

Nicolas Cage – Good or Bad? Stardom, Performance, and Memes in the Age of the Internet

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Celebrity*

Studies on 17 October 2016, available online:

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Abstract:

Using Nicolas Cage as a case study, this article discusses the complex meanings – and contradictions – that can develop within a film star's persona in the digital age. Cage has been venerated by the academy, most notably winning the Best Actor in a Leading Role Oscar for his performance in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), as well as receiving a nomination in the same category for *Adaptation*. (2002). Throughout the early 2000s, he additionally enjoyed a privileged position as one of the highest-grossing box-office stars. However, many of Cage's recent films have underperformed both critically and commercially, with several bypassing cinemas entirely. Failing stardom has traditionally been viewed as a relatively linear path

towards obscurity, save for any carefully-staged comebacks or salacious moments of scandal that revive interest. In the Internet era, however, this trajectory can be more complicated. Over the last decade, Cage's star image has inadvertently become a prominent subject for online memes. New technology has permitted such instances of 'textual poaching' (to coin Henry Jenkins' term) to reach a much larger audience than ever before. This article will consider whether such an approach should always be considered progressive, as an empowerment of the audience. Cage is often lampooned online for perceived excess – a reading arguably heightened when fragmented clips are presented in fan edits without their original contexts. Is this fair criticism of an objectively bad actor, or does this reaffirm the primacy of naturalism within American film acting?

In the NBC sitcom *Community* (2009-15), the college student Abed Nadir (Danny Pudi) frequently uses popular culture as a means of negotiating difficult social interactions. This approach is called into question, however, during the episode 'Introduction to Teaching', in which he signs up for a class entitled 'Nicolas Cage - Good or Bad?' Despite being warned by the professor that there is actually no answer to the question, Abed desperately tries to place Cage within a tangible spectrum of quality (relative to other movie stars) and is driven temporarily insane by his failure to do so. He starts shouting random noises and non-sequiturs, as well as prancing around ostentatiously: mannerisms supposedly collated from a marathon viewing session of the actor's films. Ahead of his breakdown, Abed notes that so much of his worldview – his 'reality' and how he 'learned' to engage with others – is filtered through the tropes of film and television. This, perhaps inadvertently, echoes (and amplifies) Richard Dyer's (1987, pp. 8 and 17) account of the social importance of celebrity images: 'Stars

articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society [... and] represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking'. For Abed, Cage's apparent indefinability and *atypical* behaviour short-circuits such a reading. Towards the end of the episode, he considers throwing away his entire DVD collection, noting that 'I thought the meaning of people was somewhere in here. Then I looked inside Nicolas Cage and I found a secret: people are random and pointless.' Although Dyer (1987, p. 10) acknowledges that stars can also register 'doubts and anxieties' about personhood and society, Abed's reaction goes to a much more extreme and troubling place.

Nicolas Cage is undoubtedly an extremely enigmatic figure. He has been the target of derision from certain critics, scholars, and fan communities. Yet he has also been venerated by the academy – most notably winning the Best Actor in a Leading Role Oscar for his performance in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), and receiving a nomination in the same category for *Adaptation*. (2002). Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, Cage also enjoyed a privileged position amongst the 'elite strata of bankable actors', recognised by Quigley Publishing as the fourth-highest moneymaking star (in terms of perceived box-office value amongst film exhibitors) in 2004 and the eighth highest in 2007 (McDonald 2013, pp. 25-27). Given this range of different – and even potentially contradictory – statuses, there is a danger of making any judgements based on a simplified 'good:bad' polarity. However, as Aaron Taylor (2012, p. 2) suggests, colloquial and journalistic discussion has historically privileged just such an approach, with evaluations often boiled down to whether or not the performer 'did a good job'. The intention of this article is not to provide a definitive *scholarly* conclusion about Nicolas Cage's quality as an actor – as *Community* has warned, that way madness lies – but to analyse the changing status of his star image, particularly in recent years, where the Internet has had a significant impact on reception and fan activity.

From the very beginnings of his stardom, Cage has made some unconventional choices – both in terms of his selection of projects and his performances within them. In his first leading role, the low-budget feature *Valley Girl* (1983), Cage shaved his chest hair to approximate the shape of the emblem found on Superman's costume. In *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), directed by his uncle Francis Ford Coppola, he patterned his character's voice on Pokey, a comedic horse from the stop-motion animated series *The Gumby Show* (1957-68). This led to a great deal of criticism from the film's producers and some of the other actors, with Cage only managing to avoid being fired after Coppola intervened on his behalf (Gillespie 1998, p. 31). Following mainstream success with his supporting performance in *Moonstruck* (1987), Cage went against the advice of his agent and took a role in the controversial feature *Vampire's Kiss* (1988), a film that will be discussed in more detail later. While these decisions would seem to be counterintuitive and potentially damaging to his fledgling career, the opposite actually appears to be true: Cher reportedly lobbied for him to be cast in *Moonstruck* because of her fascination with his off-beat performance in *Peggy Sue*, while Cage has also suggested that *Vampire's Kiss* led to him working with David Lynch in *Wild at Heart* (1990) (Lexton 1993, p. 26). Although Cage's acting (and the films in which he appeared) certainly did not receive unanimous praise, it is notable that even many mixed and negative reviews of this period still refer to him as a brave and challenging performer. For instance, Pauline Kael's response to *Vampire's Kiss* in *The New Yorker* draws parallels with Robert De Niro in *Raging Bull* (1980). Although she qualifies this with the statement that 'I don't mean to suggest that he's the actor De Niro is', she nonetheless suggests that Cage is 'in his own daring, light-headed way [...] a prodigy. He does some of the way-out stuff that you love actors in silent movies for doing, and he makes it work for sound' (Kael 1989, p. 105). During the late-1980s and '90s, then, there was a sense that being different was not necessarily a bad thing for Cage, even if not every movie was wholly successful. This eclectic approach to performance also extended to his

varied choice of roles, with the actor appearing in a range of different genres, including comedies such as *Honeymoon in Vegas* (1992) and *Guarding Tess* (1994), the erotic thriller (*Zandalee* [1991]), and several independent dramas such as *Red Rock West* (1995) and the aforementioned *Leaving Las Vegas*, for which he won the Oscar.

