

Review

Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse*. Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2012. 212pp. ISBN 978-1-908049-67-4, £55.00 (hbk); ISBN 978-1-781790-34-2, £17.00 (pbk).

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As the study of popular music has developed over the last few decades, a number of artists (usually solo artists, usually male) have become the focus of sustained examinations of their work by a variety of authors. Dylan, Cohen, Costello *et al.* have provided the source material for numerous dissections of their work, perhaps partly because those writing about them might be of a certain age and therefore have these artists firmly on their cultural radar, perhaps also due to the literary nature of much of their musical output. In recent years the Australian singer/songwriter Nick Cave seems to have become part of that pantheon of auteurs with an ever-growing collection of work centred around him, some purely biographical, some more academic, of which Welberry and Dalziell (2009) and Baker (2012) are notable examples. Of course Cave is a highly literary writer, not only in musical terms but through his plays, novels and short stories, and his work is dense with a range of themes ripe for exploration. However, as Roland Boer points out in *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse*, one of the major themes prevalent in his work, his use of biblical and theological imagery, has so far been largely unexplored.

Boer's book reads in many ways like a thriller. The early chapters initially seem to outline the use of the Bible and christological themes by Cave in his work from The Boys Next Door through to the Grinderman albums, touching on the use of apocalyptic imagery and the invocation of the total depravity of humanity, both in his musical output and in his literary efforts, particularly his novels *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989) and *The Death of Bunny Monro* (2009). Through these chapters Boer paints an exhaustive and suggestive map of Cave's theological and biblical concerns, a map that is full of inconsistencies, showing how Cave's own engagement with the Bible and Christ is never wholly complete or fully understood even by Cave himself. One of the strengths of Boer's analysis is a lack of trust in Cave's own reflections upon his work, even though at times the writing betrays a distinct adoration of the subject. But what emerges most fully is the use that Cave makes

of the Christ story and other elements of the Bible to tell his own autobiography through his work. Here Boer makes connections to the liberal authenticity of rock music, as analysed by Theodore Gracyk (1996) particularly, to suggest that Cave's use of a christological voice offers a (not always successful) means of containment of interpretation for the listener. Further chapters explore the role of the apocalyptic, the eschatological tendency towards which humanity's total depravity might lead.

These themes seem clear in Cave's work, particularly up to the mid-1990s. In this sense Boer's book acts more as a survey of something that already seems rather apparent. It is in the latter half of the book that Boer's thesis starts to become evident and the various strands of the thriller start to come together. Once Boer moves away from the directly lyrical preoccupations of Cave and starts to concentrate on how the music itself fits in, a pattern starts to emerge. For Boer, the overwhelming use of the Bible, Christology and theology in Cave's work is to reach for some form of redemption. The final chapter, which is perhaps the most satisfying, shows how Cave's music (with his variety of musical partnerships) has moved generally through a number of phases; from the anarchic, to the discordant, through the use of the spiritual to what Boer terms Cave's 'hymns' and 'laments' and on to the dialectical song. Here Boer makes much use of Ernst Bloch's work, particularly *Zur Philosophie der Musik* (1974) to show how the shifts in Cave's music reach (or attempt to reach) some form of dialectical position where noise and harmony work together to offer a sense of utopian redemption from total depravity and sin. Where the anarchic noise music of the punk-inspired Birthday Party revelled in depravity, and the hymn-like love songs of Cave's *fin de siècle* period develop harmonic and tonal relationships that provide a more dictatorial sense of order, Boer finds in Cave's more recent musical efforts, particularly the Grinderman project and the Bad Seeds albums *Abattoir Blues* (2004) and *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* (2008), a striving to harness the primal wail within a dialectical relationship to form and order. For Boer it is in this dialectical tension that the possibility of salvation and redemption manifests itself as the utopian possibilities of music, espoused by Bloch as replacing the utopian tendencies of religion in the modern era.

In the final instance, Boer understands Cave's work as a sometimes flawed attempt, over a long career that is still very much ongoing, to find some sense of redemption through the dialectical relationships between order and noise, sacrament and depravity. Given Cave's own various interpretations of his use of the Bible, Boer provides the reader with a way of 'hearing around corners', to use Bloch's term, to understand the underlying themes of his work as they manifest themselves through the music and the lyrics. Where much of Cave's early work seemed to focus on the irredeemable nature of mankind (the Old Testament

phase of his work), and his later work, often equating love between a man and a woman with divine love, touched on forms such as the hymn or the spiritual to suggest a kind of limited utopianism (the New Testament phase), it is in his more recent efforts that the two have come together to suggest that salvation is possible, not only through the work of expressing noise in meaningful ways, but also in more personal and social ways. Boer is careful to point out that while this progression may seem simplistic, Cave is not always wholly successful in his efforts, nor indeed might he be wholly conscious of what he is attempting to achieve. But Boer's book does at least provide a way to understand Cave's engagement with the spiritual fodder that has provided such sustained inspiration for much of his work.

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