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Kate Moffat & Pietari Kääpä

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# Taking the green pill? Keanu Reeves as ‘reluctant eco-celebrity’

Kate Moffat and Pietari Kääpä

The Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article explores Keanu Reeves as a ‘reluctant eco-celebrity’. Although Reeves’ onscreen career has revolved around films engaged with radical and alternative ideas, off-screen, he remains a reluctant cheerleader for any political cause. His reluctance to participate explicitly in celebrity culture means Reeves is often assimilated into various media and fan narratives. However, when read ecologically, we argue these ‘Keanu texts’ play with irony, humility and reluctance in ways that speak to emerging trends in eco-critical thinking. Here, we emphasise how celebrity reluctance can incentivise audiences to engage with political and environmental themes in unconventional ways. Celebrity eco-activism takes many shapes in its most visible forms, but often with the support of management structures, PR and reputational capital tied to the celebrity industry, where capitalist agendas remain the most pertinent objective. For us, Reeves’ ‘reluctance’ disassociates the actor from these PR exercises. Simultaneously, this Keanu mythology enables complex promotional discourses and fan engagement that a) exploit this ambiguity for greenwashing purposes, but which in other contexts b) reveals the contradictory processes on which celebrity engagement with environmental agendas rely. Consequently, the concept of Reeves as a reluctant eco-celebrity both challenges and advances the conventional understanding of the eco-celebrity.

## KEYWORDS

Keanu Reeves; reluctant eco-celebrity; fan culture; ecological humility; dark ecology

## Introduction

Is Keanu Reeves an “environmentalist”? Saying “yes” would mean putting him in a category that he’s not going to want to be. Instead, he’s simply a real person whose existence is not defined by all those things that give us a massive carbon footprint, and who has some normal level of concern for the planet [...] He’s an environmentalist by default, lost in a sea of environmental hypocrites (Kerns 2019)

In an article titled ‘Keanu Reeves: The Perfect Environmental Role “Model”, environmental news editor Michael Kerns, writing for the oil industry magazine *Oil Price*, positions Reeves as the antithesis of the conventional eco-celebrity. He cites Reeves’ lack of engagement with CO2-heavy technology and social media platforms as the reason behind this differentiation,

**CONTACT** Kate Moffat  [Kate.Moffat@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Kate.Moffat@warwick.ac.uk)  University of Warwick, 6 University Rd, Coventry, CV4 7EQ, UK

conveniently ignoring Reeves' motorcycle fetish and forgetting that Hollywood – as the basis for his celebrity – is an invariably carbon-intensive industry (Vaughan 2019). In a particularly suggestive twist, Kerns uses this environmentalist reading of Keanu Reeves to push through a pro-oil argument, as he suggests that oil has not, in fact, been one of the main culprits in the contemporary global climate emergency. To support this assessment, he states that 'only 3% of our planet's electricity came from oil in 2018'.

This statement can be seen as a blatant attempt to capitalise on Reeves' newly resurgent popularity or the 'Keanaissance' (largely in the wake of the popularity of the *John Wick* franchise and wide-spread pop culture appropriations, including memes and self-aware cameo roles). For us, the article's unabashed reframing of Reeves' public persona as a means to make an ideological-economic point exemplifies the ways Reeves' ambiguous relationship with environmental activism can and has been exploited. Here, the Kerns article provides argumentative assertions that could be viewed as environmentalist in their critique of the media sector while using a rhetorical sleight of hand repositioning oil as an environmental energy option. In many ways, Reeves' refusal to comment one way or another on his environmentalist opinions enables a wide variety of politicised agencies to be affiliated with his persona, much as happens with the Kerns article's unexpected correlation between Reeves and the oil industry. Moreover, it suggests that it is Reeves' lack of engagement in explicit media consumptive practices that make him an environmental figurehead, reflecting similar calls for divestment from consumptive practices that are sometimes made about environmental media production – that the absence of production is the only appropriate form of green production (see Käpä 2018). To be environmental in an inevitably and invariably carbon-intensive industry, especially the more successful one's position, is to disengage as much as possible on a practical level. And indeed, as we can see from Kerns' article, Reeves' reluctance to play along with the media industry's business-as-usual mantra is often presented as the antidote to the excessive consumption that the industry generates, even as they then can be used to promote the activities of a sector with a much more environmentally harmful track record than Hollywood.

