WIRED-31.03

WIRED

MAR 2023 ▪ TAKE TWO

KEANU AND CHAD

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINES



BY ANGELA WATERCUTTER

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The Matrix movies brought KEANU REEVES and CHAD STAHELSKI together.



photographs by ART STREIBER

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Now the singular duo is killing it on the fourth John Wick—and still saving us from the machines.

KEANU REEVES rarely malfunctions. Nearly any interview he does reveals as much. After four decades in Hollywood playing versions of the same fundamentally decent dude-in-crisis, he's learned to stay in his cyberpunk philosopher/surfing FBI agent/action hero lane. In person, he's pleasant and playful, but he also holds back, calibrating his remarks just so. Is this why we like him so much? We don't know who Keanu Reeves is, not really, but maybe we don't want to know. Or maybe this is all there is to know. He's a cipher onto whom we can project our own ideas, desires, and hopes for humanity.

So when Reeves, sitting with me in a cavernous studio in West Hollywood, ventures a feisty opinion about the latest advance in artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, I perk up. The question is whether a bot could conduct this conversation one day. While I, the human interviewer, am not so concerned this will happen in my lifetime, Reeves looks me dead in the eye and says, "Oh no, you should be worried about that happening *next month*." Very Gen X of him, I think at first, but then I remember: This is a man known for leading the revolution in the war against the machines. Reeves obviously isn't the characters he plays, but when Neo tells you the agents are coming, your instincts say, *Run.*

Not that Reeves is fighting many machines these days. For the past few years, he's been shooting up human baddies in the John Wick franchise, the fourth installment of which hits theaters this month. Reeves plays a hit man, out of retirement, bathed in ultraviolet lighting and battling an entire underworld of crime syndicates, all to avenge the death of his puppy. But the films are still an argument against machine-made anything. *John Wick: Chapter 4* director Chad Stahelski served as Reeves' stunt double in the Matrix movies—that's him in *The Matrix Resurrections* as "Chad," the guy who took Neo's place by Trinity's side—and he's adamant about capturing as much flesh-and-blood action as possible. "We're not anti-VFX," he says, seated on a couch next to Reeves. "Our problem comes when you use it in place of being creative." Perhaps that's one of the lessons you learn after working on four Matrix movies: Computers can't fix bad ideas.

While Stahelski and Reeves are off posing for photos for this story, a tweet flashes across my phone. It's a writer saying that one of his clients no longer wants to pay him for his work—because an AI will do it for free. (The client will pay a cheaper rate for him to clean up the AI's copy, if he wants.) When the shoot wraps, I pull Reeves aside and tell him about the tweet. He's probably right about the bots, I say. I attempt a joke, but he doesn't laugh. He gives me a thoughtful look, and then he gets explicit: Corporations don't care about paying artists. Well, what he actually says is this: "They don't give a fuck." It's a startling moment coming from Reeves, the most pointed and serious I've seen him all day. Corporations might not care, but he clearly does. That's one thing we can say about Keanu Reeves: In a world of fakes and frauds, he's fighting for what's real.

WIRED: I have to know, Chad, what was it like to play "Chad" in *The Matrix Resurrections*?

CHAD STAHELSKI: Oh my God. I will tell you, that was not my best day.

KEANU REEVES: It was a fantastic day.

STAHELSKI: I thought it was going to be no big deal. I think I knocked over the coffee stand. I couldn't eat. I had a croissant in my mouth. I flubbed my lines. It was tragic.

REEVES: Lana [Wachowski] thought you were perfect for the role.

Is it fair to say the John Wick franchise owes a debt to the Matrix movies?

REEVES: If we're gonna compare them, they both were original ideas with visionary filmmakers.

STAHELSKI: No one was under any delusion that *Matrix* wasn't going to be pretty awesome. Then David Leitch [codirector of the first Wick film] and I stayed on for *V for Vendetta* and *Speed Racer*, so we pretty much got a decade of Wachowski film school. The John Wicks are definitely children of *The Matrix*.

As an actor, what's it like working with the Wachowskis? I interviewed Eddie Redmayne when he finished *Jupiter Ascending* and remember him saying Lana's direction was often things like, "Play it like an accountant!"

REEVES: Um, I never got that kind of direction.

What *did* you get from them?

REEVES: Attention to detail, world-building, and having ideas as nourishment in your entertainment. That exists in *John Wick 4* too—the idea of freedom, the idea of choice with rules and consequences. How are you trying to break out of the system? John Wick has got a cool thing because everyone is bad. They're bad people. But they're also super moral and ethical. Well, not even ethical, but there's a code. You root for John Wick.

