

# ***John Wick: Chapter 2***

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**\*\*\*THIS CONTAINS SPOILERS. IMMEDIATE SPOILERS.\*\*\***

First, the mere facts. John Wick: Chapter 2 begins with its titular hero (Keanu Reeves) trying to get his car back from a terrified Russian mob boss, Abram Tarasov (Peter Stormare), the brother of now-dead villain from the first film. As the previous film established, this car is precious to him -- not because it ties him to other people, like, say, the poor beagle murdered in the first twenty minutes of the first film tied John Wick to his passed wife, but because it reaffirms his identity as a certain sort of man: a sleek, high-contrast, elegant, expensive and well-tuned man, who in operation is as much a precision machine as the lovingly-restored muscle car he drives.

Within the first twenty minutes of John Wick: Chapter 2, this car has been destroyed beyond almost any hope of repair. And not by the frightened Tarasov trying to make a point -- the car is destroyed by Wick himself, using it alternatively as a weapon and a shield in a brutal, protracted fight that is as senseless as it is beautiful. Tarasov is ready to surrender whatever John Wick wants the moment he walks in the door -- but John Wick never asks. He interacts with Tarasov's motorbike riders, guards, and consigliere the only way he knows how. John Wick knows that in this world he must fight in order to win and he must win to buy peace, even if winning means destroying what he was fighting for in the first place.

John Wick secures his peace with Tarasov, killing a dozen men to do it. He sends his beloved car, utterly totalled, to the repair shop run by Aurelio (John Leguizamo) from the first film. He never sees it again.

John Wick has a new dog, now. A bulldog. The beagle from John Wick was innocent; the bulldog is resolute, but affable while aloof. John Wick also wants to know people, but can't figure out how. He'll leave the bulldog in the care of the deskman of the Continental Hotel, Charon (Lance Reddick), the closest thing in either film that John Wick has to a friend.

But that's getting ahead of things. John Wick is still retired, he tells himself and everyone around him, the day after annihilating the Tarasov taxi cab operation for sport. This is a lie, and he will

not be permitted to live it: a man from his past, Santino D'Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio), appears suddenly on his doorstep. D'Antonio was the man who enabled John Wick to marry his now-dead wife and retreat into his now-shattered peace, and that means that John Wick owes him. Specifically, John Wick owes him one favor. One job. Anything Santino asks for. Anything he desires. Then, he's free.

John Wick refuses, and D'Antonio destroys his house with a grenade launcher.

So John Wick accepts. He is given his work: he must go to Italy, and kill Santino's sister at the moment of her greatest accomplishment. There are reasons for this, crime reasons, and they're both predictable and petty beneath mention. Santino is a coward and a hypocrite. But he is also the boss. Winston (Ian McShane), the manager of the Continental Hotel and the closest thing John Wick has to a mentor, sadly informs his not-quite-protege as such.

John Wick goes to Italy. John Wick watches Gianna D'Antonio (Claudia Gerini), who he has known for many years along with her brother, take her own life, and uselessly shoots her corpse in the head afterward. The job is completed, and there is no reward. Santino, of course, terminates his association with John Wick and sends his mute right-hand killer Ares (Ruby Rose) and as many assassins as the promise of seven million dollars can buy against the man he used to kill his sister.

John Wick returns to New York, kills every freelance assassin in his path, kills every guard in Santino's employ, kills Ares, and then walks into the Continental Hotel, walks downstairs to where Santino sits having dinner, smirking, believing himself protected by the hotel's rules sacred and inviolate rules against violence, and John Wick shoots Santino in head.

Winston is horrified. John Wick has broken the cardinal rule of this world they all live in -- that he claimed to retire from -- and now he must be excommunicated. John Wick collects his bulldog from Charon and, as every assassin in the whole wide world receives word that they are to kill John Wick on sight, he flees into the New York night, doomed and sure to die -- but free.