To unpack these complex positions, we examine the dynamics of absence and presence in the ways Keanu Reeves cultivates his public persona, especially regarding how Reeves (as a film star/celebrity and as a 'celebrity 'text') and his fandom reframe the concept of eco-celebrity. The concept of 'eco-celebrity', in general, refers to the use of environmentalist ideas and rhetoric in the act of branding a particular star or celebrity in a positive light. Such activities may be taken up by the celebrity themselves, companies that employ them, their publicity agency or the media, but the principle is that they position the celebrity as someone invested in beneficial ideologically-inflected social and political goals. Yet, such activities may often not amount to any substantial transformations but only operate as self-branding techniques, leading to persistent accusations of greenwashing and scepticism towards celebrities taking on environmental rhetoric.

Our rationale for rethinking eco-celebrity is based on Reeves' hands-off association with environmentalist ideas and how his absence in engaging with explicitly eco-activist celebrity culture leads to fan narratives reinforcing this association, largely generated by this reluctance. We propose these aspects challenge some of the rhetorical directions eco-celebrity activism has taken, particularly over the last two decades, as social media has provided a permanent

outlet for celebrity voices intending to participate in environmentalist debates (and cultivate their brand by doing so). In many instances, such activity has provoked scepticism or even rejection of the motivations behind this activism/self-branding.

Our approach delves into the cultural mythology of Keanu Reeves – the cultural celebrity text identified above consisting of a range of widely circulating snapshots of ‘Keanu-lore’ – by critically engaging with select interviews with Reeves and a range of self-published fan material. Consequently, rather than suggest eco-celebrity culture relates to those directly involved in activism, we can locate and interpret more subtle eco-discourses in fan community narratives. This is key as fans associate a whole range of discursive practices with the Reeves text, much like the textual poachers harvesting and repurposing existing media franchises extend and challenge the canon of those franchises, as suggested by Jenkins’ ground-breaking work on the agency of fan practices and cultures (1992). In the following article, we shall observe the kind of narratives Keanu fans consume and project, as the Keanu-text is so malleable and open-ended. Next, we aim to understand how they transform our understanding of the eco-celebrity’s meaning and function. Finally, we suggest that Reeves’ complex relationship with environmental activism exhibits what Morton calls a ‘dark ecological’ perspective. This is a disassociated form of activism where Reeves’ humility and lo-fi lifestyle provide a feasible alternative to much of the pomposity and empty rhetoric of most high-profile eco-celebrities. To provide context for this analysis, firstly, we identify some of the key problems with mainstream celebrity environmental movements.

### Celebrity advocacy and environmental politics

The Australian bushfire crisis in 2019–2020 mobilised a global outpouring of celebrity endorsements, from those casually promoting fundraising via social media to more direct forms of celebrity activism with the likes of Russell Crowe, Cate Blanchett and Nicole Kidman using their award speeches as platforms to raise awareness of the disaster. The unfolding events in Australia and the celebrity voices championing the cause echoed back in Hollywood, with Joaquin Phoenix and Jane Fonda using the fires to push for the climate emergency to take centre stage in the US political agenda. Indeed, through their participation in such climate protests, Phoenix and Fonda would later join a growing list of high-profile celebrity arrests that, predictably, generated a flurry of interest from the tabloid and broadsheet media (see Buckley 2019, Young 2020, respectively).

These types of eco-activism demonstrate the conflicting marriage between celebrity, activism, technology and PR. While, certainly, these celebrities’ use of both more traditional and social media channels contributes to awareness over the climate emergency, celebrity environmental activism has often received substantial critical interrogation. For example, in their ‘celebrity ecologies’ issue of *Celebrity Studies*, Goodman and Littler (2013, p. 270) emphasise the need to focus on the broader technological and social frameworks that contribute to the production and consumption of celebrity rather than just the individual star. However, whether it be Russell Crowe with his extensive tabloid history or Joaquin Phoenix with his reputation for blurring onscreen characters and public persona, there is an inherent danger that environmental facts and causes become lost or distorted in the compelling culture of celebrity PR regardless of how noble the intervention seems, as Alison Anderson (2013) points out. Here, environmental causes facilitate the celebrity rather than vice versa.

