

Cage Register

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12.14.21

In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

— Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, tr. ¹

You have good investments and bad investments. The good investments came from personal interest and my honest enjoyment of

the history . . . The funny thing is my real estate buying spree was what the real problem was. It wasn't these other things like shrunken heads that the media liked to talk about.

— Nicolas Cage, speaking to David Marchese, 2019. [2](#)

I

Twin difficulties confront the contemporary Nicolas Cage scholar: on the one hand, a superabundance of movies to keep pace with; on the other, a cultural reduction of his persona across those movies to the actor who is always on the verge of losing his shit. Against those two difficulties, two claims. First, that both this surfeit and simplification are best understood as aspects of the emergence of the "discursive Cage" in late 2010-early 2011. Second, that this discursive turn followed a decisive material reckoning in which Cage's personal financial collapse would register and exemplify the failure of the US to secure a transformative, or even merely equitable, recovery from the Great Recession. The communicating channel between his individual situation and the social surround takes many forms; for Weberian simplicity's sake I will rely on thematizations in scenes of shopping.

That thematization is not a coincidence, as we will see, but the long unwinding of the consequences of the Great Recession. The same economic forces that drove new financiers into real estate in the wake of the crisis also drove them into motion picture production: the search for return and a systemic insulation against downside. There they found Cage, dumping his real estate and his star value into the post-panic marketplace.

Like that most Cagean gesture — the one where, pointing, he snaps his wrist to lend new emphasis to the indexicality of his index finger — the pivot in Cage's persona is remarkably precise. On October 5,

2010, College Humor released "Nicolas Cage's Agent," a 2:50 sketch in which, across a series of phone calls, the fictional agent tries and fails to keep the actor from taking roles in ludicrous movies: *Swastikly*, *Schindler's Fist*, *Space Ass*. By the end, the agent is raging as hard as Cage might in one of his signature freakouts. (The currently posted [version](#) has 9.4 million views.) The next month, [Pajiba.com](#) released Harry Hanrahan's supercut, "Nicolas Cage Losing His Sh*t," a montage that would garner attention across the film [blogosphere](#) and serve as a model for others. (The original is no longer on pajiba, but [reposts](#) have also garnered several million views in total.)

The two videos demonstrate a pop-critical fascination with Cage's process — "You're a tasteless asshole!" "I like being in movies, Gary" — and product that would be stoked by the actor himself. As the sketch and the supercut were being released, Cage was in Eastern Europe shooting *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*, [pledging](#) to make his portrayal of Johnny Blaze even more unhinged than in the first installment: "We're getting into some really abstract stuff that I think will mess with people's minds." Then in early 2011, just after *GR:SoV* wrapped, Cage would be on the promotional circuit touting *Drive Angry*. The movies were a perfect pair: Johnny Blaze on a mission to save a boy from becoming the instrument of the devil's metempsychosis; John Milton (not the poet) on a mission to save his granddaughter from a cult leader bent on Satanic immortality. On the press tour, he would give a new name to his acting method: [Nouveau Shamanic](#). The phrase caught on. Fascination with Cage's process and wariness over Cage's move toward downmarket overproduction spawned a question: what lies behind these *outré* performances? The "Nouveau Shamanic" offered a theory of process and an explanation of the product, it constituted a discourse within which public judgments might take hold, a discourse all but detached from the particular movies in which Cage starred.

That spring, the complementarity became merger. On April 11, *Saturday Night Live* would introduce a new segment, "[Get in the Cage! With Nicolas Cage](#)" in which Cage, portrayed by Andy Samberg, would interview fellow actors and lament that they, not he,

were starring in whatever movie they happened to be discussing. "It has both of the classic elements of a Nic Cage movie: 1. It combines time travel with screaming. 2. I'm told the actors were paid." Not simply a Cage impression, "Get in the Cage!" was an attempt to capture how Cage talked about the competing vectors within his public persona. The "meme'd," discursive Cage had become the mainstream Cage.

