



Iko Uwais Is Hollywood's Next Big Martial Arts Star. Just Ask Keanu Reeves and Mark Wahlberg.

Hollywood has an action aversion: turning well-choreographed fight scenes into quick-cutting, hand-held cacophonies. Iko Uwais hopes his films will change that.

BY [JOSH ST. CLAIR](#) JUL 12, 2019

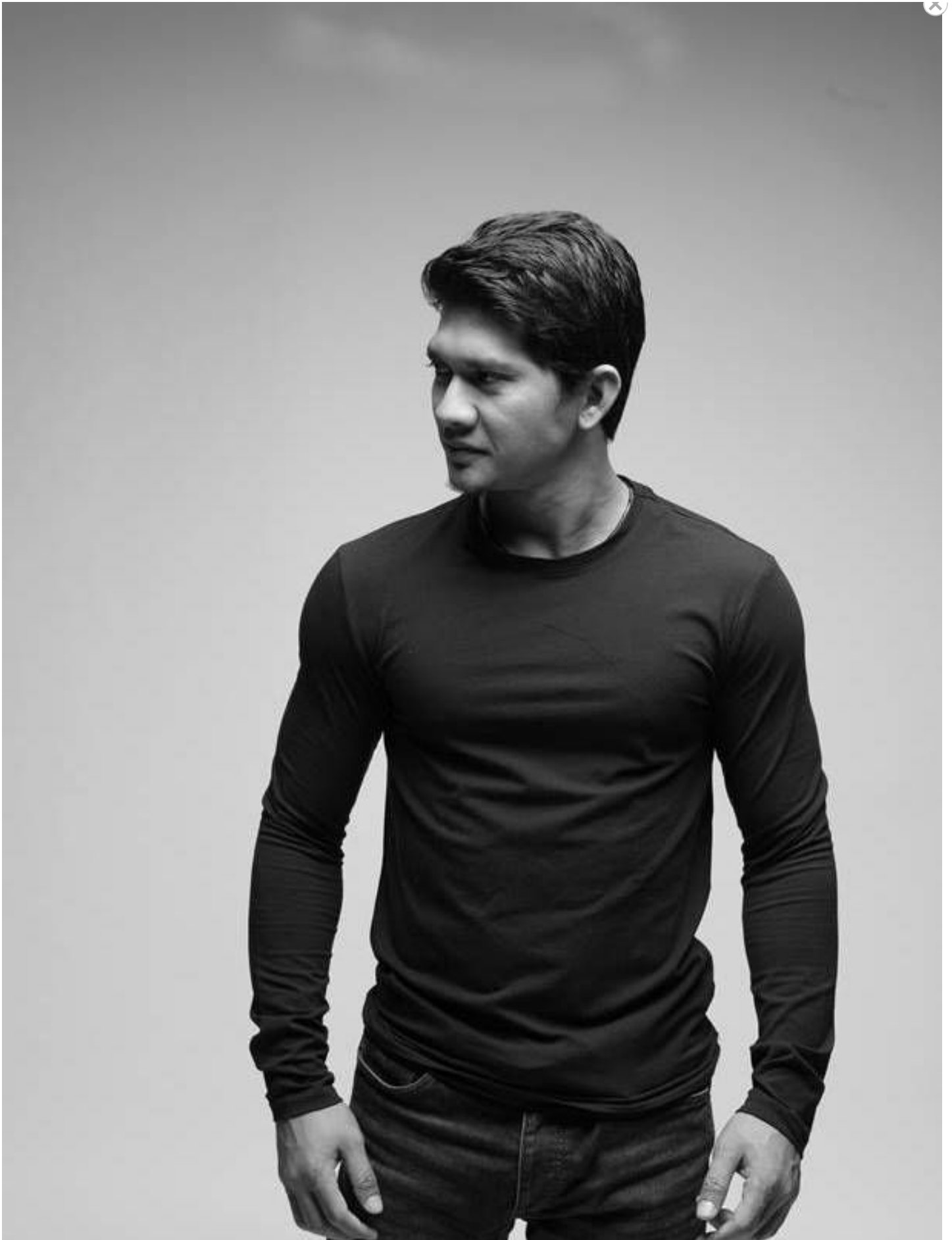


When J.J. Abrams resurrected Star Wars, he wanted excitement—and actors who would make the new films fun. For a particular scene in *The Force Awakens*, when raider assassins board and attempt to hijack the Millennium Falcon from their galactic target, Han Solo, Abrams wanted action—and actors who could make it feel real. So Abrams called Iko Uwais.

It was a fan's desire as much as it was a director's request. Abrams, like many in Hollywood, discovered Uwais through his work on *The Raid: Redemption*, Welsh director Gareth Evans' Indonesian martial arts film equally inspired by *Die Hard*, [an M.I.A. music video](#), and the Malay self-defense art form Silat. *The Raid* became one of the most celebrated action movies of the century and featured hand-to-hand combat to render Jason Bourne a haymaker-throwing street brawler and John Wick a novice MMA fighter. (John Wick star [Keanu Reeves](#) was so enthralled by Uwais, he cast him in a small role for his directorial debut, *Man of Tai Chi*.)

