

REVIEW ESSAY

A Survey of Substantial Scholarship on Nick Cave to 2012

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As I am writing this review of scholarship on Nick Cave (with a focus on Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell's edited volume *Cultural Seeds*,¹ and Roland Boer's, *Nick Cave*),² news hits that Cave is performing at the Sydney Opera House. A certain whiff of hysteria passes through my group of (mostly atheist) friends as we prepare to fight it out online for tickets. One friend has a new bloke in her life, he knows something or someone, and our anxieties are allayed. We have the tickets a day before they go out to the general public. The next morning we learn that the ticket system crashed from over-demand and tickets to both shows were gone in less than an hour: a rare honour for an Australian artist. But just to give you additional flavour to what is going on, I should also add that this friend has a tattoo of Cave's face on her upper left arm. The man himself was rather appalled to see it there when she finally got to meet him; nevertheless he duly signed his name under his own face gazing up at him from her skin. Friend then had the signature traced and tattooed over as well. Her upper arm is now a tribute page to Cave. Additionally, another friend who will be attending the concert with us spent most of 2008 completing an honours thesis on Cave. I add all this to alert the reader that this review comes from a very special social bubble that may provide some (slight?) bias to this review.

Compared to my friends, I only rise to the ranks of an *appreciator* of Cave's work; some people in my circle, it seems, would strongly consider laying down their lives for him. Cave certainly represents a thematic that is prophetic and apocalyptic in popular culture. In taking this direction of gloom and religious vengefulness, there is something of the Christian and the internationalism that accompanies this faith, connected to Cave's global renown that leads to a concern about the songwriter's *Australianness*. As a

¹ Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell (eds), *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

² Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

powerful international force we find his performance-enunciated religiosity traceable in the likes of artists such as David Eugene Edwards, and Bob Dylan; artists who delve into the majesty, wisdom, beauty, and sheer cruelty of the Bible to present an art that drips with both poetic and theological drama.³ This is not necessarily unusual for Western art, what is unusual is the depth of comprehension and enjoyment fans derive from this kind of music, not as Christians, but as appreciators of good music and overwhelming lyrics. The phenomenon of Cave has been explained textually in a variety of ways over the last decade. The recent appearance of very sophisticated work on Cave in a collection of essays (2009)⁴ and a monograph by Roland Boer (2012)⁵ marks the movement of Cave scholarship to a new level of discourse. It is for this reason that I think a review of Boer's book would be better served if coupled to a wider overview of the academic examination of Cave's aesthetic.

From a Victorian school-formed band in the late 1970s, Cave fronted 'The Boys Next Door', soon renamed the 'Birthday Party', a post-punk Melbourne group who relocated to London in 1980 and soon after to Berlin. Ian Johnston's *Bad Seed: The Biography of Nick Cave*,⁶ starts its narrative in this year, backtracks through Cave's youth, and tells the story of the singer/songwriter/actor/author up until the release of the album *Let Love In* on 18 April 1994. Around 1983, The Birthday Party mutated into Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and the biography came out in 1995. The mid-1990s were a time when Cave's cultural importance was confirmed by a second biography published in 1996 with Robert Brokenmouth's *The Birthday Party: Nick Cave and Other Epic Adventures*.⁷ This ends its narrative in January 1996 with the release of *Murder Ballads*. The success of this album confirmed Cave's place within the pop music mainstream. Brokenmouth's work covers much the same territory as Johnston's: Cave's relation to his bands, his fight with drugs, influences, connections that lead to recording deals, figures on album sales, and so on. The second book, however, contains verbatim recollections from those

³ Strangely, very little academic discourse exists on Edwards, but there is a swathe of information about the depths of Dylan's religious sentiments including Frances Di Lauro's expert assessment of the prophetic and apocalyptic dimensions of his oeuvre. See: Frances Di Lauro, 'Living in the End Times: The Prophetic Language of Bob Dylan', in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, eds Carole M. Cusack, Christopher Hartney and Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: RLA Press, 2005), pp. 186-202.

