

Being Keanu

In *The End of Cinema as We Know It*, Ed. Jon Lewis, NYU Press, 2001)

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If there is such a thing as an exemplary figure of US cinema in the 1990's, Keanu Reeves may be it. Within the context of this volume, such a statement may seem rather like a cheap joke, as if Keanu--dismissed as a "slacker Ken doll" whose acting skills and general intelligence have often been the object of ridicule--were symptomatic of a pre-millennial degeneration of cinema: "the end of cinema as we know it." In such a joke, Keanu would be cast as symbolic of not only a cinematic but a cultural decline, in which prettiness triumphs over intelligence, style over substance. Keanu, in other words, would stand as the very emblem of the banality and sheer stupidity of the postmodern culture industry.

It is not, however, my intention to launch yet another critique of the obvious shortcomings of contemporary US cinema and culture. Nor do I wish to make any argument concerning the intelligence, or presumed lack thereof, of Keanu Reeves. If Keanu is emblematic of anything about 1990's cinema and culture, and I believe that he is, it has much less to do with vague notions of stupidity or banality than with important cultural changes in how identity is portrayed and perceived. Indeed, over the course of the last decade, Keanu's films--from the Bill & Ted movies (1989, 1991) to *Point Break* (1991) to *Speed* (1994) to *The Matrix* (1999)--have exhibited a consistent concern with issues of identity and its instability, with a lack of fixity that is often figured in these films' emphasis on movement.

At the same time, the case of Keanu highlights certain assumptions concerning identity that underlie a good deal of "serious" film--and cultural--studies, including the often unstated idea that "auteurs" and "actors" are active, thinking subjects (i.e., artists) while "movie stars" are passive objects, mere products of the culture industry. My point, however, is not that stars, with their increasing power in Hollywood and the consequent ability to shape their own careers,



should now be considered as artists or auteurs. [1](#) Rather, I want to suggest almost the opposite: if we wish to understand the movements of popular culture, it may be more productive to disregard our old notions of purposeful authorship--and identity--and to look instead at the fortuitous cultural patterns and associations that swirl around a star's persona and body of work. [2](#) I am not, then, arguing for Keanu Reeves as some sort of auteur, but for the cultural significance of the links and associations that make up his persona. [3](#)

Beyond Stupidity

Much of the derision aimed at Keanu is a result of the perception that he is dumb or, at the least, flaky. Keanu has, in fact, often described himself as "goofy." [4](#) Much of that perception was clearly a result of his role as Ted in the Bill & Ted movies. As Michael Shnayerson noted in his touchstone 1995 article about Keanu in *Vanity Fair*, "The dumbness rap grew out of *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. So well did he play the Valleyspeak teen and air-guitarist extraordinaire in the 1989 hit and its sequel that [many] assumed Keanu was Ted." [5](#) In fact, in many of his early interviews, Keanu seemed to be playing Ted off the screen as well as on. As Gus Van Sant, his director in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), noted for a 1991 article on Keanu, "Keanu can lapse into Ted. Sometimes he can be momentarily possessed." [6](#)

As time has passed, and Keanu has played more varied roles, the perception of Keanu-as-Ted has faded somewhat, but the conception of him as none-too-bright has remained. Indeed, both *Speed* and *Feeling Minnesota* (1996) have jokingly played on this perception. Even in *The Matrix*, his character is portrayed as, if not exactly stupid, then certainly something of an innocent. A number of his directors have, in fact, commented on this sense of "innocence." Kathryn Bigelow, his director in *Point Break*, has noted that there is "a purity and an innocence to him." [7](#) Similarly, Bernardo Bertolucci felt that "Keanu has an



innocence I felt was crucial to the role of Siddhartha--his innocence is on his face and it goes to the core of his personality, and that's why I cast him." [8](#) Yet, if a certain innocence translates well into such proto-messianic figures as Siddhartha and Neo, it can also be read as a kind of emptiness. Thus, for example, Lisa Schwarzbaum, in her review of *The Matrix*, can speak derisively of Keanu's "serene blankness" and can complain that she "can't get [Keanu] in focus as an actor." [9](#)

Charles Taylor, in his defense of Keanu in *Salon*, quotes a film critic who told him that "he thinks people look at Reeves and see nothing going on." [10](#) Keanu, in other words, is continually depicted in terms of vacuity and superficiality: as a kind of pure, blank surface, lacking all depth. In this, Keanu's persona is oddly similar to what Steven Shaviro has written of Andy

Warhol's films and art: "it has no latent content at all. His surfaces are impenetrable precisely because there is nothing beneath them, no depth into which one could penetrate." [11](#) Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the earliest interviews with Keanu appeared in what was, at the time, still called *Andy Warhol's Interview* .

