

# Mixed Race Allegories: The Science Fiction Films of Keanu Reeves

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## Abstract

This short paper considers how several science fiction films starring Keanu Reeves exhibit a variety of allegorical references to mixed race subjectivity. Through a close reading of his films it is apparent that both narrative and aesthetic constructions ascribe additional meaning to these texts when analyzed through the framing of Reeves as simultaneously racially ambiguous, mixed race, and Asian American.

Hegemonic discourses of race in the United States perpetuate the notion that race divides individuals and groups into racially ‘pure’ categories. This has relegated media representations of mixed-race people into narratively and professionally liminal spaces. Kent Ono notes, for the most part, “mixed-race Asians and Asian American play [only] monoracial Asian and Asian American roles” (Ono & Pham, 2008). However, in the case of mixed race actor Keanu Reeves, many of Reeves character portrayals are racially and ethnically ambiguous. An exception to this, however, are Reeves’ science fiction films.

I argue in this short paper that Reeves’ character portrayals in the sci-fi genre can be read as allegorical references to mixed race subjectivities and can be made further complicated when reading Reeves as an Asian American actor<sup>1</sup>. Through a filmic analysis of *Johnny Mnemonic* (1997), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, 2004),

*Constantine* (2005), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2009), this paper details how the aesthetic, narrative and thematic elements of Reeves' sci-fi films parallel themes within both mixed race and Asian American identity politics.

### **Genre, Mise-en-scène and Body**

The science fiction film genre is a critical backdrop for Reeves as a mixed-race actor. Traditionally, the genre borrows elements from German expressionism with the use of exaggerated set designs, highly stylized camera angles as well as high contrast lighting schemes. These visual elements are all clearly present in *The Matrix*, *Constantine* and *Johnny Mnemonic*. The significance of German expressionist elements as it concerns Reeves is that the aforementioned visual techniques create a space for mixed race politics to become part of the mise-en-scène and in a way integrate Reeves' physicality into the cinematic landscape itself<sup>2,3</sup>.

In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Reeves plays a data smuggler who with the aid of technological implants smuggles and sells stolen data. In the film, Johnny exceeds the technological limits of his implants and is forced to enlist the services of a group of rebels to help him extract the data before it kills him<sup>4</sup>. In an early scene in the film, Johnny begins to experience pain from his neural modifications. He retreats to a dimly lit restroom containing several large mirrors. These mirrors reconfigure the screen space and at the same time frame Johnny within the scene. While the reflections of Johnny multiply and amplify his grimaces of pain, the mirrors also reflect Johnny's fractured physicality—half man and half machine and in anguish of their conflict<sup>5</sup>. This dualism between man and machine while certainly a common trope within the genre is reinforced through Reeves' mixed race body which is often also coded as Asian.

Asian men in Hollywood have had a long history of problematic representation. Particularly, in the action genre, Asian men's bodies are subject to very different constructions as compared to their white action-hero counterparts. In Hollywood films, Asian action stars such as Chow Yun-fat, Jet Li, and Jackie Chan, are routinely portrayed as passive. Their fighting styles are characterized by evasion and stealth (Lim, 2006)<sup>6,7</sup>. Indeed, whereas the typical Hollywood action hero would normally rely on physical strength to fight their way out of a confrontation, in the aforementioned scene, Johnny exits the restroom and chooses to evade a group of henchmen. In the first installment of *The Matrix*, and for the majority of the film, Reeves' character Neo also chooses to evade the antagonists of the film.

Reeves' body is not the typical Hollywood hard-body that audiences are

accustomed to fetishizing. Reeve's body is comparatively slender and less imposing. Yvonne Tasker writes, "Actions heroes...are cinematically constructed almost exclusively through their physicality [which is] a key part of the visual excess that is offered in the muscular action cinema" (Yvonne, Tasker, 1993). Reeves' atypical body is differently constructed. The visual pleasure of the harden action body is replaced by the aesthetic of his physical merging with the *mise-en-scène*. In one of the final scenes of the *The Matrix* (1999), Neo discovers he has the ability to control and manipulate the matrix<sup>8</sup>. When confronted by the film's antagonists Neo flexes his body and simultaneously warps the hallway that he stands in<sup>9</sup>. This visual confluence of body and *mise-en-scène* also occurs in the aforementioned mirror scene in *Johnny Mnemonic*. The restroom mirror surround him and create a cascade effect. In what appears to be a performance of kata or tai-chi movements, Johnny uses his arms and hands to collect himself and overcome the pain of his implants. Simultaneously, his movements appear to push and resist the claustrophobic screen space created by the mirrors. In *A Scanner Darkly*, this relationship between body and environment is directly connected with the visual style of the entire film.