Abrams wanted that action. So he called and cast Uwais and *Raid* co-star Cecep Arif Rahman to hunt down Han. He also asked Uwais to choreograph a lightsaber fight for later in the film. Uwais, a champion in Pencak Silat, had by then written and performed hundreds of murderous fight choreographies involving knives and machetes. The concept he showed Abrams called for a duel and featured a finishing move where a fighter strategically retracts his lightsaber before gaining his opponent's rear-side, and then, as Uwais explains, “with a swift move, puts the dead lightsaber into the back of his opponent, and turns it on.”

Abrams loved the choreography, but thought the fight too violent for the movie's PG-13 rating. Ultimately, it was cut from the film. In their own roles, Uwais and Rahman hold less than five minutes of total screen time: they engage in a brief exchange with Solo; they are set upon by a tentacled monster; they run, turn, shoot, and die—mostly off screen. By the time the “action” clears, theatergoers probably had no idea that two of the world's premier martial artists, brought on to help rejuvenate the most iconic film franchise of all time, did little more than stand around; their role was essentially a cameo.



RENDHA RAIS

Of course, Uwais doesn't see it that way, and he was happy and honored that Abrams gave him the call, cameo or no. "Getting calls from Hollywood has been quite surreal to be honest," says Uwais. "Making a living out of my real passion, which is Silat; that's certainly a privilege for me."

Uwais' humility can be disarming; for a flashy, elbow-and-knee-throwing performer, his offstage presence is surprisingly placid. He stands at roughly 5'7," muscled but not dominating, and he smiles shyly and with the sort of spotlight aversion native only to those who truly never dreamt of a spotlight.

Mark Wahlberg on Uwais: "badass."

Though already an action superstar in the eastern hemisphere, Uwais and his non-cameo talents are only now coming to American screens. Last year, Uwais shot and fought beside Mark Wahlberg as a triple-crossing police informer in *Mile 22*, his first major American movie role. Even surrounded by a cast that included Wahlberg, Ronda Rousey, and John Malkovich, Uwais became the most electrifying part of the production, and he outpaced action star Wahlberg in every action-starred sequence. During an interview for the film, Wahlberg simply called Uwais a "badass."

It's a moniker more of Hollywood's elite have come to recognize.


Uwais will appear onscreen this weekend as the bleach blond super-villain fist fighting Dave Bautista and Kumal Nanjiani in *Stuber*. In August, he will take lead in his own Netflix-produced martial arts series Wu Assassins.

Despite all the modesty, his surprise that the likes of Abrams, Reeves, and Wahlberg even know who he is, Uwais may soon be the most sought-after martial arts star in the world.



RENDHA RAIS

The legend of Silat tells of a woman, Rama Sukana, who witnesses two animals battling in the wild. Rama then incorporates these movements into a unique fighting style: Silat. In some regions, the fighting animals include a monkey and a tiger. Others tell the story of tiger and a hawk. (Uwais' character in The Raid films is also named

“Rama.”) In the human world, Silat employs strikes using every part of the body, grappling, and throws; traditional weapons include knives and daggers. 

Uwais began practicing Pencak Silat, a variation native to Indonesia, when he was ten. He learned under his grandfather, H. Achmad Bunawar, a master of the form and founder of a Silat school in Jakarta, where Iko was born. Central Jakarta was a dangerous place for a teenager in the 1990s, as Indonesia transitioned from economic hardship and largely authoritarian rule. For Uwais, Silat wasn't just a family tradition; it also proved to be a necessary survival skill.

One day at school, an older classmate, thinking he had a beef with Uwais, jumped him—with five other friends. Uwais reflexively began blocking punches, ignoring the five cronies while focussing on the one classmate. It felt like spontaneous movement—fending off the six older kids. He sustained a few bruises, but escaped unharmed. When Uwais told his grandfather, he just smiled, gave Uwais advice to stay out of fights, and then trained him even harder. Uwais was 17.



Uwais says he always avoided fights when in school. “That is absolutely not Silat is about,” he says. “It’s a self defense, and a spiritual based martial art. It focuses on respect for others, to make your mind and body healthy. Martial art skills without values and responsibility can be dangerous.”

RENDHA RAIS

In 2007, director Gareth Evans moved to Indonesia and began work on a documentary showcasing Silat. He sought out Bunawar. By then, Uwais, 24, was driving a truck for a telecommunications company. He had briefly lived out his dream of playing professional soccer for a local club and two years earlier captured the National Pencak Silat Championship.

While filming Bunawar, Evans and his wife, Rangga Maya Barack, noticed Uwais in a practice session. They sensed a screen presence in his performance and offered him a leading role in their upcoming project, Merantau, a feature film promoting Silat. The film became a cult hit, a martial arts movie stripped of flashy acrobatics in favor of fast, real, brutal choreography. It made Uwais a local star.