Such technological-cultural developments have also become a double-edged sword. While social media platforms offer reach and visibility, they also compress environmental narratives into easily digestible sound bites, talking head contributions and Instagram posts, often undermining the complexity of environmental problems and the necessary responses (Kim and Cooke 2018). However, celebrity environmentalism also conflates consumerism with activism, echoing a frequent criticism of social media activism as a form of self-promotional branding that promotes associations with positive value systems. By associating their brand with an overt form of fan baiting and clicktivism, eco-celebrities can evoke considerable scepticism over their activist credentials. Correspondingly, on the public relations side, eco-celebrities can inadvertently become complicit in sustaining the same structures they claim to work against with scholars (Kääpä 2018, Vaughan 2019), identifying well-known eco-celebrities such as George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio with problematic consumer brands or unsustainable forms of consumerism. Here, celebrity eco-activism can operate alongside wider corporate values, preserving the same institutions responsible for environmental destruction and falsehoods about sustainability. Furthermore, these perspectives on eco-celebrity raise questions over whether celebrities can speak about the climate emergency with the support of an industry whose practices, motivation and fundamental *raison d'être* contradict the very idea of sustainability.

Many of these problems relate to overt associations between eco-celebrities and corporate greenwashing, where companies employ rhetorical eco-conscience PR strategies using eco-celebrities to humanise their brand's image. Here, a celebrity's actions help conflate environmentalism with corporate social responsibility narratives, long critiqued in environmental scholarship based on the suggestion that these Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies are often nothing more than branding greenwashing activities. Many corporations do not disguise these facts but rather make their objectives appear integral to and compatible with sustainability goals and ambitions. This is often done by strategically adopting eco-celebrity ambassadors to galvanise fans and audiences to change their behaviour while encouraging direct participation in consumer culture. However, as scholars like Anderson have established, while celebrities provide buoyance to the flailing impact of scientific data and information on climate change in the media, there is little evidence to suggest these interventions contribute to any form of systematic change amongst consumers (Anderson 2011, p. 543).

According to Carrier (2010), celebrities reinforce the myth that individualism (and individual consumption) can replace direct or collective political action. However, by extension, this human face, inherently embedded in the capitalist system, does little but anaesthetise any real political or economic recourse to the climate crisis:

[T]he celebrity as public individual who participates openly as a marketable commodity serves as a powerful type of legitimization of the political-economic model of exchange and value – the basis of capitalism – and extends that model to include the individual (Marshall 1997, p. x).

The value of eco-celebrities for the environmental cause is a contested terrain, as the awareness they generate can be both valuable and harmful by side-lining the impact of environmental problems. Here, as a cultural text, Reeves provides an intriguing challenge to evaluations of what precisely constitutes an 'eco-celebrity.' These factors are significant for our discussion as Keanu Reeves fits uncomfortably amongst most of these established

communication practices. We must ask what role eco-celebrity – as a form of discourse management conducive to environmental activism and brand management – plays in maintaining and challenging environmental debates' policy impacts. This is especially relevant as eco-celebrity narratives often emerge from the complex and contradictory interstices between activism, corporate culture, marketing and show business. Reeves, or more specifically, the 'Keanu-text', answers what happens when a celebrity refuses to engage with the technology/corporate culture driving environmental PR and CSR while also appearing disinvested from the awareness generation activities that their role will inadvertently facilitate. By existing as an eco political tabula rasa, the Keanu-text exemplifies the complex mechanisms by which fans and other commentators can redirect the text in unexpected directions.

To tease out these complexities and challenge some of the dominant commercially driven behaviour narratives described above, we will examine how the Keanu-text incorporates environmental issues. Such an interrogation has much to contribute to the field of Celebrity Studies, especially as environmental concerns are habitually offset and marginalised by powerful PR mechanisms in the corporate and brand management of diverse media industry contexts (see Kääpä 2018). In many ways, this case study sheds light on the manufactured nature of most environmental activism, especially in the Hollywood industry and its paratextual associations.

### Keanu Reeves: the *reluctant* celebrity?

The so-called 'Keanaissance' has become a popular way of characterising Reeves' extraordinary three-decade-long career metamorphosis with a profile that extends across many genres and sub-cultures. Reeves's apparent modesty and reputation for seemingly un-staged acts of public generosity have helped cement his reputation on social media platforms despite his famously refusing to subscribe to them. Meanwhile, the tabloids have concentrated on the inscrutable aspects of his personal life. Simultaneously, the man himself maintains a professional veneer in all his publicity engagements, especially when hawking studio products. Coupled with this, Reeves is largely enigmatic in both his politics and relationship with celebrity culture. These ambiguities have given his loyal fans and the broadsheet media creative licence to mould Reeves into many different forms. He has been alternatively touted as a feminist figure (see Ellen 2019), as a figurehead of societal justice, and, more recently, as the introduction attests, as an environmental role model. Indeed, both on and off-screen, Reeves continues to serve as a fascinating canvas for radical and alternative ideas. Yet, he remains a reluctant cheerleader for any of these political causes.

