

Chapter 11

“Do you Love Me?” Virtual sincerity and the cyberspaces of wonder in Nick Cave’s *The Red Hand Files*.

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So it is with The Red Hand Files. When I started the Files I had a small idea that people were in need of more thoughtful discourse. I felt a similar need. I felt that social media was by its nature undermining both nuance and connectivity. I thought that, for my fans at least, The Red Hand Files could go some way to remedy that (Cave 2019a)

Do You Love Me Like I Didn’t Love You?

In a now infamous interview with Antonella Black in 1985, Nick Cave, then lead singer with the Australian post-punk band The Birthday Party, scornfully dismissed any responsibility he might have as a performer to the audience:

‘I’m not really interested in the audience’s enjoyment,’ Cave mumbles once he has changed into nice clean pants. ‘It doesn’t bother me one way or another. I just don’t give a shit. People feel more and more disappointed with each concert because less and less happens. It’s really easy to suck an audience in. Like, I can wiggle my bum and backflip on my head and they love it. I could make an audience love me until the end of my days. There’s just no point in it anymore. I wish they’d just ...die.’ (Gambotto, 1985, cited in Snow, 2011, p.37)

Moving to the UK in 1980 The Birthday Party very quickly established a reputation for their challenging sound, a visceral sonic melding of atonal jazz, primitive blues, feedback and attitude. This was reflected in their live performances which fed of a very real and often violent love hate relationship between performer and audience. In 1983 The Birthday Party split, Cave then forming Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds – with whom he has gone on to achieve both critical acclaim and mainstream success. In 1995 the band secured a European top ten hit (it

charted at number two in Australia) when Cave duetted with Kylie Minogue on the single “Where The Wild Roses Grow”. The single charted just outside the UK Top Ten, at number eleven. In 2013 the hit BBC drama *Peaky Blinders* used Nick Cave’s 1994 single “Red Right Hand” as its theme tune.

Some 30 years on from the Black interview, however, it appears that Cave, long an artist of some charismatic force, has developed a much more conciliatory, ‘compassionate’ and ‘contemplative’ approach towards his fanbase (Cunningham, 2018). The launch of *The Red Hand Files* (TRHF) project in 2018 is symbolic of the singer’s changed relationship with the audience. TRHF is an open online forum where Cave responds and attempts to answer questions put to him by the public. As outlined in the quote that begins this chapter, taken from TRHF homepage, there appears to be no filter on either what can be asked of the artist or how the artist themselves can answer. Cave seems keen to suggest that the ethos behind the project is to encourage open and contemplative online exchange.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that this development is a more or indeed less authentic (as will be discussed below) version of Cave. It would be a mistake to suggest that the relationship between performer and audience is any less confrontational or emotional in 2021, than it was in 1985. As will be illustrated below, confrontation is as much a part of TRHF as anything he has done previously, albeit in a far more conciliatory and communally discursive form.

Cave has also incorporated the online conversational element of TRHF into real time performances with the ‘Conversations with Nick Cave’ tours. Commentators have also pointed to the therapeutic tone of these events (Aswad, 2019) and suggest that TRHF signifies a use of social media markedly different from the heavily mediated para-social public-relations exercises that inform most artists online relationship with their fanbase (Cunningham, 2018).

To this end, the chapter explores the notion that Cave’s recent public persona has been characterized by a so-called ‘therapeutic turn’. However, it suggests that Cave’s TRHF offers an

alternative to the increasingly wellbeing and health orientated lifestyle coaching currently published online. The chapter suggests that TRHF attempts to step outside of the increasingly 'medicalized' narratives characteristic of much internet-based celebrity fan interaction.

Fitzpatrick (2001, p.2) notes that the tendency towards the medicalisation of life reflects particular social '...anxieties and insecurities...' which '... expand the definition of disease to include a wide range of social and biological phenomenon'. Within this process forms of human agency get 'caught' in an 'expanding range of disease' and become valued in explicitly psychological or moral frames of reference (Fitzpatrick, 2001, p.6). As will be explored in detail later, the tendency towards medicalizing human experience – primarily via the concept of mental health - has become a key reference point in discourses on social-media and its uses, particularly in relation to the fan, celebrity relationship.

Following the cultural critics of Christopher Lash, Richard Sennett and Philip Reiff, Frank Furedi (2004, p.1) has noted that since the 1960s '...therapeutic language and practices...' have become an increasingly dominant prism through which everyday life has now become interpreted and evaluated. A key dynamic within this trend is the way in which '[T]he language of emotionalism...' has come to dominate popular culture in particular, as well as '... the world of politics, the workplace... and everyday life' more broadly (Furedi, 2004, p.1).

Many explanations for the emergence of contemporary therapeutic culture point to its supposedly positive nature, such as an increasing cultural acceptance toward individual emotional openness. However, Furedi suggest that the overtly emotional character of contemporary public life reflects a much more fragmentary erosion of traditional forms of social solidarity and communal norms. Within the contemporary elevation of therapeutic culture, traditional expressions of authority are undercut, and social life becomes much more fragmented and disaggregated. A principal consequence Furedi (2004, p.86) argues is that human experience becomes much more of '...an intensely individuated experience', rather than a collective or shared one.

