

# Episode 19: An Ode to Nicolas Cage's Mullet in Con Air

I think over time this podcast is slowly morphing into a meditation on various types of guy – action guys, renaissance men, guys who love their wives even though they're divorced, guys bonded by the light homoeroticism of male strip tease, guys trying to move on from their careers as boy band guys, big strong guys who I would like to lift me in their powerful arms, and perhaps most importantly, weird guys. I love to read a Wikipedia page on a guy and go "Jesus... is this allowed?"

I did an episode on Steven Seagal earlier this year and I learned a lot about Japanese martial arts and the rise of Kung Fu cinema. To be clear – I learned a lot about each of these things separately. I know they're different – it's unclear if Steven Seagal does. Anyway, that episode was prompted by a conversation with notable friend of the pod, Jamie Preisz. At this point, he's essentially co-producing with Wesley, and I'm paying neither of them. And now that Sydney is in lockdown, he's done it again by being like "You should watch the film Next starring Nicolas Cage. What's he up to?" Which is a great question that prompted me to do a deep dive on Nic Cage's chequered film history, strange personal life and the invention of the crow dome. This journey has had two major outcomes – the first is that at various points I have said to myself out loud "Is Nic Cage hot?"

The answer I think is 'No', objectively, but lockdown has been long and the nights have been cold. The second outcome, is that I've now watched just an obscene amount of Nicolas Cage movies in rapid succession and I think I know what I want to talk about.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Nicolas Cage in Con Air.

So, unlike Steven Seagal, whose film history can really be held up against the continued Western appropriation of Eastern genre cinema into things that are barely recognisable, there's no coherent starting point for Nic Cage. He's done everything from Oscar-winners, to totally forgettable action cinema, to iconic camp action cinema, to rom coms, to children's films, to unhinged indie cinema. Where the question "What's Steven Seagal up to?" has a fairly definitive answer of "something offensive probably, just based on his personal brand", the question "What's Nicolas Cage up to?" has a variety of responses which include large goth sons, films about truffle pigs, crow domes and tax debt. There's a lot on his plate.

Hollywood has always loved an eccentric – or maybe it just consistently produces them and so they just have to turn it into a charm point. It's unclear. Either way,

I've fully bought into the narrative – I have an entire shelf of books dedicated to the various scandals, murders, affairs, addictions and eccentricities of Hollywood's Golden Age and beyond. And look, 90% of it is probably made up, but I think the number of rumours flying around often drives further oddball behaviour. Like, do I think Joaquin Phoenix is a bit of a weirdo? Yes. Do I think that he deliberately inflates his own eccentricities to allow him to maintain an air of mystery? Also yes. Do I think Ben Affleck is a grubby little ass-man who loves ice coffee? Yes. Do I think his relationship with Jennifer Lopez is real? Yes. Do I think the recently staged paparazzi photos where he is touching her butt in direct imitation of photos taken of the couple circa 2003 are the most genuinely unhinged and beautiful thing in the world? Absolutely. Everything is a circle. Weird begets further weird.

Cage is a good candidate for this angle. He comes from storied Hollywood family, famously changing his name from Coppola to Cage in an attempt to prove he could make it on his own as an actor. (Of course, that's definitely how that works. No one's ever seen or heard of you before, wink wink.) But like... I think growing up in any family that's the equivalent of American royalty makes you a little weird to begin with, and then rumours of your eccentricities begin to make the news and then that's how you end up with a stolen Mongolian dinosaur skull and a geodesic crow dome. And initially, this episode was going to be about the idea of a Weird Guy Spectrum in Hollywood, and Nic Cage's place in the canon of Weird Guys.

But then I was forced to say the plot of *Con Air* out loud to my dad, to remind him of the fact that we'd watched it together. And as I said the words "but then Steve Buscemi doesn't dismember the child who sings 'He's Got the Whole World In His Hands' and disappears into the Las Vegas night, which we are happy about", I thought "I should probably actually just write about *Con Air*." So here we are – we're going to use this episode to look at Nick Cage's Hollywood reputation at the time of *Con Air*'s release, his bizarre performance in the film and unpick the completely unhinged plotline. Let's get into it, shall we?

If you have not seen *Con Air* before and now think that it might be about a murderous Steve Buscemi finding Jesus through the power of not murdering children, allow me to elaborate. That is only a small portion of the plot. Nicolas Cage plays Cameron Poe, an army ranger in prison for manslaughter after he breaks a dude's neck in a bar far fight. He's ostensibly defending his wife's honour, but the guy also said "Pussies like you are why we lost Vietnam". Which I think is maybe the only time I've seen this specific approach to the Vietnam War on film? Not to get too side-tracked but like, I realise that it was an unpopular war and that negative public opinion resulted in some pretty difficult circumstances for some veterans... but I don't think it was cos anyone thought the Army Rangers were pussies? I thought it was cos people kept seeing children – Vietnamese and American – blown up on TV in a war effort that was getting nowhere and doing nothing? Am I wrong? Americans... if I'm incorrect, please let me know on Twitter or something. Explain to me this can of



worms.

