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WITH 2018'S NIGHTMARISH METAL HELLSCAPE *MANDY*, AND NOW SURREAL LOVECRAFT HORROR *COLOR OUT OF SPACE*, NICOLAS CAGE IS EXPRESSING HIMSELF LIKE NEVER BEFORE. HE TELLS *EMPIRE* HOW HE'S FOUND A NEW FREQUENCY

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WORDS JOHN NUGENT PORTRAITS BENEDICT EVANS

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ICOLAS CAGE HAS a mantra. Something he returns to whenever he has a big decision to make. Lately, he tells *Empire*, it seems to be coming into play more than ever. “I always ask myself, ‘What would Prince do?’”

A surprising code to live by, perhaps. But it makes a curious, Cage-y sort of sense. Much like Prince, Cage is constantly unpredictable, a true original who will

often do exactly the opposite of what you’d expect. After nearly 40 years on screen he’s still surprising us, probing uncharted territory, always in pursuit of the experimental and the esoteric. You wouldn’t put it past him to change his name to a symbol.

Lately, he seems to be finding his most natural home in cosmic horror, nihilistic fantasy, introspective sci-fi. Weird fiction. With the likes of 2018’s cult demon biker nightmare *Mandy* and the upcoming psychedelic horror *Color Out Of Space*, Cage seems to be pushing things more than ever, expanding his range yet further, with material that perfectly suits his sensibilities. He seems to have come home.

Where his non-naturalistic style of acting might elsewhere seem out of place — sometimes wonderfully so — these films are the ideal match of material and man. With H.P. Lovecraft — the innovative, apocalyptic science-fiction author and tentacle enthusiast, whose short story *Color Out Of Space* is based on — it’s a match made in hellish heaven. Cage has found a niche. Or, maybe the world has finally caught up with him. As he says: “I feel that I’m on top of my game now more than I’ve ever been.”

WE’VE WITNESSED THE parade of the unhinged throughout Cage’s career: think the deranged literary agent who thinks he’s a vampire in *Vampire’s Kiss*, the manic identity-swap cop/criminal in *Face/Off*, the flame-licked superhero-from-hell and motorcycle enthusiast in *Ghost Rider*. These characters, and Cage’s unwavering commitment to the total absence of hinges, have made him a firm favourite on the internet.

“I’ve always been trying to progress film performance into the surreal,” he explains to *Empire*, speaking from his home just outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. “I’ve just always gravitated towards what certain people in the media like to refer to as ‘Cage Rage’, or kind of unhinged characters.”

He is, to some, more meme than man. The Facebook group ‘Nicolas Cage’s face on things’ (which is exactly what it sounds like) has over 200,000 followers. One highly active Cage meme



community on Reddit worships him as “the one true god” and warns against “the temptation of Travolta”. He knows how he’s perceived. In 2014, he was photographed wearing a T-shirt of his own face, the now notorious “You don’t say?” grin taken from *Vampire’s Kiss*; on the set of *Dog Eat Dog*, he recreated the saucer-eyed moment for a DVD outtake. “He’s a very reasonable, self-aware individual,” his *Color Out Of Space* director Richard Stanley confirms. “He has a knowing sense of humour about what he’s doing.”

Yet it’s rare to find any irony in his performances. Whether milking alpacas, manically reciting the alphabet or smoking his lucky crack pipe, it’s all in pursuit of his honest storytelling goals; of his *art*. He expressed disappointment that the two-minute unbroken shot in *Mandy* in which he downed a bottle of vodka, in a toilet, while screaming, without trousers, was played for laughs on the internet. You sense he’s slightly irked by the Cage Rage compilations that rack up millions of views on YouTube, taking performances out of context — what he refers to as “a shitty little corner of the internet that thinks I’m something I’m not”.

He has only cameoed as himself once, in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch opposite Andy Samberg doing an impression of him; in the sketch he described Samberg’s impression, seemingly only half-joking, as “an exaggerated, screaming psychopath which just doesn’t exist”. He has long desired to be as mysterious as his Golden Age Hollywood heroes. “The people that



Top to bottom: Hitting a purple patch as Nathan Gardner in supernatural terror *Color Out Of Space*; With his much-loved professor father, August Coppola; As the FBI/crook hybrid in fizzog-swapping 1997 hit *Face/Off*.

I grew up loving, like James Dean — they seemed larger than life,” he says. “They seemed mythological figures because they were mysterious. I have tried to cultivate that kind of... mystique. I feel that there’s enough of that around now. It’s like Alan Moore was saying: information is going to start growing so exponentially fast that we’re all going to

turn into steam.”

It helps that he largely lives in his own Cage-curated bubble. Nowadays he stays off the internet and no longer appears on talk shows. He lives a relatively quiet life, dividing his time between Las Vegas and the tiny Somerset village of Baltonsborough, five miles outside of Glastonbury, where he has kept a home for the past 14 years. Local press reported that he rang in the new year in a Somerset working men’s club, where he happily posed for photos and bought everyone a round. “I just enjoy that part of the world,” he says. “I enjoy the rolling hills and the green and the oak trees and I enjoy the people in Somerset. Obviously the cider and cheddar cheese is enjoyable. I like to read my books and go into Glastonbury town and feel like I’m walking through a pack of tarot cards.”