Paul McDonald (2013, p. 251) has argued that Academy Awards help to create the notion of a prestige star, a legitimate actor whose work appears ‘as a gesture against the market, and the symbolic value of the Oscar-nominated performance is founded on a show of economic disinterest’. *Leaving Las Vegas* was produced on a modest budget (with Cage taking a much smaller than usual salary) and grossed approximately \$30 million at the box-office (a modest sum compared with most blockbusters) – all factors which encourage a reading of the film as art, rather than a commercial product (McDonald 2013, p. 241). Consequently, then, Cage generated a significant amount of debate – and outright criticism – for his immediate post-Oscar choices, particularly his commitment to three successive big-budget action films, *The Rock* (1996), *Con Air* (1997), and *Face/Off* (1997). The accusation from several quarters was that the actor was exploiting his newfound cultural status in order to raise his value in the mainstream marketplace, and even that this may have been the strategic aim of working on a film such as *Leaving Las Vegas* in the first place (see, for example, Chin 1997, p. 66). In 1998, Sean Penn, whose stardom has almost exclusively targeted the ‘prestige’ category, claimed that ‘Nic Cage is no longer an actor. [...] He could be again, but now he’s more like a... performer’, inferring that his choice of roles was being led by salary rather than artistry (quoted in Hirschberg 1998, p. 23). By contrast, Cage argued in contemporary interviews that moving into action was, in its own way, another example of him ‘[taking] a chance’, and tackling ‘a genre that he has yet to master’ (quoted in Puig 1996, p. 16). Although blockbuster movies undoubtedly brought additional exposure and significant financial compensation, Cage

attempted to position his decision as being authentic to his edgy and unpredictable pre-Oscar self:

One of the things I've tried to find over the years was an image. And I became aware that after 27 movies, I had no image. So I thought about how I've gone back and forth my whole career. I made three romantic comedies, I made three alternative movies. I'm doing three action movies in a row. And I decided, well that's the image – to consistently expect the unexpected. I want to have as many careers as I can possibly have in one career. (quoted in Markham-Smith and Hodgson 2001, p. 216)

By this logic – which is very much the antithesis of Sean Penn's position – conforming to the expected trajectory of the prestige star, and accepting the 'reputable' roles that would often follow an Academy Award win, could very well be seen as the 'safe', anti-experimental option.

Whether or not one wishes to accept his stated motives, Cage's 'action trilogy' was not only successful at the box-office, but also received surprisingly positive reviews from many quarters (especially given the genre's traditionally low critical reception). *The Rock*, in particular, provided a heroic protagonist far removed from the hyper-masculinity of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone in the 1980s and early-90s. Cage's character Stanley Goodspeed is a chemical weapons specialist who has spent most of his career in the laboratory rather than out in the field, who feels uncomfortable with a gun, and is sickened by the sight of death. Although the narrative ultimately requires him to deliver many of the aesthetic pleasures associated with action films, these are often undertaken reluctantly and inexpertly. Geoff King (2000, p. 106) argues that Cage was able to continue the quirkiness from his earlier screen roles, implying that the actor may have been able to offer something new to the genre, contrary to the usual accusations that the commercial system would necessarily dilute such a persona

(see also Gallagher 2004, p. 114). Cage's filmography over the next few years also suggests that action movies had by no means diminished his interest in grittier and more independently-minded fare, with work such as *8mm* (1999, featuring a narrative based around snuff films), his collaboration with Martin Scorsese in *Bringing out the Dead* (1999), and *Adaptation*. These were all significantly lower-budgeted projects, and these entries were only occasionally intersected by sporadic returns to the action genre, such as *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000) and *National Treasure* (2004). Cage's lead role in *World Trade Center* (2006) offers further evidence of his continued respectability by the mid-point of the decade. Although the decision to dramatise such a recent tragedy generated some controversy, Paramount carefully marketed the film as a sensitive, factual account of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and there is little evidence to suggest that Cage's casting was considered a liability in this regard.

During the same period, however, focus on Cage's private life began to intensify – in a sense emphasising the growth of his stardom, but also potentially beginning to work against his professed status as a serious actor. Cage had always cultivated something of a wild image, but he increasingly became the subject of stories speculating about the health of his relationship with actress Patricia Arquette, and subsequently his brief marriage to Lisa-Marie Presley (notable also because of the allusions to her father Elvis in Cage's films *Wild at Heart* and *Honeymoon in Vegas*). Accounts of his lavish expenditure – including the purchase of several homes, a private jet, and two castles – also suggested that excess was a fixture of the actor's personality off-screen as well as on. In 2009, reports claimed that Cage owed several million dollars in unpaid taxes, kicking off a flow of news stories about him selling off property, and suing his business manager – who responded by publicly detailing further examples of the actor's 'reckless' spending sprees (see, for example, Allen 2009).

Cage's perceived eccentricities – and particularly his apparent money troubles – have thus become a recurrent reading position for the subsequent trajectory of his career. Certainly,

one can identify a rise in action and/or special-effects heavy works in Cage's filmography over the last decade, including *Ghost Rider* (2007) and its 2012 sequel/reboot, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010), *Season of the Witch* (2011), *Drive Angry* (2011), and *Stolen* (2012). As a result, he has been repeatedly accused of accepting jobs based on the pay cheque rather than the quality of the project or his suitability for the role. Although, as noted, such indictments had already been made a decade earlier following *The Rock* and other mainstream releases, recent accounts have given little credence to any ongoing suggestion that eclectic and unpredictable choices are a sign of the actor's vitality. Indeed, whereas critics often acknowledged Cage's collaboration with the director and screenwriters in developing a character such as Stanley Goodspeed, many reviews of his newer films have tended to infer a lack of agency and passion – a sense of erratically 'sleepwalking' through his performances, rather than presenting deliberate stylisation (see, for example, Olsen 2011, Goldstein 2014). As McDonald (2006, p. 6) suggests, such accounts – including gossip and conjecture – can 'have a residual effect, a legacy, which contributes to the enduring image of that star'. While the claims are almost impossible to definitively verify – Cage has not, after all, openly acknowledged a financial imperative for choosing certain roles, or admitted a lack of interest in his performances – they have nonetheless rapidly congealed as a widely circulated interpretation of his latter-day persona.