Which is extra impressive, considering that he's not some known IP. He's an original creation.

STAHELSKI: It's kind of cool, like, you don't have 60 years of Batman to work from. You don't get that to lift you up, but at the same time you don't have it to hold you down. Nothing's holding us back.

You don't have a Reddit thread of people scream-typing, "This isn't canon!"

REEVES: We've developed our own playground.

STAHELSKI: We just went with a bunch of ideas we loved. But we didn't go out with an agenda.

REEVES: Yeah, we did. We went out with *your* agenda of action as part of storytelling. And character. That was the fundamental base.

And on top of that, a commitment to minimal special effects?

STAHELSKI: We're not, like, at war with VFX. It's super handy, it's a great tool. But you can't beat the blood, sweat, and tears of real people.

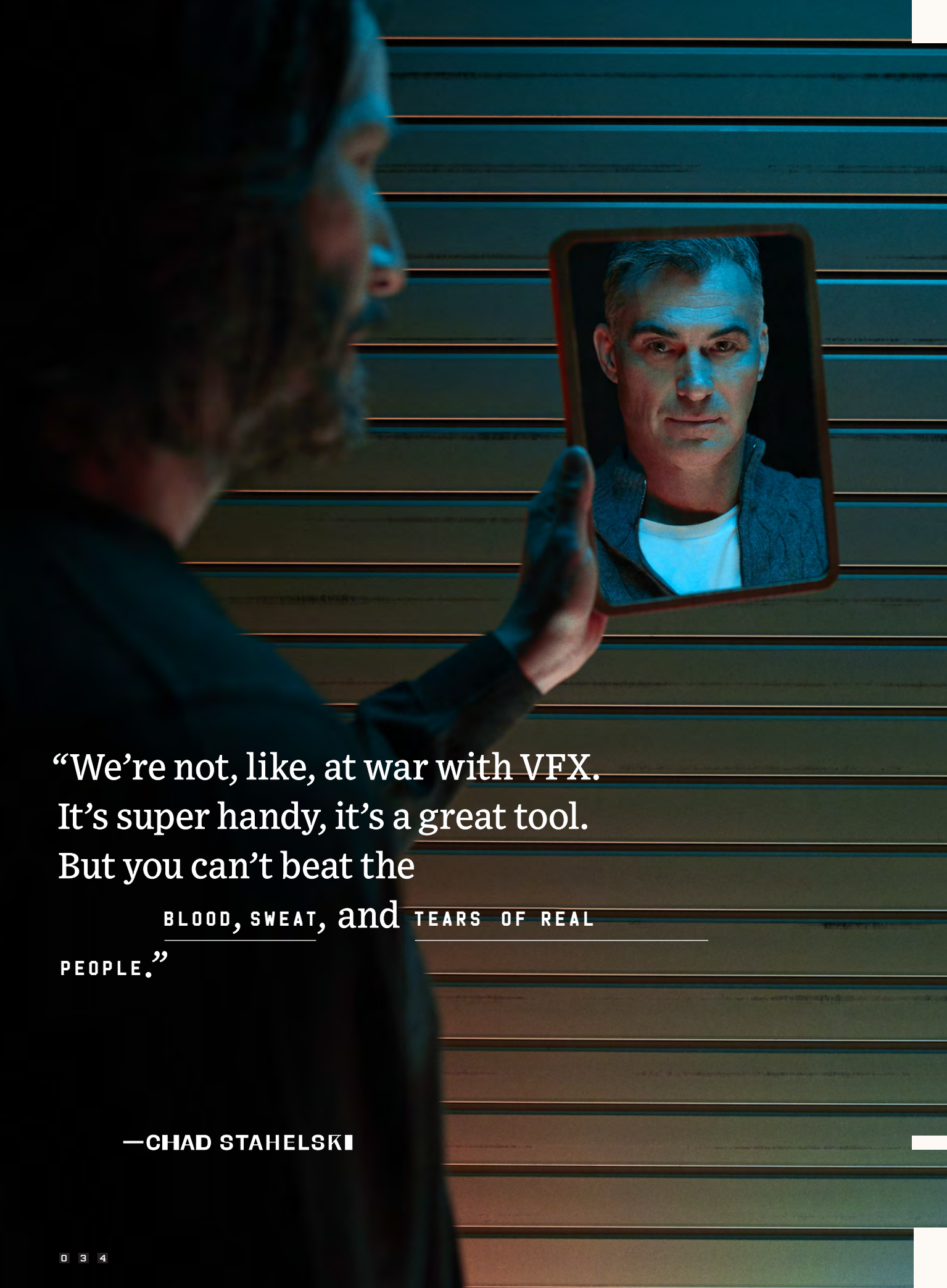


Keanu Reeves and director Chad Stahelski wanted to film highly choreographed action sequences rather than lean heavily on digital effects. It required some improvisation on-set, but that's part of the charm, Stahelski says. "It's the imperfection that makes it special."