II

It would be a mistake to imagine that Cage's career and the estimation of it merely track a series of philosophical commitments or aesthetic experiments when those experiments transpire in a cultural field subject to far more powerful forces. The discursive Cage took its particular form within very specific cultural and economic contexts: how Americans talked and felt about politics; how they consumed motion pictures, luxury goods, and houses. The public focus on Cage's relentless extremity and his theory of it coincided with the collapse of the Obama administration's campaign commitment to stimulus (however partial that commitment was in practice), the rise of the post-2008 austerity consensus, and, most proximately, the Democrats' defeat in the 2010 midterm elections, where they lost the House and narrowly held the Senate despite losing seven seats.

It might be an overstatement to claim that the raging Cage *compensates for* the evaporation of a real commitment to economic stimulus. But it would not be a mistake to align the cultural valorization of his performances of unbridled frustration with the frustrations accompanying Obama's first term, whether one believed those frustrations emerged from a sense that the President's "lofty rhetoric" failed to match his policies, from the simple failure to push for deep material changes in US society, or from the recognition that Republican obstructionism would succeed in thwarting any attempt at political progress. Then-Minority Leader Mitch McConnell

(R-KY) was comfortable enough with his power that he was willing to tell *National Journal* on the record that his party's highest goal lay in making Obama a one-term president. His remarks were published October 23, just before the midterms and midway between the College Humor and Pajiba drops.

Whether mismatch, money, or McConnell, the specific source of frustration was less important than its availability for performance — less important than, as Cage contended, the actor's ability to channel social crisis. Elaborating on the shamanic roots of his art, he explained, "What they would do is they would act out whatever the issues were with the villagers at that time, they would act it out and try to find the answers or go into a trance or go into another dimension, which is really just the imagination, and try to pull back something that would reflect the concerns of the group." ³ That year, Cage would "reflect the concerns of the group" in five movies: *GR:SoV*, *Drive Angry*, the long-shelved *Season of the Witch*, *Seeking Justice*, and *Trespass*. ⁴

But as in all things, the Cagean discourse that was spread across interviews, supercuts, and recurring sketches floated upon material supports as a skyscraper floats upon an array of friction piles. At a sociotechnical level, user-generated content platforms and democratized digital editing software drove the canalization of cultural criticism into the mode of "the supercut." ⁵

But the drive for monetizable content subtends more than the operations of platforms or corporations, more than the bibliotechnological imperatives of total content availability. Beyond all these intermediating institutions, what propelled Cage toward overproduction was a commitment to shopping simultaneously more individual and more structural. At the individual scale, Cage had inflated a personal real estate bubble that, once it popped, forced him to sell into down markets around the world. He seems to have owned as many as 15 residences spanning Germany; the UK; Providence, RI; New Orleans; and Los Angeles. He bought Schloss Neidstein in 2006 and Midford Castle in 2007 and unloaded both in 2009. That same year the IRS placed liens on his two New Orleans mansions to

cover \$6.6m in back taxes. In the legal fracas that followed, he sued his business manager and was countersued in turn. The legal documents wallowed in superspectacular details: in 2007, his "shopping spree entailed the purchase of three additional residences at a total cost of more than \$33 million; the purchase of 22 automobiles (including 9 Rolls Royces); 12 purchases of expensive jewelry; and 47 purchases of artwork and exotic items." [6](#)

Yet just as the causes of the Great Recession did not dictate the specifics of any governmental response, so the material causes of Cage's retrenchment did not determine his immediate course of action or the shape of his personated output. Where hundreds of thousands of US homeowners simply "strategically defaulted" and surrendered their underwater homes to lenders in a phenomenon called "jingle mail," Cage opted to work out his debts. Within his financial devastation, he found for himself a reason why simple bankruptcy was not an option, an ideological commitment that could then serve as motivation for "catch-up" rather than flight.

That strategy was available because of ripples within prevailing distribution models. In the waning DVD, rising VOD-streaming marketplace, there was a space in which a name star, working within genre and budgetary limits, could guarantee sufficient returns to justify a quick greenlight and substantial potential backend. Where a major studio would still be constrained by the need for enormous returns, smaller players enjoyed sectoral reductions in risk — low interest rates, favorable tax treatments, robust pre-sales, and potential long tails.