To illustrate the complexity of Reeves' eco-celebrity positioning, we might consider him in light of some of the existing scholarly frameworks in eco-celebrity studies. Abidin *et al.* (2020, p. 393), for example, have developed a typology of celebrity eco-activists that reflects the broad range of motives, mediums and degrees of celebrity involvement in eco-activism. For them, celebrity environmental movements can be classified into (a) celebrity animals, (b) ambassadors, (c) white saviours, (d) indigenous heroes and heroines, (e) gurus, (f) commercial TV products, (g) entrepreneurs, (h) activist intellectuals, and (i) ordinary people" (Abidin *et al.* 2020, p. 405). Arguably, however, Keanu Reeves does not fit neatly into any of these categories, often overlapping and crisscrossing them in both his

onscreen performances and in social media and other narratives about his personal life. Instead, his 'environmentalism' is closer to what Josh Weinstein characterises as 'ecological humility' (2015), which in the case of Reeves connects to his modesty and lo-fi lifestyle as potential aspirational behavioural modes for his fans, audiences and the general public.

In contrast to the 'actorvist' stardom embodied by George Clooney, for example, (McDonald 2019), Reeves' refusal to play to type (especially in his personal life) constitutes, in many ways, his 'star persona' (to use Richard Dyer's (2004) emphasis on the constructed constitution of celebrity) that is, the range of discourses and uses the Reeves brand is put to in popular cultural discussions. Reeves' persona both refuses categorisations and, perhaps paradoxically, relies on this refusal, especially in some of his recent more self-aware performances, such as his cameo in *Always Be My Maybe* (2020). This self-exclusion from explicit channels of political action and maintaining an inscrutable distance from more obvious celebrity practices suggests that the Reeves celebrity persona encapsulates what Lorraine York characterises as a 'reluctant celebrity' (2017). For her, this is a framework that argues how reluctance as a characteristic can generate social capital and engagement from audiences and fans in unconventional ways. If, as we hypothesise, Reeves' reluctance is the driving force for fans to imagine qualities and behavioural modes conducive to an environmental ethics (Pianalto 2013), then Reeves encourages self-reflexive tendencies among fans where their discursive contributions to the Keanu-text are motivated by *values* rather than the more problematic or superficial kinds of 'direct action' peddled by other eco-celebrities. Thus, it is not what Reeves does but what he *enables* in fans and other commentators that matters. At the same time, Reeves' ambivalent environmentalism also gestures at how the celebrity/PR industry harnesses even modesty and low-key personability as capital, to be exploited as part of the constructed celebrity persona (see Dyer 2004), and as can be seen in our opening example from Kerns.

This discussion is in line with York's argument that certain types of celebrity reluctance can produce their own dynamism and influence, generating power that exceeds the channels of celebrity authority. One of York's key case studies is actor and activist John Cusack, who is a highly vocal Twitter user campaigning, amongst other things, for a host of anti-capitalist and pro-environmental issues (see 2017, pp. 27–62). York writes about how Cusack's reluctance to immerse himself fully in celebrity culture is coupled with his own acknowledgement that he desires (and benefits) from its exploitative mechanisms. The results are a reluctant engagement with capitalist discourses that make Cusack's Twitter activism more politically accessible to audiences and fans precisely because he makes the struggle to live within one's means relatable, particularly from a privileged perspective (2017, p. 58). Consequently, his collaborations, such as those with renowned author and environmentalist Naomi Klein, lack the artificiality or piety of other more polished eco-celebrity campaigns circulating in the media. This also equips Cusack's celebrity status with the power to speak to a broader political spectrum of people.

Reeves' reluctant association with celebrity culture facilitates similarly unconventional associations but in much less manufactured ways. An example of reluctance in Reeves' case came in 2008 when he gave an interview on the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Derrickson 2008), which had been transformed from an anti-nuke parable to an eco-text. Reeves is questioned about his allegiances with mainstream celebrity environmental movements and denounces his degree of agency in relation to environmental issues,



