 'unlike the "Sad Ben

Affleck” meme, which came in response to a swaggering alpha male’s public descent, Sad Keanu was not animated by schadenfreude. It simply brought to the fore the retiring, not-long-for-this-world sensitivity that we had always intuited was there’ (2019).

While Fry rightly identifies the difference in affective tone between the Sad Affleck and Sad Keanu memes, I contend that it is important to understand the ways in which the schadenfreude directed towards Affleck works in tandem with the sympathy directed towards Keanu, as part of a wider system and affective/political economy of celebrity rise and fall (Cross and Littler 2010, p. 408, Andò and Redmond 2020, p. 1). After all, Keanu’s brand of gentle and noble masculinity achieves its cultural power only in contrast to the images of beleaguered masculinity that now litter our mediascape. As Romano Ando and Sean Redmond write, following the #MeToo movement there was ‘a veritable polluted sea of falls from grace and the perversion of star and celebrity images: it was if desecration was now...the central determinant of celebrity culture’ (2020, p. 1). Amidst the detritus of this spoiled and sullied masculinity, Keanu emerges as a good object in the Kleinian, psychoanalytic sense of the word, as a means of working through ambivalent feelings about male stardom.

In her psychoanalytic analysis of fallen celebrities for *Celebrity Studies*, Caroline Bainbridge argues that there is a ‘therapeutic dimension’ to audience attachment to the famous, who function as ‘psychological and emotional objects of the mind’ (2020, p. 79). Discussing the British entertainer Jimmy Savile and the sexual abuse scandal that emerged after his death,⁷ Bainbridge reflects on the ‘emotional work involved in the collapse of faith in celebrity icons’ (2020, p. 75). One of the ways that a loss of faith in previously revered celebrities is collectively processed is through rehabilitating an idea of male celebrity as virtuous and worthy of our idolization. The widespread cultural desecration of male stars that occurred post 2017 was embedded in the ‘new circulation processes’ of digital media (Andò

and Redmond 2020, p. 2), which afford internet users new forms of engagement – and control – over rise and fall celebrity narratives. Following Bainbridge’s argument, I suggest that the creative and collective work of building up an image of Keanu as a pristine figure is animated, even if unconsciously, by a desire for masculine stardom that is unburdened by scandal, especially of the sexually abusive variety.

While a combination of forces coalesced to single out Keanu Reeves as a touchstone of 21st century male decency, it is interesting that his internet adulation should be rooted in the sad man meme, a genre which more broadly evinces an attempt to process changing perceptions of masculinity. In this regard, it is relevant to note that Affleck, Reeves and – and, as I will discuss below, Will Smith – are male *action* stars, a form of cinema strongly associated with a dominant, active, and authoritative brand of masculinity. The sad man memes mentioned here – taken from extra textual moments outside of cinema – are highly gendered as well as raced and derive humour from the perceived emasculation of Hollywood’s male action stars.

In the Sad Will Smith meme from 2020, for example, the actor’s emotional response to his wife’s affair is a source of ridicule. The meme emerged following an episode of Jada Pinkett-Smith’s Facebook talk show, Red Table Talk, in which the couple discussed what Pinkett-Smith referred to as her ‘entanglement’ with younger male musician, August Alsina. Smith was visibly upset during their chat and the video clip of his swollen, tearful face gained millions of views and generated thousands of memes. The emasculation that lies at the heart of Sad Will Smith memes is neatly captured by this memetic caption to a photo of the actor’s emotional face: ‘he’s gotta rebrand now. He’s just Smith now. The man in that photo has no will’ (‘Sad Will Smith’). The ‘Sad Will Smith’ memes resonate within the context of what Hannah Hamad has discussed as the racially marked celebrity coupledness of Jada Pinkett-Smith and Will Smith. It feeds into racially inflected constructions of Smith as a black

husband and father and to an idea of the ‘functional (rather than dysfunctional) black family’ (Nelson quoted in Hamad 2015, p. 119). Keanu Reeves’s brand of sadness plays differently and is attached to perceptions of his loneliness as a (then) single male star.