Dyer (1991, p. 136) argues that stardom operates using a rhetoric of authenticity, with fans often assuming that 'what is behind or below the surface is, unquestionably and virtually by definition, the truth' (1991, p. 136). The notion of a star's 'failure' can thus easily become a self-validating concept. As Sean Redmond elaborates:

When fame doesn't work, when it destroys and negates and critically self-reflects on its trajectories and outcomes (through biography, confessional, irony and mockery), it

shows up stardom and celebrification to be faulty enterprises. The burnt-out star [...] is one of the most haunting, or charged images in the hall of fame. [...] One] is required to stare directly into the unmediated ‘truth’ of the star or celebrity, laid bare, at the existential level, before us. (2006, p. 42)

Redmond places the supposed ‘truth’ of failure within quotation marks to emphasise that this, too, is a constructed reading position, but one that can nonetheless be very potent and pervasive, and is difficult to counteract because of the renewed rhetoric that surrounds it. In the early 2010s, several of Cage’s productions – including *Season of the Witch* and *Drive Angry* – underperformed at the box-office, prompting discussion that his stardom was waning (see, for example, Pomerantz 2011).¹ In a similar vein, the actor’s performances in less mainstream films such as *Trespass* (2011) and *The Frozen Ground* (2013) have generally not been read as a return to more challenging, experimental roles, but rather as a reiteration of his diminished professional circumstances. One notable exception was *Joe* (2013), a relatively ‘small’ independent film which did garner significant critical acclaim, often with specific reference to Cage’s performance. Unlike *Leaving Las Vegas*, however, this failed to translate into significant prestige capital in terms of major awards nominations, or the sense of an immediate career renaissance with successive acting roles. Although *Joe*’s limited theatrical release could be presented as part of its rhetoric of authenticity as an ‘arthouse’ production – making a virtue of attracting a narrow, but ‘culturally-refined’ audience – the trajectory of modest distribution has largely continued for Cage’s recent work. Even his more genre-focused – and thus seemingly more commercially-minded – fare has tended to be shown in a comparatively small number of locations, and in some territories skipped the big screen altogether, being released straight to DVD and/or video-on-demand platforms.²

The extent to which this is a personal failing of Cage is debatable: certainly, his ‘decline’ is largely concurrent with wider shifts in the Hollywood film industry – most notably the reduction of ‘mid-level’ budget films made for theatrical release, with production now tending to privilege either lavish ‘super-blockbusters’ or comparatively ‘micro-budgeted’ independent works (Marich 2013, pp. 281-282). Cage’s early-2000s strategy of alternating big action films and quirkier projects budgeted in this ‘middle-zone’ (between approximately \$30 and \$80 million) has proven increasingly unfeasible for a variety of filmmakers – for instance, David Lynch and John Waters have lamented their recent inability to produce work in the latter category, despite significant success in previous decades (Bailey 2014). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that some actors and directors have been able to adapt to these changing circumstances more successfully than others, shifting to projects undertaken for television, new media, and on-demand viewing in ways that have, at times, ultimately bolstered their profile (see, for example, Riley and Birnbaum 2015). Cage’s recent works, by contrast, have tended to be seen as a move downmarket: a humiliating demotion for an actor whose presence in a film, in the previous decade, could often ensure a strong release in cinemas throughout the world.

Of course, virtually every star – save for those who die unexpectedly or explicitly choose to retire while at the height of their fame – has *eventually* had to endure a diminishment of status. What is notable about Cage is how quickly this perceived decline has occurred, and how persistently he keeps working in seemingly less than desirable roles. Rumours about Cage’s economic struggles thus appear to suggest – and virtually endow truth status to the idea – that he is financially obligated to remain in the limelight, unable to take the time to recuperate and carefully choose an appropriate ‘comeback’ role. Dominick Suzanne-Mayer argued in a 2014 *Washington Post* blog that ‘Cage is now seen [...] as a latter-era Bela Lugosi figure, a furious performer whose oddball work warrants ironic appreciation instead of genuine affection’. However, unlike Lugosi, whose later projects at least had the benefit of relative

obscurity upon their release, Cage's career is continuing in the age of the Internet, where each new movie can be publicly scrutinised by a large interconnected community of Web users – even if relatively few of them watch it in full.³

The first significant online response to Cage followed the release of *The Wicker Man* (2006), which received almost unanimously poor reviews following both its theatrical release and the subsequent 'director's cut' version on home video. A number of the actor's line readings were subjected to criticism – including an explosive reaction to a burned doll, and his pained shrieks for mercy as he is covered in bees – as well as some of the more bizarre sequences, such as one in which Cage's character (Edward Malmus) is dressed in a full bear costume and attacks several women. The film emerged at a transitional point in the development of new media: the rise of access to broadband services from the early-2000s, and the launch of *YouTube* in 2005, had a tremendous impact upon the ability of 'regular' people to 'upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge' (Burgess and Green 2009, p. 1). The availability of software to bypass DVD copy protection also enabled users to extract and reproduce Hollywood content with relative ease.⁴ Thus, online commentators were not just limited to writing about *The Wicker Man* – the Web audience could be *shown* visual evidence without necessarily having to track down a copy themselves. Cage subsequently became the subject of several memes – humorous images and video clips – that showcased some of his more questionable performance choices in the film.⁵