Perhaps, too, it is not coincidental that in his discussion of Warhol, Shaviro--following the lead of Michel Foucault--has recourse to the very term that has so often been applied to Keanu: stupidity. For Foucault, stupidity was that which is beyond categories--a "magma" or "amorphous fluidity" that "carries one gently along and [whose] action is mimed in the abandonment of oneself." [12](#) Similarly, Shaviro figures stupidity as an "emptying out" of representation and significance, so that one is left with "something that freely offers itself to all categories of thought and representation, allows them to invest it and pass through it, yet somehow always effortlessly evades them" (208). Shaviro finds this notion of stupidity particularly relevant to Warhol's films:

All of Warhol's films . . . are marked by the literalism with which they evacuate all other significance and content in order to capture, record, and display the sheer, stupid, inert presence of bodies. . . . The body before the camera is a mute appearance, devoid of consciousness, will, or interiority. Warhol's "subjects" are emptied out, distanced and absented from themselves, drained of their subjectivity, and reduced to a silent (yet insistent) spectacle of bodily presence. (210, 212)

Rather like the "Superstars" that appear in Warhol's films, one might read Keanu in terms of this stupidity of the body, which presents nothing except its own materiality, which says nothing beyond its own physicality. The emptiness that is often perceived in Keanu's persona is precisely a matter of this insistent, mute--or, more appropriately, dumb--physicality. Numerous interviewers have noted his persistent reticence to speak, the long pauses between his answers: as a recent interview (titled, significantly enough, "The Quiet Man") observes, "A conversation with Keanu Reeves is not always easy." [13](#) Thus, Keanu is often presented as inarticulate, lacking the words to speak, lacking even something to say. He becomes little more than a face, a body--without depth, without an interior. More than one interviewer has noted that with Keanu, "what you see is what you get"--which is, of course, one definition of stupidity. Stupidity, in this sense, is always blatant.

Outside Beauty

This stupidity of the body cannot be dissociated, in Keanu's case, from his

obvious physical beauty. Much of the antipathy toward Keanu--including the perception of his dumbness--seems traceable to the sheer fact of his attractiveness. Indeed, by the traditional standards of masculine good looks, where "ruggedness" is supposed to demonstrate "character," Keanu is perhaps too perfect, too pretty. His good looks are too obvious, too visible.

Keanu therefore seems to fall victim to some of the same stereotypes that have commonly been attached to feminine beauty--particularly in Hollywood, where being beautiful has often been figured as being empty-headed, dizzy, or downright dumb. Charles Taylor has argued, in fact, that much of the resentment directed at Keanu is precisely the result of the fact that his beauty "represents a subversion of traditional sex roles." [14](#) As Taylor observes, "performers who have offered themselves most willingly to the camera have almost always been women. . . . Men, on the other hand, have traditionally acted to deflect attention from themselves, as if doing anything less would seem unmanly or feminine" (2). As "one of the few contemporary male stars whose presence acknowledges that people are out there in the dark looking at him," Keanu's physical attractiveness is, by traditional standards of masculinity, too visible, too out. Thus, the very visibility of Keanu's beauty may help to explain not only the persistent rumors that he is gay (most notably, that he was secretly married to David Geffen) but also the resentment and ridicule that have been directed at him, which Taylor reads as a manifestation of homosexual panic (2). Here, the idea that Keanu is so pretty that he must be gay overlaps with the notion that being so pretty, he must be stupid. For being beautiful, being gay, and being stupid have all been consistently associated with superficiality, with outward appearances, with manifest rather than latent content.

Portrayed both as ingenuous, without ulterior motives, and as without depth or character (even, or perhaps especially, in his on-screen roles), Keanu comes to be seen as lacking "identity": as an empty shell, a superficial image concocted by the mass media and the culture industry (which are, of course, well known as repositories of stupidity). There is, however, a certain seductiveness to this lack, as Shaviro notes of the body's stupidity: "we are incited to keep on looking, again and again, precisely because our desire for comprehension and control is never satiated. The more we look the less we are able to make anything of what we see; we can only abandon ourselves to it" (209). Thus, the very fact that Keanu's identity seems so superficial, so obvious, makes it difficult to comprehend; we are unable to "make anything of it." Keanu's supposed lack of identity therefore comes to be seen as something of an enigma.