Gender is also a significant factor for how the ‘sadness’ of Keanu and other male stars is received and responded to. For example, the networked affect that drives the sad Keanu meme is decidedly different in tone from that which infuses the tabloid-fuelled invention of ‘Sad Jennifer’ (Aniston). The gendered discourses that construct ‘sad Jen’ play upon sexist tropes and perpetuate a narrative that she is ‘ceaselessly heartbroken’ and dependent upon male validation for her happiness (Donaldson 2018). Contra this misogynist rendering of female stardom, the affective energy of sad Keanu memes is fuelled by a cultural desire to elevate his male stardom and to generate wistful fantasies around his status as a love object.

Ultimately, despite variation depending on differing star personas, the appeal of sad man memes seems to derive from their display of a silent and remote masculine despondency, which enables internet users to have a sense of domination over the images. Tina Kendall (2018) has suggested that Laura Mulvey’s notion of ‘possessive spectatorship’ can help to account for the cultural desires at play in the internet memefication of male stars. The longstanding desire on the part of cinema spectators to have close contact with stars, which in the past was realised through fan materials such as promotional posters, magazines, and pinups, is fulfilled in new ways in participatory internet culture. While audiences have always been part of the making of a star’s image, they have not always been able to produce ‘massively available media images’ (Dyer 2004, p. 4) in the way that they can now do with memes. As Kendall observes, in a post-cinematic world of digital interaction and participation, stars become like ‘toys’ for internet users (2018). Through the remixing and sharing of internet memes, fans gain a sense of intimate engagement with stars who they had previously venerated (or maligned) from afar. If, as Mulvey suggests, digital technologies

reconfigure ‘desire and pleasure’ and can bring about a ‘changed power relation of spectatorship’, the question is raised: to what extent does the memefication of male stars disrupt cinema’s historically dominant gendered power dynamics by affording audiences a newfound control over them as objects (Mulvey 2006, p. 164, p. 167)?

This is a difficult question to answer, and I retain a healthy scepticism about the possibility of any meme to overturn longstanding gendered power dynamics of the gaze. But what is significant, beyond the representational issues at stake in the image, is how memetic culture intervenes in the material reality of male stardom. I find it quite striking how the sad man memes mentioned above demanded – and received – a response from the male stars represented in them. In other words, it is strongly indicative of the value of memetic culture to 21st century celebrity status and image, that Reeves, Affleck, and Smith (and their PR teams) felt compelled to publicly respond to their memetic treatment. Ben Affleck responded to Sad Affleck with wry humour, both in interviews and through tweets – ‘I’m doing just fine. Thick skin bolstered by garish tattoos’.⁸ Will Smith responded with ‘joking’ videos, which aimed to do two things at once: strongly refute the claims that he was crying during the talk with his wife (he was tired, it was late, he drinks a lot of coffee which dehydrates the eyes etc.) *and* present the Smith family brand as emotionally caring and supportive of mental health awareness.⁹ There are a set of serious social issues – namely male alcoholism and male depression – that are simultaneously referenced and elided in these sad man memes, as well as in the carefully tailored responses to them.

Reeves has also responded to the Sad Keanu phenomenon when pressed by journalists, and he has done so by expressing a polite, detached, and at times almost intellectual interest in what he refers to as the internet’s ‘re-contextualizing’ of the paparazzi photo of him sitting on a park bench (cited in Bryant 2019). While Reeves has acknowledged the intrusion of the original paparazzi snap of him eating a sandwich, he has, for the most