The chapter will therefore suggest that TRHF is representative of a (re)positioning of Cave within this broader shift towards 'popular culture as therapy' and forms of Digital Guru Media (DGM). However, the chapter argues that the TRHF project serves as a counterpoint to both

the acute medicalisation and individualisation identified within the extension of the therapeutic narrative to social life and popular culture (Fitzpatrick, 2001; Furedi, 2004). In its insistence upon the compassionate and communal character of social interaction, TRHF potentially points towards alternative frames of reference, grounded in shared ideals, values and norms, that move beyond the therapeutic. The compassionate nature of exchange between artist and fan signals a cultural counterpoint to the often ‘toxic’, and highly regulated interaction that characterize some social media platforms. In this respect TRHF appears to complicate the often pathological characterisation of para-social celebrity fandom (Rojek, 2016). This in turn opens up possibilities for a more humanist cyberspace, predicated upon a more contemplative and compassionate subject.

Centred upon a critique of the readings of Cave’s oeuvre as a quest for Christian redemption (see for example Boer 2006; 2011a; 2011b; 2013), the chapter will point to the intersection of Cave’s creative writing with secular Enlightenment humanism. Through a re-reading of Cave’s 10th studio album with his band The Bad Seeds, *The Boatman’s Call*, the chapter suggests that it is here that the discursive space where the ‘post-therapeutic’ persona that emerges through TRHF, begins to first take shape. Regarded by some as a low point in his artistic development (Boer, 2013; McEvoy, 2007), the chapter argues that *The Boatman’s Call* signals a shift in Cave’s aesthetic outlook – much more humanist in outlook, compassionate and as will be elaborated, grounded in the Enlightenment ideal of the purposive self. *The Boatman’s Call* points towards ways in which a virtual reimagining of the public realm might provide a secular theology of cyberspace (Zizek, 1998) as a realm of compassionate humanist discourse centred upon a late-modern ‘philosophy of wonder’ (Parsons, 1969; Lasch, 1991b).

Late-Modern Cynicism and the Audience

In Issue 48 of TRHF, published in June 2019, Cave was asked what he thought of the singer, and former front man of The Smiths’, Morrissey’s apparent ‘...recent unsavoury far right support’. Since leaving The Smiths in 1987 Morrissey (Steven Morrissey) has embarked on a solo career that has in terms of its lyrical content begun to take issue with aspects of British identity,

immigration and the decline of British national culture. As a consequence, since the early 1990s, the singer has been dogged by accusations of racism. In 2012 Morrissey won a libel action against the music magazine NME over an article they published in 2007 stating the singer was a racist. More recently Morrissey has publicly supported the Brexit vote in 2016 which paved the way for Britain leaving the European Union. Cave replied:

...despite how upsetting Morrissey's views may be to the marginalized and dispossessed members of society, or anyone else for that matter, he still should have the freedom to express his views, just as others should have the freedom to challenge them – even if just to know in what guise their enemy may appear. The charge that defending a person's right to their opinions somehow aligns one with their views makes no sense at all and strikes at the heart of the problem itself – that of conflating the concept of free speech with bigotry. This is very dangerous territory indeed (Cave, 2019d).

Much of commentary surrounding Cave's so called therapeutic turn has been accredited to the tragic loss of his 15-year-old son Arthur in July 2015. This tragedy has had a marked and lasting influence on Cave's output and the relationship he now seeks to cultivate publicly, and suggests a trend towards the increasingly emotional character of public discourse identified by Sennett (1976) that have become central to narratives of instrumentalized passion that characterise the so called neo-liberalised performance of contemporary celebrity (Couldry, 2008; Couldry and Littler, 2011; Elmer and Todd, 2016; Street, 2018). However, Cave's response to the question on Morrissey – asking the reader to separate their own personal response to the artist and in turn to reflect upon the importance of artistic freedom of expression – suggests that TRHF project problematises the therapeutic character of contemporary popular culture and the dominance of the wellbeing narrative.

Mirroring the work of the Frankfurt School (see for example Adorno, 2001), recent contributions to the literature on contemporary celebrity culture have pointed, rather pessimistically, towards the increasing colonisation, commodification and subsequently pacification of the public realm by celebrity avatars, or what this collection refers to as DGM. Dominant opinion is deeply cynical of celebrity. It is not for nothing that Giles (2018, p.12-14) has noted the tendency to construct celebrity culture as a symptom of the vulgar and worthless character of modernity. Late modern society's tendency toward massification and its distinct lack of enthusiasm for its own project, has exacerbated a tendency towards pacification and stupefaction of public culture through the mechanical reproduction, and commodification of artistic performance. A process seemingly intensified by the '... expanded and mediatized proliferation of persona...' (Marshall, Moore, and Barbour, 2020, p.207), that accompanies the expansion of digital forms of media, recasting the relationship between artist/avatar and audience as little more than market spectacle. The dominance of this relationship has provoked some to suggest that contemporary celebrity culture now adopts spiritual significance. Following Gabler (1998), Rojek has argued that '...celebrity culture is secular society's rejoinder to the decline of religion and magic' (Rojek, 2001, p.57). Within the context of early 21st century culture, one might be tempted to suggest, following the introduction to this collection, that celebrity functions not so much as a secular form of religion, but rather as a prime mover in the increasing sacralisation of the so-called information society and the role of big data, metrics and algorithms in shaping social experience. This is perhaps best illustrated by the intersection between health, emotional wellbeing and the rise of the DGM.