⁴ Welberry and Dalziell, *Cultural Seeds*.

⁵ Boer, *Nick Cave*.

⁶ Ian Johnston, *Bad Seed: The Biography of Nick Cave* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1995).

⁷ Robert Brokenmouth, *Nick Cave: The Birthday Party and Other Epic Adventures* (London: Omnibus Press, 1996).

around Cave in the 1980s and 1990s. There is also some critical examination into why his songs work with the visceral and immediate sense that they do. The 1990s are completed by a significant coffee-table style book on Cave, roughly translated from the German text of Maximilian Dax and Johannes Beck, entitled *The Life and Music of Nick Cave: An Illustrated Biography*.⁸ The work reminds us that until he left Berlin in the late 1980s, Cave was a well-known addition to the drug-addled bohemian scene in West Berlin. This is confirmed in Cave's appearance as himself and with the Bad Seeds at the end of Wim Wenders' cinematic homage to the city *Wings of Desire* (1987).

It is not really until 1997 that a sane voice begins to ask why the Australian cultural elite, and the academy more generally, seem to refuse to take Cave at a critical level.⁹ Russell Forster's article in *Overland*, pleads for a change in attitude:

There is a darkness in the Australian psyche that rarely reaches daylight, a darkness we can't afford to ignore if we are to know ourselves better than we do. The hype and hysteria of the rock world—a multi-billion-dollar industry designed to exploit the natural rebelliousness of young people—often means that when a genuine artist does come along, the arts establishment fails to provide any serious critical commentary.¹⁰

Forster does all he can in a short space to link Cave to a particular Australian grotesque that can be found in the likes of Albert Tucker and Barry Humphries. With additional brio, Forster then links the critical non-recognition of Cave's Australian grotesque to our deeper national psyche. He writes "...overburdened with the notion of Empire as both prison and moral custodian, we never had the war of independence we needed in order to sing confidently."¹¹ Worse, as a penal colony we could not let the criminals sing of crime, yet it is the murder and the punishment that so invades Cave's lyrics and novels that indeed goes straight to the heart of the suppressed violence that serves as the foundation stones of this nation. Is this where the power of his grotesque thematic resides? Sadly, Forster's article seems to stir up all the right questions but he has little time to answer them, and I would argue the potential comprehension of Cave that Forster maps in his article is yet to be fully examined.

During the first decade of the new century, the subject of Cave became slightly more familiar to an academic audience. His lecture in 1999 at the

⁸ Max Dax and Johannes Beck, *The Life and Music of Nick Cave: An Illustrated Biography* (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 1999).

⁹ Russell Forster, 'The Bad Seed From the Bad Seed Bed: A Cultural Perspective on the Work of Nick Cave', *Overland*, vol. 149 (1997), pp. 60-63.

¹⁰ Forster, 'The Bad Seed,' p. 60.

¹¹ Forster, 'The Bad Seed,' p. 61.

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Vienna Poetry Festival entitled “The Secret Life of the Love Song” gave a critical overview of how he viewed the genre of the love song: a vital text for those engaging more deeply with Cave as a *literary* figure.¹² Since *King Ink* in 1988 (a collection of lyrics and drama pieces)¹³ Cave has authored two novels, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989)¹⁴ and *The Death of Bunny Munro* (2009).¹⁵ These mark the extremes of a period interrupted in 2005 by the appearance of *The Proposition*, a film based on Cave’s dark, brooding, violent screenplay.