In fact, as Keanu's star persona has drifted away from its early identification with Ted, it has become increasingly difficult for interviewers and critics to get a fix on him. The question of whether or not he is gay is merely one aspect of this instability. *Vanity Fair*, for example, described him as "a man who earns millions, yet lives out of a suitcase; a heartthrob who dates few women, yet fends off rumors of a gay marriage; an actor who can appear in *Bill & Ted's*

Excellent Adventure and *Hamlet* with equal conviction and appeal" before posing what it called "the essential question" about him: "just who is Keanu?" [15](#) This sense of mystery persists even today, as evidenced in the title of a recent *Rolling Stone* interview: "The Riddle of Keanu Reeves." [16](#)

Keanu, for his part, often seems to encourage this haziness about his identity. When asked by Dennis Cooper in *Interview* if he were gay, he denied it, but then added, "But ya never know." [17](#) When asked if it wouldn't "be useful to shoot the rumors down cold," Keanu was reportedly taken aback, replying "Well, I mean, there's nothing wrong with being gay, so to deny it is to make a judgement. And why make a big deal of it?" [18](#) More generally, Keanu has said that "I want to fall into all categories--and no categories!" [19](#)

Similarly, Michael Shnayerson reports the following exchange:

I wonder aloud if there isn't in Keanu some central struggle between discipline and nihilism--devotion to acting versus motorcycles, Buddhism versus sex, drink, rock 'n' roll. A dynamic. Keanu looks at me with bemusement. "I get one dynamic?" he says. "Can I have more than one? I want at least nine!" (148)

Perhaps even more telling, however, is Keanu's take on his own celebrity. Asked how he manages to deal with the constant intrusions by fans and autograph seekers, he replied, "I'm Mickey [Mouse]. They don't know who's inside the suit" (148).

Of course, even when played by an actor in a suit, Mickey Mouse has no "interior." He *is* his public persona, and that persona, much like Keanu's, is based on a certain naiveté, which persists throughout the different roles that he plays. Yet, this very shallowness (and Mickey is, essentially, a two-dimensional creature, born on the screen) seems to stir the desire to discover deeper desires, hidden proclivities, true identities. To some degree, the very act of being a star involves a superficiality, a public mask, that inevitably stirs interest in the "real identity" behind it. Yet, Keanu's star persona--in its superficiality--seems at once to exacerbate and confound this desire to know "just who he is."

The Movement of the Other

For all the attempts to categorize Keanu, his identity remains difficult to pin down, evading attempts at defining him. He remains little more than a face, a body, a name. Of course, as every fan knows, Keanu's name is Hawaiian, and means, as virtually every article or fan Web site on Keanu seems obliged to repeat, "cool breeze over the mountains." Yet, despite the ethnicity of his name, Keanu is often perceived as a "middle-class white boy," perhaps because of his early roles as an alienated teenager. Indeed, so strong is this perception that

some have assumed that Keanu is simply an "exotic-sounding stage name." [20](#) As the son of a Hawaiian-Chinese father, however, Keanu could easily be described as a person of color--although he rarely is. One might view this perception of Keanu's identity as yet another example in Hollywood's long history of effacing the ethnicity of its stars while retaining some measure of their "exoticism." In this context, however, it is worth recalling that, much as with (feminine) beauty, the "exotic" is generally associated with a physicality or sensuality that evades intellectual categorization or meaningful articulation. This notion of dumb, if usually happy, physicality has often been attributed to "other" races and cultures, [21](#) but is particularly pronounced in Western portrayals of Hawaiian and Pacific Island cultures as Edenic paradises filled with beautiful, sensual natives, untroubled by depth or thought.

If Keanu's name and persona continue to evoke these kinds of stereotypes, it is also the case that his persona raises certain questions about the division between the intellectual and the physical on which Western notions of identity, of the thinking subject, are based. Many of the roles that Keanu has undertaken have in fact dealt explicitly with issues of identity. *The Matrix* and *Little Buddha* (1993) are, for example, centered on questions involving the falsity of reality and identity, and the transformative possibilities of recognizing what might be called the "stupidity" of what is taken to be "real." In *Point Break*, as well, the story revolves around questions of true and false identity, with Keanu cast as a former star quarterback who becomes an FBI agent, who masquerades as a surfer, and pitted against surfers who become bank robbers, who disguise themselves by wearing masks of former Presidents. [22](#)

Yet, I am less concerned here with the explicit thematization of identity issues than with the way in which most of Keanu's films seem to highlight the significance of sheer speed and movement. From the surfing and sky-diving of *Point Break* to the speeding bus of *Speed* to the techno-acrobatics of *The Matrix*, Keanu's films often seem to emphasize a kind of fluid kineticism over character depth, over any fixed notion of "identity." [23](#) Indeed, while in most action films, movement serves as a demonstration of the hero/star's power and control, Keanu's action films often involve his being carried along by the movement, "surfing" it, at times even losing himself in it.

