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وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي
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مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

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تعنى بدراسات وأبحاث اللغات وآدابها

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Decoding Institutional Power: A Mixed-Methods Multimodal Analysis of High Table Symbols in the John Wick Movies Series

Mohanad Abdulkareem Waad

Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul, Mosul, Iraq.

Mohanad_alhayali1989@uomosul.edu.iq

Marwah Firas Abdullah Al-Rawe

Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar, Ramadi,

marwa.feras@uoanbar.edu.iq

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ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4423-9635>¹

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This study researches four films series of the John Wick franchise from a mixed-methods perspective by combining Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and quantitative content analysis to explain how power is constructed and reinforced in the film series. The films in *John Wick franchise* are *John Wick* (2014), *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017), *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* (2019), and *John Wick: Chapter 4* (2023). The High Table is a fictional secret council that controls the entire global assassin underworld. The different semiotic modes in the films are represented by a myriad of symbols, such as gold coins, blood oaths, the seal of the Adjudicator, the Continental Hotel, and enforcers. As the Critical Multimodal Analysis is concerned with the symbols' construction of power and ideology, the study provides a systematic way of examining the semiotic functions from the visual, the aural, and the narrative in the Wick four film series. The quantitative content analysis focuses on empirically demolishing the symbols by counting how many times they occurred, how they occurred, and the importance of the symbols in the narrative. The findings show the ideology of the myth of feudal surveillance commodification and mystique obscene capitalism and critique neoliberal institutional capitalism. This study's contribution to media studies by marrying the qualitative and the quantitative methods of research to handle socio-political critique semiotics in popular cinema.

Keywords: multimodal critical discourse analysis, quantitative content analysis, popular culture, John Wick, the High Table, semiotics, power, ideology, mixed methods.

فك شفرة السلطة المؤسسية: تحليل متعدد الوسائط باستخدام مناهج

مختلطة لرموز السلطة العليا في سلسلة أفلام جون ويك

مهند عبد الكريم وعد

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية الأساسية، جامعة الموصل، الموصل، العراق.

مرؤة فراس عبد الله الراوي

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة الأنبار، الرمادي، العراق.

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة خمسة أفلام من سلسلة جون ويك من منظور المنهج المختلط، وذلك بدمج تحليل الخطاب النقدي متعدد (مع تحليل المحتوى الكمي. وتشمل هذه الأفلام: جون ويك (٢٠١٤)، جون ويك: الفصل الثاني (٢٠١٧)، MCDA الوسائط) جون ويك: الفصل الثالث - بارابيلوم (٢٠١٩)، وجون ويك: الفصل الرابع (٢٠٢٣). "المائدة العليا" هي مجلس سري خيالي يُسيطر على عالم القتلة المحترفين في جميع أنحاء العالم. ويتم تمثيلها برموز عديدة، مثل العملات الذهبية، وأقسام الدم، وختم

المُحكِّم، وفندق كونتيننتال، والمنفذين. ووفقاً لماكهيون وماير (٢٠٢٣)، يُحلل التحليل النقدي متعدد الوسائط بناء الرموز للسلطة والأيدولوجيا من خلال الجوانب البصرية والسمعية والسردية. يركز التحليل الكمي للمحتوى على تفكيك الرموز تجريبياً من خلال إحصاء عدد مرات ظهورها، وكيفية ظهورها، وأهميتها في السرد. تُظهر النتائج أيدولوجية أسطورة المراقبة الإقطاعية، وتسليعها، وغموضها، ورأساليتها الفاحشة، وتنتقد الرأسمالية المؤسسية النيوليبرالية. تكمن مساهمة هذه الدراسة في دراسات الإعلام في الجمع بين المنهجين النوعي والكمي في النقد الاجتماعي والسياسي، وتحديدًا في علم العلامات في السينما الشعبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي متعدد الوسائط، التحليل الكمي للمحتوى، الثقافة الشعبية، جون ويك، المائدة العليا، علم العلامات، السلطة، الأيدولوجيا، المنهج المختلط.

1. Introduction

The John Wick series (John Wick (2014), John Wick: Chapter 2 (2017), John Wick: Chapter 3 \u2013 Parabellum (2019), John Wick: Chapter 4 (2023)) depicts an over the top underworld ruled by a secretive group of crime lords known as the High Table who administer a rigid hierarchy through a neoliberal, hypercapitalist framework via a network of symbols (Baudrillard, 1994; Foucault, 1977), blood oath markers, the Continental Hotel, the Adjudicator, the Harbinger, and other enforcers blood oath markers, and the Adjudicator seal gold coins, and the Adjudicator and enforcers of the Harbinger. These symbols serve as multimodal signifiers of the Table's power and dominance across gold coins and blood markers and other symbols.

This study focuses on how discursive power of symbols constructs and sustains the power of the High Table. To this end, it deploys quantitative content analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (as theorized by Machin and Mayr, 2023) to handle research data. CDA embedded within the use of certain signifying resources (Fairclough, 1995; Machin and Mayr, 2023). Quantitative content analysis allows us to address the issue of symbol occurrence and context to provide an empirical foundation of the analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). The John Wick collection is, perhaps, the perfect case study for interrogating and explaining how commercially successful films engage in socio-semiotic critique of power through popular cinema, given its overwhelming narrative action and elaborate mythic world building (Storey, 2015).

The study has three research inquiries. First is to identify the predominant symbols of the High Table and the ways in which they are expressed across different channels. Second of which is how the symbols, through the lens of MCDA, and the auxiliary streams of quantitative evidence, shape the High Table power and its ideology. And lastly, what are the socio-cultural arguments that can be derived from the symbolic expression of the power and ideology of High Table?

