

20,000 Days on Earth

(2014, Forsyth and Pollard, UK)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area Critical Debates Filmmakers' Theories

Synopsis & Rationale for study

- The film is a very unusual documentary & auto-biopic of singer, musician and writer, Nick Cave (b. Australia, 1957) with Cave providing the voice over. The film focusses on Cave writing, recording and performing his 15th studio album, *Push the Sky Away* (2013) with his band *The Bad Seeds* (1983 to date). It also interrogates his life and philosophy through a number of staged interviews such as with friends on fictional car journeys (see above); archivists in a fictional Nick Cave Archive and a faux therapy session with Darian Leader, a leading psychoanalyst and writer. Other than Cave, the only other people credited to appear in the film are Cave's wife, and their sons, Arthur and Earl. In one of the DVD extras, 'The Making of ...' Cave identifies the film's rationale: (00.15) 'It's a fiction. Nothing is really real. And within that kind of filmic lie ... great truths get told.'

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences - beginnings and endings

00:45:00 to 02:17:00

- The film starts with a bank of blank TV monitors implying Nick Cave is a mediated personality. The screens then show a very rapidly edited montage of images with numbers, each one a day in Nick Cave's life, starting with 00000 (his birth) and ending with 19,999 (the day preceding

the documentary's focus, his 20,000th day). The sound design is chaotic, distorted and unnerving – a mixture of diegetic and digitally recorded sounds. Footage included is partly archive and partly recreated images. The overall effect is powerful, frenetic and confusing – a far cry from the slower pace of the documentary to come. The shot following the montage and a fade to black is a bed side alarm clock – introduced with a sound trail of its measured ticking. Time and mediation are thus foregrounded at the very start of the film – and interestingly for a biopic, the linearity of the past, is dispensed within a few seconds. The montage then establishes for the spectator, from the very start of the film, that this will be no conventional treatment of its subject.

01:25:47 to 01:28:30

- Performance footage of the anthemic song Jubilee street (a song from the album *Push the Sky Away* which we see partly being written and recorded in the documentary). Cave and his band, The Bad Seeds, perform at The Sydney opera House, accompanied by a string orchestra and a choir of kids, intercut with archive material of Cave from previous gigs. Cave repeats variants of the song's anthemic refrain: 'I'm transforming! I'm vibrating! Look at me now!' Applause precedes a fade to black and then the sound of the sea fades in to a CU image of Cave whom we track as he walks towards the beach at night. Music from the previous performance underscores his philosophical and artistic voiceover: 'In the end I'm not interested in that which I fully understand. The words I have written over the years are just a veneer. There are truths that lie beneath the surface of the words. Truths that rise up without warning like the humps of a sea monster... and then disappear.' Cut to low key LS of Cave, centrally framed, and looking out to sea (and us) as the camera (clearly on a boat) drifts away in a slow track. His voice over continues: 'What performance and song is to me is finding a way to tempt the monster to the surface. To create a space where the

creature can break through what is real and what is known to us. This shimmering space where imagination and reality intersect, this is where all love and tears and joy exist, this is the place, this is where we live.' The music, a moving orchestral string refrain from the previous song, lifts us up and is then dramatically cut short.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The film is lusciously shot and avoids dynamic camera moves. This shot from towards the end of the film, following one of Cave's gigs, is a beautifully posed MCU of Cave and his two 14 year-old twin sons, sharing pizza whilst watching the violent gangster film *Scarface* (1983, De Palma, USA). We only hear the soundtrack but they all mouth the famous line – 'Say hello to my little friend!'
- The shot is hugely poignant as a year later the son he is cuddling, Arthur, died in a tragic cliff fall. Following his death, a *Times* newspaper article, referring specifically to this scene, was criticised for dwelling on Cave 'watching lots of super violent stuff' with his boys. The article dwelt on quotes from Cave, made just before his son's death, where he talked about how moving it was as a father to watch your children feel fear: 'We share the child's terror.' *The Times* apologised for its insensitivity. Even as a grieving father, Cave couldn't escape his rock persona as 'The Prince of Darkness'.
- Cave narrates over the shot, discussing the source material for his songs, which he cannibalises and then reforms, 'inflated and distorted and monstrous', an analogy of the all seeing eye of the documentary perhaps, if not Cave himself.

Mise-en-Scène

- The use of mirrors are loaded with significance as they are a symbol of our quest for accurate self-representation. Cave narrates and co-writes a documentary about himself, starring himself, and so what better way to test our assumptions of the form being 'a window onto the world' than to find the subject of the documentary confronting himself whilst flanked by a mirror that also distorts him – like all mirrors must do and by extension all perception.

- Four shots of clocks in the first ten minutes highlight the film's preoccupation with 'time' and 'memory' which is our perception of time passing. Later in the film Cave says his greatest fear is losing his memory. Clocks seal time into a moment.

Editing

- Whilst referring to his creative song writing process in his office where he writes and types we have a virtual match cut from him frantically hitting the black and white keys of a retro typewriter to him calmly composing on a piano keyboard.
- Another match cut reflecting the importance of the writing process in Cave's work – moving from doodling outside his therapist's office to notes in the studio.
- Aside from the brilliant montage that starts the film, a very brief one occurs at highlighting Cave's frantic need to write with a number of shots of him making notes in books and on sheets of paper.
- A further superbly moving montage of images of women occurs in Cave's archive, providing illustration to an audio tape commentary of his feelings when he met his current wife, Susie. 'All the continuing never ending drip feed of erotic data came together at that moment, in one great big crash bang and I was lost to her and that was that.'