Before unpacking these tension's further, it is necessary to situate Nick Cave within the religious narrative that informs both his own artistic output and the scholarly work about him. The religious context within which Cave's work is often situated also informs and is informed by the pseudo- religious nature of the performer, celebrity, audience exchange (Frow, 1998; Turner, 2014).

What a Kant? (Mis)Hearing Cave Religiously

Nick Cave's discography has become the focus of considerable scholarly attention. Theologians, sociologists and cultural studies alike have in recent years begun to analyse the significance of

his work. Notable within this literature is the focus upon the Christian dynamics that inform his artistic output, and in particular its symbolically redemptive dimensions.

Barker has suggested that despite his unconventionality Cave is nonetheless first and foremost a Christian artist (Barker, 2013). In his forensic analysis of the twelve songs that make up *The Boatman's Call*, Peter Billingham notes how the album '... conveys Cave's search for a radical Christian theology that might offer the possibility of an existential spiritual redemption' (Billingham, 2013, p.24). Billingham notes how one of the album's tracks, *There is a Kingdom*, draws upon the image '... of a bird that begins to sing in celebration of the day and light even whilst in the darkness prior to dawn...', which he suggests '... carries a clear association to an iconic image from the opening chapter of the Gospel of St John, in which Christ is referred to as the "Logos" or "word" that originates all creation (and creativity)' (Billingham, 2013, p.18-19). However, despite its religious symbolism there is case to be made that the deliberate quotation from Kant provides the 'spiritual' hook of the song.

The theologian scholar, Roland Boer notes that the persona that Cave adopts through the album emerges '...out of a particular Enlightenment ideology of the sacrosanct and inviolable individual' (Boer, 2013). Boer considers this a seductive but regressive turn in Cave's career, as the artist is accused of succumbing to the neo-liberal and individualized market logics that dominate the contemporary moment. Certainly, *The Boatman's Call*'s marks a point whereby Cave reconceptualises his selfhood, however, the album's deliberate nod towards Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and its contemplative self-reflective tone prefigures Cave's increasing concern for artistic freedom and the accountability of artistic responsibility that find coherent expression in TRHF. It is in this aspect that TRHF steps outside of the more orthodox subjective understanding of the therapeutic. Rather than appealing to or accentuating the subjective internalized notions of self that shape the wellbeing narrative, Cave challenges readers of TRHF by foregrounding the Enlightenment ideal that purposive subjectivity is itself contingent upon a deliberate engagement with the (and often uncomfortable) other. As outlined above, this ideal is implicit in his defence of Morrissey.

The Boatman's Call, Goodbye Music, Hello Mainstream

The theologian and scholar, Roland Boer (2011, p.316) considered *The Boatman's Call* at best a '...half-hearted experiment...' and at worst tedious. Nonetheless, this was Cave's most successful album to date, and it broke him into the mainstream.

Recorded between June-August 1996 and released in March 1997, the album represented a departure in relation to song writing, narrative and sonic arrangement. Adopting more studied personal approach to theme, the album's tone and feel draws upon the breakdown of Cave's marriage and his affair with musician PJ Harvey (Cave, 2019e). The album's sonic makeup is dominated by Cave's voice and piano. Lyrically the Old Testament narratives that dominated his song writing are replaced with sombre, reflective introspection. The album received critical acclaim from both the music and popular press, situating Cave within the rock/pop mainstream rather than at its darker 'goth' margins where he had previously resided. But not everyone saw this as a progressive career move.

McEvoy (2007) suggested that *The Boatman's Call* marks a point whereby Cave '... avows his divorce from his former aesthetic' - an aesthetic characterised by the 'dense', 'polyvocality', 'sense of temporal dislocation' and 'ironic nostalgia' that had shaped the Bad Seeds previous output. McEvoy argues that the '...massiveness and pared-down-ness...' that characterised the Bad Seeds as an ensemble had all but been jettisoned on *The Boatman's Call*, so much so that that Cave openly acknowledge rifts with certain key members of the band who had become increasingly estranged from the direction that both his song writing and musical arrangements were now taking. In 2003 guitarist Blixa Bargeld (founder and frontman of Berlin experimentalists Einstürzende Neubauten) left The Bad Seeds - following the release of the album *Nocturama*. Bargeld's innovative approach to guitar and primitive soundscapes had been a central element of the development and tone of The Bad Seeds sound since 1983. It has been suggested that the guitarist even questioned why he was actually playing on *The Boatman's Call* so alien and unconvincing was its musical aesthetic (McEvoy, 2007). Equally telling was the departure of Cave's long-term collaborator Mick Harvey. Harvey - a constant in Cave's artistic development since The Boys Next Door - took the decision to leave The Bad Seeds in 2009, following the release of *Dig Lazarus Dig*, thus ending a 36-year collaboration. Harvey has alluded to the role played by *The Boatman's Call* in his decision to quit when Cave abandoned

the ethos of creative collaboration that had till then underpinned their relationship (Kinchin-Smith, 2011)

With the release of *The Boatman's Call* McEvoy suggests '...Cave has forgotten he is a musician and that songs are composed of both lyrics and music. By muting The Bad Seeds, he has said goodbye to music'. So almost sonically absent are The Bad Seeds that in a review of the album, originally published in 1997, Neil Spencer referred to *The Boatman's Call* as '...Cave's solo album' (Spencer, 2013).