Of course, it is also true that Keanu's own movements seem to convey a grace that is almost entirely missing in the dynamics of action stars such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Charles Taylor, whose essay on Keanu is titled "Something in the Way He Moves," has written eloquently of the cinematic "erotics" of Keanu's movements and physicality, particularly in a film like *The Matrix*, which "allows us to revel in his physicality, which has always been such a strong component of his acting." [24](#) Yet, as Taylor notes, while movement is an accepted part of the performance of dancers and stage actors, when it comes to cinema, "having a sensual or kinetic response" is often viewed as an abandonment of critical or intellectual rigor. To enjoy such movement, to

become caught up in it, is to lose one's critical position, one's ability to know. It is to be ourselves carried stupidly along. This is, in a sense, the critical equivalent of the fear of "going native," only in this case what is feared is the loss of one's ability to think critically, to be a critical subject, when one is immersed in the stupidity of popular culture. What Keanu perhaps shows us, then, is that identity need not be based solely on a position of knowledge, on an opposition to what is seen as inarticulable, as stupid, or as other. In a world that some would say is increasingly stupid, we must be willing, as Keanu seems to be, to take the risk of being caught up in the indeterminate currents of that "amorphous fluidity" that Foucault associates with stupidity. Indeed, this risk--the risk of losing one's self in the stupidity of the motions and images that stream around us--has perhaps always been inherent to the cinema, and to popular culture more generally.

Notes

1. Obviously, the increasing clout of stars extends beyond just cinema. Consider, for example, the case of Madonna, who is often considered as the ultimate example of a star shaping her own career.
2. Indeed, it seems to me that such a procedure is to some degree similar to Jacques Derrida's practice of playing upon the associations inherent in the names of writers and philosophers for unsuspected clues to their work. In thus giving a place to what might appear to be chance connections, Derrida often discovers new ways of thinking about the work under consideration.
3. For this reason, also, I have followed the usage of his fans, and much of the press, by referring to him throughout this essay by his first name.
4. See, for example, Chris Willman, "The Radical Reality of Keanu Reeves," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1991, Calendar Section, p. 1.
5. Michael Shnayerson, "Young and Restless," *Vanity Fair*, August 1995, p. 96.
6. Quoted in Willman, "The Radical Reality of Keanu Reeves," p. 1.
7. Quoted in Willman, "The Radical Reality of Keanu Reeves," p. 1.
8. Quoted in Kristine McKenna, "Keanu's Eccentric Adventure," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 1994, Calendar Section, p. 3.
9. Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Techno Prisoners," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 9, 1999. Available at http://www.ew.com/ew/archive/1,1798,1|25536|0|The_Matrix,00.html (5/25/00).
10. Charles Taylor, "Something in the way he moves: In defense of Keanu Reeves," *Salon*, April 29, 1999, p 2. Available at <http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/1999/04/29/keanu/index1.html> (5/25/00).
11. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 206.
12. Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 188-89.

13. Chris Heath, "The Quiet Man: The Riddle of Keanu Reeves," *Rolling Stone*, No. 848 (August 31, 2000), p. 52.

14. Taylor, *Salon*. p. 2.

15. Shnayerson, "Young and Restless," p. 95.

16. Heath, "The Quiet Man: The Riddle of Keanu Reeves."

17. Dennis Cooper, "Keanu Reeves," *Interview*, vol. 20, no. 9 (September 1990), p. 134.

18. Shnayerson, "Young and Restless," p. 146.

19. Jim Turner, "Much Ado About Keanu," *Detour*, May 1, 1993, available at <http://keanuweb.com/reports/19990258.htm> (3/31/00).

20. See "Cool Breeze," at www.keanunet.com/cool.htm (3/25/00).

21. As Avital Ronell has noted, the issue of stupidity inflects everything from "contemporary debates on affirmative action" to "seemingly less lacerating assertions of stupidity (shallow, airhead, bimbo, braindead, etc.)," all of which are part of "a sinister history" that puts into question the aptitude, educability, and intelligence of those who are seen as other. "The Uninterrogated Question of Stupidity," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8:2 (1996): 3.

22. Clearly, both *My Own Private Idaho* and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) also focused on issues of memory and identity. *Feeling Minnesota* also might be said to touch on the relationship of stupidity and identity.

23. I leave aside here the trips that Bill & Ted take, the continual, frantic running of *Chain Reaction* (1996), as well as the odyssey of *My Own Private Idaho*.

24. Charles Taylor, *Salon*, p. 1.