

“What Are These Fuckin’ Iguanas Doing On My Coffee Table?”¹: Nicolas Cage as Genre

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What is (a/the) Nicolas Cage (movie/genre)? In this article, Foster uses a genre analysis to explore the topic of Nicolas Cage the actor, and Nicolas Cage the genre.

Like most Virgos, I spend a lot of time thinking about Nicolas Cage. I don’t know if this makes me a Nicolas Cage expert, but regardless of competence, I think a lot about Nicolas Cage. Well, OK, maybe not Nicolas Cage, exactly. It’s something more like “Nicolas Cage” or Nicolas Cage™. It’s a/the version of Nicolas Cage that is public facing, or more public than that even. It’s the Nicolas Cage that is *only* ever in public. It’s a/the version of Nicolas Cage that isn’t necessarily even all that connected to a fifty-six-year-old guy named Nicolas Cage anymore. It’s still a sort of object, but it’s not for sure an object made of materials. It doesn’t have a body, doesn’t have an age, doesn’t feel things, or think things at all. It’s not an image exactly; it doesn’t live in any particular location or in any particular movie; this/that version of Nicolas Cage is always moving because new things are always being made, new things or examples or products of the **genre**. By “genre” all I mean is that Nic Cage is a thing in the world that I can recognize; I know a Nic Cage movie when I see it, even if I’ve never seen *this* specific Nic Cage movie

1. *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call, New Orleans*. USA, 2009.

before. In other words, this Nic Cage genre is always evolving into a new Nic Cage genre, *and at the exact same time* it still keeps being the same, recognizably “Nic Cage” genre. It’s a weird idea and I think about it too much. I guess maybe I think a lot about the idea of Nicolas Cage; Nicolas Cage as an artifact frozen temporarily in the ice for the space aliens to one day thaw and learn all about our trashy ancient civilization. I spend a lot of time asking things like, why do I think so much about Nic Cage? Or, what even is Nic Cage exactly?

I’ve never met Nic Cage, if you hadn’t already guessed. I thought I saw him at a Dunkin’ once, but nobody believes me, so I’ve stopped bringing it up. I’m not talking about Nic Cage. I don’t have much of an interest in him to be honest. I’m sure he’s a nice person and everything, but so what. I guess I just have no opinion one way or another regarding a person called Nic Cage. I don’t think many people do, unless maybe they know Nic Cage or they are Nic Cage. I’m not trying to hurt his feelings; I am just for sure am not going to write an essay about some man I don’t know. To be a little clearer: if Nic Cage is the person, the actor, then Nicolas Cage™ is the cultural idea that has only a see-through dotted line connection to that person. Nicolas Cage™ is maybe a sort of genre all to itself.

But just saying something is sort of a thing doesn’t feel like it proves that it is for real a thing. I really want it to be a thing; it totally *feels* like a thing; but does that make it a thing? To answer, I suppose I could dig for some evidence, do some research, or archeology, something I can actually brush some sand off of. The genre after all has to make itself (or be made) into some sort of object in order for me to be able to interact with it at all.² Of course, Nicolas Cage™ makes itself visible *mostly* through Nicolas Cage Movies™ (from here forward referred to as NCMs). Nicolas Cage™ isn’t only present in the space of the cinema through NCMs. Nicolas Cage™ can be found in a bunch of interviews, memes, T-shirt slogans, TMZ clips, social media posts, anecdotes, entire subreddits, myths, think pieces, and other texts. out in the world. However, it’s probably safe to say that movies are the most consistent form through which the genre is broadcast, and for the sake of all of our sanity, are pretty much the only format I’ll have time to focus on today. Stop me in the hall sometime and we can talk Nic Cage conspiracy theories all day, I promise, but sometimes enough Nic Cage is enough.

2. Rinard, Brenda, and David Masiel. ““A Set of Shared Expectations’: An Interview with Carolyn Miller.” 6–16.

“I’ll Be Taking These Huggies and Whatever Cash You Got.”³

What Exactly Counts as a Nicolas Cage Movie™?