especially when it comes to exerting influence on fan behaviour (Reeves, quoted in Weil 2008). This is very much in line with the position Reeves maintains as a reluctant celebrity, as according to York, 'no matter its diverse strategies or deployments, reluctance is consistently a form of power, even if (or especially when) it is wielded in situations where one may feel relatively powerless' (York 2017, p. 139–140). Reeves' choice not to participate, perhaps paradoxically, provides him with the ability to control the Keanu text, as York argues, 'celebrity energy is not dissipated in cases of reluctance, not cancelled out, but stored, persisting alongside desire as an equally possible energy source out of which the celebrity's and fan's acts may proceed' (2017, p.12). By being reluctant to participate, Reeves enables and amplifies fan curiosity, which is, in many ways, the key component in our understanding of Reeves as a reluctant eco-celebrity. The effects of reluctance in the case of Reeves have arguably created more demand from fans – a void that has been filled with a kind of Keanu mythology that takes on a life of its own, supplementing his reluctant agency. These voices evolve and live on across fan platforms, allowing a continual dialogue and contributing to what is effectively a polysemic Keanu text. The question here is whether this reluctance untethers fans from the more orthodox eco-celebrity narratives explored earlier or if it instead encourages them to fill these absences more voraciously with their own contributions to the Keanu myth.

What interests us is how far Keanu fan cultures appear to subscribe to or reflect these ideas. What kind of narratives are circulating in this community? What type of behaviour or characteristics tied to lifestyle, beliefs, and philosophies are evident? How can we understand these aspects concerning environmental discourses, especially where the celebrity declines to participate in one way or another? More than telling us something about Keanu Reeves' environmentalist credentials (or the lack of them), the fan activities in this context contribute to understanding the role of eco-celebrities (absent or present) as polysemic texts open to a range of ideological extensions.

### **Keanu fan narratives: a reluctant role model**

Fan literature and commentary on Reeves extends to a wide spectrum of dedicated websites, Tumblr blogs, and Reddit-hosted feeds like <https://www.reddit.com/r/KeanuBeingAwesome/>, which includes hourly updates and boasts some 341,000 members. In addition, fan sites like <http://www.whoaisnotme.net/> are extensive and complex, offering both orthodox and robust defences of Reeves' onscreen performances and more serious reflection on Reeves as a politicised figure, which include critical discussion on the implications and political correctness of 'green agendas' in eco-texts like the aforementioned *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (LucaM 2009). Along these lines, the site also contains an interview for the French Canal+ channel (22 November 2008) where Reeves is quizzed on his environmentalist credentials: In response to an interviewer's question on whether he has 'ever wanted, in a personal way, to fight for the ecological cause like Leonardo DiCaprio, Tom Hanks or Harrison Ford?', Reeves responds:

I guess doing the film, I do it, but I don't have any agency. In my life, I deal with it every day and for working my art. We obviously have to change our lifestyles and the impact we have on the environment. There are species threatened on our planet. Part of the message in the film is to tell us that there are characteristics intrinsic to humanity, and to save these characteristics means we're done. So we have to do something, have to change our lifestyle.



While comments such as this emphasise a distinct environmentalist agenda in Reeves' approach to the climate emergency, they are very different to the type of overt celebrity actorism embodied Clooney, or the activist fan engagement mobilised by Lady Gaga (chronicled by Bennett 2014). They certainly do not reach similar heights of fan commitment or richness of detail that Amaral *et al.* (2021) chronicle in self-mobilising fan communities. Interestingly, while Reeves fans are committed (to him), they are not politically committed, at least in the sense of Clooney or Gaga fans. Thus, it is not surprising that the fans do not fully take up Reeves' occasionally environmental gestures. In a discussion of the film's potential green credentials on the same site, LucaM comments: 'And it's not a "green" movie, either. I mean, Kilauea is actually eating a tuna sandwich ...' (2009). By picking out this minor instance, the commentator, perhaps unintentionally, emphasises the shaky foundations of Hollywood environmentalism, including that of its star, channelling perhaps the lack of commitment they gleam from the object of their fan obsession. Instead, the majority of the conversation turns to Reeves' qualities as an actor and the bad reviews the film has been generating. This is a repeated pattern on other sites as well as, for example, on a site called *Keanu Vision*, an article on the Reeves-narrated documentary *The Great Warming* (2007) contains minimal discussion of the film's content, with any suggestion of political participation quickly squashed by a user named Laura commenting 'Keanu talking about the environment? That just made me all tingly' (Keanu Vision 2004).

Thus, overall, from this brief exploration of patterns in Reeves-related fan and social media sites, we find that many Keanu fans are hesitant in taking up the few instances where Reeves offers them the opportunity to participate in environmental narratives. In another example, the fan site *keanuismortal.com* contains a discussion of Keanu that initially gestures to his potential as an environmental role model, but that quickly descends into a flame war on over-population and the role of US-led global capitalism. While this could be seen as an instance where Keanu inspires critical debate on vital environmental issues, the discussion flow is largely divorced from any mention of him or his star persona. Instead, the discussion turns on individual conflicts and trolling in ways that are largely counterproductive to any sense of rational discourse on environmental topics.