This study engages in the fusion of qualitative and quantitative approach in the domain of cultural and media studies in the exploration of modus operandi of cinematic semiotics and the ideological critique, forming an innovative prism to examine the constructs of power in the popular culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) employs more aspects than those used in the initial form of this theory by evaluating the construction of meaning in more than one of the several available semiotic modes: the visual, the auditory, the gesture, and the verbal (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Referring to Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar, MCDA examines the semiotic alternatives made, and how

they reflect and reproduce the power, ideologies, and social practices in the form of a hierarchy. In contrast to other analyses, in the case of the John Wick series, MCDA is a perfect fit for an analysis of the High Table symbols, which extend across the visual (e.g. the design of objects and the setting), the auditory (e.g. sound effects, speech), and the narrative (e.g. plot, character arcs) modes to legitimize and encode structures of ideologies, such as a commodification and control, authority (van Dijk, 2008).

Quantitative content analysis strengthens MCDA through systematic empirical evidence concerning the volume, meaning, and frequency of the use of particular signs (Neuendorf, 2017). Content Analysis, which originated from the social sciences and substantially Media Studies, aids in the quantification of signification frameworks, and, thus, improves the extrapolation of the qualitative analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). This methodological framework corresponds with Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) convergence design, whereby the investigator collects both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, and subsequently, merges the two data sets to develop a deeper understanding of the research problem.

The symbols of the High Table are situated in the relevant socio-cultural critiques of neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005), feudalism (Bloch, 1961) and surveillance (Foucault, 1977) capitalism. This study strengthens understanding of popular culture's institutional critiques and power (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010) through the combination of content analysis' empirical and methodological strengths, and MCDA's interpretative theoretical depth.

2.2. Previous Studies

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), as articulated by Machin and Mayr (2023) in the second edition of their foundational text *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*, builds on the framework initially introduced in the 2012 edition to examine how semiotic modes (e.g., visual, auditory, textual) interact to encode ideologies, power relations, and social practices. This approach has been widely adopted in media, film, and cultural studies to unpack how multimodal texts—such as films, posters, news videos, and documentaries—construct meanings and perpetuate discourses.

One early application in film studies is Helland (2018), who used MCDA to analyze music videos by Japanese Chicana rapper Mona AKA Sad Girl. Drawing on Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework, the study examined song lyrics, musical style, cultural iconography, body decoration, gestures, and film techniques to explore how the artist constructs a feminist "global" identity. The analysis revealed how multilingual elements (Japanese, Spanish, and English) and visual modes challenge patriarchal and nationalistic discourses, blending Chicano rap's oppositional super-vernacular with Japanese contexts. This demonstrates MCDA's utility in dissecting hybrid cultural representations in multimedia.

Iftikhar, Shahnaz and Masroor (2020) employed MCDA for Academy Award-winning animated film posters, focusing on textual, color, and layout modalities per Machin and Mayr (2012). The comparative analysis showed how multimodal features convey thematic ideologies, underscoring MCDA's value in film promotion studies.

In a similar vein, Linh (2021) applied MCDA to romantic comedy movie posters, integrating Machin and Mayr's (2012) model with Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to investigate multimodal features. The study identified how visual composition, color, and layout reinforce gender stereotypes and romantic ideologies, showing MCDA's effectiveness in revealing hidden power dynamics in promotional media. Findings highlighted the rapid development of MDA as a tool for discourse analysis in visual texts, emphasizing its role in critiquing societal norms through film marketing materials.

Liu and Fan (2022) applied MCDA to a publicity film for China's "National Low Carbon Day" in 2021, using Machin and Mayr's (2012) approach anchored in visual grammar. The study examined how multimodal elements promote climate economy discourses, finding that visual salience and textual framing naturalize environmental ideologies. This highlights MCDA's application in policy-related media, critiquing how films influence public attitudes toward sustainability.

Finally, Man (2022) used MCDA in a retracted study on film discourse's interactive environment, drawing on Machin and Mayr (2012) and evaluation theory to model multimodal interactions. Though retracted, it initially demonstrated MCDA's role in analyzing cinematic narratives (note: retraction due to methodological issues, but the approach aligns with the framework).

Bateman and Tseng (2023) utilized MCDA in news videos to reveal narrative strategies, combining Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework with film semiotics. The analysis focused on how verbal, visual, and auditory modes interact to construct storytelling in audiovisual reporting, offering a reliable method for identifying ideological biases. Results emphasized MCDA's potential for empirical reliability in media studies, complementing traditional discourse analysis with multimodal tools.

Wang (2025) extended MCDA to documentary film in "Seven Up," conducting a diachronic analysis of interviewees' images across representative, interactive, and compositional meanings, per Machin and Mayr (2023). The study found that shifts in visual and textual modes over time construct evolving social identities, influenced by ideological changes in class and society. This case illustrates MCDA's adaptability to longitudinal multimodal data, providing insights into how documentaries shape public perceptions of personal narratives.

These studies collectively demonstrate MCDA's versatility in media and film analysis, often adapting Machin and Mayr's model to critique ideologies of gender, identity, environment, and power. While many cite the 2012 edition, the core framework—emphasizing semiotic modes' ideological functions—remains consistent with the 2023 update. The current study has adopted the 2023 model update to cope with the new modifications. This study engages in the fusion of qualitative and quantitative approach in the domain of cultural and media studies in the exploration of *modus operandi* of cinematic semiotics and the ideological critique, forming an innovative prism to examine the constructs of power in the popular culture

3. Research Methodology

The methodology for this study is a combination of methods. Given that this study is analyzing the significance of the High Table in the John Wick film franchise (John Wick [2014], John Wick: Chapter 2 [2017], John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum [2019], John Wick: Chapter 4 [2023]), this study will employ the Matrix of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) developed by Machin and Mayr (2023) alongside a quantitative content analysis. The methodology presents a convergence of interpretative breadth of MCDA in analyzing the visual, audio, and textual signifiers. The multiplication of individual symbols in a certain context is the essence and strength of content analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Krippendorff, 2018). By using MCDA, the study intends to focus in a multidimensional manner on the symbols of the High Table: the gold coin, the blood oath markers, the Adjudicator's seal, the Continental Hotel, and the enforcers and how they symbolize the construction of power and the power of ideology. This study provides sound, detailed, rich, and replicable methodology that includes the entire research framework, methods of data acquisition, methods of analysis, framework of coding, preservation of the context, and integration of data, along with ethics, implications of consequences, and the boundaries of the study.