In her study of *YouTube* aesthetics, Carol Vernallis (2013, p. 131) suggests that a frequent outcome of online cultural production is 'insistent reiteration', with successful memes not only being spread widely but also encouraging additional variations produced by other users. The prevalence of Cage within such works grew steadily over the next few years, often moving beyond a focus on just *The Wicker Man*, and delving into the actor's back catalogue. Many of these responses appear to reiterate the emerging notion of Cage as an amusing and

potentially even ludicrous figure, re-reading existing texts in ways that diverge from the discourses prevalent at the time of original release. The 2010 *YouTube* upload ‘Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit’ proved to be a particularly effective example, accumulating several million views in a short space of time, and even getting the attention of the mainstream press.⁶ The video edits together short moments from Cage’s films – from relatively early entries such as *Vampire’s Kiss* and *Deadfall* (1993), to more recent fare such as the aforementioned *Wicker Man* – in which his characters are expressing anger, often involving profanity-laden rants and seemingly abnormal behaviour. One of the few ‘quiet’ moments, an excerpt from *The Wicker Man* in which Edward walks down some stairs, sees Cage suddenly break from the established tone and punch another character in the face – a rather unexpected moment, particularly when taken out of its wider narrative context. The entirety of the video is also underscored with Clint Mansell’s musical composition ‘Winter: Lux Aeterna,’ a sombre, classical piece that is playfully juxtaposed against the actor’s on-screen actions and screams.

Anne Jerslev has characterised such works as encouraging ‘deconstructive’ reading, and has shown that these viewing strategies predate the mainstream availability of the Internet (as well as this more recent focus on Nicolas Cage). Her study describes an example from 1987, involving two adolescent boys using a VCR to simply fast-forward and rewind to their ‘favourite’ scenes of a film, bypassing everything else in between. She notes that:

part of their pleasurable reading comes from their very obvious creation of an interpretative community by means of their control over the remote control unit – and thus by means of their changing the script and creating a reading position of their own. (Jerslev 1992, pp. 193-194)

Henry Jenkins' seminal book *Textual Poachers* provides many further examples of audience members using similar devices to appropriate media texts – for example, connecting two VCRs together to excerpt scenes from a film/TV programme, often creating entirely new meanings solely by condensing, rearranging, and re-contextualising extant footage (1992, p. 225-49). Internet technology ultimately offers an extension, but also a transformation, of this existing cultural activity. Jerslev (1992, p. 194) suggests that difference between viewing a film in a cinema and on VHS 'is that the boys may watch the video film once, but their favourite spots several times. The cinema audience watch both the film and their favourite sequences the same number of times'. Nonetheless, the control offered by home viewing that Jerslev describes still required an initial engagement with the full text – the boys needed to watch the entire movie at least once in order to decide upon the sequences that they would subsequently return to separately. Equally, the circulation of the VHS re-edits discussed by Jenkins (1992, p. 247) occurred predominantly within closed communities, such as fan clubs and conventions, which implies that the majority of viewers would also have been intimately familiar with the original source material, and would recognise the fan artist's version as encouraging a resistive or transformative reading. By contrast, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton (2011, p. 55) suggest that the Web has privileged a rise in 'compilation' and 'summary' viewing, which combines 'snippets [...] pulled from multiple texts' and often privileges 'only the worst and embarrassing moments', with the rest of the material simply excluded. Unlike previous generations of subcultural production, then, an online compilation video on a site like *YouTube* does not usually have any significant barriers to entry, or assume any prior cultural knowledge on behalf of those accessing it.

In his analysis of viewer responses to *The Simpsons* (1989-), Jonathan Gray uses the term 'anti-fan' to describe a subsection of respondents who profess a dislike for the show and a belief that it is objectively of poor quality despite, in many cases, never having watched a full

episode.⁷ Crucially, Gray (2003, pp. 71-72) notes that an anti-fan's 'distant reading' of a text may well be heavily influenced by a closer reading of paratexts – 'semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work'. Through engagement with these supplementary sources rather than the show itself, he notes that such readers can still 'have a very firm notion of the show's textual order; clearly it is a discrete, unified whole to them; and clearly this *text* has taken on some form of meaning in their lives', even if this may differ greatly from the intentions of the original creators (2003, pp. 71-72; original emphasis). It is eminently possible, then, that Internet compilation videos could generate a similar response to Nicolas Cage, acting as paratexts which create the assumption amongst those who have never seen the entirety of the excerpted films that Cage is an indulgent – and perhaps even barely articulate – actor, seemingly incapable of subtlety or naturalism.

An example in which Cage's intentions may have been misrepresented and/or misread online, wilfully or not, is his infamous performance in *Vampire's Kiss*. The film focuses on a young, psychologically troubled publishing executive, Peter Loew (played by Cage), who believes that he may have been turned into a vampire following a one-night stand. As the story progresses, Peter's grasp on the difference between reality and fantasy becomes tenuous, and his behaviour is increasingly aggressive and erratic. Many compilations and re-edits on sites such as *YouTube* tend to focus on the film's most manic episodes, including one in which Loew is running through the streets shouting 'I'm a Vampire!' and one where he hollers the alphabet to his bewildered psychiatrist. Another sequence, in which Peter is berating his assistant, has spawned a popular meme based around the actor's exaggerated facial expression.⁸ These excerpts ultimately obscure the wider narrative explanation behind many of the performance choices – the protagonist is *supposed* to be dipping in and out of sanity, and other characters around him respond to this break in decorum with an appropriate level of surprise and concern. He is also *supposed* to be a rather shabby vampire, since his 'transformation' is a product of

his own delusion and narcissism, rather than an actual physical change. This is perhaps most clearly emphasised during a sequence in which Loew visits an occult store to buy some deluxe, ‘lifelike’ fibreglass vampire’s teeth, but discovers that he does not have enough money, and has to settle for some cheap plastic ones instead. These make Peter – and by extension, Cage – look rather ridiculous, but as the preceding scene indicates, this is a conscious decision on the part of the filmmakers – something that Internet ‘summary viewings’ tend to overlook.