part, expressed a respectful bemusement regarding his memefication. And well he might, for the Sad Keanu meme has played a noteworthy part in rejuvenating his acting career and boosting his star persona. In 2014, Reeves landed the role of John Wick, the titular character in what forms a highly successful trilogy of violent action/thriller films (*John Wick* was followed by *John Wick: Chapter 2* {2017}; and *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* {2019}). The origin story of the series is one that is deeply informed by the Sad Keanu meme: John Wick is a retired assassin, who, after the death of his beloved wife, lives alone in a large house with the puppy that his wife gave him upon her death bed to help him deal with his grief. When a group of Russian gangsters break into his home, steal his vintage car, knock him unconscious and kill his puppy (a beagle called Daisy), John Wick seeks violent retribution. As Hadley Freeman suggests, ‘one of the canniest things about the Wick films is how they riff on Reeves’ public image’ as a sad and melancholy figure (2019). With the John Wick franchise, Sad Keanu becomes fully incorporated into a rebooted version of Keanu as Action Hero, with a notion of sadness now inextricably attached to the violent action of the titular character. Sadness here thus serves a commercial function and is slickly managed and commodified by the film industry. The integration of Sad Keanu into Keanu Reeves’s star brand is further underscored by the recent news that Reeves himself has now remixed Sad Keanu (as a form of ‘homage’ to the famous meme) for a comic book series he co-created and co-wrote (Powell 2020).

As will be discussed in the next section of this essay, many of Reeves’s performances are now designed to capitalise upon public perceptions of his inherent goodness and help to maintain his brand of virtuous masculinity at a time when male actors are being called to account for their standards of behaviour.

Memeability and The Keanuaissance

In November 2019, the trailer for the animated children's film *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run* (Tim Hill, US, 2020) was released and its unexpected star attraction was Keanu Reeves in the role of a wise tumbleweed: 'Call me Sage, I'm made of sage and I am a sage so it works out pretty well'. The cameo humorously exploits the internet deification of Reeves, presenting the actor as a disembodied, bearded face, bathed in a beatific glow, floating in the middle of a tumbleweed (with his appearance cued by the Gen X soundtrack of Motley Crue's 'Kickstart my Heart').

Appearing towards the end of 2019, the image is a quirky but fitting encapsulation of the 'Keanuaissance', a term that references the revival of Reeves's career in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Designed for social media circulation, the *SpongeBob* trailer blatantly uses the memetic value of Saint Keanu to generate internet traffic and produce likes, clicks, and shares. This calculated use of Reeves's golden memetic status is a striking example of how the actor's performances since 2014 (the year the first *John Wick* was released) are self-consciously produced for networked media culture and gifability.¹⁰ Writing on how meme production is 'progressively being deployed in a more self-aware manner, drawing on irony and camp and becoming part of the image-making strategy of celebrities', Mercer and Sarson contend that 'memeability is the charisma of the social media age; a form of algorithmic charisma that crystalises the intangibility of star quality into compressed, shareable, reproducible, "GIFable" content' (2020, p. 11). This notion of 'algorithmic charisma' seems especially applicable to Keanu Reeves, a 'notoriously inexpressive actor' (Shaviro 2007, p. 45), whose blankness and inexpressiveness suits the rhythms of the internet, and the desire to ascribe, assign, and share positivity.

There is a close relationship between Reeves's 'algorithmic charisma', his increasing turn to cameo roles, and memetic internet culture. Reeves's cameo in the Netflix Asian

American romantic comedy, *Always Be My Maybe* (Nahnatchka Khan, US, 2019), provides a striking example of how films and media corporations now strategically deploy the Keanu-is-too-good-for-this-world meme and of how audiences respond to it. In a tongue-in-cheek performance, Reeves appears in *Always Be My Maybe* as ‘Keanu Reeves’ – Sasha’s (Ali Wong) new boyfriend and Marcus’s (Randall Park) love rival. To a large extent, the pleasure of the performance comes from how it gives the audience license to delight in Keanu Reeves masquerading in the role of the male-actor-as-bad-object, safe in the knowledge that he is ‘really’ a good one. There is arguably a therapeutic dimension to this play with Reeves’s star persona in so far as it allows for a certain working through of anxieties and fantasies around male stardom in the current cultural climate of desecration and cancellation. If, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the cultural worry is that behind every male star there might lurk a dark tale of violence and toxicity, it is possible to evince a kind of magical thinking at work in the investment in Reeves as a good object. The cultural construction of Reeves as a talismanic figure serves as a way of warding off deep seated concerns about male stardom as a central site for the reproduction of toxic masculinity.