That's bullshit, of course. Almost no one in this movie is free, and that's by design: in the film's first real scene, Abram Tarasov knows he should just give John Wick his car, but it never seems to occur to him to tell his men to stand down. Santino knows that to kill his sister is wrong, and even claims to love her, but is consumed by the metrics of station and his need for power. His faithful enforcer Ares, along with Gianna's bodyguard Cassian (Common), are both driven to kill John Wick -- even though Cassian's mistress dies before he and John Wick ever converse in the film. Winston, the man shown to be most preternaturally in control in both the first and second films -- the only man to call John Wick simply "Johnathan," rather than utter his name (regularly first and last together) with near-totemic solemnity -- is forced, in the end, to give the kill order for his favorite son himself. And over the timeline of both movies, John Wick bargains his chains to Viggo away for chains to Santino, and then as soon as he fulfills Santino's marker he fashions shackles for himself.

What binds them all together in the universe of John Wick -- from Tarasov's men to Ares to Winston to John Wick himself -- isn't anything so high-minded as duty, or love, or anger, or even vengeance. It's work. Everyone in the world of John Wick: Chapter 2 is just doing their jobs; and what's more, it's understood that they can never, ever stop. They cannot quit. They can only be terminated. And for most of them, it's not just that they're fine with this: most of them *like it*.

For those who have seen the film, the bleak summary above likely elides your favorite parts of the film (the parts that aren't the sheer virtuosic brutality of the action scenes): the world itself. John Wick moves through a world where hotels exist on every continent to cater to the needs of high-class assassins; where there is an understood, enforced and -- most importantly -- respected code of conduct. Where assassins and the people who support them come from all walks of life, appear in all shapes and sizes: subway buskers, guys ordering takeout, office ladies, lawyers, the homeless, and in the film's denouement, every single one of over a hundred people in a New York City public park in the middle of the day, young or old, rich or poor. The homeless assassins organize to survive in the tunnels and in-between spaces beneath the city streets, led by the Bowery King (Laurence Fishbourne), a class traitor that John Wick himself helped create; the rich assassins keep to their exclusive clubs and guarded museums, protected by custom, rule of law, and armed guards. This is more than lore for the inevitable JohnWiki; this is a demonstration of class relationships. It is not sufficient to say that, in the world of John Wick, violence against your fellow man is legitimate work in the modern world; instead, John Wick: Chapter 2 argues that in the modern world all work is, itself, violence against your fellow man.

The strongest setpiece of the film comes when John Wick returns to New York City from Italy, having fulfilled his obligations to Santino and now set on killing him. Santino has put out an open bounty on John Wick's head, however -- the aforementioned seven million dollars -- and every independent contractor in the city is out to collect. We are treated to a montage of John Wick crossing the city, encountering these killers one by one -- the busker, the pedestrian, the businessmen waiting for a train -- and, thanks to the magic of editing, killing them all at the same time. Cassian then appears again, having followed his mistress's killer back stateside from Italy, and is also summarily dispatched -- the sole opponent John Wick allows to live. This is to be expected: it is well-established that John Wick, a highly skilled worker with the best credentials in his field, will turn in better work than any other freelancer when the boss pits them against each other. And of course Cassian is spared: he's off the clock. He's working, but he's working for free.

But even an individual rational actor like John Wick -- who has just demonstrated how to murder three men with a pencil (*a fucking pencil*) -- cannot prevail when the marketplace conspires against him. So following his fight with Cassian, which leaves him badly wounded -- temporarily so, but still wounded -- John Wick, fleeing two assassin janitors, stumbles over to a homeless man and puts one of the golden coins that constitute this world's currency into the man's cup.

John Wick is immediately hidden in debris surrounding the homeless man's shopping cart of possessions, and the two janitors are swiftly killed by precise, professional silenced pistol shots when they approach to investigate. Immediately two more of the beggar's comrades appear, and they ferry all three bodies -- John Wick, unconscious, and the two janitors' corpses -- into the tunnels beneath the Manhattan subway system; into the cracks of this strange world.