The Boatman's Call was the first time that Cave had consciously imposed himself upon the total development of a Bad Seeds album. For McEvoy (2007) this new 'direction' signals an increasingly 'individualistic' and solipsistic approach to creativity. Cave is charged with having '...abandoned "voice" as persona, as a contingent, expressive device and embraced "voice" as individual authenticity...' (McEvoy 2007). Abandoning his aesthetic credibility to become '...something of a phenomenon, a cultural icon, a man of letters...' and '...not just a singer/songwriter' (McEvoy, 2007), Cave self-consciously becomes a fully formed player in celebrity culture.

One might characterise Cave's apparent change of direction as consistent with what Graham Turner (2010) has called the 'demotic turn' – a process which describes the apparent proliferation of 'ordinary' people within forms of contemporary media representation. One of the most prominent expressions of this has been the emergence of the Reality TV format which effectively reverse the traditional star/ celebrity, audience hierarchy. The construct of the unknowable and distant star has been wholesale replaced by the, but no less constructed, notion of the 'ordinary' and knowable celebrity. The 'demotic' has become a pervasive feature of cultural representation more broadly, wherein politicians, film and pop stars alike seek to construct a public persona that is built upon the deliberate performance of the absence of the public, impersonal and therefore inauthentic façade. Digital celebrity accentuates this 'demotic' tendency. Indeed, there is something of the 'demotic' in the persona that Cave has sought seeks to cultivate in his post *The Boatman's Call* career. However, this doesn't really do justice to Cave's more personal approach to forms of public self-expression. More than just a 'demotic turn' and much more than just a performance of everyman 'ordinariness' Cave is grappling

with and experimenting with modes of artistic expression that publicly engage with and reflect upon the universal character of individual experience.

Citing an interview with *Melody Maker* in 1997 McEvoy (2007) suggests that Cave's narcissistic psycho-authentic turn is in part a deliberate effort to break with previous iterations of the Cave myth. In the interview Cave consciously:

... repudiates his former writing as "an incredible amount of bluster, and a way of using words in order to hide behind them, to obscure what I was actually saying. "The Boatman's Call", on the other hand, is "just making a record about the way things are and have been over the last couple of years" (McEvoy, 2007)

In a very real sense, *The Boatman's Call* was an album that reflected Cave's own personal emotional state like no other he had so far recorded. As he recounts in TRHF post number 132, its highly personal, subjective and confessional focus was at first embarrassing as it '...exposed too much', the 'hyper-personal' content of the songs '... seemed indulgent, self-serving amplifications of what was essentially an ordinary, commonplace ordeal' (Cave, 2021). Cave had recently been through a painful relationship break up with the singer P J Harvey. He even went so far as to claim he had been 'disgusted' by the album (Cave, 2021).

Boer has pithily observed that the album was conceived and recorded over a period '... spanning the time Cave finally gave up heroin. And the effect is deadening' (Boer, 2011, p.316). For McEvoy (2007), Cave's creative impulse had become increasingly 'individualistic' and solipsistic – 'He has abandoned "voice" as persona, as a contingent, expressive device and embraced "voice" as individual authenticity...' (McEvoy, 2007) which is in part both producer and processes of an apparent mainstreaming of Cave as an artist:

He has swallowed the myth of wholeness. He considers himself healed. He has failed to divide artist and man; abjuring splitness and embracing unification. He has substituted the myth of self for the mythmaking and myth-abusing of the band'(McEvoy, 2007)

The ire concerning Cave's apparent rejection of the shadowy cloisters of gothic marginality for the bright lights of the mainstream speaks pertinently to the apparent fate of the marginal prophet lured by the trinkets and baubles of fame, acclaim and narcissistic celebrity. A Cave, mainstreamed, mawkish, banally romantic, sentimental and sentimentalised, and having '...fallen prey to sincerity...', '[T]he more sympathetic Cave seems to be ... the worse his art becomes' (McEvoy, 2007).