While measuring the exact extent to which the Keanu-text *creates* or *reflects* social or environmental change presents significant challenges due to Reeves's distancing from it, these patterns suggest broader ways to interpret the impacts of eco-celebrity culture. As we have seen, the fan site message board contributions to the Keanu-text do not enhance a pro- or anti-environmentalist narrative but highlight the few instances where Reeves has actively cultivated environmental activism and how they are quickly neutered by fan bickering and diversion into irreverent discussions of his star persona. This connects to a long history of studies of active fans by the likes of Jenkins (1992) and Hills (2002), who have evaluated how fans use existing media texts and franchises for various purposes, from facilitating individual or communal identity politics to capitalising on fan creativity. The power of fans as agents is even more pronounced when the text lacks the canon or the presence of an established franchise, often shepherded by creatives with defined visions over its constitution. In this case, the 'text' is, of course, the ambivalent Keanu-text constructed in popular cultural dialogue, and nurtured by Reeves in perhaps unintended ways, that, in all its ambiguities and absences, provides an open-ended Keanu-text that facilitates both poaching and extensions of its constitution. For these fans of Reeves

partaking in discussions on various fan sites, it seems the more serious side of his films – particularly any potential environmental messages – gets lost in a general appreciation of Keanu as ‘the internet’s boyfriend’.

### **Keanu fan narratives: towards an ‘ecological humility’?**

Suppose social media and fan sites tend to downplay Reeves’ environmental contributions. In that case, more official channels, including articles in magazines and even full books, contain material that falls under the spectrum of fan discourse linking to environmental activism. Film critic and self-confessed ‘Keanu fanatic’ James King and his *Be More Keanu* pocketbook provide an interesting case in point. Presented by the non-fiction publisher Square Peg, an offshoot of Vintage, in 2020, King’s contribution opens up the environmental dimensions of the Keanu fan text in new directions. The book includes themed sections titled ‘The Guru, The Gentleman, The Lover, The Fighter, The Friend, The Rockstar, The Comedian and The Pioneer’. Each part consolidates and recycles interviews, Keanu trivia and biographical material and combines them with analysis of his onscreen performances. King then re-packages the material into a pseudo-philosophical self-help manual, providing the reader with takeaway life advice based on perceptions of Reeves’ unassuming attitude and reticent public persona. For us, the fact that King’s book is categorised as non-fiction also intriguingly reinforces the authenticity of these Keanu mythologies.

The relevance of King’s material for our project emanates from how he positions Reeves as a role model for personal transformation by adhering to positive value systems instead of encouraging direct external actions. Much of this thinking runs counter to the more ‘proactive’ patterns of behaviour and representations of environmental action supported, endorsed and encouraged by mainstream eco-celebrity culture. Largely, King’s advice is not directly related to politicised environmental concerns. Instead, the narrative he constructs emphasises Reeves ‘wandering the Earth with few possessions’ (2020) and encourages readers to live a ‘life of modesty and minimalism’ (2020).

Reeves’ ‘humility’, an impression facilitated by associations with frugality and a lifestyle that (perhaps inadvertently) fits with a loosely defined environmental ethics framework, echoes Matthew Pianalto (2013) and Josh Weinstein’s (2015) notion of ‘ecological humility.’ According to Weinstein:

Ecological humility is a humility that recognises the simultaneous smallness of any one being in relation to the whole and the impossibility of the whole without its constituent parts. It is, thus, a form of cosmic humility engendered by, and concerned with, the interconnection of people and place, living and nonliving things, in our lived experience of the world. What is most important here is the recognition of multiple perspectives, which exist without the need for a grand hierarchy. To be ecologically humble is to be attentive not only to our own individual existence but also to our often delicate and subtle interconnections with the greater world around us (2015, p. 771).

It is not difficult to find instances of this ‘ecocentric’ philosophy in King’s contribution to the Keanu text as it encourages the reader to position their beliefs in relation to the wider world around them and, in the process, emphasises the need for interdependent thinking and action. By positioning Reeves’ lifestyle as an embodiment ‘of modesty and minimalism’, King gestures to an eco-centric worldview that highlights the ways Reeves (again, often inadvertently) divests from the excesses of anthropocentric logic that still dictate

much of mainstream celebrity eco-activism (that is, eco-activism as part of a system of self-promotion and consumer branding). Eco-critical thinking, by definition, is designed to decentralise the individual human subject; yet, the irony of mainstream eco-celebrity culture is how the impetus is driven by the star power of individuals, a process that speaks more to anthropocentric tendencies predicated on materialistic gains and benefits, such as brand or image management of the celebrities in question. Whereas in these narratives, the brand culture of the celebrity industry operates in place of environmental context/problems, in King's book, Reeves occupies a curious intermediary role between conventional celebrity culture and a values-based assessment of how to be more like Keanu by prioritising humility and disinvestment.