The sequence that follows is the only time John Wick is not, for better or worse, fully in control of a scene -- even though he remains the most dangerous man in the room. He wakes up in the homeless assassin commune in the Bowery, and is led up to the rooftop to see its King. He is the interloper here in a way he never was in Italy, or elsewhere in New York; the homeless assassins keep him well-covered with their guns, working as a group, and despite his antics earlier in the film there is never any serious consideration given to the idea that John Wick could disarm one, kill the rest, and be on his way. He remains alive at their pleasure, and has to ask them for help. John Wick may be an unparalleled killing machine who can best any other single assassin alive, but he is nothing in the face of worker solidarity.

There's a striking egalitarianism to the homeless assassins, as well. They have their own vibrant community, with shared living spaces, a communal mess and co-ed locker rooms. It's clear that they're still poor, in the visual language of this world; they're well-tailored, when out of their rags, but the luxury they've achieved is either found or stolen. No computers for them; no shiny chrome -- they communicate by carrier pigeon and organize their enemy list via the twine, thumbtack, and glossy 8x10 headshot method on their office wall.

But despite the obvious fellowship the homeless assassins have, there's always a nagging feeling of performance attached to them. Every character in this film, after all, is performing -- not only are they doing the work, but they're doing the work the *right way*. With professionalism. With good breeding. With due respect to the system.

So even when the Bowery King takes the earlier scene in Italy where John Wick buys the best suit, best guns, and best maps in order to prepare for the most miserable job of his life and flips that on its head by simply handing him a pistol, a single magazine, and pointing him in the right direction -- even then, there's something inauthentic about it. And as well there should be. The homeless assassins show the power of shared class interest and the ability of any poor man to rival any rich man, given the means -- but they still bend their knees to a boss, and no matter what rags the Bowery King dresses himself in, no matter how many times he uses pigeons instead of cellphones, he will never be a revolutionary. It is impossible for him to conceive of a world without assassination. He is only capable of reproducing it, under a different set of aesthetics.

This is why handing John Wick nothing more than a gun and seven bullets, which might otherwise come off as an exercise in proletarian equality, instead reads as cruel. The Bowery King does not embrace John Wick as his brother because he cannot conceive of him, or anyone outside his cohort, as a comrade. John Wick is merely someone to further the Bowery King's

ambitions in the obvious “who controls what” crime family drama happening over John Wick’s head. And when, at the end of the film, John Wick sets himself against the very system, there is never even any question which side the Bowery King and his “union” are on.

Once he reaches Santino’s museum, John Wick’s work concludes the only way it could. He murders every man in a suit he lays eyes on, and then he murders poor, confident Ares, who perfectly apprehended the kind of opponent John Wick was -- and went to her death anyway, because that was her job. She even insists Santino flee as she walks back into the hallway where she’ll die; this is ludicrous, of course, because Santino was going to flee anyway. That’s what men like Santino do. And like with Cassian and Gianna, there is no indication that Ares and Santino are lovers -- instead, that emotional intimacy is transferred to the employee/employer relationship. Ares goes to her death gladly not because she loves Santino, but because she loves her job. John Wick empties her pockets and steals her phone while she lays dying in her boss’s high-concept art exhibit. She dies smiling, with open eyes.

By the time John Wick arrives back at the Continental Hotel, the end of things is obvious. He will not be retiring. He never really retired at all. No one still living in the world that John Wick: Chapter 2 posits ever has. He speaks with Charon about his bulldog, which unlike his car, he has not wholly abandoned. Then he walks downstairs to the Continental’s dining room, and as Santino sits at his table eating dinner, confident, smiling, telling John Wick that he can live in this hotel where the rules make him untouchable forever, John Wick shoots him in the head.

There were other ways that Santino could have plausibly died. Poisoning, perhaps. A trick to draw Santino off the property, somehow, before killing him. The most elegant method would have been to drag the shithead to the roof of the Continental and simply send him plummeting to his death on the sidewalk below -- grounds technically not protected by the hotel’s rules against guest-on-guest violence, as seen earlier in his brawl with Cassian in Italy. John Wick does none of these things because from the moment Gianna D’Antonio up until the very last word out of Santino D’Antonio’s mouth, John Wick’s grudge has been against the system itself. He wants to live free -- but that is impossible in the miserable late capitalist hell that’s sketched around him.