Anyway, they give Nicolas Cage 10 years because his Army Ranger training makes him a deadly weapon – again, this is a direct quote. But he's well behaved in prison because he's actually a nice man at heart, and he writes to his wife and daughter every day. He's finally paroled, but first him and his buddy Baby-0 have to take a flight to a new supermax prison, from which he will be released. Unfortunately for Nicolas Cage, he's about to be put on a plane with the so-called worst of the worst, a plane full of predators. Again, these are lines taken directly from the script. These predators include Oscar nominee John Malkovich, national treasures Danny Trejo, Dave Chapelle and Steve Buscemi, and Marsellus Wallas himself, Ving Rhames. The unfortunate thing about putting every criminal mastermind in the world on one plane is that they're probably gonna mastermind some stuff. Which they do, and lo and behold they hijack the plane. Nicolas Cage has a chance to escape but decides not to because Baby-0 is diabetic and needs his insulin shot, which has been destroyed during the hijacking. Nic Cage spends the rest of the movie being thwarted in his attempts to find a needle so Baby-0 can have his insulin. Meanwhile, John Cusack is on the ground trying to work out what's happening. He gets the hot tip when Nic Cage attaches a note to Dave Chapelle's corpse and drops it on an elderly couple. Eventually, John Cusack and Nicolas Cage manage to take down the criminals but not before crashing a plane into the Las Vegas Strip, presumably killing hundreds of people. Also, at some point in there, Steve Buscemi finds Jesus. Or something.

It's a lot of trouble because one man wants to save a diabetic, and he doesn't care how many casino-goers he takes down in the process.

If that all sounds completely batshit, it's because it is. When I started watching *Con Air*, one of the notes that I wrote down was "who would put every single bad guy in the world on one plane?" (and then in brackets I wrote "John Cusack") – the script even acknowledges it too, when Cage says to Baby-0 that the guards had somehow managed to get "every creep and freak in the universe on one plane". This is explained away through a new supermax facility that conveniently needs to be populated. Now, I didn't know much about supermax facilities, aside from hearing them as a buzz word on crime procedurals. The Wikipedia definition of a supermax prison facility is as a "control-unit" prison, or a unit within prisons, which represents the most secure levels of custody in the prison systems of certain countries with the objective of providing long-term, segregated housing for inmates classified as the highest security risks in the prison system and those who pose an extremely serious threat to both national and global security. In movies, that usually means serial killers (Hannibal Lecter types) or criminal masterminds (guys who pull off big heists). In reality, the majority of people who sit in supermax prisons in our current climate are people being held on terrorism charges – in the US federal system this includes the Unabomber, the Oklahoma City bombers and the Boston Marathon bomber. Same deal here, except no one has actually committed any acts of terrorism, they've just been convicted of planning them. Supermax

prisons also house people considered to be too high profile to be in the general population – like El Chapo in the States, or Ivan Milat in Australia.

I am getting lightly side-tracked by history here, but the blueprint for supermax prisons is considered to be Alcatraz, which was constructed in 1934 and designed to be inescapable. This is the set-up for a theme, because Alcatraz was so notoriously inhumane and brutal that Hollywood made several prisoner-sympathetic films about it. But there was big push for supermax prisons in the 80s following the killing of two prison guards. So, by the time *Con Air* rolls around in 1997, it's interesting to see what types of prisoners they're interested in putting in there – most of them are the kinds of dangerous types Hollywood loves as criminals because they make us feel alright about prison – a serial killer who describes wearing a little girl's head as a hat, and a serial rapist whose nickname of 'Johnny 23' reflects the number of sexual offences he was convicted for. Theatrical, but also the types of people we hope that prison keeps away from us. The one that I found really interesting was Diamond Dog, played by Ving Rhames, who is a black power activist who blew up an NRA meeting and wrote a New York Times best seller in prison. It's interesting to see that even prior to supermax prisons being filled with (largely white) domestic terrorists, Hollywood was still so scared of radical black activists and prison philosophers that they would cast them as primary villains next to blood soaked serial killers.

Anyway, the features of supermax prisons vary significantly from country

to country, and even from state to state in the US, but Leena Kurki and Norval Morris identified four general characteristics in a 2001 paper called *The Purposes, Practices and Problems of Supermax Prisons*. They are: long term incarceration; extended powers of prison administration without outside review or usual prisoner grievance systems; intensive and long solitary confinement designed to isolate prisoners from each other and the outside world; and few, if any, opportunities to access rehabilitative programs generally seen in other prisons (for example, substance abuse programs or formal education). Essentially, regardless of whether or not you think the carceral system is something that should exist, supermax prisons are pretty much designed to isolate and break down the humanity of the people in them. So, it's not like... entirely surprising to me that the people on John Cusack's crime plane saw an out and took it.

*Con Air* has a weirdly dual approach to crime and punishment, where it revels in the view of prisons as necessary and vital, and the notion that good men can be redeemed through staying true to their goodness, while also showing redemption as somehow able to be obtained through personal revelation – see Steve "I wore a girl's head as a hat" Buscemi wandering free into the Las Vegas night after realising that perhaps he needn't kill (maybe because Jesus has the whole world in his hands? It's unclear). And I know I said this podcast was actually about Nicolas Cage in this film, but I'm giving you all this so you have the fully muddled backdrop against which truly bizarre performance takes place.