The work is the focus. He speaks earnestly and thoughtfully about performance. His unique style of acting, which he calls ‘Nouveau Shamanic’, inspired by the Brian Bates book *The Way Of Wyrd*, ignores the widely accepted principles of performance. “To break form with typical narrative film performance, I thought: ‘Well, let’s not get totally obsessed with naturalism.’ The only way I thought I could go into the surrealistic approach was to explore characters that were either a) losing their minds, b) ‘on something’, or c) under the influence of something supernatural or alien. That’s why I always enjoyed science-fiction, why I’ve enjoyed horror — because it provides a mechanism where I can explore my surrealistic



film performance dreams.” *Mandy* and *Color Out Of Space*, by that token, are dream gigs.

IN *MANDY*, CAGE plays an understated lumberjack whose girlfriend is kidnapped and killed by a murderous cult and a demon biker gang, only to seek bloody revenge while off his face on LSD-laced cocaine. In *Color Out Of Space* he plays an alpaca farmer whose entire family lose their minds after a glowing purple alien meteorite lands in their garden, spewing supernatural force. The criteria for a), b) and c) all satisfied there.

The attention, as ever, is on Cage’s hinges flying loose. But these characters are as much ordinary, understated men as they are beset by monstrous challenges. “Ever since I’d seen James Dean’s *East Of Eden*, I’ve loved family drama,” he says. “If you take horror, and all the imagination and surrealism that horror can provide, and you collide it with the mundane or the ordinary, it becomes a great mix.” In *Color Out Of Space*, the descent of his character, Nathan Gardner, into extra-terrestrial madness is deliberately incremental. “The way I approached it was, the more average I can make Nathan Gardner, the more terrifying the overall influence of the alien energy will be — so that the surreal and the fantastic of the alien energy becomes more compelling.”

In both films, he digs deep into a personal well, too. For *Mandy* — a staggering exploration of grief, among other things — he channelled emotions felt from the loss of his father, August Coppola, some years before. For *Color Out Of Space*, he actually adopts his late father’s voice; as Nathan’s descent into madness grows, he begins to speak in an uncanny, vaguely English accent. That, says, Cage, is pure August.

“I start mimicking my father,” he explains. “In fact, we came up with the idea that we should go back to *Vampire’s Kiss*, that voice which is actually the voice of my actual father. I used to call it his ‘Continental BS’ voice. I could never understand, growing up with him, what this voice was. ‘What are you doing, trying to sound like you’re from England?’ He would go, ‘I’m an English professor. I need to speak with distinction.’ Understandably, if he was going to teach English,

Above: Possibly his most psychedelic and offbeat film ever, Cage plays *Mandy*’s understated lumberjack-turned-brutal LSD-powered avenger, Red Miller.

he wanted his students to hear proper English. But if he got angry, it was terrifying.”

Finding that groove between human drama and otherworldly insanity can be a delicate balance. Cage needs the right collaborators. He seems to have found a kindred spirit in *Color Out Of Space* director Richard Stanley, who he bonded with over a shared love of the Dark Ages and Arthurian legends. “We have similar interests, philosophically,” Cage agrees. “It didn’t surprise me that he comes off a bit like some sort of sorcerer. I remember once, he said, ‘I’m gonna bring blood from a stone!’ He had these two small meteorites and he rubbed them together and this red liquid started emerging from them. I thought that was fascinating.” Curiously for an American and a South African, they also bonded over a familiarity with the West Country. “He knows a lot of the people I know in Glastonbury — some of the people in the magic shops,” he says.

With his *Mandy* director Panos Cosmatos — who was inspired to write the film after losing both his parents — Cage found a colleague he could trust, one who understood his versatility and trusted him to let loose. “The main thing for me is I like directors who don’t fix things that aren’t broken,” he says. “I’ve been very fortunate with filmmakers that genuinely care about performance.”

He certainly dabbles in mainstream Hollywood much less than he used to: the recently announced *National Treasure 3* will be his first major studio film in almost a decade. The advent of streaming has allowed space for the smaller, weirder films that can accommodate Nouveau Shamanism. In America, *Color Out Of Space* had a simultaneous streaming and theatrical release — in love with the grandiose visuals, Cage was hopeful it might hit some cinema screens too, and it did. “There is risk aversion [in Hollywood], especially if a movie is really expensive,” he says. “And it’s understandable. But the good news for me is that streaming allows these experimental and original storylines. Stylisations with film performance can still be deployed.” The new

"I'm on top of my game more than ever."

streaming status quo enables him to stretch his experimental muscles as far as he wants.

He's busier than ever, ludicrously prolific, with six films on his slate this year alone; he had seven last year, and eight in 2018. Most actors in Hollywood might max out at three per year. He sees the work-rate as an essential part of his craft. "It keeps my abilities at my fingertips," he says. "Simply because I've been practising. I'm always a man that likes to work. I don't want to be just out by the pool, drinking mai tais and Dom Perignon. As much as I enjoy a nice time out with friends as anyone else, I need to work." Being Nicolas Cage is a full-time job.