REEVES: When you watch John Wick action scenes, it feels different. There's so much choreography. It's out on the edge.

STAHELSKI: And sometimes what we have in our heads doesn't work, so we have to change it. You can't rehearse 40 cars driving around in a parking lot, you gotta get it on the day. You don't know what's going to happen, so there's a little desperation. Some of the best moments we've had in all four movies are—if not accidental, they're incidental. It's the imperfection that makes it special.

STYLING BY JEANNE YANG. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY CHLOE TAKAYANAGI AND ELLA HARRINGTON (KEANU). EMILY DIDDLE (CHAD). GROOMING BY KERRI SMITH FOR SCHNEIDER ENTERTAINMENT (KEANU). JENI CHUA FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS USING KEVIN MURPHY (CHAD). SUIT BY BRIONI. T-SHIRT BY JAMES PERSE. SHOES BY MAGELLAN & MULLOY (KEANU, FIRST SPREAD). SUIT BY BROOKS BROTHERS. T-SHIRT BY HERMES. SHOES BY JOHN VARVATOS (CHAD, FIRST SPREAD). SWEATER BY BRIONI. JEANS BY FABRIC DENIM (KEANU, SECOND SPREAD). SWEATER BY ETRO (CHAD, SECOND SPREAD).



“We’re not, like, at war with VFX. It’s super handy, it’s a great tool. But you can’t beat the BLOOD, SWEAT, and TEARS OF REAL PEOPLE.”

—CHAD STAHELSKI



“Culturally, socially, we’re gonna be confronted by the VALUE OF THE REAL, or THE NONVALUE. And then what’s going to be pushed on us? What’s going to be presented to us?”

—KEANU REEVES

Speaking of incidentals in John Wick, those coins the hit men use. They look a lot like bitcoins, but Bitcoin wasn't very big when you made the first movie.

STAHELSKI: [*Laughs*] We're going to take credit for that.

It's kind of ironic how it's the cryptocurrency of this underworld. In the real world, crypto is having a tough time.

REEVES: I think the principle, the ideas behind an independent currency, are amazing. These are amazing tools for exchanges and distribution of resources. So to pooh-pooh crypto, or the volatility of cryptocurrency, it's only going to make it better in terms of how it's safeguarded.

Do you guys love science fiction?

STAHELSKI: I'm always big on sci-fi. Like, John Wick is hyperreal. But it's also got this analog sense. Old computers, old suits, old stuff.

REEVES: I'm interested in the storytelling of humans and their interactions with technologies.

Keanu, years ago you put a clause in your contracts saying that your performances couldn't be manipulated without your say-so. Isn't that right?

REEVES: Yeah, digitally. I don't mind if someone takes a blink out during an edit. But early on, in the early 2000s, or it might have been the '90s, I had a performance changed. [He won't say which.] They added a tear to my face, and I was just like, "Huh?!" It was like, *I don't even have to be here.*



Reeves and Stahelski met while making the Matrix movies; Stahelski served as Reeves' stunt double. Another Matrix alum, Laurence Fishburne, has been part of the John Wick franchise since *Chapter 2*.

And now someone like Bruce Willis has found himself getting deepfaked into Russian telecom commercials. As an actor, what do you think of deepfakes?

REEVES: What's frustrating about that is you lose your agency. When you give a performance in a film, you know you're going to be edited, but you're participating in that. If you go into deepfake land, it has none of your points of view. That's scary. It's going to be interesting to see how humans deal with these technologies. They're having such cultural, sociological impacts, and the species is being studied. There's so much "data" on behaviors now. Technologies are finding places in our education, in our medicine, in our entertainment, in our politics, and how we war and how we work.

***The Matrix* just looks more and more wildly prophetic by the day. AI doesn't control our lives yet, but ...**

REEVES: [*in his best Agent Smith voice*] They started making decisions for you. It became our world.

