Art in the Cage of Its Technological Reproducibility:
Understanding Nicolas Cage's Current Star Persona

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Given his "memeification" over the past decade, the time has come to give an accurate appraisal of Nicolas Cage's star persona. This task is potentially complicated because much of the actor's recent increase in popularity must be attributed to ironic appreciation rather than sincere admiration. Even as user-created compilation videos and online forums have made Cage's visage ubiquitous across the Internet, they have done so primarily to mock him. Despite—or perhaps thanks

to—such devoted ridicule, the process of dissecting and reproducing his film performances through remixes and online rituals has allowed Cage's Internet "fans" to elucidate what makes those performances resonant. Rather than burying Cage's star persona under ironic noise, the actor's memeification has in fact helped to excavate from his films the immanent sublimity of his performance style.

Before launching into such an argument, it would be wise to

first outline how the Internet has absorbed and deployed Cage as an actor and persona. Though lauded by critics for his work in films such as Raising Arizona (Coen, 1987), Leaving Las Vegas (Figgis, 1995), Adaptation (Jonze, 2002), and Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans (Herzog, 2009), he has generally made a habit of alternating between offbeat, complex portrayals, and outlandish, lowbrow fare. In fact, the release of one of the latter sort, The Wicker Man (Labute, 2006), may have been the exact moment when Cage "became the star of the Internet" (Suzanne-Mayer 1). The film itself is a remake of the British horror classic also titled The Wicker Man (Hardy, 1973), and concerns a policeman named Edward Malus (played by Cage). Malus and his ex-fiancée, Willow Woodward (Kate Beahan), conduct a search for their daughter, who has gone missing on an island populated by neo-pagans. Attempting to replicate the supernatural dread of the original, Labute's film instead comes off as an unremarkable thriller. Unremarkable, that is, save Cage's unrelenting and melodramatic performance. At times distorting his face into expressionistic horror as a deluge of bees comes down upon him, and at other times punching neo-pagans with animalistic strength, Cage exhibits the sort of non-naturalistic excess that so often transforms contemporary acting into unintentional comedy. These moments have not been lost on the film's (initially unwitting) audience, and in its wake emerged a YouTube compilation of its most ridiculous and unintentionally funny moments. Assembling disparate clips into a cohesive whole, the video unmoors Cage's acting from the film's temporality and puts it to use in service of a larger goal: humour by means of accumulation. The plurality and rhythm of the clips intensify their effect, and this concept is played out further on the YouTube platform a couple

years later in the more comprehensive (and aptly named) video, "Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit." This video differs from the first in that it compiles scenes of intensity and madness from Cage's entire filmography, and his vocalizations are mixed with Clint Mansell's epic composition "Lux Aeterna" from the Requiem for a Dream (Aronofsky, 2000) soundtrack.

Taken in conjunction, these two compilation videos are crucial to our understanding of Cage's contemporary star persona. Using clips from actual source material, the videos are products of an audience that has learned to use technological tools to "write" using images and sounds. As Lawrence Lessig explains in his article, "RW, Revised," such remixes approximate great written texts in that they "quote" from sources in order to create entirely new and often quite resonant works (1085, 1092). In fact, Lessig suggests that remix artists feel compelled to use the actual source material – at the risk of copyright infringement – because they believe that their remixes retain the "aura" inherent in the source material (1088). This suggestion of course harks to Walter Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in which he argues that art's aura withers in the age of technological reproducibility (233). More specifically, he considers film to be the medium that best represents such mechanical reproduction: "The social significance of film, even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage" (233). Benjamin posits that if cinema overcomes the aesthetic distance that isolates art from the "real world," the medium is thus able to break down art's aura to offer audiences a more immediate engagement with their everyday realities. Thus, the mechanical reproduction of images and art through technol-

ogy becomes an essentially democratizing process. But, if Benjamin feels that art's aura withers in this age of technological reproducibility, then his argument is at odds with Lessig's conception of remix artists who sense the transference of an aura from source material to their videos. What are we to make of this dialectic? More pertinently, what are we to make of the artistic resonance of a remix like "Nicholas Cage Losing His Shit" and the fact that it has imbued Cage with a certain type of online emanation?