Netflix’s marketing campaign for *Always Be My Maybe* actively fuels the power of Reeves’s networked image as an icon of goodness; shortly after the film’s release, it tweeted a clip of Keanu’s star entrance in the film, with the caption: ‘We don’t deserve Keanu Reeves’. Almost immediately, the film clip became an internet meme with its own Twitter account: ‘Keanu Walking to Music’.¹¹ Users remixed the slow-motion scene to their own song choices; examples include Keanu walking to the Cure’s ‘Just Like Heaven’, Keanu walking to ‘Sweet Child O’ Mine’ by Guns and Roses, and Keanu walking to ‘Whatta Man’ by Salt n Pepa. The joke of the meme, and what makes it so successful, is that Reeves’s star entrance works no matter what song it is set to because it provides fans with the opportunity to swoon over Reeves to their favourite music. Described by *The Huffington Post* as

‘delightful concoctions’ (Wanshel 2019), the 20 second clips of ‘Keanu Walking to Music’ revel in setting the star’s body in motion to a chosen soundtrack. They operate as intensive ‘blocs of sensation’, to borrow a phrase from Sean Redmond (2019, p. 63). According to Redmond, ‘our encounters with celebrity are sensorial and multi-modal, involve joy and pleasure, and at their most are asemiotic – activated in and through feeling alone’ (2019, p. 63). Redmond locates a liberatory potential in this sensory engagement with stars, which he sees as offering fans ‘intensified possibilities’ for expressions of identity (2019, p. 63). Without wanting to discount the value of this, I am interested in pushing further at the implications of such sensory, networked public engagement with Keanu as an internet star-text. What does it mean, culturally speaking, to be pleased by Keanu memes in this way? What might be the socio-political implications of these affective nuggets of positivity and of Keanu’s consecration as an internet deity more generally?

#MeToo and The Internet’s Boyfriend

In the final section of the essay, I consider these questions in relation to the status of Keanu Reeves as a sterling example of ‘the internet’s boyfriend’. As Francesca Sobande has noted, ‘The term “the internet’s boyfriend” is typically used in reference to high-profile men who are a source of desire—broadly defined—which is extensively expressed online, including across social media and content-sharing platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, as well as in articles and output produced by media organisations’ (2021, p. 3). Typically, it is handsome young cis-gendered heterosexual white men who are positioned in this way. Though at 57, Keanu Reeves is by no means young, his youthful appearance is much discussed by fans online, as well as in media pieces that rhapsodize about his beauty sometimes using racially inflected (and problematic) descriptors such ‘almond eyes’ to reference his ethnicity in coded ways (McCrae 2019; Reilly 2019).

The label of the ‘internet’s boyfriend’ is ephemeral, and shifts from star to star according to the cultural whims and desires of the digital mediascape; in other words, it is by no means exclusively linked to Keanu Reeves. Nonetheless, Reeves has persistently occupied the role in recent years with his compassionate, ‘vulnerable’ style of masculinity being viewed as the necessary antidote to the brutish, toxic masculinity exposed in the wake of the #MeToo movement. In the online media coverage of the ‘Keanuaissance’ it is often what he is *not* or what he has *not done* that garners attention: ‘There have been no drunk altercations with police officers; no recordings or accusations of him abusing anyone, and subsequently, no #MeToo faux apologising; no violent threats; no childish spats on social media, no brawling, no beat ups. No great, horrific reveal about a scandalous double life’ (Reilly 2019).

