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Bruce Campbell: A Rebel in Film

Bruce Campbell, star of many a low-budget B-movie, possesses intimate knowledge of Hollywood stylistic conventions and uses them, skillfully molding his own unique form of humorous acting that puts style before narrative - a major attack on the dogma of traditional American cinema, with its obsession for placing narrative before pure style at any cost. With his skillful manipulation of "star image" in film as well as autobiographical printed media, Campbell shapes his persona using tongue-in-cheek humor and an "over-the-top" machismo that satirizes mainstream Hollywood conventions, while painting himself as an "everyman" Hollywood outsider and champion of the "working man."

From the very outset of his autobiography, *If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a B-movie Actor*, Bruce Campbell establishes himself as an outsider mainstream Hollywood outsider and an everyman. In the very first sentence, he sarcastically assumes that his readers expect "another actor [writing] a book about [his] glamorous, whirlwind life" - an assumption he quickly dismisses. In the second paragraph, he proclaims:

This is not a memoir about what I said to so-and-so at the Beverly Hills Hotel. It's also not about an actor's 'meteoric' rise, or 'tragic' fall. Rather, this book is dedicated to the players on the second string, the 'B' people, if you will, and I cheerfully include myself in that lot.

(Campbell, *Chins* xi)

Here Campbell quite boldly implies that *other*, "mainstream" actors' autobiographies would be a chatty "memoir" featuring superfluous details, gossip, and airy banter, and indirectly characterizes stories involving "meteoric" rises and "tragic" falls as bombastic fantasy not worth his - or our - time. Elsewhere in the introduction, Campbell uses colloquial language to connect with his intended audience of "working stiffs," deriding most Hollywood stars as those who write "phony 'tell-all' books" and "crap" that "bores [him] to tears" (xi). Clearly, Campbell embraces a populist perspective, apparently eschewing the pretensions that he believes define other actors' images.

Closely related to Campbell's populist image is his intimate connection to his fanbase. He maintains a website where he often responds to fans' questions on a regular basis (Ferber 53). Throughout his autobiography, Campbell regularly includes snippets of fans' e-mails to him over the years as epigrams,

often for good-natured humorous effect (Campbell, *Chins* 1). In addition, Campbell frequents comic conventions and film festivals, making speeches, signing things, and talking one-on-one to his fans (Campbell, *Make Love* 78). This tendency to “walk the walk” and maintain honest, close ties to the members of his fanbase adds *ethos* and believability to his self-made image as “champion of the common people.”

Not content simply to *state directly* his anti-mainstream Hollywood convictions, Campbell’s ideology often bleeds into his works indirectly, manifesting itself in satirical jabs, playful sarcasm, and many humorous winks to his fanbase that pop the pretensions of A-list Hollywood productions. I will now examine his works in both print and film media in order to point out this implied populist ideology.

Throughout his novel *Make Love! The Bruce Campbell Way*, Campbell uses self-conscious - and self-deprecating - humor rife with satire to connect with his readers and get his “subversive” message across. One of Campbell’s main ideological adversaries is taking oneself seriously - and Campbell certainly does not do that. *Make Love* purports to be “a continuation of his first autobiography, picking up where *If Chins Could Kill* left off” (Danford 114). However, as one reads the book, each successive chapter becomes less and less believable until it becomes obvious that the book is a tongue-in-cheek work of fiction - one in which Campbell characterizes himself as a hard-working actor

struggling to get into the exclusive world of A-list Hollywood. The main plot of the novel revolves around his "over-the-top" adventures he undertakes in preparation for a small role in a fictional A-list movie called *Make Love*. However, as the movie nears completion, it becomes increasingly apparent that the film is slipping dangerously into cheesy "B-movie" territory - simply because of Campbell's involvement with the project. This sort of humorously satirical plotline - coincidentally quite similar in spirit to the film *Adaptation* (2002), written by Charlie Kaufman - illustrates just one of the many fan-serving in-jokes jabbing at the Hollywood mainstream that appear in *Make Love! The Bruce Campbell Way*.

It now becomes necessary to point out the difference in "A" and "B" movie mentalities. There are many loosely defined criterion one could cite to distinguish these two types of film: "A" movies often feature a high budget, whereas "B" movies" usually thrive on a relatively low budget; "A" movies frequently take themselves and their narratives seriously, whereas "B" movies often allow the viewer to "see the strings"; "A" movies usually foreground narrative at the expense of pure style, whereas "B" movies are more prone to allow style to encroach upon raw narrative. "B" movies can be subdivided into two further categories: "cult films" that playfully make use of "intentional errors" to serve a stylistic or ideological purpose, reminding the viewers that they are watching a film in

the tradition of French New Wave cinema and American revisionist styles; and "creature features" that usually feature genuine incompetence resulting from an extremely low budget and/or an inexperienced director. Since Bruce Campbell mainly appears in the "cult film" variety of "B" movies, I will be focusing my attentions solely on the former.

