

“Set Up like Drama, Shot like Documentary”: 20,000 Days on Earth Directors Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard

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20,000 Days On Earth

The Guardian recently republished a [1988 profile of Nick Cave](#) in which the infuriated musician veered over the course of days from open, insightful and analytical to infuriatedly seething “I have to spend hours talking to fucking idiots like you who have no kind of notion about anything” and throwing a boot at his interlocutor. As with Richard Hell — who over decades went from alarming Lester Bangs for his nihilistic abandon to [writing poetry reviews for *The New York Times*](#) — Cave is a former self-destructive dark messiah turned elder statesman, a respected screenwriter and still recording/touring musician who’s yet to embarrass

his fans and can now handle the press without exploding in rage.

20,000 Days on Earth's opening runs through his life to date, arrayed in stills and clips over a Nam June Paik-ish wall of TVs: as a boy, Birthday Party and Bad Seeds performer, etc., the music building to apocalyptic release. Then it's an early morning rise for a sedate-seeming Cave. "At the end of the 20th century, I ceased to be a human being," he announces in factual rather than aggressive voice-over. "This is not necessarily a bad thing." With that, Cave goes about his day, driving through the not-so-jolly little seaside town of Brighton (it's nearly always raining) from the studio to longtime collaborator Warren Ellis' house for a home-cooked lunch and memories of a Nina Simone show, to the (non-existent) Nick Cave archives to tell the stories behind old stills, et al.

Many of the locations and geographical distances between them have been fabricated. As co-directors Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard have often stated, they had no interest in "demystifying" a legend; with their constructed settings and situations, they allow Cave to collaboratively build on it. No longer a human being, Cave is free to play whoever he likes on stage but secure enough to discuss his work concretely and lucidly — notably in a long conversation with a psychiatrist that plays like a low-key '70s talk show, with carefully arranged lights casting a glow on interviewer and subject while rendering the rest of the room non-distractingly dark and obscured. Here, Cave recalls the formative influence of hearing his father read *Lolita* to him as a child and seeing how that seemed to make his father grow in stature. The constant subject is art's ability to let people transcend themselves, and Cave talks about the process of being onstage and channeling that force as what he lives for. These are some of the film's most interesting sequences, allowing a musician who craves the validation of live performance to articulate what that feels like subjectively without sounding more egotistical than necessary (some of that is needed to achieve the full performative effect) or lapsing into broad emotive clichés.

The film constructs artificial situations, then records the real responses they elicit, but there's unmediated documentary in the live in-studio

performances, well-recorded from a locked-down series of angles. The camera's gaze is often trained on Cave as he conducts his band through the performance from his piano. Your ability to be hypnotized by these sequences throughout may be partially related to how compelling you find Cave's latter-day lyrics, and I'll confess to some agnosticism on that score (sample: "Hannah Montana does the African savannah"). Still, these scenes' willingness to stick with a band both before and during recording, patiently working their way through to an optimal version, recalls the "Sympathy for the Devil" sessions captured in Godard's *One Plus One*. I was much more compelled by the driving scenes bridging locations in which Cave's friends and collaborators — Kylie Minogue, Ray Winstone, former bandmate Blixa Bargeld — interrogate him with the ease of old friends. The movie ends with another explosive live performance, but you don't have to be a true believer in Cave's fervor here to appreciate the film's patience in getting him to articulate and demonstrate a multi-faceted cross-section of how and why he does what he does.

Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard met over 20 years ago at Goldsmiths College, where their hackles were raised by the success of Damien Hirst and the wave of would-be successors. Empty conceptualism ticked them off, but the musical scene at the time made an immediate emotional connection. As Forsyth and Pollard were explaining over Skype before a bad connection led to the email interview below, the strength of the bands they saw inspired them to want to make art that would make an emotional impact immediately and be available for thought afterwards. Their CV includes re-enactments of David Bowie and The Cramps performances, and they've shot music videos for Cave before. This is their first feature; Drafthouse Films is distributing in the US, and it's currently expanding worldwide.

Filmmaker: How did you set up the cameras for the recording sequences? You're committing to several locked-in POVs in advance.

Forsyth & Pollard: We've worked a lot with Nick and the band, so we have pretty good instincts when it comes to where to focus cameras at any

given time. We also have quite a lot of experience of shooting live music performances, so you do get a feel for where in the room you should be concentrating your attention at any given moment. And luck, of course, has a part to play too.