In *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Karen Boyle discusses how the #MeToo stories that circulate about celebrity figures ‘involve men we think we know, doing things which prompt us to re-examine our affective investments in them’ (2019, p. 93). #MeToo, in other words, has significant implications for film and television cultures and ‘has put the conditions of our pleasures under the microscope’ (2019, p. 94). The networked positivity which buoys up Keanu’s star persona thus needs to be viewed in terms of the cultural investment in male stars, and a wider public anxiety over the ‘pleasure-destroying’ properties of #MeToo.

The collective positive affect generated around Keanu Reeves’s star persona as a saintly figure works to rehabilitate notions of male stardom in a climate of intensified accountability. This is the point of the ‘hover hand’ meme, which consists of a collage of photos of Reeves posing for pictures with various women, in which he respectfully hovers his arms over their backs, thereby avoiding any untoward touching of their bodies. This viral meme was deployed to consolidate Reeves’s star image as a gentleman par excellence. As CNN excitedly announced in an article entitled ‘Keanu Reeves not touching women is a thing’: ‘Not only is he having a moment where the world has fallen in love with him all over

again thanks to his movie and streaming roles, but now you can add a new accolade to the list. Reeves has mastered the art of posing with women without being grabby' (Respers France 2019).

Twitter responses to the hover hand meme demonstrate awareness of its resonance for the cultural moment, with many suggesting that Keanu's hover pose is a 'reaction' to the #MeToo movement. While there is a degree of debate over whether Keanu's hover pose is wholesome and considerate *or* cynical and litigiously aware, what's interesting in any case is how the meme – and the responses to it – make apparent the links between the 'Keanuaissance,' the cultural processing of #MeToo, and the attendant issues of male stardom and gendered power.

As sexual and ethnic 'emblems' of their time (Dyer 2004, p. 3), stars have long served this kind of cultural processing function. For instance, in her analysis of Rock Hudson's star image over several decades, Barbara Klinger has explored how his star persona as a 'beefcake idol' in the 1950s 'functioned defensively against changing conceptions of masculine power and sexuality in a post World War II era' (1994, p. 98, p. 99). As Klinger suggests, the media 'developed Hudson's image as proof of the widespread appeal and endurance of uncomplicated virility. They helped sustain, that is, a certain brand of traditional masculinity in the face of great public turmoil over appropriate social and sexual behaviour for men' (Klinger 1994, p. 99). Reeves' star image also serves to help sustain an idealized conception of masculinity amid turmoil over #MeToo, even though this persona is not imposed from above as a mere studio construct but is a complicated amalgam of user-generated content and industry discourse, which circulates through an online economy of stardom.

Although much of the appeal of Reeves derives from how he provides 21st century media culture with a different version of what it means to be a man, the masculinity

associated with his star persona arguably does not diverge in a significant way from hegemonic forms of masculinity. What Sobande writes of Timothée Chalamet, another popular, if much younger, ‘internet’s boyfriend’, is also true of Keanu Reeves: his is ‘a masculinity ambiguously marketed as modern and different without explicitly articulating or expressing a sense of queerness,’ and does not present a ‘radical challenge to the masculinity status quo’ (Sobande 2021, p. 14). Although queerness has been attached to Reeves’s image (through roles he has played and through fan networks and gossip), it has not been sufficiently strong or explicit enough to dislodge his star persona from dominant, idealized conceptions of a mainstream, action-cinema brand of hetero-masculinity. Similarly, while Reeves’s Asian American heritage is also undoubtedly part of the appeal of his image as an alternative kind of male star, his appearance largely conforms to dominant conceptions of white male Hollywood stardom and does not substantially rewrite definitions of what it means to be handsome in Hollywood.