Nic Cage’s filmography is pretty effing extensive, providing some pretty rich evidence of Nicolas Cage™, or at least “Nicolas Cage,” in the wild. Since 1983, Nic Cage has appeared credited as Nicolas Cage in exactly 107 films, many of which I’d say are NCMs. Not every film Nic Cage has acted in needs to be (or can be) classified as an NCM; only the films that share the traits, conventions, and features that constitute the Nicolas Cage™ genre constitute NCMs. That’s how we all decide a thing’s a thing, right? To define the genre features for Nicolas Cage™, we have to actually look at some NCMs. Genres are sort of always moving in circles in this way, the genre informs the artifact, the artifact informs the world and a million other things in the world, and all of that world stuff informs the genre. NCMs are where we *see* and *hear* the features of Nicolas Cage™. To identify an NCM then, we have to look for specific, recognizable aspects of the filmmaking that immediately let us as the audience understand that we are looking at an NCM. Hiding in those patterns, maybe, are the fuzzy shapes outlining Nicolas Cage™, defining what makes it distinctive from other genres. A genre probably should be different from (all) the other genres in order to be a genre.

To start with, here is a chronological listing of Nicolas Cage’s personal film history, including all of his credited (as Nicolas Cage) onscreen appearances: *Valley Girl*, *Rumble Fish*, *Racing with the Moon*, *the Cotton Club*, *the Boy in Blue*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Raising Arizona*, *Moonstruck*, *Vampire’s Kiss*, *Time to Kill*, *Wild at Heart*, *Fire Birds*, *Zandalee*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Amos & Andrew*, *Red Rock West*, *Deadfall*, *Guarding Tess*, *It Could Happen to You*, *Trapped in Paradise*, *Kiss of Death*, *Leaving Las Vegas* (won an Oscar), *the Rock*, *Con Air*, *Face/Off*, *City of Angels*, *8mm*, *Bringing Out the Dead*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, *The Family Man*, *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, *a Christmas Carol*, *Windtalkers*, *Sonny*, *Adaptation.*, *Matchstick Men*, *National Treasure*, *Lord of War*, *The Weather Man*, *The Ant Bully*, *World Trade Center*, *the Wicker Man*, *Ghost Rider*, *Next*, *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*, *Bangkok Dangerous*, *Knowing*, *G-Force*, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, *Astro Boy*, *Kick-Ass*, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, *Season of the Witch*, *Drive Angry*, *Seeking Justice*, *Trespass*, *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*, *Stolen*, *The Frozen Ground*, *The Croods*, *Joe*, *Rage*, *Outcast*, *Left Behind*, *Dying of the Light*, *the Runner*, *Pay the Ghost*, *the Trust*, *Dog Eat Dog*, *Snowden*, *USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage*, *Army of One*, *Arsenal*, *Vengeance: A Love Story*, *Inconceivable*, *Mom and Dad*, *The Humanity Bureau*, *Dark*, *Mandy*, *Looking Glass*, *211*, *Teen Titans Go! To the Movies*, *Between Worlds*, *Spider-*

3. *Raising Arizona*. USA, 1987.

*Man: Into the Spider-Verse, A Score to Settle, Color Out of Space, Running with the Devil, Kill Chain, Primal, and Grand Isle.*⁴

If we can all agree that a physical performance from Nic Cage is a requirement for membership to the NCM set of movies, then we can eliminate anything animated or films in which only his voice appears. We're left with about ninety-five movies, and several more listed as forthcoming. That list drops down in size a little if we only include movies where Nic Cage gets top billing, but especially in the later, more productive years of his career, when he generally has top billing, which ends up being unhelpful. We can maybe narrow down the definition of an NCM even more by including something about the *kind* of performance given by Nic Cage. The problem we run into now is with trying to define the type of performance, even though *I* know exactly what I mean. It is difficult to put it into words even if it is easy to recognize. There are some physical traces I can point us towards, at least. It's in the image I think about a lot; Nicolas Cage wide eyed, head back, teeth showing, looking straight into the camera. It's a flail of his limbs at a moment that absolutely doesn't call for flailing. There's an inappropriateness to every role Nic Cage plays. It's a kick and a scream and smashed glass in response to someone's lunch order. It includes pretty much anything in which Cage gets violent with anything, including himself. Two recentish NCMs in the Nic Cage corpus, *Color Out of Space* and *Mandy*, lean hard on the portrait of Nic Cage in neon light, smiling, streaked with simulated blood. His facial expressions range from something like stoic to something like a Dr. Frankenstein, but with more of a smirky, self-awareness. There's a sense in his performance, and often built into the script(s), that Nic Cage knows he's doing "Nicolas Cage." He understands his own Nicolas Cage™-ness, or participates in his understood role at least.