Mark Mordue’s 2009 article on Cave comes from a knowledge amassed by a rock journalist with years of Cave encounters. What is particular about the article is its appearance not in *Rolling Stone*, but the literary magazine *Meanjin*.¹⁶ Mordue places Cave into the type of “original hillbilly Australian Gothic”¹⁷ and discusses at a profound level Cave’s identification with Jesus,¹⁸ and the state of damnation that the figures in Cave’s songs and novels face unceasingly¹⁹

In the same year, Peter Conrad’s essay on Cave appeared in the topical magazine *The Monthly*.²⁰ Conrad, who focuses on English literature in his career, struggles in this piece to place Cave in some relation to The (literary) Canon with comparisons to Milton, Coleridge, Baudelaire, and Kant. Amidst an essay that blends these high-art references to religious and pop-culture themes, Conrad’s canonical confirmation of Cave comes with a final reference to A.D. Hope and a line from our most famous national poem ‘Australia’. Towards the end Hope writes,

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come...²¹

For Conrad, Cave satisfies this hope as he beams at us in adamantine fashion like the very face of God itself.²²

¹² Nick Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’, archived at, <http://everything2.com/title/Nick+Cave%2527s+Love+Song+Lecture>. Accessed 23/01/13.

¹³ Nick Cave, *King Ink* (London, Black Spring Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009).

¹⁵ Nick Cave, *The Death of Bunny Munro* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

¹⁶ Mark Mordue, ‘Nick Cave, Man or Myth’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol 63, no. 3 (2009), pp. 81-93.

¹⁷ Mordue, ‘Nick Cave, Man or Myth’, p. 85.

¹⁸ Mordue, ‘Nick Cave, Man or Myth’, p. 86.

¹⁹ Mordue, ‘Nick Cave, Man or Myth’, p. 84.

²⁰ Peter Conrad, ‘The Good Son’, *The Monthly* (August 2009), pp. 28-37.

²¹ A.D. Hope, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1978), p. 47.

²² Conrad, ‘The Good Son’, p. 37.

The reference to the deity is quite appropriate, for during 2008 (the now doctor, and soon to be co-editor of this journal) Zoe Alderton was preparing her honours thesis entitled 'Nick Cave is God: An Examination of Nick Cave's Spiritual Beliefs and The Religion that Surrounds Him'. It would be unfair to mention this thesis in a review at any length, for the document is not presently available to the academy nor the public, but Alderton's 2009 article, based on the thesis, is a smaller tighter version of her work on Cave's religious journey.²³ She leaves to one side the reception of Cave by his audience – atheists, and faithful alike (but not necessarily Christians) who celebrate Cave as something celestial and prophetic. In covering Cave's religious outlook, Alderton returns regularly to the creative potentiality that arises from his readership of Scripture and his assumption of a Jesus-like freedom by which he describes his creativity that is wrapped up in a quote of Cave's that she unpicks with profound care,

Merely to praise Christ in his perfectness keeps us on our knees, with our heads pitifully bent. Clearly, this is not what Christ has in mind. Christ came as a liberator. Christ understood that we as humans were forever held to the ground by the pull of gravity—our ordinariness, our mediocrity—and it was through His example that He gave our imagination the freedom to fly. In short, to be Christ-like.²⁴

Alderton's religious take on Cave will be expanded in a particular direction by the theologically insightful Boer; but before his book appeared, two Australian academics Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell edited a collection of essays on Cave in 2009. What fascinates me with this work, titled *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, is how a group of academics not necessarily familiar with religious discourse deal with the output of a man who cannot cease to examine the world through an aesthetic soaked in a particularly potent spirituality.

The first four essays in the book provide a series of cultural contexts of some fashion. In 'The Light Within: The Twenty-First-Century Love Songs of Nick Cave', Jillian Burt accounts for her time with Cave on one hand, and on the other, demonstrates, at a very personal level, how Cave's words connect her to profound insights into the world. It is an article that borders on the spiritually autobiographical. Clinton Walker's 'Planting Seeds' is Burt's antithesis. Walker focuses on his personal knowledge of Cave, but from the

²³ Zoe Alderton, 'Nick Cave: A Journey from an Anglican God to the Creative Christ', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 169-186.

²⁴ Nick Cave, 'Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark', in *Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible*, ed. R. Holloway (New York: Canongate, 2005), p 246.

late 1970s; a period still shadowy for many who might seek to understand the very formative dimensions of Cave and *The Birthday Party*.