In *A Scanner Darkly*, Reeves plays Bob, an undercover narcotics officer. Bob tracks a group of drugs users that he has befriended but he soon becomes addicted to the drug Substance D. Due to the effects of the drug, Bob begins to lose sense of his identity and reality. The film's director Richard Linklater used an animation technique called rotoscoping to animate the film. As a result, Bob's/Reeves' body blends in with the *mise-en-scène*. Jane Park addresses this merging of body and environment, writing that science-fiction heroes like Reeves, "literally embody the racial and ethnic diversity of the *mise-en-scène*" (Park, 2008). Narratively speaking, Reeves' character also enacts a literal merging with the background in an early scene in the film. Bob, speaking to a group at a press conference, wears what is called in the film a "scramble suit"<sup>10</sup>. This suit obscures his identity which helps him with his undercover work. Bob's boss introduces him to the group saying, "Now you will notice that you can barely see this man, because he is wearing a scramble suit...made up of approximately a million and half fraction representations of men, women and children in every variant. Making the wearer of a scramble suit the ultimate everyman...let's hear it for our vague blur"<sup>11</sup>. Ultimately, in the film, Bob succumbs to Substance D addiction and his memory and identity becomes blurred to the point that he essentially forgets who he is. This kind of alienation of mind and body and the perpetual negotiating of self-identity are both common themes in mixed race studies and reoccurring themes throughout Reeves' sci-fi films.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Reeves plays the humanoid embodiment of an alien-being named Klaatu. Klaatu represents a coalition of aliens that are concerned with the environmental conditions of Earth<sup>12</sup>. After making first contact with the United States, Klaatu informs the Secretary of State (Kathy Bates) that humans are slated for extermination in order to keep the Earth alive. After Klaatu befriends a scientist, Helen (Jennifer Connolly) and her son, Klaatu is persuaded that humans have redeeming qualities and that they should be spared destruction. Klaatu also experiences a moment of disconnect from his body. After waking up in the custody of the U.S. military, Klaatu inspects his body and remarks, “It feels unreal to me. Alien.” A similar scene in *The Matrix* echoes this theme of physical disenfranchisement. Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) explains to Neo that while in the matrix, Neo’s body and sensations are merely electrochemical signals transmitted via computers to his brain and that his physical appearance is a “residual self-image” or a “mental projection of [his] digital self”. Neo asks, “This isn’t real?” as he inspects his arms<sup>13</sup>. In addition to these similarities, both films have remarkably similar scenes where both Neo and Klaatu experience a kind of rebirth where they emerge as new bodies<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, both scenes depict Reeves’ reborn body as hairless, pale and slimy. Reeves’ body is presented as foreign and repulsive, suggesting perhaps that the racial ambiguity of mixed raceness evokes a sense of disgust and echoes racist discourses of anti-miscegenation.

Several of Reeves’ sci-fi character portrayals demonstrate what appears to be psychosomatic stress brought on by irreconcilable conflict between mind and body. In his films, this stress tends to culminate with the seepage or expulsion of blood and vomit. In *The Matrix*, Neo vomits after he learns the truth that he has been living in a machine world. Later in the film, as Neo fights an agent in the Matrix, his ‘free’ body outside the Matrix spits up blood during a battle. In *Constantine*, John coughs up blood due to advanced lung cancer. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Johnny’s nose bleeds when he is overcome by the data that has been downloaded into his head. In *A Scanner Darkly*, Bob vomits from nausea as a result of becoming a Substance D addict<sup>15</sup>. In the film he also suffers head trauma and bleeds. In each of these instances, Reeves’ characters experience these moments of trauma that arise ultimately because of some kind of conflict between two different worlds. In *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, Neo and Johnny exist as hybridized cyborgs—men with technological implants. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Klaatu is an Alien life form occupying a man’s body. In *A Scanner Darkly*, Bob is both a drug addict and an undercover narcotics officer and in *Constantine*, John straddles a line between Earth and Hell (i.e.: life and death).

