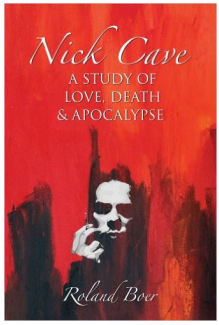
Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse, by Roland Boer



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The experience of reading Roland Boer's *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* is much like a late-night conversation with an exceedingly well-read, flawlessly erudite, and occasionally filthy-minded old friend with whom one shares some aesthetic tastes and obsessions. It is, in every respect, a pleasure

to read and contemplate. That this pleasure, on occasion, is tempered with doubts and frustration detracts but little from its cumulative effect, like a long argument with one of those friends that one can't help but want to smack upside the head from time to time. The image of a conversation with an old friend is apt here for another reason as well: I know Nick Cave's music and his other work well, though not as well as Boer, by any means. That Boer's study—always respectful and at turns playful, deadly serious, and challenging—has only deepened my appreciation for and understanding of Cave as an artist and a thinker says volumes about the quality of Boer's analysis.

It is again to Boer's credit that these chapters, though originally published independently in various journals and anthologies, offer far more as a complete package than they do in isolation. These chapters, and the ideas and analyses within them, build upon and complement each other, creating a nicely understated ebb and flow of feedback and commentary from chapter to chapter. Despite Boer's admission in his introduction that the idea to produce a book about Cave came to him only gradually (and at the suggestion of others), this is not merely a scattershot collection of articles thrown together unconvincingly into a single book (an all-too-common feature on academic publishers' lists these days); it is a coherent, thorough, and constantly engaging study of one of the few figures in contemporary popular music whose work could stand up to a study of such depth and detail.

For Boer, the Australian-born Cave is "singular, idiosyncratic and brilliant" (vii). He is also something of a polymath, in artistic terms at least, producing not only a stunning (if occasionally uneven) body of songs—dating back to the 1970s—but also novels, plays, screenplays, essays, short stories, and lectures, all of which feature in Boer's wide-ranging analysis, which remains focused on the ways in which Cave interacts with the Bible, biblical language, and the Christian theological tradition. Even as the book exemplifies the best tendencies within the range of work we call "reception history," Boer explicitly separates himself from some of the lazier and more apologetic impulses which the label attracts (and more on Boer's somewhat fraught relationship with various forms of *apologia* later): "Far more interesting are the patterns of interpretation in which Cave engages, the creative reconstructions of the theological and biblical motifs (in which neither the Bible nor theology has priority), rather than any concern for the legitimacy or otherwise of those reconstructions" (xii). Instead of looking for any definitive readings of these texts, or drawing an artificial line between text and reception, Boer

allows himself to be guided by Cave and his fragmented aesthetic, adopting a borderline-chaotic method influenced by a number of thinkers from Ernst Bloch to Theodor Adorno to Jacques Attali. Though Boer clearly has a great deal of respect for his subject, he never succumbs to the temptations of hagiography, and treats Cave's own attempts to influence the interpretation of his music with as much suspicion as sympathy, going as far as "casting aspersions on Cave's written and spoken word as means of controlling interpretation" (xiv).

After a short, punchy introduction, the first chapter, "Searching the Holy Books," sets the scene and allows those readers who are unfamiliar with Cave—or even those who are only casual listeners—to catch up, at least a little. Most interestingly, Boer here undertakes to examine critically what Cave himself has said about his relationship with the Bible and with Christianity more generally. Though Boer states simply that "Cave is not always the best guide to his own work" (3–4), he notes at the same time that "autobiography and Bible have a symbiotic relation in Cave's carefully crafted narratives concerning his own life.... [W]henever Cave writes, sings and speaks about the Bible, he is very keen to control how that engagement is interpreted" (4). Boer argues that Cave's persistent attempts to exert this control are related to his Christology, a tantalizing if not altogether convincing idea.

The second chapter, "The Total Depravity of Cave's Literary World," is in many ways the most intriguing study in the whole volume, and it serves as an interesting case study of how a non-Christian artist both deploys and challenges the central notions of Christian theology. The chapter examines a smattering of Cave's literary work, taking in his poetry, short plays, the occasional lecture/essay, screenplays and, most importantly, Cave's novels *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989) and *The Death of Bunny Munro* (2009). Boer argues that his diegetic world—"relatively consistent," "distinct and continuous," and built across a number of works—is a "world whose unifying theme may best be understood in terms of that irreproachable Calvinist doctrine of total depravity" (16). Reading these works can be taken as an invitation to enter this imaginary world, but not lightly, for this is "not a world, however, into which one willingly escapes, for it is grim, deranged, fevered, stark, sordid, violent, treacherous and perverse, in short, utterly depraved" (18). These novels, which mix hints of the American South with the English countryside and the Australian Outback, paint a world that is, perhaps, unredeemable. Here Boer mixes in a bit of his own autobiography, which gels somewhat