It is in Karen Welberry's 'Nick Cave and the Australian Language of Laughter' that we meet a critical insight that almost immediately outdoes Conrad's attempts to canonise Cave, and seeks to address themes raised by Forster. She takes Cave at his word when he says he is "...more or less a comic writer."²⁵ and tries to assess where the jokiness of Cave might begin and end. She delights in the singer's ability to "inject absurdly discordant erudition, banality or lyricism into seemingly inappropriate places."²⁶ She links this habit to the postcolonial studies found in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) where this kind of wordplay both appropriates and abrogates a colonial literary heritage. The article ends, I regret, with a focus on the tragic circumstances of the death of Colin Cave, Nick's father, when the singer was nineteen. Tragic though it may have been, I do not think it stands as the Freudian master key to Cave's oeuvre. Welberry quotes the lyrics of 'Nature Boy' (2004) as a confirmation of the impact of the father; indeed the quote itself is fast turning into a cliché amongst commentators on Cave who seek a Freudian explanation for his drive:

I was just a boy when I sat down
To watch the news on TV
I saw some ordinary slaughter
I saw some routine atrocity

My father said, don't look away
You got to be strong, you got to be bold, now
He said, that in the end it is beauty
That is going to save the world, now.

Laknath Jayasinghe's 'Nick Cave. Dance Performance and the Production and Consumption of Masculinity' takes a delightful and unexpected turn by assessing Cave's movements on stage for both their performability and their pleasure through a queer paradigm. This article opens a new perspective on Cave, but one that is often mentioned only in passing – that of the aesthetic nature of his presence. His brooding physical aesthetic and the ways in which the history of Berlin, the drugs, and the thousands of concerts are somehow wrapped inside him as a bodily knowledge and also as an authority. Jayasinghe's model of examination is Jonathan Bollen's 'Queen Kinesthesia: Performativity on the Dance Floor', which examines how dancers in queer

²⁵ Karen Welberry, 'Nick Cave and the Australian Language of Laughter', in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 50.

²⁶ Welberry, 'Nick Cave and the Australian Language of Laughter', p. 49.

spaces such as the Sydney Mardi Gras, 'queer' or complicate the coupling between gender and sexuality. A close reading of the video clip for 'Nick the Stripper' and recourse to numerous live performances allows the author to examine the pleasure dimension of Cave's presence:

Cave's hyperbolic dance style moves from effeminacy to that of parodic hypermasculinity, simultaneously incorporating the seemingly disparate elements of earnestness, parody, gender fixity and queerness.²⁷

It is within this nexus, and the context of both Ozrock and his English performances, that Jayasinghe cleverly explains the pleasure of Cave as a dancer. Much more could be done with the wide range of sources that try to capture Cave's presence, but this article moves the discussion to satisfying new ground.

Similarly, Chris Bilton examines Cave's link to celebrity in 'An Audience for Antagonism: Nick Cave and Doomed Celebrity'. Bilton examines the parody of the persona that Cave has created. Where Jayasinghe discussed aspects of Cave's hypermasculinity, we might say that Bilton draws out the operation of the singer's hyperperformability. He concentrates on the ways in which celebrity can mean that a statement or gesture by an artist may be woefully misread. In this process lays the idea of a doomed artist, doomed both to death and misunderstanding. Bilton bases his argument quite tightly at times on a reading of lyrics over that of the musical form – an approach that, as we will see below, Boer tries to avoid.

The middle section of the book is rounded off by Carole Hart's examination of *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, which I thought spent too much time reifying a possible idea of what the genre of Gothic was, and then hammering home the point that Cave's first novel fits this genre quite precisely. Adrian Danks explores Cave and the cinema by providing both a history of Cave's connection with film and an examination of the ways the powerfully melodramatic nature of Cave's lyrics do and do not suit a cinematic structure. Finally, Angela Jones in 'Grinderman: All Stripped Down' looks at what is precisely 'stripped down' about this side project of 2007 comprising Cave and various members of the Bad Seeds by examining the music, lyrics and, interestingly, the CD artwork. A project described as a mid-life crisis experiment by some, Jones deftly considers its claim to be a more authentic return to the basics of rock and roll. It is interesting that with many papers in this volume referring to 'Nick the Stripper', Jones uses the idea of the strip to put her finger on the Grinderman project:

²⁷ Laknath Jayasinghe, 'Nick Cave, Dance Performance and the Production and Consumption of Masculinity,' in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 77.