This zone of the market also benefitted from the entry of new players (such as Relativity Media) backed by private equity in search of return. [7](#) In this new era, Cage would only rarely appear in major studio fare — Disney's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010); voice roles in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Columbia/Marvel 2018) and *The Croods* (Fox/DreamWorks 2013) — but he could be found far, far more often in movies from midtier and lower distributors such as Lionsgate, Millennium/Alchemy, RLJ, and Saban. [8](#) In those vehicles, as we will see, Cage's shopping takes a monitory turn.

III

Cage's public justification for his amped up production has oscillated between socioaesthetic reasons — versions of the shamanic — and socioeconomic reasons — his stardom, his debts. He has tried to square the circle: the stories *in* the movies register cultural frustrations and yearnings; the stories *of* the movies are exempt from ordinary economic calculations. The shaman's role transcends its material support: "By design, with video on demand, I felt that if I made more movies, not only was it good for me financially, people would be able to tune in at home and go, 'What's the next movie that Nick made?' They'd have a large selection. So I'm not worried about too much supply and not enough demand."

But if Cage is the actor more than any other caught bodily, spatially, temporally, materially, economically in the pincers of the present then perhaps his registration of forces is more materially determined than he would wish. "Maybe there's been more supply than demand," he concedes.

The operationalization of the question of supply and demand in an actor's career might take several forms, but one of the most direct would be shopping. Perhaps no other actor's oeuvre has been as closely associated with shopping as Cage's. *Valley Girl* (Atlantic 1983) opens with a trip to the mall. In *Raising Arizona* (Fox 1987), an ethics emerges: theft is excusable when done for someone else, so his robberies are not simply about money but about getting baby Nathan some Huggies. In *Gone in 60 Seconds* (Touchstone/Buena Vista 2000) he only steals to help out his indebted brother. The scheme to boost 50 cars in 72 hours seems impossible because, as Robert Duvall explains, he has no "time to prep, time to shop." Even when Cage isn't a thief, his protagonists shop for others: the redemptive arc of his relationship with his daughter in *The Weather Man* (Paramount 2005) turns on a set of shopping trips. By the time the Great Recession hits, then Cage's persona has settled into a

groove of ethical stealing/shopping. What the economic crisis brings is an imagery of overconsumption.

In *Kick-Ass* (Lionsgate/Universal 2010), the parentally enabled consumption of *The Weather Man* appears as a pure surplus. When his daughter Hit Girl asks for a "Benchmade model 42 butterfly knife" for her birthday, he proves his love by literally doubling down, "You know what, I'm gonna get you two. One Balisong. Two Balisong."

By the time we get to *A Score to Settle* (RLJE 2019), the surplus solution has become suspect. Here, the setup is virtually the same as *Stolen* (Millennium, 2012): a stand-up ex-con emerges from prison to renegotiate the terms of his fatherhood. The accompanying shopping merges a makeover sequence from *The Weather Man* with *Kick-Ass*'s rhetoric of commitment. Early in *Score*, Cage's parolee and his recovering addict son Joey (Noah Le Gros) blow a ton of cash from the titular score on clothes, watches, phones, a Corvette, and an expensive hotel. At dinner, Joey notes, "It all looks so good," and Cage responds, "So get two things — get three." It is an unconsumable amount of food and it sits uneaten. The spree only fitfully repairs the father-son bond, and they eventually split. In the third act, though, it is revealed that Joey has been long dead and his presence a compensatory hallucination. The capper of the reveal is Cage looking at his son's bedroom in the hotel suite, the bed unused, the clutch of shopping bags undisturbed.

This array of scenes activates only part of Cage's careerlong exploration of consumption and its attendant spaces. We might go on to other dimensions of that work — those moments when he tosses money on a table and dashes out of a restaurant; the drug stores in *Bangkok Dangerous*, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, and *Matchstick Men*; the castles and libraries where he can buy nothing but only stare in wonderment or steal.