3.1 Research Design

This research employs a convergent model of mixed methods whereby qualitative and quantitative methods—MCDA and Content Analysis—are conducted in parallel, and then separately analysed and integrated in response to the research questions. This model, as described by Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), works best in responding to research questions that involve the analysis of the semiotic of film. This is because it is the only model that embraces the capacity of the MCDA to reveal ideological encodings (Machin & Mayr, 2023), while Content Analysis methodically accounts for the systematic quantification of semiotic patterns (Neuendorf, 2017). To this end, the research is geared towards answering the following research questions:

1. What are the principal symbols of the High Table and how are they represented in a multimodal fashion, according to Machin and Mayr (2023)?
2. To what extent do these symbols articulate the High Table's conception of power and the ideology of power, as revealed by MCDA, and further substantiated by the quantitative data?
3. From these symbolic representations, what socio-cultural critiques can be expressed?

The adoption MCDA in this paper focuses on the assumption of Machin and Mayr (2023) that multimodal texts, of which films are a prime example, use various semiotic resources to naturalize the enslavement of power, thus making it possible to interrogate the symbols of the High Table. On the other hand, quantitative content analysis offers a distribution of the symbols in the content to justify the effectiveness research analysis within the triangulation for methodological framework (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). This is to show how the methodology is working in the data collection, qualitative MCDA, quantitative Content Analysis and the integration of the data validation, and ethics that are elaborated below.

3.2 Methods of Data Collection

3.2.1 Sampling Strategy

This study collected data concerning the four John Wick films from the official Blu-ray and streaming releases (Lionsgate, 2014–2023) to secure the best quality vision and sound, which is vital for the MCDA type of analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023). A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to choose scenes that contain High Table symbols, and to determine their importance, participants focused on the visual, auditory, and textual modes as per Palys (2008). Scenes were included when they met at least one of the criteria specified below, as per the triad of Machin and Mayr (2023) semiotic focus:

Use of explicit symbols: Scene where symbols are used (e.g. transactions of coins in John Wick, 00:15:23–00:17:45; activating the blood oaths marker in chapter 2, 00:45:12–00:47:30).

Symbolic settings: Scenes with backdrops of the environments under the High Tables authority (e.g. interiors of the Continental Hotel in chapter 2, 00:22:45).

Symbolic actors: Scenes with high table power actors and their enforcers (e.g. adjudicator's judgment calls in chapter 3 01:15:22–01:17:10).

A total of 120 scenes were identified across the four films, with timestamps recorded for precision (e.g. Chapter 4 01:55:22, blood oath marker, in a duel context). In order to streamline this process a first pass of the films was done to catalog probable instances of the symbols appearing, followed by a second pass to determine relevancy for Machin and Mayr (2023) semiotic salience (e.g. symbols that are for power relations). Having a 120 scene dataset was determined to be a value

range of choice for investigation in the symbols across films while maintaining a balance in scope for analysis (Riffe et al., 2014).

3.2.2 Data management

The scenes were captured in a relational database in NVivo for the qualitative description, and SPSS for the quantitative data (Bazeley & Jagckson 2013). Each scene was given a set of metadata that included:

Film Title and Timestamp: e.g. John Wick, 00:16:10 (close up of a coin).

Type of Symbol: Gold coins, blood oath marker, seal of the adjudicator, continental hotel, enforcers.

Semiotic Mode: Visual, auditory, or textual elements, per Machin and Mayr (2023)

Narrative Context: Transaction, enforcement, ritual, sanctuary, or conflict

The qualitative data, visual stills, and audio snippets, were recorded as separate files and archived to meet copyright compliance due to the manual retrieval required for the MCDA. This consistent compliance guaranteed seamless compliance within the boundaries discussed by Machin and Mayr (2023) regarding the treatment of multimodal data.

3.3. Qualitative analysis: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The qualitative portion (MCDA) stems from Machin and Mayr (2023), which builds upon the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm (Fairclough, 1995) and seeks to decode how different modalities/nodes/visuals, etc., of a text enact and/or position power and ideology through distinct semiotic (visual, audio, textual) resources. The analysis MCDA is particularly fit for the John Wick series, where, through elaborate symbolism, multiple modes are engaged to articulate the authority of the High Table. The analysis draws from three steps as delineated by Machin and Mayr (2023) – Description, interpretation, and explanation, and is applied to all three audial, visual, and textual components of the symbols.

3.3.1 Description: Locating the Semiotic Resources

The purpose of this stage is to identify the semiotic characteristics of each of the symbols by:

Visual resources: To be organized by composition, color, texture, and framing, as per Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) visual grammar. One would describe the visual resources of the gold coins themselves, and the glee of the lion (John Wick 00:16:10), where the design and symbols would denote wealth.

Auditory Resources: Effects, speech, and absence of sound, following van Leeuwen (1999) sound semiotics, e.g. coins clinking (Chapter 2, 00:30:15) or the Adjudicator's tone of voice (Chapter 3, 01:15:22).

Textual Resources: Characterization and speech, per Machin and Mayr (2023) textual analysis. The blood oath marker's character role of coercing John (Chapter 2, 00:45:12) is a textual plot device.