with Cave's novels, particularly his itinerant religious upbringing in small-town Australia. It is a tribute to both Boer's skill as a writer and the depths of his engagements with Cave that this brief insertion is not more jarring than it is; the attentive reader knows that such things are a relevant, even necessary part of his analysis. Boer equates Cave's fictional world with the rural outliers he encountered in his youth, though Boer admits that his perspective "was always that of an outsider" (20). Cave's work tries to bring the reader the *insider*'s perspective, and it is here that the total depravity of this world finds its fullest expression, for these people are as bad as everyone already thinks they are, maybe even worse: "In a depraved world, in a depraved valley, that house on the edge of town is the most depraved of all" (21). Cave's earliest journeys into this world offer little if any redemption, Boer argues, but Cave has been growing more optimistic, offering admittedly "ambiguous and unresolved" forms of redemption (29).

Chapter 3, "Some Routine Atrocity, or Apocalyptic," offers an analysis of Cave's use of end-times and revelatory language, in which Cave "constructs his own apocalyptic world from the building blocks of biblical apocalyptic" (32). Apocalyptic finds a ready home in Cave's world of absolute depravity, and in his fierce individualism, as when he employs frequent apocalyptic images, language, and mood on his *No More Shall We Part*, the album he wrote and recorded while struggling to overcome heroin addiction. Cave's apocalypses are thus idiosyncratic, even intimate, crossing over into his famed murder ballads, in which "we have … a strong doctrine of sin and evil" (40), a sense that something could, indeed, should, be different: "slaughter, destruction and atrocity may be the way the world is, but it should not be so" (40).

The fourth chapter, simply titled "Death," brings the reader fully into one of the most important elements in all of Cave's work, one that pervades his songs and his literary worlds. Boer argues that, in contrast to much of mainstream contemporary culture, where death is often hidden away or ignored in favour of life, "Cave is refreshingly, if at times scandalously, direct" (44). This confrontation most often takes place in what Boer dubs the "sinister song," a bridging form between Cave's hymn-like slower songs and the anarchic, noisy, and downright messy discordant strain that has been a feature of his music since the earliest days of his career. Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer's work on capitalism and death, Boer delves more fully into Cave's extensive catalogue of murder ballads, which recount individual

deaths, often in precise, chilling detail. Cave makes no bones about the fact that these are *murders*, often of women, deaths inflicted rather than natural deaths:

> he dwells at length on precisely such deaths, dissecting them, joking about them, not allowing us to forget, deny or push them from our consciousness. It is as though he focuses precisely on the extreme, accidental and violent forms of death in order to bring that too into the realm of life—for all too often death is brutal… for Cave there is no denial, no effort to forget and bury death under police, law or a mountain of commercial crap; he focuses squarely on death in a way that is difficult to disregard. (51)

The next chapter, "God, Pain and the Love Song," takes what seems at first to be a radical change of direction; however, as Cave is so often able to remind the listener (or reader, viewer, etc.), love, death, and conceptions of the supernatural are often inextricably tied up with one another. For even Cave's love songs are haunted by shadows. Even his most sentimental ballads can draw blood. It is God and pain that make Cave's love songs unique, Boer argues, and it is also this conjunction that unifies the diversity of love songs across Cave's extensive catalogue. Here again Boer's analysis runs next to, and in some senses against, Cave's own comments, particularly on the Song of Songs and the Psalms. Where Cave strives for simplicity, Boer goes further: "The two terms of pain and God appear in a pattern of presence and absence, for a song may include or exclude pain and it may do the same with God" (60). Boer even provides the reader with a series of helpful diagrams to illustrate the relationship between the four logical possibilities created by these binaries of presence and absence. Boer is openly dismissive of the first type, the "secular songs of love," which are "the type of song we hear spewing out of the radio at all times of the day or night" (61). He is understandably thankful that he is only able to identify seven such "secular soppy songs" in Cave's back catalogue. Songs of "painful love," or about the "sadness of love, the disappointment it brings, the anger and desire for revenge that the more passionate among us feel; in short, the sorrow of love," are "by far the most common of Cave's love songs" (65). In his songs with no pain, but with God (and Cave's God is a "very Christian" God [62]), Boer argues that Cave

demonstrates a remarkable technique: "the elision of faith with love … this feature of Cave's love songs is what may be called Cave's Trinity… God, Cave and woman, with the outcome that God and the woman merge into one" (63). This elision is both "extraordinarily conventional" and "touches on taboo" (63), as in the song "Brompton Oratory," which gives the listener an unconventionally frank collision of worship and the blunt physicality of human sexuality. Boer wonders of the song's narrator, "Have they been fucking just before he worships?" (64).