Sound

- Few shots are mute and non-diegetic, electronic, ambient sound design accompanies most scenes, along with atmospheric Foley, like the sounds of gulls screeching. Towards the end of the film we see Cave's charismatic performance style and this is of course accompanied by the diegetic sound of his music. The aural landscape is then as constructed and composed as the visual – further evidence of this documentary's opposition to the observational form.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- *Ethnicity, gender and age*
- Nothing significant in the film's construction is evident here although the cast are all white westerners in their forties and fifties. Cave's

wife is discussed but not interviewed – his muse perhaps is veiled in mystery and his children are only given a brief cameo. Cave's fans (some of whom we see at a gig) are not interviewed either. The documentary is clearly therefore about the creative process and the role of the artist.

- We see Cave wake up in bed next to his wife (his muse), study himself in a bathroom mirror and then at work, writing. For a man who, despite his success as a novelist and screenwriter, is known primarily for his music and rock star persona, this is a marked attempt at self-representation – 'Cave the writer'. 'Mostly I write, tapping and scratching away, day and night sometimes.'
- Cave is clearly happy to present himself as willing to 'self-examine' so we see a faked but certainly earnest and compelling counselling session. Cave is candid and at times clearly moved discussing his childhood memories, relationships, performance style and past problems with drugs. However when he does get upset about his Dad (he died in car accident when Cave was 19), the cameras are frustratingly turned off.
- Also of note is the presence of a TV monitor with a black and white CU of Cave. This is a self-reflexive nod to the documentaries construction as well as reference to the images and TV screens that we saw at the start of the film: even in therapy, it seems, our subject is mediated. We move from this interview (carefully shot with multiple cameras) into a cross-dissolve which, self-reflexively, shows digital interference from the next shot.
- Continuing the 'constructed interview' theme which we first saw with Cave and his fake therapist, Cave discusses ageing and his career with friend Ray Winstone. Cave is driving (or pretending to) the car and Winstone is his front seat passenger. Two further car interviews take place – one with friend and collaborator Kylie Minogue (she rides in the back – driven about like a star and discusses Cave's most commercial hit – his duet with her in 1989 – and performing); the last auto-interview is with an ex-band mate, Blixa Bargeld, who again sits in the passenger seat but is significantly never shown in a two shot with Cave (they discuss song writing). Like the therapy sessions these shots are pure artifice – the car is sitting on a raised trailer which is attached to a truck

which is being driven through the streets of Brighton. The shots are intentionally cinematic and have a heightened sense of realism – the conversations are heartfelt and 'real' but the sense of 'construction and artifice' is equally present. There are no greetings and Winstone literally pops into the shot like a ghost breaking continuity and further shocking the spectator.

Aesthetics

- The film consists largely of a crafted mise-en-scène: well framed shots in lush cinematic high definition; artificial lighting and non-diegetic score; Foley and VO. However there are verité moments largely in recording studios and rehearsal rooms where the camerawork is handheld, auto-focus pulls us in and out of shot and the sound is chaotic and unfiltered – you can hear the whir of the camera's motor. The realism of the creative process is thus depicted as chaotic and cacophonous. Cave refers to the essence of song writing as being 'counterpoint', 'putting two disparate images beside each other and seeing which way the sparks fly.' Like this documentary perhaps and its varied aesthetics.
- As Cave enters the faux 'archive' where his memories (largely stored as real photographs, notebooks, audio tape and objects) are documented and stored by fake archivists (50.39) he says in VO: 'Who knows their own story; certainly it makes no sense when we are living in the midst of it. It's all just clamour and confusion. It only becomes a story when we tell it and retell it...creating the narrative of our lives and then keeping the story from dissolving into darkness.' Another reflexive moment commenting on this, and indeed any documentary's role, in framing a narrative and creating a character.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- The documentary forms part of a resurgence in cinematically released documentaries that has been going strong since the new millennium. Numerous documentaries of rock icons have been made over the years starting most famously with Pennebaker's verité Direct Cinema classic *Don't Look Back* (USA, 1967).

Historical

- Nick Cave is nearly 60 and lives in Brighton

with his model wife, Susie. He is known for his powerful and emotional performance style and blues inflected, electronic rock. The bands he is most known for performing with are: *The Birthday Party*, *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds* and *Grinderman*. He has sung duets with Kylie Minogue and Johnny Cash, amongst others.

Political

- The film is markedly apolitical from a man who represents the left leanings of Avant-garde rock music..

Technological

- The film is filmed on HD digital cameras – Arri Alexa Cameras.

Institutional

- The Producers were: Film 4, Corniche Pictures, Pulse Films, PHI Films, Goldin Films, JW Films and the BFI. As a fairly typical UK co-production supported by Film 4 and the BFI - the film is predictably independent, artistic and challenging dealing with a sub-cultural icon.
- The Directors: Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, had worked with Cave before on some of his music videos and are an artistic team who work with digital and film formats commercially and as artists in their own right. This documentary won The Grierson Award for the Best Arts Documentary in 2015.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS

- *Film Makers' Theories* - See the references to Nichol's modes in this fact sheet. The film is a performance and a subtle reflexive interrogation of the documentary form. It is a film about an artist constructed artistically. It is subjective (some critics argue it is a sophisticated advertorial) but its portrait of Cave as an artist and a man feels real.
- *Critical Debates 1: Realism* - Clearly neither Cave nor the directing team had much interest in a fly-on-the-wall approach to documenting their material. There is little classical objectivity present in this film but that by no means suggests it is any less 'true'. This is because the subject matter is only in part the performer Nick Cave: other topics such as 'the creative process', 'love' and 'the power of memory' are equally present.
- *Critical Debates 2: Digital Technology* - The film is largely filmed on digital HD but some handycam footage is also included as well as many archive shots from mixed formats. Digital manipulation is foregrounded at certain points in the film (see editing above) and the opening montage is clearly more achievable through the use of digital software.