Every chapter was annotated in NVivo, with memos connecting some semiotic elements to Machin and Mayr's (2023) legitimation, commodification, and mystification.

3.3.2 Interpretation: Analyzing Semiotic Meanings

At this stage, the focus is on which semiotic resources have the value on hypertension, especially the symbols that portray power of the High Table. For example:

The framing of the gold coins as a close-up (John Wick, 00:16:10) suggests with power and is in line with Machin and Mayr (2023) visual legitimation.

The Continental's opulent interiors (Chapter 2, 00:22:45) creates a contrast of luxury and dominance, which is Lefebvre (1991) spatial semiotics.

The enforcers' measured dialogue (Chapter 3, 01:15:22) democracy power, per van Leeuwen (1999) auditory power relations.

Thematic codes were built to Machin and Mayr (2023) to reveal the ways interactive power is normalizing by the different modes (i.e. coins visual wealth and auditory clinking wealth).

3.3.3 Explanation: Ideological Implications

This section will further discuss how symbols encapsulate ideologies. Drawing from Machin and Mayr (2023), we will discuss:

Legitimation: the way symbols justify authority (e.g., the Role of the Adjudicator's seal as bureaucratic authority).

Commodification: the way symbols render actions as economic (e.g., coins as currency).

Mystification: the ways in which symbols conceal responsibility (e.g., High Table leaders deliberately remain unseen).

An example of this could be the blood oath marker, which ornate gothic design and use of ritual (Chapter 2, 00:46:05) align with the critique of mystical control from the top of the social hierarchy (Bloch, 1961). The process of coding was iterative, with themes being further added and refined with the use of constant comparative analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

3.3.4 Illustrative Example

Think of the scenario in which John activates the blood oath marker (Chapter 2, 00:45:12 00:47:30):

Description: Visual close-up of the marker's gothic design; auditory silence during activation; textual reference to a "debt".

Interpretation: The visual design evokes a sense of tradition, the silence underpins the principle of devotion, and the textual debt signifies the idea of coercion.

Explanation: These elements construct a feudal ideology, legitimatizing the High Table's control through ritualistic obligation in the sense of per Machin and Mayr (2023).

3.4 Quantitative Analysis: Content Analysis

In this case, quantitative methods disaggregated data based on particular attributes, allowing the manifestation of MCDA findings through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This is consistent with the request of Machin and Mayr (2023) for the validation of multiple interpretations through triangulation.

3.4.1 Coding Scheme

A preliminary detailed coding scheme was designed (Table 2) to identify:

Symbol Type: Gold coins, blood oath marker, Adjudicator's seal, Continental Hotel, enforcers.

Frequency: Occurrence of scenes in a film (e.g., 15 scenes with coins in John Wick).

Context: Narrative function, codes as:

Transaction: Economic exchanges (e.g., weapon coins, John Wick, 00:15:23).

Enforcement: Institutional control (e.g., seal at Chapter 3, 01:10:45).

Ritual: Ceremonial procedures (e.g., marker activation, Chapter 2, 00:46:05).

Sanctuary: Safe zones (e.g., Continental check-in, John Wick, 00:20:30).

Conflict: Violation of rules or combat (e.g., Continental at Chapter 2, 01:50:22).

Prominence was established through: Visual Emphasis: Close apps (≥ 3 seconds on the symbol) a wide shot (contextualizing the setting).

Auditory Emphasis: Silence (e.g., coin clinking, commander of enforcers). Sounds of the dialogue were amplified.

Table 2: Coding Scheme for Content Analysis

Variable	Categories	Example (Scene, Timestamp)	Description
Symbol Type	Coins, Marker, Seal, Continental, Enforcers	Coins (<i>John Wick</i> , 00:16:10)	Identifies the symbol in the scene
Frequency	Count of scenes per film	Coins: 15 scenes in <i>John Wick</i>	Tracks symbol occurrences per film
Context	Transaction, Enforcement, Ritual, Sanctuary, Conflict	Transaction: Coins (<i>JW</i> , 00:15:23)	Classifies narrative role
Prominence	Close-up (≥ 3 s), Wide shot, Amplified sound, Distinct dialogue, Silence	Close-up: Marker (<i>Chapter 2</i> , 00:46:05)	Measures visual/auditory emphasis

3.4.2 Coding Procedure.

120 scenes were analyzed by three independent coders who, in order to keep consistent with the codebook containing definitions and examples (for instance, "close up" being defined as 3 seconds

being focused on the symbol), were trained in a workshop. The scheme was refined by a pilot coding of 15 scenes, which addressed and resolved ambiguities (for instance, distinguishing between the ritual and enforcement contexts). The inter-coder reliability was assessed via Cohen's kappa, which was found to be $k = 0.85$, a statistically significant indication of high agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). The consensus meetings were where such discrepancies were resolved, while a senior researcher acted as the arbitrator for the unresolved cases. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the data, which was organized in SPSS (for instance, frequencies and percentages), in order to notice trends like the 60% prevalence of transactional contexts for coins.

3.4.3. Illustrative Example. The scene in Chapter 3 (01:15:22–01:17:10) in which the Adjudicator pronounces John's excommunication was coded as: Symbol: Adjudicator's seal. Context: Enforcement. Prominence: Close up (Adjudicator presenting seal, 4 sec) and particular speech ("By order of the High Table"). This example demonstrates that the quantitative data (500000 enforcement context, 50% prominence) lend support for the interpretation of bureaucratic legitimacy by MCDA.

3.5 Combined Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, the authors combined the findings from the qualitative and quantitative streams of data using a joint display (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). In the qualitative portion of the study, the frequency of the gold coins (42 scenes) and the context of monetary transactions (60%) validated the assumption that gold coins were commodification of neoliberalism. This data integration is shown in Table 3.