"Jesus of the Moon, or, Christology," opens with a sentence that could serve as a deft summary of the whole volume: "In about the year 1988, a major event in music history happened: at the same time that Nicholas Edward Cave made his first serious attempt to give up heroin he also became rather interested in Jesus" (72). He brings a typically eclectic mix of scholarly tools to the party, involving Theodore Gracyk, Jacques Attali, and Theodor Adorno in the process. He also, though not unproblematically, tries to trace the softening of Cave's musical voice—though not his lyrical fury in many cases—to the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc (75). These slower songs are potent, and potently seductive, as Boer notes (76). Throughout songs (and Boer calls them "hymns" with some justification) like "Brompton Oratory," Cave sings of an unidentified other who may be a lover, may be Jesus, Jesus as Christ, or an amalgam of all three figures. Returning to this patchwork Christ later in the volume, Boer writes, "In place of the redemptive Christ, Cave prefers Jesus-the-amazing-man, the one given to sensuality, creative imagination and stunning teaching, but suffering chronic misunderstanding.… In fact, the Christ with whom Cave identifies is much like himself, but in this respect Cave is by no means unique" (114–15). Cave's Christ is, as Boer quite rightly points out, a deeply sensual, sexual figure (not unlike Cave himself, of course), a divine figure in the tradition of the Song of Songs.

The next and very intriguing chapter, "Hearing Around Corners: Nick Cave Meets Ernst Bloch," appeared in an expanded and, frankly, better edited and proofread form in an earlier issue of this journal (vol. 1, no. 2, 2011). Here, Boer focuses more on the sonic form and genre of Cave's shifting musical language than in previous chapters of the book, which were more concerned with matters of language. Boer delves into Cave's massive catalogue with the help of Ernst Bloch's philosophy of music. He identifies a number of different types of Cave songs, which become central to his argument:

> the nub of my argument may be stated briefly: the basic form of the song in Cave's work is the anarchic or discordant song (even though he worked hard in his early days to discover this form), but he attempts to resolve the internal tensions of this song through two main approaches and a few sidelines: one is the hymn and the lament (and then also a delightful perversion which I call the sinister song), and the other is the dialectical song.… Always tempered by the hymn, I suggest that musical redemption is achieved—always partially—only through the dialectical garage song, in which the former anarchic song is allowed full reign. (89)

This analysis leads Boer into some interesting speculations, many of which, sadly, go largely unexplored:

> Only in the last few centuries, and especially … since the explosion of the myriad forms of rock music since the 1950s, has music come into its own as a central and complex cultural form (Cave of course is part of this late flourishing). Why? Not only does it step in the role of a seemingly fading religion, but the lateness of music gives it a uniquely dialectical role in the anticipation of utopia, for it both negates and transforms, or rather sublates (*Aufhebung*) the hope embodied in religion. (86)

This chapter also reveals some of the inherent weaknesses in Boer's analysis, or at least lays bare his artistic biases. At one point, he calls 1997's *The Boatman's Call* "perhaps the least listenable of all Cave's recordings" with little justification beyond the fact that it is composed mainly of hymns or ballads, which he happens to dislike. The album also, we must imagine, rubs Boer the wrong way in that it is one of Cave's most easily accessible works, at least for those listeners disinclined to Cave's more chaotic work. In contrast, all of his anarchic songs are given a free pass, and are "In a word: brilliant" (92). Much as this reporter might be inclined to agree with this simple assessment, I also have to realise that this is largely because I share many of Boer's tastes musically (and perhaps even ideologically), not because such songs have any intrinsic value over and above slower, more hymn-like numbers.