Yeah, I know, that's unfortunately still not hyper-specific. In researching this thing that you're reading, I've been watching a lot of movies with Nic Cage in them, trying to articulate something more quantifiable, or material within the group of films. The problem is that some of these remaining movies with Nicolas Cage doing all those performative things still do not feel like Nicolas Cage™ movies (NCMs) to me. Anything before *Leaving Las Vegas*, including even *Raising Arizona*, doesn't *feel* like an NCM to me, even though Nic Cage is in many cases the lead actor. But if Nic Cage being in the film isn't enough to gain entry into the Nicolas Cage™ genre, then what else am I seeing that feels so "Nicolas Cage"-y about NCMs?

4. "Nicolas Cage," IMDb, IMDb.com, www.imdb.com/name/nm0000115/

“Oh No! Not the Bees! Not the Bees! Ah! Oh! They’re in My Eyes!
My Eyes! Ah! Ahhhhhh ...”⁵

What Makes a Thing Feel so Nicolas Cage™-y?

There have to be other things going on in NCMs, things other than “has Nicolas Cage in them” that define the genre. I guess I could start with what Nicolas Cage *does* in the NCMs, his performance, hyperbolic or “over the top.” This performance goes beyond his physical appearance within the film; sure, it includes stuff like gesture, but it also includes tone, it includes intent and motion and gaze. In some ways, Nicolas Cage has also recognized Nicolas Cage™, and the genre is continually reinforced with his amping up of his own performed energy. It feeds itself. Current Nic Cage interacts with early Nic Cage, multiplying the “Nicolas Cage”-ness. And Nicolas Cage™ gets more Nicolas Cage™-y all the time. For example, his performance in the straight-to-streaming *Primal*, in which he plays a big game hunter whose prized white jaguar gets released on a ship by an international fugitive who also happens to be on the same ship, thereby requiring the character played by Cage to hunt both man and beast (and yes, this is what really happens), is going to be more Nicolas Cage™-y by definition than something older, like *The Rock*, which, by comparison, feels weirdly grounded in reality. The genre becomes more of itself over time. Each time there’s a new example, a movie, a book, a meme, or whatever, the genre is expressed in a more clear, more complete sort of way; it’s more of its own thing, separate from all the other stuff out there in the world. Nicolas Cage’s Nicolas Cage™-ness, moving further and further away from real life, has evolved over the filmography. NCMs build on all the NCMs that came before; the audience’s **antecedent knowledge**—the stuff they’re bringing to the party, the information they’re coming in with, their previous experience(s), the relevant stuff they’ve learned before—grows and complicates itself. Just like right now becomes a moment ago, the stuff you’re learning becomes the stuff you’ve learned, and that stuff changes the next stuff you’ll learn and so on and forever.

There is also the generally unnatural dialogue, movie dialogue that feels exactly like movie dialogue, sometimes so much so as to be unsettling, and the accompanying performance, which, with clear exceptions (*Adaptation.*), seems specifically written intentionally with Nic Cage in mind. A part written for Nic Cage, that therefore only Nic Cage can embody.

5. *The Wicker Man*. USA, 2006.

We can't move forward here without pausing for a moment to seriously consider *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*; arguably/maybe the most concentrated distillation of Nicolas Cage™, besides *The Wicker Man* remake, but I refuse to talk about that movie for personal reasons.