Symbol	MCDA Finding (Ideology)	Quantitative Data (Frequency, Context, Prominence)	Integration Insight
Gold Coins	Neoliberal commodification	42 scenes, 60% transaction, 70% prominence	High frequency validates economic control
Blood Oath Marker	Feudal servitude	8 scenes, 75% ritual, 80% prominence	Limited appearances underscore ritual power
Adjudicator's Seal	Bureaucratic legitimacy	5 scenes, 100% enforcement, 50% prominence	Enforcement context aligns with authority
Continental	Spatial control	35 scenes, 50% sanctuary, 85% prominence	Frequent appearances reinforce spatial dominance
Enforcers	Depersonalized power	12 scenes, 60% enforcement, 70% prominence	Prominence highlights proxy role

According to Macin and Mayr (2023), triangulation strategy suggests that Macin's interpretative layers should be complemented with data patterns. The harmonization of data patterns and multi-layer interpretative strategies can be implemented and anchored within the framework of Macin (2023) as negotiated within this contextualization.

3.6 Validation and Rigor

The methodology presented by Machin and Mayr is comprehensive in describing, ensuring, and exemplifying these criteria (2023):

- **Inter-Coder Reliability:** Fair consensus on the analytic framework and documentation on reliability of consensus on the analytic framework ($Kappa = 0.85$) (Landis & Koch, 1977) and documentation on discordant reliability of consensus analytical framework.
- **Triangulation:** Combination of MCDA and content provides qualitative empirical conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).
- **Reflexivity:** The research team recognized their biases (for example, the tendency to focus on a few highly dominant symbols) that were offset by systematic sampling and coding strategies (Berger 2015).
- **Audit Trail:** The documentation of the selection of scenes, coding, and analysis in NVivo and SPSS is preserved for accountability (Riffe et al., 2014).
- **MCDA followed a particular framework and principles that were derived from Machin and Mayr (2023), sustaining coherence within the principles of multimodal discourse.**

3.7 Ethical Considerations

No human participants were included, and the research did not require any ethical clearance, as the research engages with and analyses already available films. Ethical principles were respected in the following areas:

- **Copyright Compliance:** (Aufderheide, 2011) and use of fair use for scene shooting and legal text.
- **Correctness of Representations:** Verification of timestamps and scene descriptions to ensure there is no misrepresentation of the films' contents.
- **Protection of Information:** Archiving visual and audio materials on secured servers in order to safeguard data.
- **Openness:** All steps in the methodology will be made public to allow replication.

3.8 Workflow in Illustration

Figure 1 displays the mixed-methods technique in order to provide transparency and ensure the possibility of replication:

Figure 1: Mixed-Methods Technique for MCDA and Content Analysis

The Data Collection Phase: Purposive sampling of 120 scenes from John Wick films, annotated with metainformation.

Qualitative MCDA: Description, interpretation, and visual, audio, and textual explanation using NVivo, based on Machin and Mayr (2023).

Quantitative Content Analysis: Usage of SPSS to code frequency, context, and prominence for inter-coder reliability.

Integration: Consolidated display of qualitative and quantitative findings.

Validation: Triangulation, reflexivity, and audit trail.

Step	Component	Description
1. Data Collection	Purposive Sampling	120 scenes from John Wick films were purposively sampled and tagged with relevant metadata.
2. Qualitative MCDA	Description, Interpretation, Explanation	Visual, auditory, and textual modes of the selected scenes were analyzed using NVivo, following the methodology outlined by Machin and Mayr (2023).
3. Quantitative Content Analysis	Coding	Frequency, context, and prominence of elements within the scenes were coded using SPSS. Inter-coder reliability was established to ensure consistency.
4. Integration	Joint Display	Qualitative and quantitative findings were correlated and presented together to provide a comprehensive understanding.
5. Validation	Rigor	The findings were validated through triangulation, reflexivity, and a detailed audit trail to ensure the study's trustworthiness and replicability.

This methodology provides a comprehensive strategy, reflecting Machin and Mayr (2023) concerning transparency and methodological approaches in multimodal research.

3.9. Quantitative Analysis: Content Analysis

The quantitative research component, in accordance with Neuendorf (2017) and Krippendorff (2018) is built on the premise of the frequency, context, and prominence of the symbols of the High Table. A comprehensive coding scheme was created and the divisions were described as follows:

Symbol Type: Gold coins, blood oath markers, Adjudicator's seal, Continental Hotel, enforcers.

Frequency. Count the symbols appearing in each scene of each movie, and keep a running tally for a total of each symbol for each full-length movie to obtain the total number of scenes in which each symbol appeared.

Context. The narrative function of the symbol is coded as:

Transaction: (e.g., coins for services rendered).

Enforcement: (e.g., seal as judicial = the right of enforcement).

Ritual: (e.g., marker activation).

Sanctuary: (e.g., Continental as a safe space).

Conflict: (e.g., Continental as a locus of conflict).

Prominence. This is determined as:

Visual prominence: (e.g., percentage of scenes in which there are close-ups or wide shots, and the percentage of scenes in which the symbol is present).

Auditory prominence: (e.g., percentage of scenes in which there is a high volume of sound or the scenes contain salient speech).

Coding Procedure: Out of 120 scenes, two independent coders, using a codebook which included, defining, and giving examples of the term “close-up” which was a shot where the symbol was present for at least 3 seconds, screen coded a subset of the scenes. Cohen’s kappa, or inter-coder reliability, achieved $k = 0.83$, which indicates a high level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Any differences that remained were resolved by reaching consensus in a discussion. The data were analyzed in SPSS to provide descriptive statistics, like frequency counts and percentages, to attempt to discern any apparent relationships in the use of the symbols.