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Grinderman appears to strip away the trappings of fame and stardom, to take the audience behind the scenes, and to expose a glimpse of the ‘real me’ behind the rock star. And yet, all that is revealed, in the end, is a performance: it is the gesture itself—the gesture of stripping down—which is held up for the audience’s listening pleasure.²⁸

The last section of the book, ‘The Sacred’, opens with Robert Eaglestone’s ‘From Mutiny to Calling Upon the Author: Cave’s Religion’. From the start, the author undermines the complete sincerity of Cave’s public spirituality because of the *prosopopeia* or ‘face making’ of Cave in his performative self. The author thus divides Cave into two people: the public effect and the private man. Eaglestone has no interest in the latter. The author charts aspects of Cave’s spirituality and seeks an account of the unique position of religion in his aesthetic. What Eaglestone suggests is that Cave’s work “...rejects the division, typical of modernity, of public from the private and religious spheres, and instead maintains an orientation to the world suffused with religion.”²⁹ This conclusion, however, needs to be understood in relation to Eaglestone’s opening point that Cave, as a public figure, is a manifestation of his *prosopopeia*. That is to say, Cave’s religiosity is a performative mask in itself. The mask is understood by Cave’s audience within the sort of melodramatic ‘humour’ that we find mentioned throughout the book, but particularly in Karen Welberry’s chapter in this volume. To highlight this issue, here is as good a time as ever to mention the strange religious-rock performances carried out by Nicholas Hope in Rolf de Heer’s *Bad Boy Bubby* of 1993. The musical performances of Bubby (in the persona of ‘Pop’) are fascinating because they are delivered by a ‘preacher’ on stage. But does that mean that either Bubby or Cave are religious in a real sense when either of them are on stage? And is it not the secularity of the modern rock concert (and the secular world around it) that makes the unusual introduction of religious themes on stage more entertaining than simply religious? Or is it *actually* the case that the modern rock concert is a new religion?³⁰ Eaglestone moves in these directions, but scholarship generally could go much further in asking what are the uses and pleasures of Cave’s religion when thrust into the world of secular entertainment? When he concludes that “Cave’s relation to religion...

²⁸ Angela Jones, ‘*Grinderman*: All Stripped Down’, in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 135.

²⁹ Robert Eaglestone, ‘From Mutiny to Calling Upon the Author: Cave’s Religion’, in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 150.

³⁰ For those who think this proposition is going too far, I suggest they examine the video artwork based on a rock concert and entitled *Rapture (Silent Anthem)* (2009) by Angelica Mesiti; a work which rightly won the 2009 Blake Prize for Religious Art. The work is available at http://www.angelicamesiti.com/rapture_video.html. Accessed 20/2/13.

in no small way make[s] him the significant artist he has become.”³¹ I rush to agree.

Nathan Wiseman-Trowse draws out the uses of Elvis in Cave’s work in his ‘Oedipus Wrecks: Cave and the Presley Myth’. In fact, what we seem to find here is another myth trail down which Cave himself can move further into his own mythological status. The singer is able to appropriate Presley to underline the connection of religion and popular culture through another constant thematic in this work: that of celebrity. Lyn McCredden’s ‘Fleshed Sacred: The Carnal Theologies of Cave’ presents in the penultimate chapter of this book a reworking of the clear religious references to a number of Cave’s songs. To this extent she picks out what she sees as “an idiosyncratic but also embracingly contemporary theology of the fleshed or carnal sacred”³² It is a schema that could be amplified by Alderton’s work on the creative processes in Cave – one that suggests that this flesh is indeed able to embody something sacral in Cave himself.