Given the millions of hits that ‘viral’ links can often achieve, such a reading can be extremely influential, to the point where it may, as Gray (2005, p. 848) suggests, actively encourage ‘an avoidance of the aesthetic text in others’. For instance, in the DVD audio commentary for the *Community* episode discussed at the beginning of this article, Danny Pudi notes that one of the show’s producers sent him an online video of Cage’s wackiest cinematic moments – seemingly the aforementioned ‘Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit’ – and that he used this as the basis for his performance when Abed starts imitating the actor (Pudi *et al.* 2014). The compilation video can thus displace the original film(s) as the primary source of interpretation: in essence, the paratext may *become* the text for certain audiences.⁹

It is nonetheless problematic to assume that all Internet fan (or anti-fan) activity is limited solely to distant reading. Richard McCulloch’s (2011, p. 201) study of audiences of *The Room* (2003) – an independent film which has developed a cult following over the last decade – notes that a significant number of viewers claimed to have sought out the full text as a result of viewing short extracts on *YouTube* that were designed to poke fun. In some instances, Cage’s rising Web notoriety also seems to have encouraged a more *comprehensive* engagement with the actor’s career, moving beyond the summary viewing already described. Blogs such as *A Year in the Cage* (ayearinthecage.blogspot.com) and *Unlocking the Cage* (unlockingthecage.tumblr.com), and even an audio podcast entitled *CAGECAST!* (<http://nate-porter-1b0o.squarespace.com>), have seen the respective authors commit to watching the

entirety of Cage's filmography and providing a review of each entry. However, McCulloch (2011, p. 201) argues that the prominent online derision surrounding *The Room* can still 'effectively [pre-empt] a specific reading' for those who graduate to viewing the complete film, and the Cage blogs and podcast exhibit similar tendencies.¹⁰ *CAGECAST!* evaluates the films in three categories – 'Entertainment Value', 'Artistic Merit', and 'Cage's Performance' – while *Unlocking the Cage* ranks the levels of 'Craziness', Cage's overall acting, and only then the quality of the movie itself. *A Year in the Cage* has just two major ratings – 'Cinematic' and 'Cagematic'. In each case, there is an expectation that the (presumed) excessiveness associated with Cage's presence will provide viewing pleasures that are separate from, and may even be in opposition to, the wider aesthetic qualities of the film. For instance, *Unlocking the Cage* gives *The Wicker Man* a full 10 out of 10 for 'Craziness', meaning that the total score averages to 7 out of 10, despite a comparatively low grade for the movie itself. *A Year in the Cage* rates films such as *Fire Birds* (1990) and *Zandalee* high on the 'Cagematic' scale, yet considers them to be otherwise disappointing in terms of story and direction. Each review also contains statistics, including the number of Cage's 'flip-outs', as well as a total of people that his character kills. As such, despite these viewers engaging with the full texts – and not always entirely dismissing the underlying film (*Face/Off* and *Leaving Las Vegas*, for instance, tend to get good write-ups in *all* categories) – one can still identify a tendency to privilege and isolate moments that reiterate certain hyperbolic aspects of Cage's star persona.

This response to Cage may reflect, to an extent, wider attitudes towards divergent film performances. As James Naremore suggested in his 1988 work *Acting in the Cinema*:

Nearly all forms of actor training in the United States today are approximately Stanislavskian, whether or not he is recognized as a source, and most film reviewers operate from Stanislavskian principles [...]. The hallmark of such an attitude is the

belief that good acting is ‘true to life’ and at the same time expressive of the actor’s authentic, ‘organic’ self [...]. Stanislavsky is the great exponent of naturalism. All varieties of teaching derived from his work try to inculcate spontaneity, improvisation, and low-key psychological introspection [...which devalues] anything that looks stagy. (Naremore 1988, p. 2)

Such perspectives have continued to persist. In 2012, Brenda Austin-Smith noted that ‘so strong is the influence of “realist” performance styles, usually conflated with “the Method,” that these are often regarded as the standard against which all other forms of acting are judged’, still frequently leading viewers (and also, she suggests, some areas of film studies) to the conclusion that ‘that “visible” acting is bad acting’ (2012, p. 20). By contrast, in one of the few scholarly analyses of Cage’s performance style, Carole Zucker (1993, pp. 60-61) refers to his work in *Vampire’s Kiss* as *deliberately* ‘antithetical to Stanislavski’ and emphasises that ‘we must recognize “excess” in performance – not as a negative attribute – but as a challenging, exploratory style of acting’. Cage himself has often made similar statements: for instance, in the DVD audio commentary for *Vampire’s Kiss* – recorded 11 years after its original theatrical release, but predating the more recent online interest in the film – he notes that:

‘over-the-top’ is one of those things that doesn’t work with me, because I don’t believe in such a thing. I feel that it’s just stylistic choices, and this was obviously a choice to use grand gesture and go bigger. [...] I’ve always thought that acting is [...] an art form, therefore if you look at other art forms like painting, you have photo-realism, and you have surrealism, you have abstract... Why can’t you do the same with film acting? (Cage and Bierman 2002)

Zucker (1993, p. 56) suggests that, in instances where ‘the diegetic world presents a very heightened or otherwise distorted version of reality,’ actors should not necessarily be ‘bound by the laws of naturalistic behaviour’. Many of Cage’s protagonists are placed in a significant amount of emotional turmoil over the course of the narrative, and a surprisingly high number of them are explicitly shown to be suffering from some form of mental illness and/or drug dependency, seemingly offering some justification for an off-beat or abstract performance.¹¹ However, for certain viewers, this extremity can potentially lead to ‘slippages’ in the distinction between star and role. As Adrian Martin (2002, p. 11) argues in relation to Dennis Hopper, ‘[he] is a far more controlled and focused performer than he is sometimes taken to be – often, the excess and mania of the characters he plays are mistakenly assumed to be the excess and mania’ of Hopper himself.