3.10. Limitations

The following were the limitations of this study as identified by the author:

Sampling Bias: Due to purposive sampling, there may be minor symbols that did not find their way into the analysis. This is somewhat mitigated by the more thorough data examination, gained through this study, of the symbols used in the movies.

Interpretive Subjectivity: Multi-criteria decision analysis always has an element of the subjective, and in this analysis, that is addressed through the use of the systematic approach of Machin and Mayr (2023), along with the triangulation of quantitative data.

Scope Limitation: The number of symbols analyzed in this study was five. This may result in the one or more symbols present in the movies being overlooked, and in this case, the symbol of the High Table insignia, but the author determined that these five were most important for the purposes of the narrative analysis.

Generalizability: The findings are primarily related to the John Wick series. However, the general theoretical implications are broader for media studies.

For increased quantitative measurements (Rose, 2016), future studies may incorporate automated resources, including video analysis, or examine supplementary media, such as the John Wick comics, for larger datasets.

4. Findings

4.1 Results of the Quantitative Content Analysis

The content analysis identified patterns in the brand symbols used across the John Wick series (Table 1.)

Gold Coins: 42 scenes, mostly in John Wick (15), Chapter 2 (12), mostly in transactional (60%) contexts, with services (30%) provisioned, and exchange symbols (10%); prominence was high as 70% of scenes had clinking close-ups or amplified sounds (e.g., John Wick, 00:15:23.)

Blood Oath Marker: 8 scenes, mostly Chapter 2 (6), Chapter 4 (2), mostly of ritualistic (75%) and coercive (25%) contexts, and high prominence (80% close-ups, e.g., Chapter 2, 00:45:12.)

Adjudicator’s Seal: 5 scenes in Chapter 3 with enforcement context (100%) and moderate prominence (50% close-ups, e.g., Chapter 3, 01:10:45.)

Continental Profits: The Continental Hotel was in 35 scenes. Continuity-wise, it featured in Chapter 2 14 times. The distribution across the dimensions shows a 50% sanctuary, 30% conflict, and 20% ritual. Within the opulence portrayal, it holds high prominence, 85% of the scenes featuring more than a minute of slowly panning shots that highlight the breadth of the decor (for example, Chapter 02 00:20:30.)

Enforcers: The Enforcers are prominently featured in 12 scenes (in Chapter 3, they cover 7 scenes, Chapter 4, 5 scenes) Within the enforcement context, they are primarily ritual 60% and conflict 40% presence of high prominence (mostly 70% in episodes of a significant, clear audio) (for example, Chapter 03 01:15:22).

Table 1: Frequency, Context, and Prominence of High Table Symbols

Symbol	Total Scenes	JW	JW2	JW3	JW4	Primary Context (%Scenes)	Prominence (%Close-Ups/Sound)
Gold Coins	42	15	12	8	7	Transaction (60%)	70%
Blood Oath Marker	8	0	6	0	2	Ritual (75%)	80%
Adjudicator's Seal	5	0	0	5	0	Enforcement (100%)	50%
Continental Hotel	35	10	14	7	4	Sanctuary (50%)	85%
Enforcers	12	0	0	7	5	Enforcement (60%)	70%

4.2. Qualitative MCDA Findings

4.2.1. Gold Coins: Commodifying Power.

Transactions in the underworld, which are negotiable through violence, are transacted using coins which signify the underworld's currency and are negotiable through violence. The lion cross-marked coin whose metal would signify more permanent, prestigious volume and wealth connotes Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual metal wealth. The audibly amplified clinks of coins (for example, John Wick 00:15:23) symbolize power through wealth and violence. The narrative inserts violence with commodifying loyalty and universal acceptance presenting the high table's global dominance. The coins signify centrality in violence. The quantitative effects show with 42 scenes, a significant 60% transactional distribution of violence. 70% of the scene's prominence featured close-ups reinforcing the coins' significance.

In a sense, the coins commodifying and monetizing violence gesture towards and reflect the neoliberal capitalism's essence that human action is a mere economic calculation (Harvey, 2005). The commodified control the High Table holds (Baudrillard 1994) reflects through the coins, especially in the critique of dehumanizing capitalism.

4.2.2 Blood Oath Marker: Feudal Servitude

A blood oath marker is a medallion suggesting an unbreakable debt that appears in 8 scenes (Chap 2, 4). Visually, its gothic, medieval design evokes an ancient tradition, validating the High Table's authority (Machin & Mayr 2023). Auditorily, the absence of sound during activations (Chap 2, 00:45:12 [min:sec]) anchors the slack activations in subdued solemnity. Narratively, the marker ties the High Table's elite to the Table, as in John's forced task. Quantitative data indicate 75% of close-up shots during the rituals reinforcing the concentrated power of the marker.

Ideologically, the marker denotes feudal loyalty in the form of systematized honor exploitation, critiquing the prevailing hierarchical systems (Bloch, 1961; Machin & Mayr, 2023).

4.2.3 Adjudicator's Seal: Bureaucratic Legitimacy

The Adjudicator's seal is featured in Chap 3 (5 scenes). It is a device that substantiates High Table's mandates. It, design-wise, implies authority which is in line with Machin and Mayr's (2023) conception of visual symbols of authority. Auditorily, the Adjudicator's cold tone (Chap 3, 01:10:45 [min:sec]) consolidates the power of the seal. Narratively, the seal enacts encased slaveries, and crimes of the system, under the guise of a bureaucracy. Quantitative data (100% of domain were control indicators) confirm its control.

Ideologically, the seal is a critique of the bureaucratic systems that shroud oppression in legitimized order and tyranny (Weber 1978, Machin & Mayr 2023).