However, as Cave reflects in TRHF 132, over time his own initial reaction to the narcissistic tone of the album has changed:

I no longer see *The Boatman's Call* in that way, and understand that the record was a necessary leap into a type of signwriting that would ultimately become exclusively autobiographical... but, conversely, less about myself and more about our collective 'selves'...(Cave, 2021)

The songs on *The Boatman's Call* began to accrue a significance that appeared to outgrow their seemingly solipsistic origins. As he recounts, they:

...became more about a spiritual liberation from the self, about something broader and more comprehensive – not transcendent exactly – but expansive, in that they collected us all up in the commonality of the experience they attempt to describe (Cave, 2021)

It is worth noting that Cave included a number of songs from the album in his 'lockdown' solo performance at Alexandra Palace. The performance, 'Idiot Prayer, Nick Cave Alone at Alexandra Palace', recorded live some five months into the Covid-19 pandemic, and streamed online on 23 July 2020, has since been released in both film and LP formats. "Idiot Prayer" is the tenth track on *The Boatman's Call*.

Narcissistic Celebrity & the Cult of Para-Social Pathologies

As Turner (2014) notes there is now a significant body of work that situates contemporary celebrity culture in relation to the religious or spiritual impulse. Drawing attention to the work of Frow (1998) and Rojek (2001; 2012), he suggests that the ‘...cultural function of celebrity today contains significant parallels with the functions normally ascribed to religion’ (Turner, 2014, p.16). Both Frow and Rojek ‘...elaborated quite detailed comparisons of the qualities attributed to particular celebrities and to religious figures, as well as the kinds of spiritual experiences provided for audiences of fans on the one hand and congregations of believers on the other.’ (Turner, 2014, p.6). Rojek points to the particular para-social nature of this intersection in that it ‘... trades in motifs of unity, ecstasy and transcendence...’ whereby ‘...religiosity permeates the production, exchange and consumption...’ of the celebrity avatar (Rojek, 2012, p.121).

The para-social is not new concept in terms of describing the relationship between celebrities and fans. Joli Jensen (1992), citing Horton and Wohl (1956), describes fandom as a ‘...surrogate relationship ...that inadequately imitates normal relationships’ (cited by Turner 2014, p.102). For Rojek these are ‘... relations of intimacy constructed through the mass-media rather than direct experience and face-to face meetings’ (Rojek, 2001, p.52).

Seen as largely pathological in character the para-social relationship is considered an abnormal imaginary substitute for ‘... real relations...’ (Rojek, 2001, p.51). The para-social aspects of celebrity culture are formed through second-order expressions of faux-intimacy that are partial, one sided and ‘...non-reciprocal...’ in character that prompt ‘...emotional dependence...’ (Rojek, 2001, p.51). As such then the para-social aspect of contemporary celebrity culture seemingly reaffirms the pathological, deviant readings of fandom more broadly (Jensen 1992). As Jensen notes:

Fandom is conceived of as a chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition (Jensen 1992, p. 17)

This particular perspective compounds what might be referred to as a cynical ambivalence within the academy towards the celebrity realm. Generally regarded as a form of ‘...mass

delusion...' (Turner, 2014, p. 26) its apparent celebration of the increasing inauthenticity and illusory nature of late modern intimacy (see Schickel, 1985), it might generally be regraded a form of false consciousness.

Rojek is clearly an advocate of the para-social as pathology argument. As late modern social life becomes increasingly fractured and isolating the para-social assumes a dominant role in the formation and mediation of social relations. For Rojek the par-social nature of contemporary social relations has become mediated through and by celebrity, which '... offer peculiarly powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition and meaning' (Rojek 2001, p.52) in early 21st century culture, and gives it the appearance of '...highly personal contact' (cited Turner 2014, p.104). This '... "extreme para-sociability" ...' is characteristic of '...isolated and lonely people...', who's '...fantasies of intimacy and solidarity... carry over...' into their primary personal relationships (Rojek, 2012, p.125). These fantasies produce '...unhealthy neuroses and morbid obsessions' (Rojek, 2012, p.125), which have dangerously pervasive consequences:

Para-social conversations are just as dangerous to some isolated and vulnerable stars as they are to isolate, vulnerable ordinary people. For they make the star look into the mirror of public adoration and media applause and see the reflection of an untouchable being. But this reflection is a mirage. Stars who are consistently heedless of public opinion or engage in recorded narcissistic outburst walk on the edge of the cauldron (Rojek, 2012, p.141)

Do you love me like I love self? Cave against Adorno

Art must be wrestled from the hands of the pious, in whatever form it may come – and they are always coming, knives out, intent on murdering creativity. At this depressing time in rock 'n' roll though, perhaps they can serve a purpose, perhaps rock music needs to die for a while, so that something powerful and subversive and truly monumental can rise up out of it (Cave, 2019b).

As noted in the previous section the 'para-social conversation' between fan and celebrity appears for some to accentuate the dangerous narcissistic trait of individual 'omnipotence' within popular culture (Rojek, 2012). Within the 'para-social conversation' the celebrity

assumes the role of 'life-coach', or postmodern oracle. As influencer/guru the celebrity offers apparently '...free advice about grooming, impression management, self-promotion and even "correct" social, political, cultural and environmental values' (Rojek 2012, p.139). As Turner notes this advice '... carries over into ordinary life as a resource that equips individuals to present themselves as more relevant, competent and capable' (Rojek 2012, p.139 cited by Turner, 2014, p.104). The pathology of the para-social is bound up in the claim that, as it to mediates between supposedly vulnerable and disconnected subjects, it also accentuates these conditions. However, as noted above and developed further below, Cave's TRHF problematizes this perception. TRHF offers a positive alternative to the characterisation of digital space and the para-social as inherently pathological. The Cave that emerges out of TRHF is less digital lifestyle guru, more digital anti-guru, a necessarily post-therapeutic counterpoint within the prevailing para-social nature of contemporary popular culture.