Cage, like Hopper, broadly fits into the category of the ‘eccentric actor’, described by Naremore (1988, p. 235) as ‘a highly stylized creation made up of peculiar movements and an interesting combination of expressive codes’. Although Naremore (1988, pp. 17 and 235) acknowledges that such elements exist in most performers – all forms of acting involve some form of ‘ostensiveness that marks it off from quotidian behaviour’ – he nonetheless indicates that, generally speaking, ‘the Hollywood star system and most of the other media strive to make obvious theatrical eccentricity seem invisible’. Cage is thus notable for accentuating, rather than downplaying, this eccentricity – and crucially often within primarily dramatic roles.¹² This style of acting has been privileged mostly within cult or ‘paracinematic’ filmmaking, generally operating on the fringes of the industry and, as Jeffery Sconce (1995, p. 380) suggests, often as an explicit ‘challenge to reigning aesthetic discourse in the academy’. Cage’s attempt to achieve this while working *within* the Hollywood system, and particularly as *a leading man*, is also relatively rare – as Mathijs and Sexton (2011, p. 81) note, few performers ‘attain the status [of] both a cult star *and* a mainstream star at the same time’.¹³ This inevitably creates certain

ambiguities and contradictions, not least because Cage has tended to demand critical legitimacy for his acting, rather than fully embrace the reflexivity and self-parody that often factors into non-mainstream performances (Hills 2013, p. 26).¹⁴

A suggestive area of crossover involves narratives related to drugs – an attribute that has frequently been associated with cult movies (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, p. 164). However, Naremore (1998, p. 76) notes that storylines ‘about drunkenness or addiction’ have also been valuable ways to incorporate heightened performance into ‘respectable’ films, since they can offer a rational explanation for the ‘expressive incoherence’ exhibited by the character and the actor. It is notable, then, that Cage’s most celebrated role – *Leaving Las Vegas* – and also some of his most derided – such as *Deadfall* – have involved characters who struggle with vices. *Deadfall* sees Cage in a supporting role as Eddie, a two-bit gangster whose cocaine addiction reduces him to an incomprehensible mess, often screaming obscenities and being reduced to tears. In *Leaving Las Vegas*, Cage’s character (Ben) drunkenly starts fights and ricochets from one extreme emotion to another, such as during a sequence in a casino approximately midway through the film, in which he suddenly explodes with rage following a conversation with a waitress. Indeed, Cage plays Ben at the height of his drunkenness as almost baby-like, unable to articulate himself, and frequently becoming dependent on Sera (Elisabeth Shue) – a prostitute with whom he has struck up a complicated relationship – while also cruelly rejecting her affection at other times. There are certainly moments in Cage’s performance where he displays the sort of tics that have amused Web respondents in other films – including a falsetto laugh after being rejected by a woman (played by Valeria Golino) at his local bar – yet such sequences from *Leaving Las Vegas* have rarely been excerpted in compilation videos.

This observation raises questions as to why some instances of Cage’s ‘visible acting’ have been relatively overlooked, while others are so frequently reiterated online. Perhaps the Internet video compilers have chosen to focus on Cage’s most poorly-reviewed films in the

hope that this will provide more consistently humorous material. However, it is also fair to say that what a film like *Deadfall* (or even *Vampire's Kiss*) lacks compared with *Leaving Las Vegas* are quieter moments of introspection. Whereas the former texts tend to revel in the carnival of the protagonist's indulgence, the latter often linger on the moments of sadness that underpin his outbursts. Eddie in *Deadfall* is presented as a hugely exaggerated figure, sporting a fake tan and a somewhat bizarre accent. Cage's character in *Leaving Las Vegas* is also presented as a grotesque, but again this is pushed in a different direction. Ben's plan over the course of the film is to slowly drink himself to death, and these actions clearly take their toll upon him. Cage's make-up is applied in an extremely unglamorous way, with Ben often looking more like a reanimated corpse than a healthy human being. The film often privileges tight camera angles that linger over his declining body while, conversely, a number of the character's more outrageous moments are framed in longer shots, with the full detail sometimes obscured by distance or through muffled audio. These aesthetic choices emphasise the sense of tragedy, creating an intellectual distance from the extremity of the performance, which in turn restricts the potential for easy parody. Indeed, only one brief sequence from *Leaving Las Vegas* appears in the 'Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit' video – a snippet of the aforementioned casino outburst. Tellingly, the footage has been reframed, zooming in to focus more intensively on the actor's behaviour than in the original work.

There are, furthermore, a number of other films in Cage's filmography which have exhibited more overt 'excess' than *Leaving Las Vegas*, and yet have also rarely been isolated within Internet discourse. A suggestive example is *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009), which features Cage as Terrence McDonagh, a drug-addled police officer. His addiction even causes hallucinations, including a scene in which Terrence imagines a pair of iguanas on a table, leading to an outlandish montage of hand-held shots of the creatures with Cage in the background. The film was directed by Werner Herzog, who has an established

reputation as an auteur amongst cinephiles, which may help to endow the text with a presumed legitimacy and clear intentionality that is not necessarily always extended by audiences to some of Cage's other work. The same has also largely been true of the actor's collaborations with filmmakers such as the Coen Brothers and David Lynch. While it may be the case that these artists have been able to more carefully integrate Cage's performance – creating a diegetic world in which his characterisation appears narratively justified rather than merely aberrant – there is an argument to be made that many contextualising factors can influence a viewer's reception in either direction.