The final chapter in the book brings Cave home in a manner that allows me to understand him at a very personal level. Tanya Dalziell in ‘The Moose and Nick Cave: Melancholy, Creativity and Love Songs’ looks at the religious in Cave in relation to the depressive elements of the man’s work. She remembers the powerful statement in his 1999 lecture on the love song where Cave states that the love song, as he sees it, fills “the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.” Of this quote Dalziell adds,

[the songs] do not simply ‘fill’ but *perform* this filling (in) of the silence, which the language of love itself creates. And the sense of melancholy lies, in part, in the knowledge that this silence exists, and will continue to exist, despite, or as a consequence of, the love song’s promised intimacy.³³

It is, in fact, this acknowledgement of the perennial sadness of life in such a powerful manner that forges Cave’s depressiveness as sign of his understanding to those of his listeners and readers, some of whom are as equally afflicted by the melancholic as Cave himself. It is as if Cave’s ability to use religious narrative as a marker of the injustice in the world, and with the injustices of a vengeful God both ameliorated by the creative potential of a

³¹ Eaglestone, ‘From Mutiny to Calling Upon the Author: Cave’s Religion’, in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 150.

³² Lyn McCredden, ‘Fleshed Sacred: The Carnal Theologies of Cave’, in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 168.

³³ Tanya Dalziell, ‘The Moose and Nick Cave: Melancholy, Creativity and Love Songs’, in *Cultural Seeds*, p. 196.

force in the form of Cave's Jesus, that a salve is offered. But salve enough can be found also in Cave's ability to use a wide scope of eloquence and drama, including religious eloquence and divine drama, to enunciate the darkness that dwells in those who are drawn to him. It is out of this need for a figure like Cave, at an emotional level, that I drew so much delight in this edition, but reading *Cultural Seeds* also reminds me of how much more can be done on the subject of Nick Cave.

This brings me to Boer's book. Alongside the list of potential biases I mentioned in the introduction of this piece, the other bias I must note is that Boer attributes the impetus for his book to myself. I did indeed ask him at a conference on religion and the arts if he was turning his rather astounding paper on Cave into a volume. It was a small gesture, one might say, which encouraged the first extended academic monograph on Cave – one that will certainly set the foundational boundaries for an ever-increasing theological and religious/cultural studies debate on what this artist really means to us.

'God is in fact Cave's muse' is the central thematic of the first chapter entitled 'Searching the Holy Books.' But the muse comes with certain costs. Here, Boer surveys the Biblical content of Cave's oeuvre in direct relation to the singer's attempts to control interpretation of his life, his work, and his particular interpretation of who Jesus was. This quest for authorial dominance breaks down as Cave seeks to manage this control through a containment of the subjects he raises. Boer traces this breakdown to the album *Tender Prey* where the prevailing clarity of Cave as singer breaks down and the music seeks to overwhelm the words. The author's reading of 'The Mercy Seat' makes this most clear. Because Cave is invoking the Bible in a seemingly autobiographical manner, there is a powerful tension at play. Cave may have said that in his performances all he need do is "walk out on stage, open my mouth and let the curse of God roar through me" but Boer demonstrates here the complexities of the songwriter's Christology.

The next chapter, 'The Total Depravity of Cave's Literary World', is a fascinating examination of the Calvinist idea of total depravity that courses through Cave's novels. Here Boer works through the novels to demonstrate that both works are held together by the thematic that "...we are so utterly sinful, we can do nothing good on our own..."³⁴ and he traces how far that sense of depravity goes in the novels themselves. But as Boer points out, the answers to this problematic are never ecclesiastical in Cave's work. The individual sins, falls to madness, and seeks salvation alone. With much of his other work in the interface of Marxism, community, politics, and Christology,

³⁴ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 28.

Boer (with some disappointment?) admits that Cave is just a “good old liberal” he “buys deeply into the conventional liberal ideology of the private individual, the ego at the centre of the universe (and Cave’s ego is rather large).”³⁵ Could we, however, imagine a more ecclesiastical, community-oriented Cave?