In addition to playing characters that are themselves mixed or divided, Reeves' body itself is also often constructed and referenced as distinct parts<sup>16</sup>. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, the villains that are after Johnny say that they just want what's in his head. The rebels that protect Johnny continually remark about the importance of his head. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the U.S. Military takes great care in examining and dissecting Klaatu's body-as if to uncover Klaatu's or Reeves' true origin. While the races of Reeves' characters are never explicitly expressed in his films, these references to living on the edge between two different worlds and pre-occupation with Reeves' body parts can all be read as allusions to Reeves' mixed raceness.

### Racing Reeves

As a leader figure in both *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, both Neo and Johnny are charged with the responsibility to lead a group of rebels on a quest to overthrow a power hierarchy. The power struggle in *The Matrix* is racially charged. LeiLani Nishime notes that the Agents, "the people who enforce the reality of the matrix[,] appear as stereotypical white, male corporate drones whereas the rebel forces are a conglomeration of various ethnicities" (Nishime, 2008). Reeves' mixed-raceness and his apparent ability to pass for White, initially situates him on one side of the conflict. As Thomas Anderson, his meager life as a cubicle office worker codes him as the status quo. Coupled with his initial namesake and his formal attire, Thomas appears to act and be White. There is even a scene where one of Thomas' associates remark, "What's wrong dude? You know you look a lot whiter than you normally do." But as Thomas learns of the deception that surrounds him, he transcends boundaries by leaving the matrix and appears to transform racially. He sheds his 'slave' name, adopts the name Neo and swaps his attire for a more 'Earthy' wardrobe. In addition to this, outside of the matrix, Neo's technological implants are visible. These intrusions of technology installed by the masters bare a resemblance with the shackles and chains that African slaves wore. The rebel humans are also described in the film as being enslaved as the "batteries" of labor that keep the machine world running. The rebels too appear ethnically coded<sup>17</sup>.

In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Johnny also appears to be a white office worker. When Johnny is made aware of the conspiracy that surrounds him, he also alters his allegiances which again appear to be racially structured. Several of the rebels in *Johnny Mnemonic* wear face paint similar to the facial painting of some Native Americans Indian tribes or the facial tattooing of some Polynesian cultures. In addition to this, the leader of the rebel group (just like in *The Matrix*) is an African American

man, J-Bone (Ice-T). The rebel group in *Johnny Mnemonic* also resists a power bloc that consists of a big corporation and government, again, similar to *The Matrix*.

It has been noted by some that Reeves exhibits an Asian or 'Oriental' demeanor. He has been cited for having almond shaped eyes, an exotic Hawaiian name and an aloof and enigmatic personality. Also, Reeves' repeat casting as a "softer, somewhat "effeminized" masculinity...has been associated with men of East Asian descent" (Park, 2008). In *The Matrix*, *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, there are instances where Reeves' characters act out stereotypes commonly associated with Asians or Asian Americans. In *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson is a computer programmer with exceptional computer (and hacking) skills<sup>18</sup>. As Neo, he is master of a variety of Asian martial arts<sup>19</sup>. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Klaatu speaks Mandarin with a fellow undercover Alien who takes the form of an elderly Chinese man. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Johnny finds himself in a gunfight between the Japanese Yakuza and a group of what seems like Asian Americans.

Throughout the story of *The Matrix*, Neo is often addressed as a person who is mixed. When he encounters The Architect (Helmut Bakaitis), the humanoid embodiment of a machine program responsible for constructing the Matrix, he addresses Neo as an "anomaly". He explains to Neo, "Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix." His description of Neo as an unbalanced equation suggests that Neo consists of two parts and that these mixed parts are in conflict. Neo's unreconciled identity disrupts the hegemonic structures of the Matrix in a similar way that his mixed-race politic disrupts conventional notions of racial difference.

In both *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, both Neo and Johnny are cyborg characters; half human/half machine. The cyborg is coded with identity complexities that parallel discourses of mixed-race subjectivity. The cyborg invokes disgust since it emphasizes a mixing of two forms that traditionally have remained separate. Nishime writes, "cyborg [are] displaced representations of mixed-race people" (Nishime, 2005). She adds, "a machine, like race, can corrupt the supposed purity of whiteness/humaness". Both Neo and Johnny journey down what Nishime would describe as a cyborg narrative, in that they "assume a new identity, escaping the subordination oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other". In regards to the pasts of these cyborgs, she adds, "The constant search for origins...so persistently haunts these "good cyborgs" (Nishime, 2005). Although not a technological cyborg, Reeves' character in *Constantine* also demonstrates a similar search for his origins.