Mathijs and Sexton (2011, p. 101) note that stylistic excess may be a conscious aesthetic goal of the filmmaker or performer, but they also emphasise that it can be the accidental result of 'incompetence'. As J. Hoberman (1980, p. 8) elaborates, a 'bad film' is one that 'attempts to reproduce the institutional mode of representation', but ultimately fails to do so, with excess produced inadvertently rather than deliberately. Although Cage has always been a controversial figure, the rise of the Internet – and the aforementioned subcultural production by fans and anti-fans, which has privileged certain elements of his performances over others – has arguably served to shift fundamental interpretations of his underlying intentions and capabilities as an actor. I. Q. Hunter's (2008, p. 474) essay on the film *Showgirls* (1995) discusses the difficulty of expressing legitimate fondness for a work that has become so critically maligned, and now seemingly only considered acceptable to enjoy from a detached 'so bad it's good' perspective. Recent discourse on Cage has exhibited similar tendencies: while it is not impossible to find articles and blog posts that offer a positive evaluation of his career, many of these sources explicitly infer (even in their very titles) that they are in opposition to the status quo (see, for instance, Snyder 2012, Suzanne-Mayer 2014, Dayton 2014). Lindsay Gibb's (2015, p. 2) book *National Treasure*, a pop culture celebration of Cage, likewise highlights the frustration of 'having to constantly defend something that you like'. Although she vehemently takes issue

with the notion that Cage ‘is a bad actor (or even the worst actor of our time)’, she nonetheless acknowledges that ‘it’s easy to understand how he’s come to be seen as a joke’ (2015, p. 3).

This should not infer that all negative or critical perspectives on Cage, however widespread they may have become, are homogeneous. A full ethnographic study of the bloggers, the video producers, and their audiences is beyond the scope of this article, and in some cases no longer possible – for example, the original upload of ‘Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit’ has been removed from *YouTube*, which has in turn deleted all of the comments left by the initial viewers in 2010. However, the video has since been duplicated online by other users, and a brief survey of the newer annotations on these pages, as well as the aforementioned blogs, reveals a diverse and multifaceted interpretation of the actor. Most notably, such responses highlight that a stated belief in Cage’s ‘badness’ does not necessarily preclude enjoyment of his performances in the original films and/or their representation within these online texts, even if this often involves laughing *at* him rather than *with* him.

Susan Sontag (1966, p. 282) famously suggested that ‘naïve’ campiness can be much more satisfying to audiences than ‘deliberate’ attempts at stylisation, which may explain the appeal of viewing Nicolas Cage as an inept actor whose misplaced confidence and/or lack of skill has permitted unintentional humour to counteract the dramatic aims of his films. Cage has not regularly commented on his status as an Internet meme, although when the subject has been broached in a few recent interviews, he has expressed a desire to correct certain ‘misconceptions’. One such article from *The Guardian* newspaper in 2013, which is suggestively titled ‘People Think I’m Not in on the Joke’, sees him take issue with the idea that the heightened moments in his acting are merely failed attempts at sincerity. He even addresses the *Wicker Man* remake, noting that ‘you don’t go around doing the things that [my] character does – *in a bear suit* – and not know it’s absurd. It *is* absurd’ (quoted in Brockes 2013, p. 31; original emphases). This does not mean, of course, that such choices are automatically more

valid – or are beyond criticism – simply because they are proclaimed to be intentionally atypical, but the fact that Cage has framed his work in such a manner – as (at least partially) stylised and non-classical – on a fairly regular basis is nonetheless significant. It suggests that these performances need to be judged by a different criterion than usual, with potentially altered boundaries for success and failure.¹⁵ As James MacDowell and James Zbrorowski state:

the act of appreciating a film [or its actor] as ‘so bad it’s good’ might indeed initially seem to be one which – crudely put – grants more power to the interpreting reader than to the interpreted text. [...] Yet we should also acknowledge what this phenomenon makes equally clear: how fundamental initial assumptions about intention are to this very process. If we cannot assume that a film intended to achieve certain aims, then we cannot deem it ‘bad’ for failing in those aims, and cannot then recast this badness as ‘so bad it’s good’. (2013, pp. 4-5)

It is possible, then, that Cage has become a victim of misassumption regarding his acting intentions in some online discourse. However, cult and paracinematic audiences – such as those fostered by the various Internet activities surrounding Cage – have often been characterised as purposely ‘disregard[ing...] textual authority’ (Corrigan 1991, p. 29; see also Jenkins 1992, p. 18). With such readings, it does not really matter whether or not Cage is truly ‘bad’ by any objective standard: the appeal often comes from audiences appropriating the films, and revelling in the pleasure generated by their own reworkings – which essentially become distinct texts in their own right.

There remains a debate amongst scholars as to whether these reactions should always be seen as progressive. Certainly, one can see value in audiences being productive and active in their consumption of media, rather than just passively accepting whatever ‘official culture’

is produced.¹⁶ Nonetheless, as Mark Jancovich *et al.* (2003, p.5) suggest, there is a danger that, in ridiculing ‘bad’ films for their supposedly inept deviance from the classical Hollywood style, viewers may be implicitly affirming ‘existing norms, rather than challenging them’. Having begun this article with the question of Cage’s relative quality as an actor, can the audience be subjected to the same scrutiny? Matt Hills argues that academia should take a:

‘suspensionist’ position [...] which refuses to split fandom into the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ [...]. This means approaching the contradictions of fan cultures and cult media as *essential cultural negotiations* that can only be closed down at the cost of ignoring fandom’s cultural dynamics (2002, p. xiii; original emphasis).

Jancovich (2002, p. 307; original emphasis), too, suggestively discusses his anxieties about writing as a scholar-fan, and the danger that his claims of authority can ‘implicitly cast anyone who might construct and value the field in different ways as not simply naïve, foolhardy and ignorant but as an implicitly *phoney* [...] fan who has no right to speak’. As such, it should not be suggested that any of the aforementioned activity surrounding Cage – the video edits, the memes, the blogs, and so on – ought to be dismissed as invalid or inappropriate. Even in cases where the works might encourage a selective or closed reading of the subject, these are still valuable artefacts which highlight the complexities of fandom and media consumption. Cage’s career has been significantly impacted by these representations, and they now form an important part of his overall star image, whether they are welcomed by him or not. At the same time, there is still an argument to be made for greater nuance in receptions of screen performance. Is Nicolas Cage a good actor? Not necessarily, but star studies may also benefit from complicating discourses that frame him as merely a bad one.