Film Indonesia The Raid 2: Berandal - Final Fight



Soon after, Uwais and Evans set out to film what would become their breakout project, The Raid: Redemption, a one location action film: one high rise building, one raiding group of SWAT officers, including Uwias, and floor after floor of bad guys. (Evans made The Raid with just \$1.1 million.) Evans and Uwais then shot the sequel, The Raid 2: Berandal, which premiered at Sundance, featured even larger fight scenes and one car chase, murdered 327

people on screen, causing one audience member to faint and Malaysia to initially ban the film, and solidified Evans' and Uwais' status in the world of martial arts cinema: they were on top.

That's when Hollywood started calling.



Uwais and director Gareth Evans

LARRY BUSACCA / GETTY IMAGES

In August 2018, as *Mile 22* and his' first major American performance hit theaters, Uwais was already filming his next project, *Stuber*. He had also returned east to shoot *The Night Comes for Us* (Indonesia) and *Triple Threat* (China)—both low-earning, but critically-well-received martial arts films. Uwais was as busy as ever.

By the end of August, however, *Mile 22* had been thoroughly thrashed by critics and at the U.S. box office, stomping the breaks on what was supposed to be a film franchise. That failure also meant that Uwais' most successful U.S. role to date remains his *Star Wars* cameo. All 3 minutes of it.

But success for Uwais can't be measured by numbers, and it's almost frustrating how content Uwais appears despite his lukewarm American reception. "I'm just grateful that I have a chance to introduce traditional Indonesian martial arts to a worldwide audience," he says, underscoring his role as a choreographer and cultural ambassador; he sees his role as creating shock and awareness.

But why, even while Abrams, Reeves, and Wahlberg see Uwais as the next big thing, is Uwais not yet the next big thing?

Mile 22 | "Introducing Iko Uwais" Featurette | Own It Now on Digital HD, Blu-Ray & D...



Part of Uwais' lackluster American reception is baked into the history of Hollywood martial arts.

Jackie Chan, Uwais' own inspiration, was 26 when he appeared in his first American film, *The Big Brawl*, a movie which saw marginal success in the American box office, but was poorly reviewed by critics. Chan's breakout in the States came only later and with *Rush Hour* (1998), when Chan was 34.

Uwais, now 36, faces the same challenges as Chan—as well as Chan's fellow Hong Kong film star Donnie Yen—namely American directors who aren't quite sure how to employ his talent for cinematic success. (Yen was also cast in the new *Star Wars* franchise and, despite his martial arts talents, was also given little to do.)

Most Hollywood directors lack the eye (and ear) for action. When Uvais explains the aesthetic of Silat, he does so using percussive language: “Silat is not just block and punch; it has a specific rhythm to it, a dynamic to it.” Each fight scene, each block and punch, must edit to a beat. (Raid director Gareth Evans would even match this beat to onscreen gunshots.)

One of the reasons why Chan, Yen, and Uvais had (and have) such a difficult time adapting to Western cinema is the tone-deafness among Hollywood directors; they fail to edit around these actors' particular fight and comedy rhythms.

Mile 22 | Iko Uvais vs. Doctors | Hospital Fight Scene | 1080p



The result, notes Uvais, is that American films begin “over editing” and obscuring fight movements. They turn symphony into cacophony. Directors, Uvais explains, must compensate for actors who lack fighting skills; they use aggressive camera work to make movements look aggressive. Hence all the hand-held, shaky cam and quick-cutting fight sequences you see. (Yen's Star Wars fight lasts less than 30 seconds and cuts 19 times. Uvais' premier hospital fight scene in Mile 22 cuts 19 times in the first 13 seconds.)

Quick-cutting mainly allows directors to inexpensively simulate aggression without showing aggression, the cause and effect of fight movements that take months to prepare and shoot—and potentially slap the film with a "restricted" rating.

And until recently, well-choreographed, R-rated cinema didn't win at the box office. The success of [Chad Stahelski's John Wick franchise](#), which goes to great choreography lengths in the name of realism, may help to upend that economical thinking. But until Hollywood is able to lean behind a fighter like Uwais or Yen for a leading role, their action skills are likely to remain hidden, over edited, or simply under appreciated. (And while this slight may not visibly aggravate Uwais, it should aggravate movie fans; why wouldn't you want well-choreographed action movie?)



Uwais in The Raid: Redemption

IMDB

But perhaps Uwais' films are not the ones western critics or viewers are ready to see.

In his one-star review of The Raid, critic Roger Ebert wrote that the film had “no dialogue, no plot, no characters, no humanity. Have you noticed how cats and dogs will look at a TV screen on which there are things jumping around? It is to that level of the brain's reptilian complex that the film appeals.”

When asked whether he thinks his films are excessively violent, Uvais simply highlights martial arts' balletic qualities. "I always try my best to bring the beauty of the martial arts into the screen," he says. The fight is an aesthetic, after all. An art form. A beat. Yet it's one American cinema continues to bastardize. Or let stand in the background, while the amateur A-listers slug it out. Or cross lightsabers. No humanity indeed.

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Keanu Reeves Should Have Been In These Movies