Boer's conclusion, "Gates to the Garden—The Search for Redemption," takes this idea further before going off in some curious directions for an anal-

ysis that largely maintains an admirable sense of focus on one man and his work. It is here that the main problem with Boer's study truly raises its head over the parapet (though there are hints of it throughout), as when Boer writes of Cave's varied love songs:

> The problem with these myriad invocations of love is that it so often operates with a similar universality of exclusion to the one we saw with beauty. If a preacher, philosopher, or singer calls on us to love another, if that God loves us, it so often means: do not worry about your class differences, the patterns of exploitation, the fact that the wealthy boss over there is screwing you, for we must love one another. (113)

Even accepting without question that such a criticism is valid, the question has to arise, from a scholarly, analytical standpoint, at the very least, why stop here? Why not turn on Cave for writing more songs about heterosexual love than homosexual love, for example? Why not chastise him for not explicitly attacking other social ills, from discrimination to the ongoing ravaging of the ecosystems on which we all depend? As we have seen, Boer often chastises Cave for being a typical modern liberal for whom personal expression and truth are paramount, though he gives little enough justification for this (what *should* be top of our list of concerns remains largely unspoken in Boer's analysis, although—perhaps contrary to Boer's intentions—a Trotskyite collective revolution would do the trick).

There is, in fact, a never-acknowledged tension between warring orthodoxies that is visible through the volume as a whole and Boer's book is, ultimately, a curious thing. Taking his judgments of Cave's worth over the book as a whole, Boer praises Cave to the heavens for failing to adhere to an orthodox Christian theology when grappling with both humanity and the gods we create. At the same time, Cave is damned for failing to subscribe to a Marxist orthodoxy that is every bit as dogmatic and ahistorical. That Boer presents the tenets of his Marxism as the same sort of universal, self-evident truths that theologians have been peddling for centuries only worsens the damage and serves to weaken both his analysis and his very pointed criticisms of the blindness of theological orthodoxy. Is Boer merely dismissing one orthodoxy so that a different one can take its place, just as he accuses Cave of doing when valorising the needs of the individual genius over the good of the collective? Are these two warring dogmatisms even that different? A num-

ber of thinkers—and John Gray comes to mind most immediately—have argued convincingly that there are demonstrable historical connections between Christian eschatology and Marxist visions of a glorious future shaped by historical materialist ideals.

That all of this passes by unmentioned in Boer's study lends to the volume a certain feeling of incompleteness and, furthermore, opens up questions about the overall integrity of Boer's analysis. A careful reader, tuned in to such tensions, can uncover easily enough some of Boer's other unstated assertions or preconceptions. Boer's aesthetic judgements—in short, that Cave's chaotic songs are his best—also strangely seem to blind him from treating Cave fairly on the terms of the analysis itself. A case in point: the song "Darker with the Day," which makes the occasional appearance in the book, is largely treated as another of Cave's tiresome laments. A closer look at the song, however, reveals an abiding anger with and dismissal of the petty bourgeoisie, as when Cave sings of the "amateurs, dilettantes, hacks, cowboys, clones/The streets groan with little Caesars, Napoleons, and punks" too occupied with their "building blocks and their tiny plastic phones/Counting on their fingers with the crumbs down their fronts" to notice the signs of what might very well be the apocalypse. These self-important figures, recognisable denizens of any modern city, remain in the song pathetic obstacles around which the song's narrator is forced to weave on his own mysterious errands. When writing of this song, Boer heaps praise upon Cave's chilling, graphic, and counter-intuitive use of theological language—the song describes an image in a Bible of a "woolly lamb dozing in an issue of blood and a gilled Jesus shivering on a fisherman's hook"—but somehow overlooks that later verses of the song render just the sort of political and ideological critique that Boer finds missing in Cave's work.

Falling back on what we can only call a theological stance as the book draws to a close, Boer asks, "Is redemption possible at all, at least in Cave's work?" (115). Working again with Bloch's thinking on the redemptive possibilities of music, Boer concludes:

> it seems to me that Cave may indeed offer possibilities for redemptive and utopian transformation despite himself.… By now it should be clear what redemption actually means for Cave… redemption now becomes the dialectical response to total depravity, the ability to find gaps in apocalyptic mayhem, the refusal to allow death its famed finality, the unexpected and un-

> deserved possibility of a better world and even a challenge, despite Cave's avoidance of politics, a possibility of overthrowing oppressive powers. (116–17)

The question that goes largely unasked in Boer's analysis is whether or not Cave is actually looking for redemption in any of the senses that this word has been used over the centuries of Christian theology, irrespective of whether it ultimately makes sense to describe the work of an artist as iconoclastic as Nick Cave in such traditional language. Perhaps this is the next step for Boer to take when facing up to Cave's ever-evolving body of work (he has released a film and an album, *Push the Sky Away*, since the book was published). Given the very real strengths of this study, despite its missteps, it would be a genuine loss for engaged listeners and readers if this is Roland Boer's last word on Cave, for Cave certainly hasn't finished with us yet.

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