But in the 35-year arc of these most vernacular moments we find enough fraught instances to reject the idea that Cage's problem "wasn't these other things like shrunken heads." ² To be sure the real estate losses were larger, but for the cultural shaman there is no a priori distinction between the drive to buy more dinners, more heads, more Balisongs, more Rolls Royces, and more castles: the need to secure social connection is under pressure at every scale and all at once. It is not that the media concentrate on the wrong commodities; they correctly understand that the consumption is of a piece. The mistake is that they assume the drive to consume rests in Cage's *character*. For Cage, though, the drive lies just outside his character, in his adopted social role. At the moment of crisis, in 2009, when that role butted up against new limits, the alignment of shopping inside and outside the films slipped. Under these new conditions, the operationalization of the relationship between supply and demand found its material complement in surplus production (not consumption) and routinized, extreme affect. Faced with the problem of maintaining the shamanic channel between Cage and the social, these new surpluses gave rise to the discursive Cage as a metastable solution.

IV

The discursive Cage that circulated in the culture was always only provisionally separated from his movie roles — not because it was built on the ostensibly rickety foundations of postmodern allusion or knowingness, but because it was always susceptible to introjec-

tion into the persona itself. Cage appeared on "Get in the Cage!" as early as February 2012, making it clear he could be in on the joke. But if the discursive Cage was always formally assimilable, it would take years for its real subsumption to emerge as a project *for* the persona. That process of internalization gathered steam in 2019.

Since then we find Cage working through his own gradual recognition that the high-volume, low-status version of his persona requires renovation along three fronts. First, the public narration of his place within a history of star acting. Second, the self-conscious delimitation of this period as a period. Third, an exploration of the limits of enfolding, the modalities of extreme meta-ness.

The Marchese interview constitutes the first front. They discuss good and bad acting — from James Cagney to John Stamos — the balance between paycheck movies and demonstrations of range, irony and sincerity, the feeling that for certain stars there is no overproduction, only another movie to be found.

As always, that justification only plugs Cage more firmly into the economic: "I also want to argue with the concept of supply and demand," Cage tells him, drawing on the careers of TV stars of yore. In the place of a worry about overproduction, he and Marchese agree to read Cage's life against his movies, a sort of effortless and endlessly surprising allegory. The real estate spree was "almost like 'National Treasure,'" Cage says. Marchese agrees that the "whole thing is very 'National Treasure.'" Cage notes that he bought his castles while on a grail quest; Marchese is struck that it is *literally* a grail quest. "I find that grail quests tend to be more fulfilling when they're metaphorical." Cage dissents, pulling us back to the place where the metaphorical and the literal converge: "Well, I knew that, and the metaphor for me is the earth. The divine object is earth." ¹⁰

The second phase of reclamation takes place in a pair of movies that seem finally to liquidate the neurotic commitment to paternal consumption and to sublimate the years in the wilderness since 2009.

Willy's Wonderland (Screen Media 2021) amounts to a reckoning with *both* Cage's process and its tendency toward gimmicky reduc-

tion *and* the contractual limits placed on those investments. Here, a mute Cage hews fastidiously to the movie's basic deal: he can earn enough money to get his car repaired by staying through the night at the demonic Chuck E. Cheese knockoff. As he is besieged by malevolent animatronic entertainers, Cage's protagonist diligently fulfills his cleaning duties and just as resolutely takes breaks from that work to drink soda and play pinball. He all but refuses to look after the teens who want to protect him from the ultraviolence that surrounds them. The conceits may be thin — the silence, the **hostile animatronics** à la *The Banana Splits Movie* (WB 2019) or the *Five Nights at Freddy's* video game series (Scott/Lionsgate 2014-), but the anti-parental, anti-consumptive lesson seems to be underway.

Pig (Neon 2021), ostensibly the story of a celebrity chef turned hermit in search of his stolen pig, extends the reckoning in *Willy's Wonderland*, but shifts the arena from process to persona and the modality from extremity to introspection. Cage comes to terms with his fame by coming to terms with his name. The movie's three acts pivot on the acknowledgment of the name. In Act I it is a quest — "Do you even know his real name?" In Act II, it is something to conjure with — "Your name used to mean something. Now you don't exist" he is told only to quickly follow that by Rumpelstiltskinly revealing he is Robin Feld. Finally, in Act III he cashes in the name's value, calling in favors and coming to terms with his partner's legacy, a cassette tape labeled, "For Robin."