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¹ Cage's two largely unsuccessful attempts to embody the Marvel Ghost Rider character are also potentially damning given the huge profitability (and often critical acclaim) enjoyed by many other superhero movies in recent years, including the similarly irreverent *Deadpool* (2016). The actor has also received some online ridicule over leaked photographs and test footage from an ultimately aborted Superman film, which was to be helmed by Tim Burton in the mid-to-late-1990s. The documentary *The Death of "Superman Lives": What Happened?* (2015) emphasises that much of this material is taken from a very early stage of pre-production, and not representative of the intentions for the finished product, but Cage's casting in this project remains controversial.

² *The Croods* (2013), featuring a voice performance from Cage, did have a widespread and successful theatrical release during this period. However, given the existing track record of DreamWorks Animation, it is difficult to determine whether Cage's presence played a significant factor in *The Croods*' profitability. The lengthy production schedule of computer animation also means that Cage was cast in the role before the full extent of his box-office decline had become apparent.

³ This should not ignore, of course, the fact that some of Lugosi's later work, particularly the films directed by Ed Wood, became the subject of camp appropriation by cult fans before the rise of the internet. Nonetheless, online communication has significantly transformed the manner in which viewers can interact with each other, as well as engage with the film texts themselves.

⁴ The legality of 'quoting' such audio-visual material online remains a subject of debate (see Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, pp. 187-188). However, removal of appropriated content from

YouTube on the basis of copyright infringement is still an inconsistent process, and deleted videos have sometimes been re-uploaded by other users.

⁵ For more information on this online response, see *The Wicker Man* 2015.

⁶ At the time of writing, ‘Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit’ has been removed from its creator’s YouTube channel due to alleged copyright infringement (presumably of the excerpted clips). Copies of the video are currently accessible online via other users, but these are similarly prone to deletion. Due to the difficulty of guaranteeing the ongoing availability of the video from any specific location, the original URL has been cited in the references.

⁷ Such readings certainly go in both directions. For example, Paul Hammond notes that, in the age before films were readily available in home video formats, fans often had to longingly engage with them ‘at a forlorn distance through secondary material like stills, posters, and press books,’ assuming their adoration of the movie without necessarily being able to confirm it directly (2000, p. 27).

⁸ See *You Don’t Say?* 2012.

⁹ Some activity has moved almost exclusively beyond the films. The *Tumblr* page *Nic Cage as Everyone* (<http://niccageaseveryone.tumblr.com>), for instance, focuses on superimposing Cage’s face onto various other images; an activity which is also frequently privileged in the popular *Reddit* group, *Nicolas Cage: One True God* (<https://www.reddit.com/r/onetruegod>). Several entrepreneurs have even produced unofficial products – from pillowcases to paintings – featuring the actor’s more exaggerated facial expressions. As Suzanne-Mayer (2014) suggests, for some internet users, Cage is ‘no longer an actor; he’s a living meme.’

¹⁰ One must nonetheless acknowledge that Hollywood often engages in similar practices, albeit usually to suggest a film’s artistic merit. Even many of Cage’s ‘lesser’ works are publicised with posters, trailers, DVD cases and so on, that emphasise his status as Academy Award winner, encouraging an intertextual association with quality ahead of the viewing.

¹¹ A fair number of Cage's films are also set in New Orleans, as well as several in Las Vegas – cities which have themselves gained a reputation for celebrating excess and the carnivalesque.

¹² Comedy has tended to be permitted greater freedom to incorporate eccentric characterisations, although actors within this genre have traditionally struggled for respectability in a similar manner to Cage. As Philip Drake suggests, Jim Carrey's physical comedic roles have often been dismissed by critics as 'dumbed down,' and yet his 'serious' films (such as *The Truman Show* [1998] and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004]) have frequently received plaudits, thus 'continually affirming the higher status of teleological acting over comic performance' (2004, pp. 77, 81).

¹³ Paracinematic actors have at times been permitted to crossover into bigger films, but primarily in character parts, in which excess is subjected to some form of narrative 'containment' (Thomas 2013, p. 45). Mathijs and Sexton use Johnny Depp as an example of a star who has been able to take on major roles and still present an 'outsider' sensibility (2011, p. 81). However, while *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and its sequels may have permitted Depp to present an idiosyncratic performance while also reaping blockbuster profits, some of his more recent films – such as *Dark Shadows* (2012) and *Mortdecai* (2015) – have been less critically and commercially successful. As with Cage, there can be a difficulty in maintaining a quirky persona within the mainstream system, especially if the films underperform financially.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that Cage has been unwilling to poke fun at himself. For instance, he gamely appeared in the 11 February 2012 episode of *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) as a Nicolas Cage clone, alongside the comedian Andy Samberg (supposedly playing the 'real' actor). During the sketch, Cage claims that the 'two key qualities of a classic Nic Cage action film' are that 'all the dialogue is either whispered or screamed,' and 'everything in the movie is on

fire.’ However, he also jokingly rebukes Samberg’s bombastic impression of him, describing that version of Cage as ‘an exaggerated screaming psychopath [which...] just doesn’t exist.’ Unlike a performer such as David Hasselhoff, whose recent media appearances often play to the stereotypical image prized within fan discourse, Cage still seems reluctant to *wholly* embody the internet meme.

¹⁵ Whether this can be accepted within internet discourse remains unclear. Cage received a significant amount of derision in the early-2010s for describing his acting in several contemporary films as ‘nouveau shamanic.’ These responses rarely acknowledge that he is drawing from the research of scholar Brian Bates, whose book *The Way of the Actor* draws parallels between the transformative rituals within historical Eastern and Western mysticism, and the transformations undertaken by modern actors when inhabiting theatrical and cinematic roles (see also Nordine 2014). As above, revealing this often-overlooked piece of information does not immediately legitimise Cage’s approach, but it does infer that he is at least making informed and reasoned decisions – based upon concepts that have been used (without internet criticism) by other actors – rather than just naïvely posturing.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Mathijs and Sexton 2011, pp. 57-58.