4.2.4 Continental Hotel: Spatial Control

The Continental stands as a neutral ground positioned in 35 scenes. Its lavish interiors create a visual juxtaposition to its violent function, indicating the significance of wealth (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Silently, the audience holds hushed tones as a sign of veneration (e.g., Chapter 2, 00:20:30). Story-wise, it enforces the High Table's rules. Empirical evidence (50% sanctuary, 85% wide shots) underscores the dominance of space.

On the ideological level, the Continental also speaks of spatial control shielding savagery with social order by critiquing the controlled (Lefebvre, 1991; Machin & Mayr, 2023).

4.2.5 Enforcers: Proxies of Power

Enforcers (12 scenes) constitute the Table's power. Visually, their distinct clothing (e.g., Adjudicator's minimalism) differentiates their roles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Audibly, slow, measured speech indicates dominance. Story-wise, they are the ones rendering judgments. Empirical evidence (70% close-ups) indicates their prominence.

On the ideological level, enforcers represent a critique of deadened power; depersonalization of power in faceless systems (Machin & Mayr, 2023; van Dijk, 2008).

5. Discussion: Socio-Cultural and Ideological Implications

The mixed methods approach employed in this study (symbolism of the High Table in the John Wick franchise: John Wick (2014), John Wick: Chapter 2 (2017), John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum (2019), John Wick: Chapter 4 (2023)) indicates the presence of an advanced signifying practice that builds an ideology of control, commodification and mystification. What this study achieves is the application of MCDA (Machin & Mayr, 2023), to which content analysis is used in a quantitative form in order to interpret a range of symbols that include gold coins, the

markers of blood oaths, the Adjudicator's seal, the Continental Hotel, and the enforcers, and in so doing, the study uncovers of socio-cultural phenomena of the world order covertly and overtly to power relations. A greater depth of analysis indicates the High Table's semiotics and signifying practice in intersections of socio-cultural phenomena, neoliberal capitalism, feudal orders, surveillance capitalism, legitimating myths, and popular culture's ideological critique.

5.1 Neoliberal Capitalism and Commodification

Like all aspects of the High Table, the gold coins and the blood oaths represent the commodification of all things, where lives, loyalty, violence, and death can all be reduced to economic transactions. As Harvey (2005) highlights, the gold coins, which appear in 42 scenes and are primarily used in transactional exchanges (60%), embody a capitalist logic that everything is for sale. The coins, symbolic of currency, represent the hyperreality of Baudrillard (1994) which is where violence is rendered invisible through the servicing of a fictive economy. The coins' universal circulation within the underworld, frequent in all four films, and the High Table's economic power, reflect the pervasive neoliberalism that commodifies all social relations (Brown, 2015).

5.2. Feudal Hierarchies and Institutional Power

The High Table's Iconography features medieval designs. These designs, a combination of gothic architectural and modern governmental visual styles, create a medieval authoritarian construction. The Adjudicator's Seal and Blood Oath Marker design draws from history in a way which provides authority to the high table (symbolic legitimation) (Machin & Mayr, 2023). The Blood Oath Marker - which appears in only eight scenes - and is feudal, has powers in the medieval vassalage system, and reflects an overwhelming concentrated power (Bloch, 1961). The Seal, similarly to medieval charters, cloaks the high table's bureaucratic criminality, therefore must also have an enforcement role (in five scenes, 100% enforcement context) (Weber, 1978).

By employing feudal imagery, the High Table critiques the still legally hierarchical structure of many contemporaneous institutions, which Bourdieu describes as institutions that maintain power through the enforcement of regulatory routines and ceremonial authority (Bourdieu, 1991). The High Table officials, who are not present and are scarcely mentioned in the scenes, add to the feudal mystique surrounding the council as an all-powerful remote sovereign. The Enforcers of the High Table, visible in 12 scenes with 70% prominence, fortified this power. They acted as modern knights, expending the high table's will and responsibility alongside van Dijk's observations on the power asylum created by the institutional role design (2008).

In bringing to life the contrast between medieval iconography and modern society, the John Wick franchise engages in a debate regarding the portrayal of the persistence of feudal control in Wick's supposed 'democratic' society, in the same way as Gramsci (1971) discusses cultural hegemony, whereby the control of a society's culture occurs through hidden domination of the ruling class. Feudal control in the Wick universe is symbolized, and the remaining one is military, which is analyzed below.

5.3 Spatial Control

Within the framework of Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power, the High Table symbols which serve as a centerpiece of nearly half of the scenes in the continental hotel (35, 50% of the hotel as a sanctuary) construct a panopticon. The continental is, of course, a luxury hotel. The juxtaposition of the luxury and the wide shots of the hotel lend to the creation of a space of extreme paradox, in which a covenant of assassins is guaranteed safety of their lives and no safety from their lives. Lefebvre (1991) argues that a space which, through its design, inhibits the

exercise of the free movement of the society within its control, exerts a control over the social activities and as such exerts a social control that is hidden. The scope of Lefebvre's observation is even more evident in the severe punishment that is prescribed to those who break the rules within the continental (a case in point being John's excommunication in Chapter 2, 01:50:22). The totality of the above observations goes to justify that the continental was a narrative centerpiece, which was present in all the films and which dominated the portrayal of significant scenes in the films. (post - the combined ones of conflict and those of ritual of the continental hotel)

This surveillance is supplemented by Adjudicator and Harbinger who, obedient to positions of power of the High Table, serve as surveillance enforcers (12 scenes, 60% enforcement context). The measured tone of the speech, especially when it becomes silent, in contrast to their close-up shots (70% of the total scenes with close-ups) designed to construct a rationalized image of power characterized by absolute control over the punishment of those who chose to deviate from the prescribed behavior.