Rojek (2012) suggests that as a process the 'para-social conversation' is exploitative. It is a fictitious form of familiarity and personalisation which occurs via the increasingly democratised 'extreme para-sociability' of digital media. Not only does the para-social become the principle medium by which individuals present personality '... refine lifestyle skills and expand social appeal', it also exacerbates and accelerates the '...narcissistic idealization...' of hyper commodified cultural relations (Rojek, 2012, p.139). Intimacy is presumed rather than experienced as an authentic reality (Rojek, 2016). This may well be the case but however, the presumption of intimacy is itself a necessary precondition for the actual possibility of intimacy. Moreover, this is, by its very character, a necessarily shared, presumption. This shared character becomes a very real basis for so-called authentic inter-personal relations, rather than a substitute for them. This is a feature of the para-social nature of highly digitised cultures, that critiques and criticisms such as Rojek's misunderstand. The para-social character of modern digital cultures has tended to be viewed with the same cynical negative eye that casts its gaze upon most forms of popular engagement in late-modern culture.

As noted above the reception of Cave's apparent entry into the mainstream of pop culture has been identified as the principal root of his supposed retreat into the solipsistic self-regard of celebrity. As we have seen Cave's increasing popularity in the latter half of the 1990s has been equated with his demise as a creative (and thus authentic) artist. His growing popular appeal

becomes a substituted for aesthetic distinction and is interpreted by some as the measure of his decline as an artist. It is suggested he becomes increasingly reliant upon the conventional, instrumental and market orientated ‘...harmonic recipes...’ of popular appeal (Adorno, 2001, p.68). Cave the artist, as Adorno might suggest begins to put on the ‘...unadorned make-up...’ of mass culture and begins to assimilate himself to ‘...the realm of ends...’ where standardization and mass production are recast ‘...into a matter of art...’ (Adorno, 2001, p.78). Cave’s ‘...path of the note...’ loses out to the ‘... cul-de-sac ...’ of the neo liberal ‘... private individual...’ (Boer, 2011, p.113). After all, as Adorno reminds the consumer ‘[T]he Ford model car and model hit song are all of a piece’ (Adorno, 2001, p.79).

Following this line of reasoning and pulling together the themes so far explored in this chapter one might surmise that TRHF is, as a project, entirely consistent with celebrity culture’s embrace of the faux intimacy of the para-social relationship. Indeed Sennett’s (1976) identification of the extent to which emotionalism now terrorizes the social realm could be held up as the appropriate description of an online, neoliberal landscape predicated upon the marketized exchange of commoditised intimacy – and Nick Cave just another digitized faux lifestyle guru peddling yet another standardized set of secularized homilies destined to set us on the path of wellbeing and self-enlightenment.

However, this synopsis is far too cynical and contemptuously dismissive of popular culture, those that make it, consume it, and are moved by it. The theoretical obsession with mass culture as a form of mass deception lacks subtlety and is itself blind towards more utopian and thus hopeful interpretations.

This pathologizing of the para-social association underpins a broader more popular narrative on online identity, social media and mental health. There is now a considerable body of opinion that argues that the apparent deterioration in wellbeing, especially among young people is related to social media, and has resulted in calls from health bodies to curb social media use (see for example Karim, Oyewande, Abdalla, Ehsanullah & Khan, 2020). In 2018 the then Conservative Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, asked the British Chief Medical Officer to draw up guidelines establishing parameters for ‘healthy’ social media use (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018).

However, an important body of academic research has developed that resists this pathologizing narrative, and points to evidence that suggests that engagement with social media can have positive psychological effects.

Best, Manktelow and Taylor's (2014) review of studies assessing the impact of on-line technologies on adolescents concluded that effects could be both beneficial and harmful. However, amongst the beneficial effects they identified included increased self-esteem and perceived social support, increased social capital, safe identity experimentation and more opportunity for self-disclosure. It has also been argued that social network platforms can provide effective mechanisms for addressing issues around mental health and wellbeing (Moreno, Jelenchick, Egan, Cox, Young, Gannon & Becker, 2011; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Research underlines the importance of distinguishing between active use of social media, such as posting and chatting, and passive use, for example, perusing photos, comments and the activity of others (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Tandoc, Ferrucci & Duffy, 2014; Yang, 2016; Uusi-Tatti & Määttä, 2014).

As will be discussed below in more detail, there is a case to be made that online technologies provide a basis for forms of self-actualisation and selfhood that not only embolden but liberate the individual from the dominant motif of the contemporary moment, that '[E]very contact with another human being...' whether in real or virtual time and space, should be '...experienced as a potential threat' (Zizek, 1998, p.490).