‘Some Routine Atrocity, or, Apocalyptic’ examines the apocalyptic dimensions of Cave’s music. The benefit of Boer’s approach here is that he seeks to speak of the apocalyptic in the *form* of Cave’s music as much as he seeks to explain it in the words. Boer examines how Cave’s work fits apocalyptic genres and exists within an apocalyptic worldview, but has little potential for developing into a social movement. Boer is interested in how the above-mentioned liberal stance of Cave makes this so. It is a stance that refashions the cast of the apocalyptic to rest upon small individual acts that may cause vast differences in life, rather than an apocalyptic that ends the world *per se*.

Chapter Four adds to the former chapters by including ‘Death’ as the next major theme in Cave’s work. For Boer, Cave actually treats death as something integral to life. Through a methodological prism that rests on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, Boer is satisfied that Cave, with his catalogue of gruesome murders, is able to break through our wilful cultural ignorance of death and put it back on our cultural map as it were.

‘God, Pain and the Love Song’ appears as a solace to the world-ending, life-ending themes of the book so far, although Boer avers that “God and pain” are the two major factors. Boer divides Cave’s love songs into (1) Secular Sappy Songs – No Pain No God, of which Boer believe Cave has released about 7; (2) Painlessly Divine – No Pain, with God – such as ‘Into My Arms’ and ‘Brompton Oratory’; (3) Painfully Secular – With Pain No God – Boer thinks the primary example here is Cave’s famous ‘Ship Song’, not because of the powerful sweetness of the tune, but because of the duplicitous and confusing lyrics it contains; and (4) Brutally Divine – With Pain, With God. Summing up what is a trinity for Cave of ‘God, pain, and woman’, Boer notes that the love, suffering and redemption of Jesus rarely makes it anywhere near Cave’s love’s songs, whereas the angry sadistic elements of love abound. Boer finds this a little odd, for as he explains, “[i]n a sense, Cave’s search has been for this difficult truth, namely that redemption may in fact come through the brutal and unwholesome side of love. Cave’s Trinity embodies both erotic play and painful love.”³⁶

³⁵ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 28.

³⁶ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 71.

The penultimate chapter, ‘Jesus of the Moon, or, Christology’, uses the motifs of Jesus in Cave’s music to take us closer to the music theory that Boer wants to manifest in the last chapter. This is intertwined around 1990 with a move by Cave from the *Old Testament* to the *New*, a newfound control over his drug habits, and a change in musical style. Boer takes the noise—not necessarily ordered—of the post-punk early days of The Boys Next Door and watches as it mutates through Cave’s career. Boer underlines this through the work of Grayck. He examines the phenomenon of rock through all its aspects, excepting that of lyrics. By removing the lingual he sees rock as a genre demarcated by volume – loudness. Turn down the volume and the music moves away from this genre. And from the 1990s Cave does indeed get more considered in his music, and quieter. Here is where Boer goes a little radical:

...rather than see this turn to Christ, from the spiteful God of the Old to the quiet, sad Christ of the *New Testament*, as a cause of Cave’s evolution into the sad ballads of the 1990s, I would like to reverse the equation.³⁷

In a way, Boer is arguing that the very nature of life, the survival of Cave into his 40s and 50s and his slowing down, quietening down, provides space for Jesus. It is both a novel argument and a believable one. Rather than seeing a progression in religious themes, what we are witnessing is a progression of performative scope. All the time with Cave the primacy of the performance outweighs, or at least dictates, the nature of the content. To prove this conclusively, Boer does a deep reading of ‘Brompton Oratory’ and with a nod to McCredden (see above) writes,

It is never clear whether Cave sings of his lost lover or of Christ, for the Eucharist becomes a moment of sensual and physical contact with both Christ and the lover.³⁸

Cheekily, but with some reason, Boer considers the delightfully heretical implications of this song:

Sceptical of the Church and its teaching, not given to believing in the historical veracity of the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, then finding a sensual and sexual Christ who has a peccadillo for threesomes is not your run-of-the-mill orthodox Christology.³⁹

In a Christian sense, the concept is shocking. But then of course, Roland, it is quite un-heretical to consider the force of God actively present in the act of passionate lovemaking. It is all there in the *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* (The Sacred Letter) which is handed to Jewish men on the occasion of their marriage. Here

³⁷ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 76.