In *Constantine*, John Constantine (Reeves) is an exorcist who has the ability to see angels and demons that walk the Earth. John, who came close to death in a failed suicide attempt, believes that if he banishes daemons back to hell, God will forgive his suicide attempt and admit him into heaven. When John is asked about his gift to be able to access heaven and hell he replies, "I was born with this curse." In a flashback sequence, it is revealed that as a child John was so angered and frustrated by his ability that he tried to commit suicide<sup>20</sup>. John says that he wanted to cross over (i.e.: pick a side). Later, John voices his contempt for the demons that cross the boundaries between Hell and Earth. He whispers menacingly to one of these beings, "You're the one that should go to hell half breed"<sup>21</sup>. He emphasizes his disdain for these creatures that live in both worlds, saying, "When a half breed breaks the rules, I deport their ass to hell." John's desire to resolve his split existence can be read allegorically as a mixed-race dilemma and parallels Reeves' apparent reluctance in acknowledging a mixed race identity. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Reeves' characters also express a contempt for his split/mixed identity. When he is told that that he is the leader of the rebel movement the savior of the human race, Johnny explodes with anger. He does not embrace or value his technological ability and allegorically his mixed-raceness; instead he sees it as a burden<sup>22</sup>.

The theme of memory and origin remains consistent through this selection of films. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Klaatu retains no memories of the human host that he occupies. Additionally, the audience is not provided any background information on his origin and little is known about Klaatu and his past. In *The Matrix*, when Neo returns to the matrix for the first time, he reminisces about a noodle shop he used to enjoy. He remarks that since he was plugged into The Matrix when he ate them, those memories he had of the noodles never really existed. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Johnny says that he "dumped" his childhood memories because he "needed [his brain] for the job". In *A Scanner Darkly*, Bob experiences difficulties forming new memories as a side effect of being addicted to Substance D. Reading Reeves' characters for their detachment from memory and past echoes Reeves personal take on his own background. It's been noted that in interview Reeves does not like to answer questions regarding his origins.

There is a power in representation. Visibility, voice, and agency are heavily contingent on representation and Hollywood continues to be a major player in producing or withholding representation. Racial representations should become fuller and more complex in tandem with the ever increasingly complex world we live in. Yet, scholars note that mixed-race representation still seem to be under

or misrepresented. This paper does not suggest that Reeves' films are literal representation of mixed-raceness. Instead, this ongoing project of reading mixed-race allegory is productive in imagining new ways of understanding race. Jane Park alludes to this, writing, "Multiracial representation offer new ways of thinking about racial identity, difference, and discrimination" (Park, 2008).

Arguably, while Reeves is still continually denied an opportunity to portray mixed race characters, it is useful to consider that counter hegemonic images need not be literal. Close readings of his films reveal that perhaps the casting of Reeves' is done so with the idea in mind (consciously or unconsciously) that he embodies a mixed-race politic that is a crucial component of these futurescape narratives. This same kind of critical analysis may be applicable for other mixed race actors like Russell Wong, Kristin Kreuk, Mei Melançon, Daniel Henney, Kelly Hu and Maggie Q. These actors are also frequently cast in the sci-fi/fantasy genre as well. Although their mixed raceness may not be overtly represented, we may come to appreciate the variety of their characters complexities through which their mixed-raceness may also be allegorically and creatively expressed.

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*The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Dir. Scott Derrickson. 20th Century Fox. 2009.

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*The Matrix: Reloaded*. Dirs. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski. Warner Home Video. 2003.

*The Matrix: Revolutions*. Dirs. Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski. Warner Home Video. 2004.

*The Replacements*. Dir. Howard Deutch. Warner Home Video. 2000.

## Notes

- 1 Outside of the science fiction genre, Reeves has played a variety of characters: A slacker teen in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventures* (1989), a romantic lead in *Sweet November* (2001) and a football quarterback in *The Replacements* (2000).
- 2 *Mise-en-scène* is a French term used to describe the material and physical properties of what is contained within the frame of the image.

3



Left: A still from a classic film called *The Big Combo* which also uses highly stylized German Expressionism elements (*The Big Combo*). Right: Neo waits under a bridge (*The Matrix*). Both scenes exhibit similar German expressionist aesthetics of high contrast silhouetting.

4



Left: Johnny (*Johnny Mnemonic*) hacks into a computer system. His digital avatar bears a resemblance with German Expressionism. Right: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Berlin Street* (1913).