Though *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*' director Werner Herzog is pretty adamant that his film was not in fact a remake or sequel to 1992's original *Bad Lieutenant*, even he admits that the dickish protagonist is carried over from the first into his version. The audience is absolutely invited, maybe even instructed, to compare Nic Cage's detective to Harvey Keitel's. In playing the pseudo-protagonist in the original version, Keitel's performance informs Nic Cage's; remakes almost have built into their form the act of retroactively comparing the remake to the earlier version. Nic Cage is *pushed* by the prior performance to play it even bigger this time around. Remakes in some ways have an impossible goal; they're tasked with capturing something difficult to articulate about another movie. Herzog does not interfere in this process, if anything, he also pushes it even further. He is definitely no stranger to eliciting over-the-top performances from his actors, even the difficult ones—he spent years doing similar work with Klaus Kinski—and those learned skills, those experiences, only add to the level of hyperbole present in the film. I don't think it's unfair to assume Nic Cage was aware of Herzog's prior work. I also don't think it's unfair to assume he was aware that Kinski's style of performance grew from his background in theatre; Nic Cage has some of those same exaggerated instincts, in some ways, this connection between actors, between Cage and Keitel and Cage and Kinski, is essential to understanding the movie. Beneath the surface, Herzog's antecedent understanding of Cage, and Cage's antecedent understanding of Herzog, really allows Cage to sink deep into his "Nicolas Cage"-ness. Herzog, as a rule, permits it; he gives space to that sort of performance. Nic Cage isn't the only person creating the "Nicolas Cage"-y tone; it's always a team effort. I suspect even the backup sound guy is somewhat to blame.

But "being on film" is also not enough to define the entire category, since there are things that feel Nicolas Cage™-y that aren't movies. Any of Nicolas Cage's late-night TV interviews since approximately 2002, for example, although I guess those are still performance based. There are static images and memes featuring Nic Cage that often live outside the world of cinema in digital spaces. These extra-cinema Nic Cage references are, however, dependent on our at least peripheral understanding of a "Nicolas Cage"-ish approach to acting.

“I’m a Vampire! I’m a Vampire! I’m a Vampire!”⁶

But How is Nicolas Cage™ Different From Other (Super Similar) Genres? Is it?

If the various aspects of “Nicolas Cage”-ness above provide a start, at least an incomplete set of features, that we can use to attempt to define the genre, then Nicolas Cage™ is probably in some small part located in the stuff on that list. These features and their combination should produce something that is distinctive and easily to recognize. The problem is that they sort of don’t, at least not by themselves, and for sure not all the time. Take, for example unnatural dialogue. Cheesy dialogue can be found in all sorts of genres, like rom-coms and comic books and Shakespeare. Maybe no/most single feature(s), tool(s), technique(s) is/are specific to a single genre.

There’s the extra problem that a lot of the time any of these single features can also be true in their inverse. For example, earlier I said that the performance of Nicolas Cage™ is based in hyperbole, in other words, an over-the-top exaggeration. A few paragraphs later, I also said that his delivery of dialogue is unnatural, often flat, or made of wood or whatever. Both these things probably can’t be true at the same time, and yet both these things are exactly true at the same time, so one thing on its own probably isn’t enough for a definition.

So then let’s take two features of the NCM subgenre, like “cheesy dialogue” and “is violent”; maybe two co-occurring features will be specific enough to attach to only a single genre. That’s unfortunately a lot of things as well, and I get the feeling if we took three or four or five or six things, we’d always be describing more than one genre. So maybe a set of things isn’t all we need to define Nicolas Cage™; but then what else is there? I think the sum is totaling more than the value of the combined parts, or whatever the saying is: $2+2=5$. If stuff’s not enough, then what about if all that’s left is what that stuff does: its actions, or its activity.

I mean I’m pretty convinced Nicolas Cage™ *does* something in the world. An image of Nic Cage in a meme does more than make us think “Nicolas Cage” when we see the visual. It brings up all the associations of “Nicolas Cage” held by the viewer; it calls up a history of stuff and ideas and feelings and actions. It does something. I’d call the verb for (per)forming the various affects, feelings, jokes, ideas, cultural signification, history, and film corpus attached to the genre Nicolas Cage™, “Nicolas Cage”-ing. Maybe the problem with trying to define the object—in this case, the genre—is that the object isn’t an object at all. It’s active, a verb; it’s an actor, a subject.

6. *Vampire’s Kiss*. USA, 1989.

Genres do things, or they compel other things to do things, even if they aren't things.