The limitations of a vision of Saint Keanu for rewriting dominant conceptions of male stardom became perceptible, to an extent, when the internet’s boyfriend got a girlfriend. When paparazzi photos emerged of Reeves with his partner, artist Alexandra Grant, in November 2019, they went viral, and were immediately swept up into the buzz of networked positivity around Reeves’s star text. There was an explosion of tweets expressing joy for Reeves finding happiness after his personal heartbreak, praising him for dating someone who was ‘age appropriate’. As one social media user tweeted: ‘It’s a miracle: Hollywood actor dates age-appropriately. An artist with a full head of grey hair to boot. Keanu, I could not love you more at this moment’.¹² Remarks on Grant’s silver hair and age abounded, with media headlines drawing explicit attention to the age differential, such as this example from *Bored Panda*: ‘Keanu Reeves, 55, Goes Public With His Alleged Girlfriend, 46, For The First Time Ever’ (Grinevičius and Balčiauskas 2019). On the one hand, public response to the

news was largely positive and demonstrated critical awareness of tiresome gendered double standards in Hollywood whereby male actors routinely date women half their age at the same time that older female actors are side-lined and judged more harshly by the industry and media culture at large. On the other hand, the extraordinary levels of praise Reeves received for dating someone nine years younger, is itself problematic and indicative of the political limits of his public adulation as a Good Man. The dark underside of the networked positivity that envelops Reeves surfaces in reports that Alexandra Grant was subjected to trolling and misogynist abuse online regarding her appearance and her age. In one case, the abuse was so bad that she had to take out a restraining order against a Keanu fan (Rawden 2020).

Conclusion: The Limits of Loving Keanu

During the COVID-19 global health crisis, media opinion pieces emerged that discussed the ‘dismantling of the cult of celebrity’ in the wake of COVID-19 (Hess 2020; Sigee 2020). It was asserted that, as stars took to Instagram during lockdown in order to try to remain relevant, the nature of the interaction between Hollywood and the general public was shifting, and disparities of wealth and privilege were exposed anew in particularly grating ways. However, as an examination of the contemporary star text of Keanu Reeves should make clear, the magical status of stars as living ‘gods and goddesses’ (Tyler 1970, p. xxvi) remains pertinent.

Limor Shifman argues that memes reflect ‘deep social and cultural structures’ and operate as a kind of ‘folklore in which shared norms and values are constructed...’ (2013, p. 15). The folklore of Keanu Reeves as ‘God of the Internet’, constructs a vision of an idealized masculine stardom, one that can be held onto fervently amid ongoing public re-evaluation of acceptable standards of sexual conduct in Hollywood and beyond. The problem is that that very idealisation is what has helped to create and sustain a culture whereby longstanding inappropriate sexual behaviour, harassment, and abuse is allowed to go on

unchecked. In the cases of R. Kelly in the US, and Jimmy Savile in the UK, to name just two high profile examples, blind adoration of male celebrity and the culture that supported it, is what enabled sexual abuse to occur and to keep occurring.¹³

This is not in any way to align Keanu Reeves with the predatory behaviour of these male celebrities; rather, it is to reflect on how the cultural championing of him as a saintly figure orients public feeling towards an idea of male stardom, at a time when public revelations of endemic male celebrity sexual predation are ubiquitous. But, as many feminist scholars have cautioned, if the #MeToo movement is to have lasting relevance, it is necessary to move beyond a discussion of individual celebrities as monsters (and, I would add, as ‘gods’) to uncover the structural conditions that allow cultures of silence and abuse to be perpetuated (Boyle 2019; Horeck 2019). The vision of male stardom supported by Reeves’s cultural adulation is therefore what must be called into question.

Writing at a time before the advent of social media networks, Klinger notes that the ‘star is never a mere celebrity but a bundle of media constructed traits that reflect cultural preoccupations’ (1994, 97-98). This remains the case even in an era where social media platforms and their affordances offer new, more direct opportunities for internet users to remix and affectively engage with star images. As I have argued in this essay, a large part of the appeal of Keanu as internet star text, whether it is openly acknowledged or not, comes from how he enables cultural processing around male stardom in the #MeToo era. It is no accident, I suggest, that the public swelling of support and affection for Reeves has emerged at a time when anxieties around so-called ‘cancel culture’ – defined as the public removal of support for stars because of something offensive they have said or done – have intensified. An idea of the purity and saintliness of Keanu is held in counter point to a looming notion of the offensive, out of step celebrity, who behaves badly and abuses their power. This is to say,

in the face of the desecration of celebrities, the collective affect ascribed to Reeves' image allows for positive, uncomplicated expressions of pleasure and delight in masculine stardom.