Such approaches position Reeves as exhibiting what Klain *et al.* (2017, p. 1) call 'the principles, notions, and virtues of relational values', emphasising reconciliation with ecosystemic approaches to living in and with the world. As this comprises the driving logic for King's book, it inadvertently suggests the need to expedite a type of ecological reflection that moves away from the anthropocentric foundations of most eco-celebrity activism. To push this argument further, such an approach corresponds with Pianalto's (2013, p. 147) argument that an environmental ethics begins with precisely this type of self-reflexivity that may seem lacking in engagement and impact, but which reflects a much more pervasive connection to environmental citizenship. Such a perspective highlights individual responsibility as a value-based approach, much like King describing Reeves as wandering the Earth with few possessions.

Superficially, it may appear that the piety and goodness that drives a lot of the Keanu-text, and that John Cusack's type of reluctance rejects is precisely what fuels fan adoration for Reeves. However, *Be More Keanu's* ecological humility also demonstrates other ways in which fan communities do not adhere to or accept the terms of corporate celebrity PR mechanisms. As Jenkins observes, fan communities are often powered by a rejection of official celebrity channels of representation and dissemination (Jenkins 1992), shifting official narratives in often unexpected directions. *Be More Keanu* also engages in a similar reluctance as Reeves himself, rejecting affiliation with the unquestioning anthropocentric logic of much mainstream eco-celebrity, as well as the ways environmental values are appropriated by the film industry as potentially lucrative cultural (green) capital. Part of the book's satirical edge draws on the various incarnations of Reeves as a saviour of Earth. Indeed, throughout his career, Reeves has played a host of characters who have saved the world, including those in films with specific environmental anxieties like Andrew Davis' *Chain Reaction* (1996) and Derrickson's aforementioned remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), with this critical, ironic perspective casting a healthy sceptical view on the ways these blockbuster narratives deal with environmental themes (see Brereton 2004 and Kääpä 2014 for critical evaluation of such narratives). The book is, after all, a tongue-in-cheek take on Keanu where King synchronises his admiration for Reeves with irony, sending up both the celebrity industry and the fan cultures themselves.

Hence, the irony explicit in King's text adds another layer of complexity to the book's ecological dimensions. Specifically, we suggest this irony contributes a further dimension to Reeves' and his fans' reluctance to fully subscribe to the more politicised or 'authentic' celebrity eco-narratives. This reluctance does not necessarily compromise the ecological humility at work. Instead, it enhances it precisely because this humility refuses the excesses and compromises essential to the illusions of more mainstream celebrity

environmentalism. Indeed, these elements inform the book's advice for how to be more Keanu as 'it's Keanu's very ambiguity that changes our perspective of what can be achieved' (King 2020).

### Keanu's dark ecologies

While exploring the relationship between ecological thinking and reluctance may seem like an oxymoron, the King case study can point us towards a different type of ecological thinking akin to ecologist and philosopher Timothy Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' (2010, p. 16). Dark ecology is a philosophical framework designed to combat oversimplified views on ecological problems, specifically by denouncing the affirmative rhetoric of environmental ideology. Morton (2010, p. 17) states that 'as well as being about melancholy, dark ecology is also about uncertainty.' He calls for people to reevaluate the notion of ecological thinking. Dark ecology acknowledges the embeddedness and complexities of humanity's relationship with the planet as it does not limit or reduce ecological thought to stories or themes related to nature or those large-scale environmental catastrophes often highlighted by eco-celebrity campaigning. Rather, Morton claims that:

a more honest ecological art would linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference. With dark ecology, we can explore all kinds of art forms as ecological: not just ones that are about lions and mountains, not just journal writing and sublimity. The ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror (2010, p. 16)