The Cagean reclamation will be complete in a reckoning with metadiscourse itself (phase three). Here, the reading must be more speculative, but only slightly, because it, too, has been scripted-in-potential for years. The crucial text will be the impending title *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent* (Lionsgate, 2022 [in production]). An updated version of *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, the fantasia Chuck Barris biopic, it finds Cage playing a version of himself with Neil Patrick Harris as his agent. The premise of the movie is the premise of this piece: a seriously indebted Cage takes any project that will have him. Only instead of simply starring in a collection of direct-to-video genre pictures — the strategy that neces-

sitated his post-recession persona management — Cage calls on fragmentary versions of his earlier roles to help the CIA to take down a Mexican drug kingpin (Pedro Pascal).

The script originated when Tom Gormican found himself at a similar moment of career desperation but found industry cachet when it was chosen for the 2019 **Black List**. That cachet could then be ported *back* to Cage even as the actor's fractured star status underlay both the narrative conceit and the financial plausibility of the movie in the first place. The discourse is enfolded into the text in a real way, depriving the discursive Cage of its purchase on the work. Thus is the Cage scholar's predicament — caught between an oeuvre of overproduction and a culture that responded to that excess by reducing Cage's work to an endless freakout — resolved.

A final turn remains. Such shuttling makes it clear that the socio-strategic landscape has not shifted by much. Cage has emerged from the financial obligations that drove a decade of production no longer in need of his shamanic alibi. Yet he finds himself in very nearly the same role. The project of enfolding the discursive Cage into the work since 2019 has been a matter public education and demonstration, culminating in *Unbearable*. Yet however personal that process seems to have been, it remains bound up with the other great macroeconomic education of its era. If the discursive Cage channeled the frustrations of Obama's first term, today's chastened Cage carries the promise of Biden's, a public commitment not to repeat the mistakes of austerity.

Cage's self-allegorizations in early 2021 keep him aligned with the social forces that pushed the Democrats into becoming the nominally progressive party that emerged over the course of the 2020 campaign. Teetering on a knife-edge of legislative control, the party came to power seemingly determined to do what it would take to hold it: to ignore the calls for austerity that had so devastated their electoral results in 2010. The new era of bigger government seemed to be everywhere in the media. Even a socialist publication such as *In These Times* thought we were witnessing "How Austerity Politics End." They rounded up words of fresh wisdom from Obama

veterans Chuck Schumer, Steve Rattner, and Biden himself: "One thing we learned is, you know, we can't do too much here. We can do too little. We can do too little and sputter." ¹¹

But as summer 2021 stretched into fall, the prospect that Biden would be the standard-bearer of progressive politics eroded; signal legislative priorities were abandoned or vitiated by the sorts of centrist means-testing that would, of course, cost the party dearly. The moment of structural openness — the moment when one might believe that a committed politics could exert determining force over the economy — is labile. The nouveau nouveau Shaman might just as readily take the form of a QAnon-besotted Capitol rioter preaching wet fascism as a father trying and failing to buy his child's love. Better, the centrists would say, to avoid the risks of such extremity and hope to weather the frustrations of the means-tested many at the ballot box.

If such openness was illusory, Cage is back where he began, only now he is stripped of his need to "work *through* anything." Cage entered this most recent phase denying there was any narrative integrity to his enterprise, claiming, "I never had a career, only work. I'm just going to keep working." ¹² When he said that in 2019 he was certainly wrong. He had a career. If he is finally right, it is only because the relative social cohesion of mass frustration has shattered. In the meantime, Cage has only to be able to gather the pieces of his past, not the unpredictable shards of affect that litter the political terrain.

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Post45, 2015). His work can be found at johnconnorlikeintheterminator.com or, sadly, [@jdconnor](https://twitter.com/jdconnor).