5



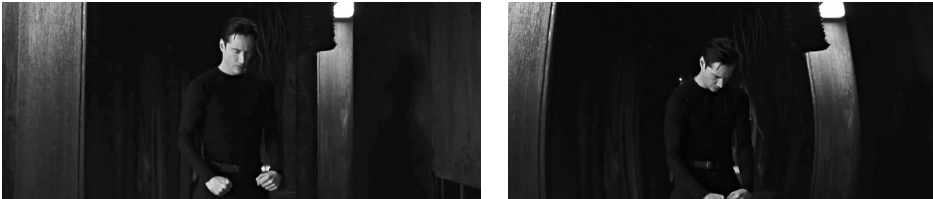
'Oriental' Johnny uses tai chi to compose himself (*Johnny Mnemonic*).

6 This passive persona is paralleled with the absence of romantic engagement with women in their films.

7 This passive/evasive form of 'Oriental' fighting style—"Fighting without Fighting"—was made popular by the prolific Bruce Lee.

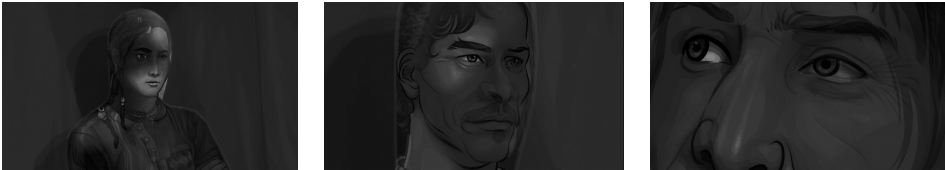
8 In *The Matrix* and the subsequent installments of the franchise, *The Matrix: Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, Reeves plays Thomas Anderson, a lowly computer programmer. Thomas, who later adopts the name Neo, learns that the world around him is not as it seems and that he, along with the population of Earth, are living in a virtual world run by machines. In this science-fiction post-apocalyptic wasteland, machines have enslaved the human race and are harvesting their bodies to power their techno-cities. A band of rebels escape the control of the matrix and some of them believe that Neo, the prophesied 'One', will lead a revolution that will overthrow the machines.

9



Neo flexing and warping the mise-en-scene (*The Matrix*).

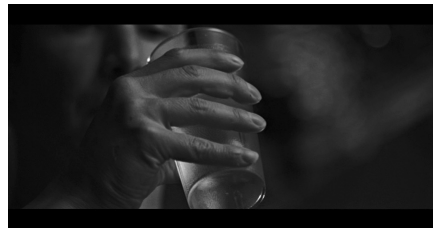
10



Bob wears a suit that obscures his identity (*A Scanner Darkly*).

11 The names of the characters Reeves portrays are remarkably similar in terms of being 'normal' names: Thomas (*The Matrix*), Bob (*A Scanner Darkly*), John (*Constantine*) and Johnny (*Johnny Mnemonic*). These names can all be read as additional markers of Reeves' racial (white) passing.

12 It is interesting to note 'Keanu' and 'Klaatu' both rhyme and start and end with the same letter.



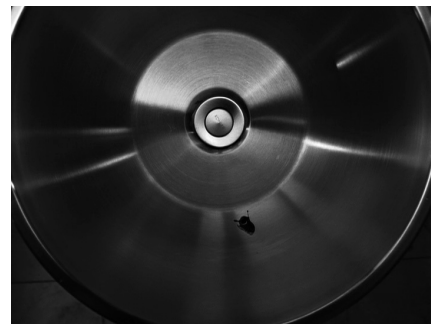
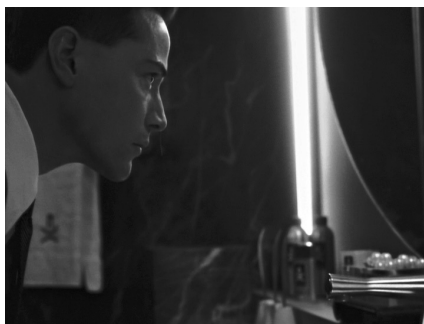
Neo learns that his body is not real (*The Matrix*). Klaatu's hand shakes. He remarks, "This body will take some getting used to" (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*).



Left: Thomas leaves the matrix and is birthed into the real world (*The Matrix*). Right: Klaatu is birthed onto Earth (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*).