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Ultimately, the answer lies in the style of Cage's acting. Highlighted by these remixed videos is a particular mode of acting, each clip catching Cage as he releases a certain restless, suppressed hysteria. If his actions are sometimes described as "melodramatic," it is because the remixes condense these moments into an archive of movement from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the case of the "Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit" video, Clint Mansell's musical composition pairs melos with Cage's drame, and serves to highlight the exaggerated emotions he displays. Spotlighting such exaggerated emotions, frequent as they are, transforms the actor's most impassioned recordings into something quite humorous; and where viewers find unintentional humour they also find the record of drama's failure. But as the videos have become more popular, Cage's star persona has been rehabilitated, and in many ways the essential dramatic success of his acting has been heightened. The "Losing" video inundates viewers with examples of Cage's primal intensity, but by the end they commonly feel inspiration rather than pity. As YouTube comments like

"Almost forgot to watch this today" suggest, many return to the video long after the humour has worn off. In light of the emotional power invoked and provoked, what brings a video like "Losing" to the level of art is Cage's acting, taken out of the context of its original source material and put into a new performative space: a site on the Internet, or in the case of these videos, YouTube.

James Naremore, in his chapter "Protocols" from Acting in the Cinema (1988), offers a helpful outline of how these performative spaces work: "When art theatricalizes contingency […] it puts a conceptual bracket around a force field of sensations, an ever-present stratum of sound, shade, and movement that both precedes meaning and makes it possible" (204). He goes on to reference Julia Kristeva's concept of the "anaphora," which she defines as "the gesture which [sic] indicates, establishes relations and eliminates entities" (Kristeva 270). In many ways, a site like YouTube acts as an anaphora, or the primary gesture that signals a separation of audience and performer and the commencement of an ostentatious display of acting. The very architecture of its page layout predisposes visitors to become audience members, as it forces them to view the video frame before being allowed to scroll down to view or contribute to the comment section. By the time a visitor sees the comment section, the video/performance has buffered and started. This online anaphora is the ideal host for remixes like the "Losing" video, for their existence within such an architecture automatically ordains them as having meaning and thus the potential to become art. Naremore, meanwhile, would argue that a platform like YouTube, which acts as an anaphora for these types of remixes, contributes to the withering away of art's aura: "By slightly extending Walter Benjamin's well-known argument about painting in the age

of photography, we could say that mechanical reproduction deprives performance of authority and 'aura,' even as it greatly increases the possibility of stardom" (206). However, in the singular case of Nicolas Cage's memeification, that argument does not quite convince.

Cage's case is unique due to his ability to tap into a performance style that recalls the work of silent film actors who relied primarily on their faces and bodies to express. Though the remixes do derive humour from Cage's dialogue ("Killing me won't bring back your goddamn honey!"), most attention is paid to his face in close-up as it elongates, twists, and distorts into masks of surprise, horror, and insanity. In fact, much of Cage's resonance for Internet fans can be surmised in the rampant reproduction of his visage online. Whole websites, such as the blog "Nic Cage as Everyone," have been devoted to the sole cause of curating photoshopped images of Cage's face on others' bodies. There is even a subreddit on Reddit.com, titled "One True God," where those who are devoted to Nicolas Cage gather to share these face-swaps and other Cage-related memes. In the subreddit's description, the cult's scribes claim that Cage's "light guides us away from John Travolta, and saves us from bees." The deification of Cage as the "One True God" is done ironically, but the ritual of pasting his face over the faces of others hints at a deeper sort of worship. To Bela Balázs, a Hungarian-born writer who was one of the first comprehensive theorists of cinema, the close-up of the face "must be the lyrical essence of the entire drama" of a film (75). Indeed, in Balázs' theory, cinema brings to light the "essence" of things (objects, people): "cinema's most significant feature is its capacity to reveal truths about reality invisible to the naked human eye" (Turvey 86). In their insistence on pasting close-ups of Cage's

face onto images of others, Cage's online fans betray a desire that all publicly scrutinized figures measure up to his ability to express "that indeterminate something" (to borrow Balázs' phrase) through a language of gestures and facial expressions (Balázs 76). In Cage's face, in Cage's mode of performance, there is evidence of a more primordial signifier of human imagination and emotion, and all the while it is expressed in a language more befitting of contemporary visual culture.

In some ways, the technical reproducibility of Cage's performances through remixes/online ritual has evinced what made those performances artistic in the first place. As Lessig explains, these user-generated remixes and online technological experiments do not assert truths; they show them (1088). Read in light of Cage's memeification, Lessig's contention suggests two intriguing ideas: 1) the authority and aura of the actor's performances were degraded in the process of being filmed, but, 2) the aura of such performances may be rediscovered in the process of being decontextualized. Despite what may be ironic intentions, when Internet users create online videos and forums that heighten awareness of the artificial style of Cage's acting, they actually catalyze a revelatory process whereby the artistry of that style becomes foregrounded. Previously passive film viewers have become Internet users who insert themselves into the creative act by taking back control of the machinery, and in so doing they have revealed the auratic quality of Cage's performance style. Their creative energy—whether spent ironically or not— has contributed to the rediscovery of sublimity in Cage's acting performances; any consideration of his star persona must reckon with the inarguably devoted and percipient nature of those who might mock him.

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