CAGE'S COMFORT ZONE seems to be discomfort. His upcoming slate — which includes a film in which he must rescue the governor's daughter from ghosts or the grenades attached to his black leather jumpsuit will explode (*Prisoners Of The Ghostland*), and a sci-fi martial arts film about an alien that returns to earth every six years, looking for a fight (*Jiu Jitsu*) — suggests a desire for the path less travelled. Among it all he is attempting something he hasn't previously attacked. In *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent*, an upcoming original comedy by writer-director Tom Gormican, he will play 'Nicolas Cage', a fictionalised version of himself, confronted by a younger, mid-'90s Nic Cage. "That's me going into the meta, which I haven't done before," he says, with a hint of hesitation. "It's a stylised version of me, and the fact I even have to refer to myself in the third person makes me extremely uncomfortable. There are many scenes in the movie where modern or contemporary — here we go — 'Nic Cage' — he pauses to admit he "felt

really gross" at that third person reference — "and then young Nic Cage are colliding and arguing and battling it out. It's an acrobatic approach to acting."

Despite this rare show of mild anxiety, it sounds like a blast. "Remember that talk show I went on, *Wogan*, back when I was promoting *Wild At Heart*?" he asks, referring to a 1990 moment now immortalised on YouTube, and consistently viral, in which Cage karate kicks his way onto the stage, throws money into the



Clockwise from right: Being an enigma comes naturally to Nic Cage; As Sailor Ripley alongside Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) in 1990's *Wild At Heart*; Playing the film noir/Bogart-obsessed crook Troy in 2016's *Dog Eat Dog*.

audience, then goes topless, handing his T-shirt to a bemused Terry Wogan. "Young Nic Cage [in the film] will be *that* guy. But this is a very stylised version of me. It's definitely just me 'taking the piss', as they say, out of myself."

It may also mean revisiting his vast back catalogue. "I don't normally do that," he qualifies. "I don't like to look back. But this movie kind of pushes it all back in my face. I'm probably going to have to look at a couple of the movies from the past again, because I think we're gonna have to reenact some of those sequences. It's like walking through a *Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* version of *Con Air* and *Face/Off*."

Meta-Cage has spread to other mediums, too. Jim Carrey — a longtime friend of Cage's, and a fellow eccentric, to say the least — has written a semi-autobiographical novel called *Memoirs And Misinformation* in which Cage is a major character. "None of this is real and all of it is true," reads Carrey's logline. Cage has read the book, and given his blessing to it, though he laughs off some of the stories within it. "He has me arguing with Kelsey Grammer in an ashram," he says. "I've never been to an ashram in my entire life."

The Nicolas Cage persona, it seems, is wilder than even he could ever possibly control. Like Alan Moore predicted, it's turning into steam: intangible, ethereal, like an alien colour. He is the ultimate enigma. It comes naturally to him. "I don't think it's very difficult to keep a kind of enigmatic quality about you," Cage says. "If you care." It might not always look like it, but Nicolas Cage *cares*. Like Lovecraft — or Prince — he just wants to forge his own unique, strange myth. **E**

COLOR OUT OF SPACE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 FEBRUARY

## UNDER THE INFLUENCE

IF NICOLAS CAGE'S ACTING EVER SEEMS SIDWAYS OF HUMAN, YOU COULD PUT IT DOWN TO HIS LEFTFIELD SOURCES OF INSPIRATION



### EDWARD MUNCH'S *THE SCREAM*

The 1893 portrait of a figure howling existentially has consistently inspired Cage, who's talked about aping it for *Ghost Rider*, and elsewhere. "Looking for characters who had some sort of emotional or mental difficulty," he once said, "I saw opportunities to express [myself] in a way that could get a bit surreal, like Francis Bacon's screaming pope, or *The Scream*."



### WOODY WOODPECKER

Cage leaned into the cartoon bird for the Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona*, seeing the character as, in his own words, a "Woody Woodpecker come to life", which is why his wide-eyed ex-con H.I. McDunnough has the bird tattooed on his arm. Woody's haircut was also key. Ethan Coen said: "The more difficulties [H.I.] got in, the bigger [his hair wave] got."



### MEDICAL COCAINE

Cage was under the effects of medical cocaine, treating a sinus infection, when he first read the screenplay for 2009's *Bad Lieutenant: Port Of Call New Orleans*, he said in an interview. Having not taken drugs for years he immediately soaked up the script, recalling "feelings of invincibility and sexuality. I made notes and then I started rehearsing the scenes".



### HIS PET COBRAS

A couple of decades back Cage became the owner of two king cobra snakes, Sheba and Moby. Both snakes have influenced his acting, he recently said, particularly on *Ghost Rider: Spirit Of Vengeance*, for which his character would try to hypnotise victims by moving from side to side.

ALEX GODFREY

Alamy, Getty Images