References

1. Parsons's translation has come under deserved fire. Weber's term was "*stahlhartes Gehäuse*," more literally "a shell hard as steel." Given Cage's deep identification with Superman, though, whether possessions amount to an iron cage or a gundam of steel matters little in his case. See Peter Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage' and the 'Shell as Hard as Steel': Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (May 2001): 153-169. [↑]
2. David Marchese, "[Nicolas Cage on his legacy, his philosophy of acting and his metaphorical — and literal — search for the Holy Grail](#)," *New York Times*, August 7, 2019. [↑]
3. Cage is drawing on Brian Bates's work, *The Way of the Actor*, as [he would acknowledge in 2014](#). Bates's version of this contention is: "A healing performance by the actor-shaman, carried out in front of an audience comprising the whole community, was aimed not only at helping particular, sick individuals. The performance was for the community as a whole. It was a communal ritual in which the actor brought the public into contact with the powers of the imaginal world, both within themselves individually, and in a shared sense as a group. In traditional societies acting was a ritual which released communal energies, and invoked the spirits. It still does." Cage would not only blurb a reissue of Bates's book on acting, but would also *The Way of Wyrd*. [↑]
4. Cage was not a singular figure of national frustration. The [most explicit linkage](#) of the performance of frustration to US politics was the character of Luther, Obama's "[Anger Translator](#)," who debuted in the premiere of *Key and Peele*, Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele's sketch show, in January 2012. Perhaps the most durable was Laura Dern's Amy Jellicoe, who fantasized about burning down her "data-entry hell" at the end of the first season of *Enlightened*, [a scene that became a touchstone of righteous, feminist rage](#) in GIF form. Both appeared in the wake of Cage's invocation of the shamanic. [↑]
5. Such platforms and technologies could serve indie outlets, like pajiba.com, or they could be enfolded into broader circuits of finance capital, as College Humor was. In the latter case, the precarity of the indie could be rewritten as a strategy of flexibility and adaptation. CH was one of many websites bought and sold by IAC, Barry Diller's "diversified web conglomerate," that, in its search for outsize, tech-company valuations and returns, at one time included hotwire, LendingTree, and vimeo. But even when IAC dumped College

Humor in 2020, it marked part of a commitment to componential fungibility that, again, participated in a broader culture of ruthless evaluation and the cultivation of contingency as corporate identity (*Moneyball*, Relativity Media). IAC was not alone in attempting to monetize humor and it was not alone in abandoning that attempt — both Super Deluxe and Funny or Die! followed similar paths:

<https://openscreensjournal.com/articles/10.16995/os.45/> [↑]

6. Rebecca Mowbray, "[Nicolas Cage's New Orleans home bought by Regions Bank at auction.](#)" NOLA News, November 12, 2009.

Suit: <https://www.scribd.com/document/21308988/Nicolas-Cage-Money-Manager-Suit>

Countersuit: <https://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/11/17/nicolas.cage.lawsuit/> [↑]

7. For the discussion of private equity's pivot to distressed real estate see, for example, . The complementarity of the distressed assets and the devalued star image appears in Levin's countersuit: "to alleviate the financial pressure to take film roles that might be detrimental to his career" "implored Coppola to stop buying real estate and urged him to reduce his real estate holdings, warning Coppola that the financial press was filled with references to a 'real estate bubble.'" [↑]
8. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* seems tailor-made for Disney, and it was, but it was also the outgrowth of Cage's study of Bates, in this case the book *The Way of Wyrd* (Hay House UK, 2004). [↑]
9. The shrunken head example is no accident. Cage's invocation of the shamanic draws on a Melvillean vision that would bring together the South Pacific idols, makeup drawn from "Afro-Caribbean voodoo," and ancient Egyptian artifacts sewn into his clothes. Here, Cage draws on Bates's notion of a general, global shamanism, a notion that is itself a product of a general, global imperial encounter. [↑]
10. See Marchese. [↑]
11. Miles Kampf-Lassin, "[How Austerity Politics End,](#)" *In These Times*, March 9, 2021. [↑]
12. Marchese. [↑]