³⁸ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 79.

³⁹ Boer, *Nick Cave*, p. 80.

we have a problem with Christianity and Western European hang-ups with love, not necessarily a problem with Cave. If there is a heresy in Cave it is in his beautiful confusions of ultimate meanings (in a Tillichian sense); the lover and Jesus as ultimate concerns in Cave's love songs inform on each other.

It is in the final chapter that Boer carefully pieces together a new way of comprehending Cave through the work of the great utopologist Ernst Bloch in 'Hearing Around Corners: Nick Cave Meets Ernst Bloch'. To place this schema in a nutshell, Boer lays on us (without making it blatant) a powerfully Hegelian way of comprehending Cave's career. The post-punk heritage of Nick and the Boys Next Door serves as a thesis of noise, or discordant anarchy that moves Cave into a thematic of Calvinistic total depravity. From 1990, the hymn-like manifestations of a quieter Cave serves up an antithesis of the melodious, calming hymn. But the hymn cannot, in itself, resolve the total depravity. So then, the synthesis:

Cave needs another form entirely: the dialectical song in which the anarchic and discordant song is drawn up, its depravity recognised, even celebrated, and yet by allowing the anarchic song the full reign it sought but could not find, the dialectical song achieves the musical redemption Cave seeks.⁴⁰

Is this why, although I can recognise the power and delight of the earlier songs, I find the most sublime comfort in the discursive music one finds in *No More Shall We Part*? Boer even finds some redemption at a Marxist level here. Whereas the anarchic song is at war with itself, and the hymn accepts the world and the powers that be, the dialectical song analyses and questions.

It is a daring analysis, but what will prove Boer's veracity in my eyes, will not be a vindication, by any means, of his book's truth, but that the book will continue to inspire both scholarship about Cave and about the place of the obviously religious in the performances of popular culture. As sophisticated as the academic commentary of Cave has grown in the last decade, I have one prayer – please let it not end here. The scholarship I have surveyed in this article moves constantly in the direction of depth and sophistication, but many of the themes raised by Forster in 1997 still need addressing.

Finally, there is one part of Boer's book I have not touched yet: the introduction. The night this review was due, I scampered down to the opera house to see Cave and the Bad Seeds with my gang. There was a child's choir on stage (Nick said "cock" once and had to apologise profusely to them), there was a docile middle class audience filling the rows, there was a section of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra up the back. This was in no way the Crystal Ballroom; it was more post-post-punk meets the empty nesters. Cave swirled,

⁴⁰ Boer, *Nick Cave*, pp. 110-111.

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ranted, and screamed and by the fourth song it was all there: the discordant noise, the hymns, the dialectic rants; but Jesus was on his lips as an expletive more than as part of the music. At half time, the choir went home. ‘Deanna,’ ‘Stagger Lee,’ the ‘Ship Song’; they all worked and worked powerfully. But the religious? That seemed to be located more in the experience of being in the room than in the lyrics. But it was also with Nick, not because he was pushing his credentials as a religious man, but because of the sheer potentiality of what the concert *could* become. The simple fact that this group on this stage could summon a hundred songs that would give us a hundred different emotional experiences was a potency that seemed miraculous in and of itself. For me, the religiosity of Cave remains in the nature of his performance, which unlike a lot of other music, remains at some powerful level inexplicable. In his introduction, Boer riffs on the primacy of performance. The opening line of the book, in fact, is from Chris Bailey—lead singer of The Saints—who, when introducing Cave and The Bad Seeds in Sydney in 2008, described them as, and what more could be said to this,

The best fucking band in the universe.