The only freedom to be found in John Wick: Chapter 2 belongs to Gianna, the one woman in either movie in a position of power in the violent mirror world where John Wick resides. Even so, she is not permitted one night on her hard-won throne before her own brother’s assassin arrives -- entirely legally, as far as the ‘authorities’ in this society are concerned. Her freedom, then, is not to live. Her freedom is to choose how she dies. She slits her wrists in her bath and makes John Wick -- a former family acquaintance or friend; perhaps a former lover -- watch her go. And when she’s gone, he puts a single, pathetic bullet in her temple, because he hasn’t yet realized that if he wants to be free, he should put it in his own.

John Wick: Chapter 2 is a beautiful, miserable movie. It’s a lot of fun to watch moment-to-moment, it has great B-movie dialogue and acting, and it presents some of the best

conceptualized and realized action choreography ever committed to film. Stunt choreographers and action directors learn quickly; lessons from the first John Wick film are already evident in the gunplay, blocking, and aesthetics of movement present in the Ben Affleck action-thriller *The Accountant* (2016). Just as *The Bourne Identity* (2002) changed how mainstream hand-to-hand combat was blocked and filmed, the two John Wick films are master texts for kinetic, effective, affective lethal gun violence. They'll set the tone for stylized hard-R action films for the next couple years; it would be shocking if the upcoming *Logan*, for instance, didn't take some choreography cues from the John Wick films in how they handle Logan's SWAT'd-up opponents, if not Logan and his tween charge themselves.

But beyond the action, it's a horribly bleak experience. Any number of 'mindless' blockbuster films have used the stylized confines of their genre world as metaphors for how to think about modern society, the most successful and obvious example being the Marvel line of films. Starting with *Iron Man* and moving to the most recent *Dr. Strange*, the solo entries in the Marvel milieu have always starred an exceptional man who is empowered to break society's rules in order to save it, always by opposing a more ideologically extreme version of himself -- and in the end prevailing over that extremism and reaffirming a comforting status quo. *Captain America vs. Red Skull* (a dark Nazi mirror of Cap), then against the *Winter Soldier* (a dark Soviet mirror of him); *Thor's* (white, liberal) Asgard against the unwashed hordes of the *Dark Elves* and the *Ice Trolls* (their names matter far less than what they signify: faceless, hiveminded religious extremists bent on slaughter and apocalypse); *Ant-Man* against what might as well have been a palette-swapped *Yellowjacket*; *Tony Stark* against no fewer than four evil versions of either *Stark* or his father in only three movies.

*John Wick: Chapter 2* turns that formula on its head. John Wick is the extremist in this film, the man willing to oppose and destroy the system and anyone in it to achieve his goal of freedom, and Cassian and Ares are the true believers in the system's inherent worth, benefitting from it, moving within it, and refusing to abandon it even in the face of death. John Wick wins -- he defeats not only them, but by walking into the Continental and shooting Santino in the head, he demonstrates that the system's laws are not natural laws -- but unlike the *Red Skull* or *Yellowjacket* or that stupid *Star Trek* elf that Christopher Eccleston played, who presumably would have gotten whatever terrible revolution and breakdown of society they pleased had they prevailed, John Wick simply learns that the system is stronger than one rich boss.

When Winston orders John Wick's death at the end of the film, he claims he's excommunicating his former protege -- shutting him off forever from the world he formerly lived in. Winston's wrong. A simple phonecall could no more excommunicate John Wick from this world than it could keep him from air or water; as the rumpled, beaten widower learns, stumbling with his dog through a park as everyone's cellphones start to go off around him, a killer's world was all this world ever was. There are no civilians. There are no escapes. There never were.

John Wick runs off into the night, still alive, either into imagination or a sequel. No one else in the park leaves, though. As the camera pans up they're still there; shooters and targets, the lot

of them, waiting for their turns. Perhaps there's a world out there in which people can escape their own economies -- but in John Wick: Chapter 2, no one survives the work.