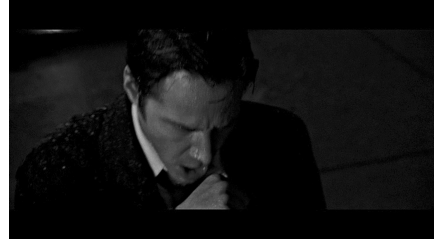
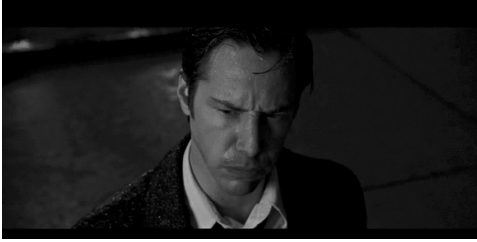
Bob vomits (*A Scanner Darkly*).



Johnny's nose bleeds (*Johnny Mnemonic*).



Neo vomits and spits blood (*The Matrix*).

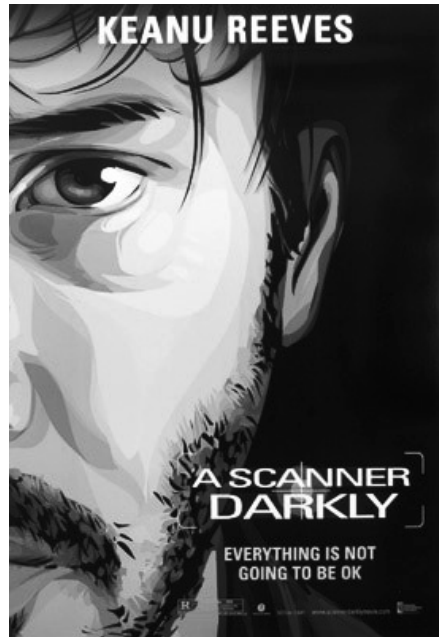


John coughs up blood (*Constantine*).



Bob bleeds from his head (*A Scanner Darkly*).

16

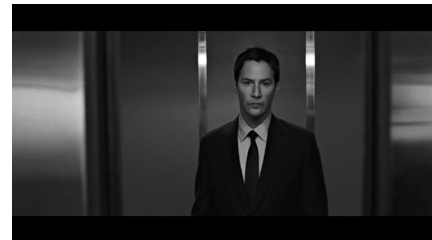
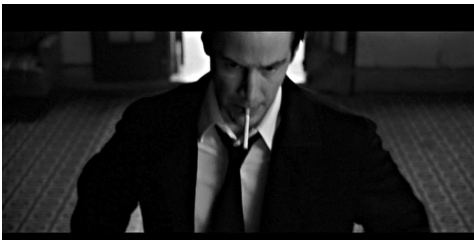


Left: Poster for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Right: Poster for *A Scanner Darkly*. Both posters literally cut Reeves in half.

17

Racialized rebels (*Johnny Mnemonic*).Natives of Zion (*The Matrix: Reloaded*).

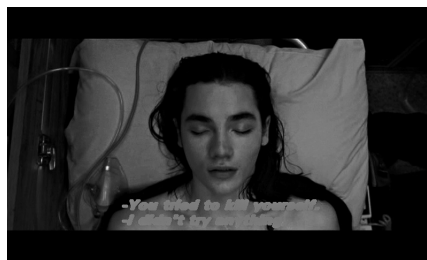
18



The consistent suit-and-tie attire of Reeves' characters frame him as the status quo but through an Asian American lens, his clothes might also signify references to model minority constructions of a straight-laced Asian salary man. Clockwise from top: Thomas Anderson (*The Matrix*), Johnny Mnemonic (*Johnny Mnemonic*), Klaatu (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*) and John Constantine (*Constantine*).

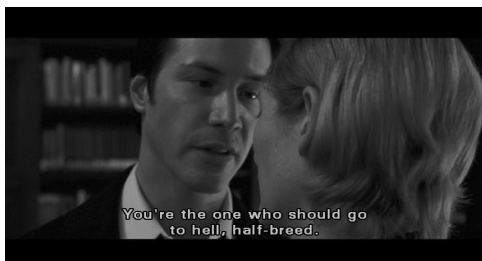
19 This binary character construction is a classic racialized trope of how Asian and Asian Americans are represented in mainstream media.

20



Two actors cast as younger versions of John/Reeves (*Constantine*). The casting of Reeves as a child and teenager acknowledges Reeves' racial ambiguity as both actors playing John are coded as mixed race as well.

21



John tells a fellow half breed to go to hell (*Constantine*).

22



Johnny exclaims, "I am responsible for the entire fucking world!" Johnny's sentiments may echo Reeves' burden of representation (*Johnny Mnemonic*).