I was trying to explain the plot of *The Matrix* to this 15-year-old once, and that the character I played was really fighting for what was real. And this young person was just like, "Who cares if it's real?" People are growing up with these tools: We're listening to music already that's made by AI in the style of Nirvana, there's NFT digital art. It's cool, like, *Look what the cute machines can make!* But there's a corporatocracy behind it that's looking to control those things. Culturally, socially, we're gonna be confronted by the value of real, or the nonvalue. And then what's going to be pushed on us? What's going to be presented to us?

The metaverse!

REEVES: It's this sensorium. It's spectacle. And it's a system of control and manipulation. We're on our knees looking at cave walls and seeing the projections, and we're not having the chance

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SET BUILDING BY ANTHONY ALTOMARE. FILM STILLS: MURRAY CLOSE/LIONSGATE

to look behind us. Or to the side. I'm sorry to go on here, Chad.
STAHELSKI: No, it's great.
REEVES: It's also a fascination—it seems for us, the animals on the planet, like, *How do we defeat death? How do we change the weather? How do we replace nature?*

Should I be worried about AIs coming for my job?
REEVES: The people who are paying you for your art would rather not pay you. They're actively seeking a way around you, because artists are tricky. Humans are messy.

We push back, we have our own ideas.
REEVES: People in power don't want that, you know? So that's not your lifetime, that's like your next birthday. And before then, they're going to challenge how much they pay you. So everyone's gonna be an independent worker. *Look at all the independence you have! Let's not have unions.*

WIRED just unionized, actually.
REEVES: That's cool. See how long that lasts. Fingers crossed.

But yeah, in the meantime, now ChatGPT can write scripts that are just combining other ideas.
REEVES: Which is cool, because that's what artists do, right? We take our influences and we synthesize them. But what's the intention behind that synthesis?
STAHELSKI: I'm all for the tools. It's just, we want to control the choice behind it. We had AI-produced digital art for some background stuff in John Wick. The younger staff are into that world, and they were like, "Hey, this would be cool. Let's try it."

Keanu, you recently became an adviser to the Futureverse Foundation, which is focused on diversifying the metaverse. How did you get involved with that?
REEVES: It's something my partner, Alexandra Grant, is really interested in, so I'm kind of riding her coattails. I helped set up the launch. We're trying to take this technology that people are interested in and give opportunities to artists with different viewpoints.

When you look at a company like Meta, which has made building in the metaverse a priority, the entry points there aren't accessible to a lot of people.
REEVES: It's like they've created more land. There's more land for sale. It's wealth creation and it's opportunity.

But I have to believe in-person experiences are here to stay. The release of *John Wick: Chapter 4* got delayed a couple times because of Covid-19. Was it important to you to release it theatrically?
STAHELSKI: Maybe it's our generation, but I like seeing a movie in the cinema. Even if it's meant for streaming eventually. It's such a different experience.
REEVES: It's dreams, right? And immersion. I think the power of cinema—part of it is its novelty, but also its scale. You see a close-up of a wonderful performance with emotions and storytelling that touch you. Whether it's horror or action or comedy, you're seeing a face that's, you know, 20 feet tall. Yeah. You're, like, there. The intimacy of that.

It seems like people often project a lot onto their heroes online. Is it weird being internet-beloved?
REEVES: It's nice when it's nice, but I'm sure it's super horrible when it's horrible.

Well, there were people who made mods to have sex with your character in *Cyberpunk 2077*...
REEVES: Getting it on with Johnny Silverhand?! I hope it was good. I'm sure Johnny tried hard.
STAHELSKI: I'm sure he gave it his best...
REEVES: If he cared. [*Laughs*] He's kind of bitter.
STAHELSKI: Emotionally empty.
REEVES: He's not emotionally empty. He cares so much, and the world's so corrupt and he's just trying to get some back!

Do you have a favorite Keanu meme?
REEVES: No. I don't seek them out. Once in a while people show 'em to me when they're fun.
STAHELSKI: Keanu with the sandwich is probably my favorite.

Sad Keanu!
REEVES: The original!

On that note, we need to wrap up. I guess this is the time to say "Be seeing you."
REEVES: It's always fun when I'm out in the world and people say, "Hello, Mr. Wick."

How long before that was it people imitating Agent Smith and saying "Hello, Mr. Anderson"?
REEVES: Oh, I still get that.

This interview has been edited and condensed.