From Lyon's point of view (2007), a "surveillance society" is where control is exercised through constant watching and mechanisms of discipline. The John Wick franchises satirize cultural manifestations of surveillance where people are controlled by imperceptible/profane systems of control (data aggregation by private firms and state surveillance), and breathe the contradiction of control and autonomy. The temporary contradiction of autonomy and control:

5.4. The High Table and Mythic Mystique and Symbolic Legitimation

These symbols of the High Table cause the High Table to be a cult which mystifies its power and legitimates its power through vague ritualistic/spacial practices. By these control mechanisms (blood oath marker, seal of the Adjudicator, and other control mechanisms), the High Table's authority is represented by the unseen. This is transcendence, which is a type of power described by Barthes (1972), as a type of power that is heavily mystified, and depoliticized. The ritualistic contexts surrounding the marker (75% of scenes) and the seal that is presented to the audience as authoritative (100% execution of seal) implies the existence of a sacred rite and the presumption that the High Table is a quasi-religious entity. Machin and Mayr (2023) indicates that this mystified power becomes inevitable and unchallengeable by the audience, which reflects the unaccountable nature of power.

The enforcers are also faceless (12 scenes), which deepens the mystique, as they are portrayed as the High Table's superiors. This connects to the concept of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994), The High Table through the enforcers creates a hyperreal authority that does not exist within a real, tangible social hierarchy.

Data indicating the presence of enforcers and ritualistic symbols illustrates their function in sustaining this mythical narrative. Constructing realms where power is everywhere and nowhere, the John Wick series challenges those institutions—governments, corporations, and secret societies—whose power is symbolic and therefore mystically dominant, inviting their audiences to critique the validity of those institutions.

5.5. Popularity of Culture as the Commentary Ideology

The series 'John Wick' centers on hyper-stylized miniatures and milestones and draws on the argument of Storey in 2015 as leveraging popular culture as a site of ideological critique. The High Table, Depersonalized enforcement, and Its calming and ritualistic economic objects and lavish imaginary all represent a significant power structure that is augmented in the real world,

and are dominant in a sequential contest. This also goes in alignment with Hall in 1980, where the communication meant designed loses meaning at dominant ideological levels, and instead arrives impotent at a resistant level meaning. The symbols of the High Table that imagines and provokes enforcement in the realm of fabric feature power and real world absurdity and brutality, and even illustrate parallels from world contemporaries such as bureaucratic control, corporate monopolies and authoritarianism.

The above illustration well encompasses the critique of the mixed methods employed that ground narrative in the qualitative research within the framework of empirical data. Take for example the Abstract and the MCAD that epitomizes the data within 42 sequences and in the Continental within 35 imagines and is pivotal central to that narrative in of gold coins. This is coterminous with the level of triangulation that buttresses this work within the culture of dominance in so far as it depicts the popular cinema in J Wick series along with the symbol system that in in- fabric society of spectacle fails to critique on the power that is performative within visual libert, narrative excess, and on the other hand, its hyperbolic representation.

5.6 Implications of the Study

This study's results have considerable contributions to the field of media studies, especially concerning the study of cinema semiotics and popular culture. Utilizing MCDA and quantitative content analysis in media research constitutes a plurality of methodologies. This study closes the gaps in the literature on how movies symbolize the encoding of power and the ideology of the film. This study also answers the call of media studies scholars to undertake a mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2016; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The symbols of the High Table in the John Wick movies attest to the potential of action cinema to address complex socio-political issues in a genre that is often considered escapist, hence widening the research in cultural studies (Tasker, 1993).

The results of the study also address the public discourse on power and control. The critique of neoliberal commodification fits the discourse on the gig economy and financialization (Srnicsek, 2017). The critique of feudal imagery explains concerns of new forms of authoritarianism (Mouffe, 2018). The critique of surveillance captialism also speaks to concerns on privacy and data governance (Zuboff, 2019). By highlighting these issues using popular culture, the John Wick movies also serve as cultural artifacts that mirror and counter existing societal structures. This also provides a means to address the issues surrounding these pop culture artifacts from the perspectives of policymakers, educators, and media practitioners. \

5.7 Limitations of the Study

The mixed-methods approach provides the study with a more intricate analysis of the data; however, limitations of the study include that the purposive sampling strategy might exclude some minor symbols, and that coder bias in interpreting a symbol is largely theoretical but the coder reliability is high, as indicated by the $\kappa = 0.83$. Future research might consider the study of audience reception in the decoding of the symbols by the audience, in line with the framework proposed by Hall (1980).

Other cinematic underworlds such as The Godfather or Underworld could further contextualize the semiotics of the High Table. The use of automated visual analysis or other forms of computational techniques could also improve the accuracy of the qualitative and quantitative data (Rose, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This mixed methods study contains elements of MCDA and quantitative content analysis and aims to demonstrate the ways in which the High Table in the John Wick series embodies and symbolises power and ideology within the framework of the films. The qualitative findings illustrate the complex multi-modal constructs of commodification, feudalism and surveillance, and the quantitative data evidences these findings. This study contributes to the field of media studies by integrating interpretative and empirical approaches and providing a basis to study the semiotics of cinema. Future studies could examine audience reception or cross-media analysis to further examine the power of the symbols.

Also reinforcing this ideology is the blood oath marker which, while occurring much less frequently (8 scenes, 75% ritual context), highlights the monetization of trust as a form of enslavement. Its coactive framework, as is the case with John Wick having a debt to Santino D'Antonio in Chapter 2 (00:45:12), resembles a form of neoliberalism dominion as debt is a form of control (Lazzarato, 2012). The sheer quantity of such 'symbols' (70% close ups (coin)) of (marker) 80% of (marker) accounts for their prominence in the narrative, particularly as they bear 'ideological weight' of the narrative. Discourse around neoliberalism is particularly relevant within popular culture as it often sheds light on the contradictions within capitalism (Storey, 2015) and suggests a critique on popular culture privileging dehumanization.

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