The Para-Social Cave Reconsidered: the wonder of cyber selfhood

Whilst the para-social may point to formal differences between face-to-face relations and those conducted through particular forms of media, Turner notes its limitations as a description of the quality and cultural function of these relations. He suggests that '...a far more fundamental...' analysis is required go beyond '...descriptions that see it as merely compensatory, second order practice' (Turner, 2014, p.105).

The conceptualisation of the para-social as the irreducible 'other' to 'properly' constituted social relations, is a symptom of a broader cynicism towards human agency – it is not a coincidence that Rojek equates the rise of the political personality with a withering critique of modern liberal democracy as an expression of the 'false consciousness' of celebrity (see for example his discussion of celebrification and democratic politics in Rojek, 2001). Celebrity and its par-social forms represent a lack, a substitute for meaning. Mediated through a faux, presumed intimacy this lack takes the form of an apparent retreat into individualism, and emotional authenticity. Reduced to conveying 'personal messages' (McEvoy, 2007) this tendency, one assumes, intensifies as the artist moves online so to speak.

However, the counter position of the face-to-face relationship to the para-social is a false one. Interaction in late modern digital society takes the outward form of the para-social. Indeed, this seems a much more blatantly obvious point to make, as at the time of writing this as so many millions have become entirely dependent upon the par-social as a means of our daily routines as we self-isolate and socially distance due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

The production of commodities and the increasing global complexity of the division of labour take a completely impersonal form

'Proper' social relations are not predicated upon nor are they dependent upon the proximity of 'real' physical relations. Human sociability is inextricably bound up in the non-physical and the impersonal which is itself the reflection of the impersonal and complex nature of the capitalist division of labour. As Christopher Lasch (1991a) perceptively points out, the impersonal nature of social relations is itself predicated upon inter-subjective intimacy. Intimacy he argues is the necessary pre-requisite to the formation of publicly civil relations between mutually equal and autonomous subjects.

However, Lasch suggests that intimacy has been undermined to such an extent '... that personal life has almost ceased to exist' (Lasch, 1991a, p.30). 'In fact ...', he continues, '...the cult of intimacy originates not in the assertion of personality but in its collapse' (Lasch, 1991a, p.30) so much so that:

Our society far from fostering a private life at the expense of public life, has made deep and lasting friendships, love affairs, and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve. As social life becomes more and more warlike and barbaric, personal relations, which ostensibly provide relief from these conditions, take on the character of combat (Lasch, 1991a, p.30)

This decline in public life has been shaped by a wider cultural cynicism towards the capacity for the spontaneous development of private inter-subjective relationships between formally autonomous, active and purposive subjects. Following Lasch, the cynicism towards celebrity and mass culture more broadly reflects a seemingly ubiquitous disquiet with human sociability. Lasch offers an important rejoinder to this narrative through his dynamic conceptualisation of hope which he roots in the inter-subjective intimacy of the pre-public realm (Lasch 1991b).

It is in the context then, that the para-socially ‘post-therapeutic’ character of Nick Cave’s TRHF project offers an opportunity to recast the sphere of intimacy as a sphere of mutual respect and solidarity. Through a reassertion of inter subjective solidarity TRHF points towards what Lasch considered a fundamental reconceptualization of the notion of hope as a democratic virtue.

In *The True and Only Heaven*, Lasch (1991b) offers up the concept of hope as an antidote to the narcissistic culture that he had identified in his earlier work. Whilst this conceptualisation has a religious quality – derived from the poet and philosopher Benjamin Paul Blood’s notion of the ‘philosophy of wonder’ – it is the vigorous civic aspect of hope that Lasch seeks to emphasize:

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories – no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events – in which experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointment (Lasch 1991b, p. 81)

Less a belief and more of a character trait Lasch counterposes his understanding of hope to the prevailing sense of 'hopeful fatalism' (Lasch 1991b, p.226) that characterizes the late modern imagination – a vague, disconnected, largely cynical sense that solutions lie outside of the reach of human agency, and things might work just out if one goes with the flow and just let things be. For Lasch the reinvigoration of a 'philosophy of wonder' has very real democratic consequences that are built upon very real freedoms – the autonomous and free exchange between intimate individuals. As Miller observes, for Lasch:

Democratic freedom, to put it differently, had a positive definition in addition to its negative one. Freedom required not simply autonomous and tolerant individuals but rather self-reliant, strong citizens who could join together in a way that would ensure protection of the weak, honour the dignity of each, and seek the preservation and conservation of the variegated gifts that make the good life possible (Miller, 2010, p.368)

The Marxist philosopher and scholar Howard L Parsons understood the 'philosophy of wonder' as being fundamentally humanist in character, underpinned by collective and creative social impulses. Underlining the necessity for forms of humanist communion based upon a mutual '...will to consider great alternatives for self and society, and the will to try them out' (Parsons, 1969, p.101), Parsons offers the 'philosophy of wonder' as a resource '... for learning to live creatively', particularly when the '[M]ere development of scientific or aesthetic creativity... is no guarantee that human value in the long run will be advanced' (Parsons, 1969, p.100).