Now that you have that – let's talk about Nicolas Cage in this movie. He is Southern, he has a mullet, he doesn't walk anywhere, he swaggers like he's Naomi Campbell hitting a Mugler catwalk circa '92. He answers everything with the calm confidence of a man who believes in his core that his is the most practical, powerful and honourable man in the room. He says "please don't do that", giving his opponent the opportunity to walk away before inevitably gutting them like a fish. It is, as with all Cage performances, totally unhinged, especially when placed in contrast with the screaming camp that is John Malkovich playing prison genius. Nicolas Cage was on Saturday Night Live in 2012, side by side with Andy Sandberg who was doing an impersonation of him – the point of the bit is irrelevant, but at one point Andy Sandberg-as-Cage and Cage-as-Cage say that the primary qualities of a Nicolas Cage action film are that "all the dialogue is either whispered or screamed" and that "everything in the movie is on fire". Everything in Con Air is on fire, and while everyone else is screaming throughout the film, Cage barely makes it above a Southern whisper. Despite being shot, stabbed, punched and blown up, Cage literally never loses his cool. Like... never. At one point he kills a guy who threatens to expose him as working with the police after finding a rabbit toy he bought for his daughter, looks at his bleeding corpse, drawls "why'd you have to touch the rabbit?", sits back down in his seat and stares forlornly at his hands, as though he simply cannot believe that God would curse him with the fighting skills of an ancient warrior.

It's odd to think about where in his career

Nicholas Cage was when making Con Air. By 1997, Cage was about 2 dozen films deep, with several of them going on to be either cult classics, like Raising Arizona, or Oscar favourites, like Moonstruck. His performances in every film were the notable kind of eccentric, garnering reviews that hinted at Cage's talent even where the films themselves weren't good. In 1995 he won an Academy Award for Best Actor for his role as a suicidal alcoholic in Leaving Las Vegas. People tend to view an Oscars win as a launch pad for serious actors who are looking to make more serious films. Cage did the opposite. Rather than meaty dramas, Cage films a three large budget action films back-to-back – The Rock, Con Air and Face/Off – all of which are very silly. He received a weird amount of criticism from colleagues and film writers, who viewed the move as a cynical cash grab. And I think this is partially where public perception of Cage started to change.

If you were on the internet circa 2006, you likely saw the evolution of Nicolas Cage into a meme. It started with a YouTube video called Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit, which was a super cut of every time a Cage character had a screaming breakdown – I still sometimes mutter "I'm a vampire, I'm a vampire!" from early Cage film Vampire's Kiss in the which features in the clip. Out of context and hacked together, these screaming breakdowns seem as though the sum of Cage's craft is just that he is a man who yells on film. This was combined with some very publicly odd goings on in his personal life – like the purchase of several castles, a public feud with his tax accountant, and the return of Mongolian dinosaur bones. Rather than being rewarded for daring

performances, Cage was lampooned for obvious acting.

Now, like I said before – Con Air feels deeply strange to watch. I think part of this is because of the strangeness of Nic Cage's performance, but I think at least part of it is because I know Nicolas Cage is a little eccentric. I've seen his fancy jacket collection and read about the meaningful conversations he has with his pet crow, and I'm projecting a little bit. I've decided that the person and the acting are the same thing. I was reading a piece by David Goodman while researching this pod, I was struck by the phrase "audiences have been trained to believe that visible acting is bad acting". I'd never really thought about it before – I think because I once had an actor tell me that I would never understand how Heath Ledger died for his craft because I wasn't an actor, and decided to write the entire profession off – but there is nothing about visible performing that necessarily renders a performance bad. What's interesting is that Nick Cage thinks the same thing. There are hundreds of interviews with him name checking early German cinema as references for his turns of phrase or use of body language. He says:

"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?"

When he was breaking the role down for

GQ, Cage says "Cameron Poe was really a fantasy... growing up as a skinny kid who wanted to not be bullied... it was a version of myself, of who I wanted to be at that age." And if you think about the performance as this totally unflappable man who is honourable, gets the girl, protects his friends and wins every fight, then actually Nicolas Cage has created the perfect vision of a shy 12 year old's version of cool cinematic tough guy.

The point of this podcast was initially going to be what a weirdo I think Nicolas Cage is, but actually I've really discovered that I kind of love him? He talks about acting as a craft without making it sound like wank and by referencing his sources the same as any other artist. And if he wants to use his post-Oscar clout to jump on a fully unhinged crime heist movie, then more power to him. Let that mullet float gently in the breeze.

Well, that was my Con Air podcast. I really watched a lot of Nicolas Cage films for this and one of the things that I don't think we talk about enough is the fact that in the 2004 film National Treasure, there is a full 45 seconds where the full message of the film is "the real national treasure is the friends we made along the way". And then they find the Scrolls of Alexandria and everyone is like "NEVER MIND!" If you have a particular favourite Cage performance – or just want to talk about Nicolas Cage's geodesic dome he built for his crow – talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace.





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**Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

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