This perspective expands our analytical frame to consider contributions like King's as part of a complex ecologicalism that positions Reeves' reluctance and humility as an entirely appropriate response to our current climate crisis. To illustrate, King's book centres on choice and cooperation by refusing to shy away from the darker aspects of these relationships and maintains an ironic distance from the self-proclaimed authority commanded by the eco-celebrity industry. By simply not being interested in the conventional clichéd trappings of the eco-celebrity industry, Reeves becomes a poster boy for an environmental ethics that rejects the very principles of (capitalist, exploitative) eco-celebrity perpetuated in much of contemporary industry discourse. This is also where the Keanu text becomes 'dark', ecologically speaking, in that it sustains itself by contributions like King's (that in many ways casts doubt on the very concept of a celebrity industry). However, it also engages with fan communities, who take Reeves' humility more at face value than King's take but who tend to use other positive Reeves narratives – the 'internet's boyfriend', the 'world's kindest celebrity' etc. – to envision a value-centric world of frugality, charity, sharing and down-to-earthness, all qualities that fit under an orthodox ecological understanding, but are fundamentally at odds with the glamour and jet-setting of conventional eco-celebrity. Furthermore, the polysemy of the Keanu text also draws from the hardships endured by Reeves and the frequently dark themes of his films which facilitate framings that may not be explicitly environmentalist nor make statements about environmental concerns – especially in the sense of the pointed PR of eco-celebrities – but which become such in the context of fan discussions that positively evaluate precisely these qualities.

## Conclusions: taking the green pill?

While Reeves and his role as a reluctant, dark eco-celebrity have thus been contextualised in multiple ways, we must also be cautious or critical when interpreting Reeves' apparent inaction or reluctance as a radical or transformative act. Framing Reeves' 'lo-key practices' is complex, reflecting Dyer's description of the ways celebrities straddle the line between being extraordinary and ordinary. Reeves is both ordinary – acting and behaving in a way that is not associated with the excess of celebrity culture – yet that normalcy is transformed into an extraordinary attribute in the broader context of celebrity culture where, conventionally, there is an expectation that celebrities either represent excess or actively use their platforms to promote specific causes. In other words, the more Reeves appears inconspicuous and 'normal', the more he stands out in the context of celebrity culture. The polysemic uses of the Keanu text allow for incorporation into a wide variety of ideological agendas, from environmentalist rhetoric (such as the mileage that organisations like UNESCO have made from *The Great Warming* and its celebrity associations) to corporate social responsibility framing as we saw with the Kerns article that positioned Reeves as a potential role model for a green oil industry. As greenwashing is a habitual problem in the media industry, the fact that Reeves is a celebrity, despite and because of his reluctance, means that he can be used as a green pill – effectively a placebo – for industries in need of greenwashing.

If anything, Reeves' reluctant environmentalism emphasises two key strands: firstly, the dark ecologies of the Keanu text exemplify the idea that environmental role models may be reluctant to espouse environmental wisdom especially as they belong to an industry that is inevitably about public relations management. Simultaneously, in celebrity studies, there are explicit questions about where power lies. In the academic study of celebrity, the reach and efficacy of celebrities as ambassadors, whether that be for a product or a political cause, is an ongoing debate. Celebrities are part of an ever-shifting hierarchical constellation where, according to Fletcher's psychoanalytical take (2015), the celebrity's authority is not absolute. Equally, according to Marshall, 'in one sense, the celebrity represents success and achievement within the social world' while at the same time 'celebrity is ridiculed and derided because it represents the centre of false value', signifying what he describes as 'success without the requisite association with work' (Marshall 1997, p. x–xi, original spelling).

As a result, we must qualify the degree to which fame affords the celebrity an ability to command authority on subjects generally unrelated to their careers or attributes – or whether they actually want to do so. As a consequence, the second most vital aspect of Reeves' reluctant environmentalism emerges from the openness of the Keanu-text, which makes such reluctant participations effective as they tie into more positive value systems. Such approaches highlight the sense that to be an environmentally responsible citizen does not necessary entail high-impact statements framed in the vernacular of the entertainment industry but can also be much more lo-fi and 'ordinary'. These, then, in their ordinariness translate into much more influential and effective behavioural models closer to the lives of fans than the jet-setting of the glamorous eco-celebrity.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributors

**Kate Moffat** is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow based at the University of Warwick. She has published widely on themes of ethnic Otherness and cinema in journals such as *Somatechnics*, *Lähikuva* and the *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*. She has also published on aspects of eco-cinema with a particular focus on how marginal identities are explored through environmental politics. Her current work explores the ways indigenous media cultures position themselves in the global media environment.

**Pietari Kääpä** is an Associate Professor in Media and Communications at the University of Warwick. He has published widely on environmental approaches to film and television studies, including *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *Environmental Management of the Media* (Routledge 2018). He continues to be fascinated with THE intersections of environmentalism and popular culture, and currently runs an AHRC network on Global Green Media Production (2019-2021).

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