The cultural elevation of Reeves as an internet god serves to fend off worries that male stardom is, fundamentally and possibly irredeemably, a site for the reproduction of toxic masculinity. While the internet validation of Reeves as a shining example of just how pure and good male stardom can be, might be born of a need to be hopeful and to imagine a positive alternative, there is a worry that what falls out of sight is the very question of why such deification might be problematic in the first place. Keanu Reeves may very well be too good for this world, but we mustn't lose focus of the need to re-structure the world itself.

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Notes

¹ Because Keanu Reeves is more generally known as ‘Keanu’ – indeed I would argue that the familiar use of his first name is part of his star image as friendly and down-to-earth while at the same time saintly and celestial – I will use his first name at certain points during this essay.

² See Lisa Bode (2021) for a fascinating analysis of the deepfake Keanu video which explores how networked publics make sense of such digitally manipulated images.

³ See Francesca Sobande (2019) for a discussion of digital remix culture.

⁴ Reeves’ performance of extreme humbleness can be understood as what York describes as ‘reluctant celebrity’, which she argues is a product of gendered and raced privilege (2018, 2-3).

⁵ The tragic details of Keanu Reeves’s personal life circulate widely online. One viral Facebook video, which has apparently been watched over 100 million times, recounts his biography as a succession of personal sadness and tragedy, from the time his father left him when he was five years old, to his struggles with dyslexia in high school, the death of his best friend River Phoenix from a fatal overdose when he was 23, the still born birth of a child with his girlfriend, Jennifer Symes, the death of Symes 18 months later in a car accident, and his sister’s fight against leukaemia (<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/keanu-reeves-tragic-story/>). See <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1286229764756576>

⁶ As this essay went to press, Sad Affleck became happier as reports of his rekindled relationship with Jennifer Lopez were dominating the media.

⁷ Jimmy Savile (1926-2011) was a popular British television and radio personality. After his death in 2011, an independent inquiry, Operation Yewtree, established that he had sexually abused hundreds of people across several decades, including children.

⁸ See <https://twitter.com/benaffleck/status/979371324979245056?lang=en>

⁹ The video in which Will Smith refutes that he was crying during the Red Table Talk can be found on his YouTube channel at <https://youtu.be/g0FiR8yAYG0>

¹⁰ As Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield define it, a GIF is a ‘communicative device’ and a 30-year-old file format that enables the endless looping of image sequences: the animated Graphics Interchange Format’ (2017, p. 2).

¹¹ The Twitter account ‘Keanu Walking to Music,’ has since been suspended for reasons unknown (copyright to songs could be an issue) but evidence of the impact of the meme can be found at

https://twitter.com/search?q=Keanu%20walking%20to%20music&src=typed_query

¹² See

https://twitter.com/search?q=%20a%20miracle%3A%20Hollywood%20actor%20dates%20age-appropriately.%20An%20artist%20with%20a%20full%20head%20of%20grey%20hair%20to%20boot.%20Keanu%20I%20could%20not%20love%20you%20more%20at%20this%20moment.%20&src=typed_query

¹³ The docu-series *Surviving R. Kelly* (Bellis and Finney, US, 2019) details how Kelly’s celebrity status as a pop star protected him despite widespread awareness of his sexual misconduct and abuse of under-age girls. The justice system ignored his abuse in part because his victims were young black girls and women who are devalued in white patriarchy. Jimmy Savile’s abusive behaviours against vulnerable young people were also largely conducted ‘in plain sight’. See Boyle (2018) on this issue and the media coverage of Savile.