

Drew Bassett

Joceline Andersen: Stars and Silhouettes: The History of the Cameo Role in Hollywood

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Joceline Andersen: Stars and Silhouettes: The History of the Cameo Role in Hollywood

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The ability to recognise cameos no matter how brief or obscure is one of the main currencies of fandom. What Andersen does excellently in this well-researched and informative book is chart how film studios, TV channels and film stars have harnessed the cameo in different ways over the years to engage and enthuse the consumers of their products.

“Cameos create a space in a movie, a break in the narrative, that is filled with the audience's extra-textual knowledge” (p.2) creating a moment of documentary space, but it is up to the viewer to recognise it. The cameo exists at the intersection of celebrity culture and participative audience practices (p.5). Whether a celebrity is playing themselves, or a role they are known for, or a non-actor appearing as a celebrated figure in the real world, “recognition and brevity are the clearest criteria for identifying a cameo” (p.5). Hence, most cameos are celebrity cameos from which audiences feel they can glean information about the person behind a star persona.

Andersen then illustrates the historical changes and different uses of the cameo appearance in film and tv. In the early days of Hollywood, for example, actors weren't even identified. They were known by their roles or associated with the studio they worked for. In the 1920s, as fan interest in the actors

increased and actors became famous, ‘stars’ became the most visible aspect of the marketing of films. These cameos were first used to illustrate who the studio owned, but as studios lost control of their stars, it was a way for actors to assert their independence by choosing in which cameos they participated. And “not only current stars were used in marketing, nostalgic cameos engineered for recognition became more and more popular”(p.64).

By the 1930s, audiences through fan magazines had become informed about the workings of the studio system and were slowly becoming sceptical about the use of cameos. Additionally, Hollywood was going through a period of transition with respect to its relationship with its stars. Many stars were working in non-exclusive contracts, and in the 1940s were setting up their own production companies and were less amenable to being used in movies other than their own.

Because of the narrative disruption a cameo can bring, its natural home is in comedy. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in the 1940s and 50s and *The Rat Pack* (Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr.) in the 1960s established and sustained themselves by repeated self-referential cameos in each other's productions. The fourth wall was often broken and the stars

presence explained as friends doing favours for friends.

Simultaneously, independent producers such as Mike Todd (*Around the World in 80 Days* (1956)), who were trying to entice viewers away from television, were populating their films with contemporary and nostalgic cameos. But by the mid-60s, nostalgic cameos were becoming increasingly seen as a cheap marketing ploy. Television and talk shows “had over-taken the cameo's claims to reveal to the audience the celebrity as he really was” (p.132).

The cameo in a fictional television series, mostly in sitcoms, has been used by artists from John Wayne in *I love Lucy* (1951-57) to Bruce Willis in *Friends* (1994-2004) wanting to promote a new film or album. “Celebrities were welcomed as stars and ambassadors from another medium rather than characters” (p.134). Television could depict the star in the real-life situation of the sitcom countering the perceived out-of-touchness of movie stars and presenting another side of the stars persona for inspection. However, shoehorning

a youth-oriented musical act into the conservative *mise-en-scène* of the sitcom, such as Harry Nilson in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1968-70), could be jarring.

The most famous proponent of the celebratory or an authorial cameo is, of course, Alfred Hitchcock. His cameos became his signature of authorial control. But by over-exposure of himself in the promotion of his films and his TV series, Hitchcock's image eventually outlived its associations with mastery. Finally, Andersen points out that cameos have found a new prominence in the endless replay culture of the digital media. “The disruptive elements that make themselves ideal for cult reception” (p.206) also lend themselves to repurposing in Top 10 lists.

Stars and Silhouettes is a fascinating but not exhaustive study of the industrial imperatives that have influenced the cameo from the birth of the star system, through the decline of the studio system to access on demand and the repeat viewing enabled by the internet.

Drew Bassett (Köln)