The Don Coscarelli film *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2002) serves as an outstanding example of a low-budget, "cult" "B" film featuring "intentional errors" and tongue-in-cheek genre humor. In the movie, Bruce Campbell plays an aged Elvis Presley living in an "abusively neglectful" East Texas retirement home with an old Black man claiming to be John F. Kennedy; when residents in the nursing home begin to perish mysteriously, the two decrepit old men discover a malicious conspiracy involving an undead, soul-sucking Egyptian mummy possessed by an ancient curse. As Lucius Shepard notes in his article "Return of the King," the film is hardly a serious affair, making frequent use of voiceover as an "effective device" for creating "suspension of *belief*" - a humorous inversion of the Hollywood "A" movie obsession with maintaining audiences' suspension of *disbelief* (121). Shepard goes on to compare the film's frequent use of "over-the-top" stylistics and apparently purposeful mistakes to *Alphaville* (1965), directed by Jean-Luc Godard - one of the fathers of French New Wave cinema (122). Clearly, the film follows in a long tradition of breaking, mocking, and satirizing mainstream

Hollywood norms, a tradition in which Bruce Campbell cheerfully takes part.

Although *Bubba Ho-Tep* serves as a prime example of low-budget ideological mastery, Campbell's legacy mostly stems from his starring role as Ash in Sam Reimi's iconic *Evil Dead* trilogy (1981, 1987, 1993). While the first film, *The Evil Dead*, shows Campbell just beginning to come into his own as an actor, its sequels *Evil Dead II* and *Army of Darkness* show the classic "Campbell style" fully in place both visually and ideologically. Over the course of the next few paragraphs I will look at the characteristics of this "style" and examine the ways in which it acts as a send-up of traditional "macho" Hollywood action heroes. I will also analyze the ideology implicit beneath the thin façade of machismo to reveal a sort of "hidden" feminist ideology.

In *Army of Darkness*, Campbell - as Ash - must defend a medieval castle from siege by an army of the undead. He takes on the position of a "hero" even though the film makes it quite clear that he less-than-fulfills this role. Ash repeatedly cowers from responsibility, unwisely disregards sound advice from authority, and generally bungles any duties he is assigned throughout the story - in fact, if it wasn't for Ash's stupidity and foolishness, the Army of Darkness would not be attacking in the first place, its very existence owing to a particularly humorous moment of arrogant incompetence on Ash's part. Instead

of showing off the "ultimate good" of conformity to traditional "macho" gender norms reinforcing patriarchal hegemony, Campbell's character reflects - through hyperbole - the flawed, impractical nature of these ideals; and because mainstream Hollywood tends to reinforce the values of traditional patriarchal hegemony, Campbell's portrayals take on an added rebellious flavor, oppositional as they are to established conventions (England 361).

This "over-the-top" machismo barely hides a sort of feminism implicit in Campbell's portrayal of Ash. One of Campbell's most well known catchphrases is "give me some sugar, baby," uttered twice in *Army of Darkness* - once by Ash, and once by his counterpart Bad Ash - to the same woman. Superficially, this quote appears to reinforce gendered stereotypes and mainstream clichés involving the man in the primary position of power; it *demand*s that the woman kiss him, demeaningly refers to the woman as "baby," and refers to the kiss in question as nothing more than "sugar" - just a cheap, sweet treat to be capriciously eaten, enjoyed, and forgotten. However, when one looks harder at the context of the phrase, an entirely different meaning appears - a meaning that ultimately subverts the explicit meaning of the quote.

In order to find this implicit ideological meaning, we must consider the way Ash's character is portrayed throughout the rest of the *Evil Dead* trilogy. As we have already established,

Ash's character essentially serves as a satirical mirror to the conventions of traditional Hollywood "A" film heroes. When Campbell's conceited character utters this phrase, which appears chauvinistic on the surface, we must think of it as the sort of phrase that a traditional "A" film Hollywood character would utter. It is as if Campbell were saying "this is the sort of phrase some *real* Hollywood idiot would say." In this new light, "give me some sugar, baby" becomes an attack on the hallowed patriarchal conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema, and paints Campbell as a rebel in opposition to this system.

Campbell's opposition to the "A-list" Hollywood system takes on additional intricacies when one examines the "A" films he has actually *been* in. The most well known films in which Campbell has appeared consist of the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007), directed by Bruce's longtime friend Sam Reimi. In these films, which share a decidedly "A-list" and "mainstream" commercial appeal, Campbell makes a series of cameos as bit characters, all of whom antagonize lead actor Tobey Maguire in some way. For instance, in *Spider-Man 2*, Campbell plays an "obnoxious usher" that denies Maguire's character entrance to a theatre, leading to a damaging rift between Maguire and his love interest. As Lawrence Ferber puts it, Campbell "makes Tobey Maguire his bitch" (53). The importance of this scene emerges when we realize that Maguire represents the conventions of "A-list" Hollywood stars, while Bruce Campbell represents the

rather disgruntled and downtrodden "B" sect. Essentially, this scene can be read as the personification of "B-list" films' rejection of and derision for standard "A-list" values. The fact that Campbell only appears in short cameos further illustrates the rift between "A" and "B" - in the exclusive club that "A-list" values form, not even a well known "B" actor can get a big role - even in the most comicbook-ish of "A" films.

In the face of such rigid boundaries between "A" and "B", is it any surprise that Bruce Campbell chooses to align himself with the plight of the workingman? Campbell specifically manipulates his image to avoid identification with what he perceives to be the unattractive, pretentious snobbery that he feels characterizes Hollywood.

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