Via this reconceptualization of the creative, 'artistic experience', Parsons suggests, becomes an increasingly salient one. Wonder '...passes into a sensuous medium, objectified and public. The artist not only undergoes wonder: he forms and creates it, and in the sensitive spectator it is recreated' (Parsons, 1969, p.98). This notion of the unitary, shared nature of creativity – between creator, created and spectator, offers an important counter-reading to the cultural pessimism embodied in the readings of mass popular culture offered by the Frankfurt School, and similar critiques that now shape dominant understandings of the social function of celebrity, digital-selfhood and the para-social.

It is in this sense then that Žižek (1998) offers a transformative theory of cyberspace. He rethinks digital space as autonomous space– and a basis for reengaging with Enlightenment concepts of autonomous moral selfhood. The digital interface, as a form of face-to-face interaction, continually problematises the attempt to posit fixed ‘real’ identity. Rather than ‘...enslaving us...’, ‘...and thus turning us into desubjectivized, blind puppets...’ it invites us ‘...to risk the most radical experience imaginable: the encounter with our [Kantian] “noumenal Self” ‘ (Žižek 1998, p.510) – a self not reducible to experience, but the necessarily abstract ideal self upon which Kant suggests our status as free autonomous and immutable equal subjects is conferred (Guyer, 2006; Scruton, 2001; Kant, 2002).

Žižek notes that like art, cyberspace facilitates ‘... a mode or practice of writing which augurs that which “one cannot speak about” ...’ and as such has a utopian potential in that it traverses ‘... the existing network of prohibitions’ and follows the dictum ‘... “Wo von man nicht sprechen kann, davon muss man schreiben” [Where of one cannot speak, therefore must one write]’ (Žižek, 1998, p.511). Indeed, he notes the ‘...long tradition of using writing as a means to communicate a declaration of love too intimate and/or too painful to be directly asserted in a face-to-face speech act’ (Žižek, 1998, p.511). Cyberspace allows for a communion between selves (and the other) that is freed of its own self-consciously and socially enforced prohibitions – it opens up a space, all be it tentatively, where the subject can begin to engage, or at least minimise the distance between the self that is and its abstracted universal counterpart.

The ‘philosophy of wonder’ stands as an alternative world view to the seemingly engrained pessimism that shapes contemporary human experience and the cynicism that constructs human activity, particularly in the digital realm, as impersonal and dehumanizing. It is in this sense then that Nick Cave’s TRHF offers a space for such creative communion to take place. Despite the apparent theological character of his work, it is not redemption that Cave craves, but a humanist philosophy of wonder centred upon the contemplatively purposive individual.

The Bourgeois Blues

Not so long ago the big idea in the world was freedom of expression. It looks like the new big idea is moralism. Will rock music survive this one? We shall see (Cave, 2019c)

He's a ghost, he's a god, he's a man, he's a guru
They're whispering his name across this disappearing land
But hidden in his coat is a red right hand (Cave, Harvey and Wylder, 1994)

As noted above Roland Boer (2011) considered *The Boatman's Call* little more than a 'half-hearted experiment', pithily observing that as it emerged during a period when Cave kicked his heroin habit '... the effect is deadening' (Boer, 2011 p 316). Clean and mainstreamed Cave has apparently swallowed the bourgeois myth of the aloof free thinking individual.

It is true that Cave's artistic development post *The Boatman's Call* becomes increasingly more individually centred as evidenced with the last three Bad Seed studio albums. With the albums *Push the Sky Away* (2013), and *Skeleton Tree* (2016) it is possible to argue, that in the studio at least Cave becomes less reliant on The Bad Seeds as a band (but not as a concept). Cave's recent creative output has largely been shaped by his collaborations with Warren Ellis. 2019s *Ghosteen* double album, the band are dispensed with almost completely. Sonically dominated by Cave and Ellis, the band reduced to bit parts on the albums sleeve notes.

Bourgeoise it may be, but the individuality that emerges out of and through Cave's recent work is unswervingly Enlightenment in character. This is evident in the discussions on artistic freedom on TRHF which stem from the shifts that emerge in the creation of *The Boatman's Call*.

Through the TRHF project Cave has identified himself as one of a few artists that is willing to unapologetically defend the positive capacity of autonomous human agency – concepts as relevant today as they were for Kant and other eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers. As Kant's philosophy upheld the sanctity of reason as the source of moral authority, so to TRHF upholds the sanctity of open and free discourse between individuals.

Nick Cave's 'bourgeoise' individualism stands as an alternative to the pessimism that shapes modern culture and the censorious cynicism that pervades public life. By providing a space for creative, open and mutually respectful communion, TRHF offers a counterpoint to the call out, no platforming, cancel culture that has deformed public discourse.

There seems to be agreement between critics and scholars alike that *The Boatman's Call*, for good or bad, marks a sea change in Cave's artistic development. This turn, I suggest is indicative of a more secularly humanist (re)turn to Enlightenment enquiry that now informs Cave's recent, and perhaps his most important work. Nick Cave is no theologian (McCredden, 2016), ghost, or god. He may not even be a guru, digital or otherwise. However, he appears a humanist who is not afraid to kick against the pricks.

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