Of course, I'm pretty sure if they do things then they must also be things, and for proof we can look at the things that they do. The problem here isn't that I can't see the thing, the problem is that it's still blurry, no matter how much I fiddle with the focus. Sometimes a blur is a smudge on the lens, but what if maybe, and give me a chance here, the thing we are looking at *is* perfectly in focus. What if the thing is just a blurry thing? And we're seeing a blurry thing in super high definition. It may not be super-duper profound, but I think it's important: sometimes shit's blurry. In many ways, the genre, Nicolas Cage™, it seems, exists mostly or maybe only in my head, even if its IRL examples, NCMs, do in fact exist in the world. But what if, since these movies are really real, the genre also always finds its way into other people's heads. If it's in one head then it's probably in two heads and so on; maybe that's why it's a thing I can recognize in the first place.

“I Did a Bare Ass 360 Triple Back Flip in Front of Twenty-Two Thousand People. It's Kind of Funny, It's On YouTube. Check It Out!”⁷

Ok, But How Can a Genre, Like Nicolas Cage™, Change and Stay the Same at the Exact Same Time?

In my messy memory, Nicolas Cage™ has always been the same thing, but this obviously isn't true, like at all. The moment a genre hits the brakes and stops in a fixed, unchanging, position, it stops being a genre. It was a genre, and you can now read about it on Wikipedia next to “telegraph” and “poetry.” Like we talked about before, new NCMs are coming out all the time, and each new NCM has an effect. The genre is those changes and the repetition; change plus repetition is maybe called evolution. Every version that comes into the world is a little different; each NCM is a new, different thing; and if that's true, the boundaries of the genre must always also be changing, bit by bit, to fit all the new thingies. What Nicolas Cage™ meant before Nic Cage's most recent film, just can't possibly be the same after his most recent film, because there's a new film. The world has changed with the introduction of a new example of the genre. And Nicolas Cage™ today is not the same as Nicolas Cage™ tomorrow. Anytime anything connected in any way to Nicolas Cage™ comes into being, Nicolas Cage™ has to change to accommodate it.

7. *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*. USA, 2011.

So, maybe it’s more helpful to think of genres being stable things only temporarily, for a second, just for now, an idea that, I know, I know, totally further complicates things.⁸ But then asking “what” a genre is might be the wrong question. Maybe “when” or “how” might get us better, more complete answers. Except even the clear answers don’t appear so clear since it gets difficult to be specific in (permanent) text about something temporary; a high-quality picture of a cloud is still cloudy. But everything doesn’t have crisp lines. Ghosts don’t have any.

One quick last thing . . . Nicolas Cage™ gets its “Nicolas Cage”-ness through repetition, through memes and films and other media, and then more memes and films and other media. Nicolas Cage™ is invented by the repetition of Nic Cage and “Nicolas Cage”-ish shit and NCMs. Maybe genre isn’t a container of stuff, but it’s the repeated social interactions between people and texts and stuff and the world. Genre is in our heads, not in the films; genre might basically be the ways we recognize and change and interact with stuff and each other. Nicolas Cage™ is our collective expectations when we see Nic Cage’s name in the opening credits.⁹ So Nicolas Cage™ isn’t necessarily in the NCMs where I was looking for it earlier, but its traces are. Nicolas Cage™’s not even located in Nic Cage himself. But Nicolas Cage™ is housed in my brain and your brain and other people we haven’t met’s brains and so on, and it’s in the way those brains all relate, communicate, understand, interact, and create with each other, changing slowly and/or quickly over time. All that brain stuff is what produces the genres in the world; all that brain stuff makes real stuff. All that brain stuff making all that real stuff can maybe be called literate activity; it’s all the reading and writing and speaking and gesturing and hieroglyphics and everything. But the moral of the story is that literate activity is a mess. And even though it’s a headache, I think I’ll probably learn to live with it, and I’m pretty sure you’ll be okay too. And Nicolas Cage will continue to “Nicolas Cage” his “Nicolas Cage”-ness in a stream of updated versions of Nicolas Cage™ forever and ever and so on and so on, or at least until the sun goes out.

8. Miller, Carolyn R. “Genre as Social Action.” 151–67.

9. Rinard and Masiel. “A Set of Shared Expectations”.

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