Because they were writing and recording for real while we were shooting, the biggest limitation really was that we had to work alone. We had no crew, so most decisions were practical, to do with choosing kit we could operate unaided, lenses we could carry in pockets, lighting that could be rigged once and left in place all day, and so on. In practical terms, we had one camera focusing on Nick pretty much full-time while the other would be picking up as much as possible in the rest of the studio. We had room mics and lapel mics on everyone in the room, as well as of course the music being recorded to multi-tracks for the album. For music performance, we tend to like to shoot close with long lenses. For most of the time we were there we would have a camera no more than a couple of feet from Nick, and there's only really trust and friendship that can make this possible.

Filmmaker: The massive piles of books in Nick's office: are those all chosen from his personal stacks? I feel like blown up and illuminated, they could constitute a fine list of everything that matters to him.

Forsyth & Pollard Everything you see in Nick's office is from him. There is a lot of production design in the film and our art department worked hard to create the feeling we wanted in this scene. We felt strongly that we should have every inch of the screen available to us to tell the story we wanted to tell. So everything you see is there for a reason – albeit some more obvious than others. Nick was totally involved in this process, and although it's probably a bit of a stretch to suggest that the things you see represent *everything* that matters to him, there's certainly nothing there by accident. We used the same approach in many of the key scenes in the film, we wanted to be able to show the story as well as tell it.

Filmmaker: Can you tell me about the long conversation Cave has with the psychiatrist? I understood you took several days to shoot it months before the rest of the production.

Forsyth & Pollard: The simplest way we've found to explain our approach to this scene is that it was set up like drama, shot like documentary and cut like drama. That maybe doesn't quite explain it, but it comes close. The psychoanalyst is Darian Leader, who is a leading professional psychoanalyst in the UK. We've known him for maybe ten years, and really he was someone who we felt able to trust. We knew that we needed to find a different way to speak to Nick – we couldn't just sit him down with a journalist and expect anything surprising to come out of the conversation.

Anyone with even the most passing knowledge of Nick tends to have heard of his troubled relationship with the media. It's well known, but it's also on some level fairly easy to understand. Nick – like most “famous” people – talks to the media when he has something to promote – a record, book, film, whatever. This usually involves having a series of journalists wheeled out in front of you, who tend to (perhaps understandably) ask the same questions. And that tends to provoke (perhaps understandably) the same answers. It's really not a situation conducive to discussing big ideas, or anything new. So Nick gets bored. Our operating theory was simply that if we could make the conversation an interesting one for Nick to be participating in, then we'd be able to hold his interest and elicit something interesting in return. Our experience of Nick is that he's an incredibly open person, so knowing Darian we felt that he would be the right person to lead this conversation. Nick was hesitant at first, but in the end seemed to thoroughly enjoy the process. Darian was very clear that he wasn't conducting a “session,” as such, but his professional experience enabled him to make associations and ask questions in a way that got us to where we wanted to go with Nick.

We shot for about ten hours, over two days, so the conversation was incredibly wide-reaching. Another key idea with this scene was that we shot it about three months ahead of principal photography so that it could enable us to identify some of the big themes and ideas that the film might be able to explore.

Filmmaker: The opening montage, with its multiple TVs, has shades of Nam June Paik. How did you conceive this arrangement of screens, and was licensing difficult?

Forsyth & Pollard: We edited those screens ourselves. Our editor Jon Amos was fantastic, but he was apprehensive about this scene in a way we couldn't quite understand, because the language it speaks makes perfect sense to us. It's certainly coming from a video art perspective, and that's probably why we were so comfortable with it, as that's what we've done for the past twenty years. Conceptually, this opening sequence for us was a way of clearing the decks. In 90 seconds we tried to do everything that we thought that people coming to the film might expect it to be – we run through Nick's entire biography, the first 19,999 days of Nick's life, and get it out of the way. We felt that we'd then be freed up and able to make the film we wanted to make.

In terms of editing, working on that many screens simultaneously is pretty daunting, but it's really just an exercise in strong organisation. Trying to cram more than fifty years of a life into that space was a big ask, and we began by asking Nick to give us words that he felt related to his life in some way, from birth until now. The process then was a massive research exercise, sourcing material from many different sources and locations. It was then a massive data wrangling job to get everything into a workable format for editing. We had a stack of personal material from Nick and his family, stock footage, images and video contributed by fans, official video clips, just a ton of material. Clearing it all was a logistical nightmare, but cutting it was a process we were incredibly comfortable with.

Filmmaker: How did you shoot the massive final shot pulling back from Cave on the beach?

Forsyth & Pollard: With a Libra head on a boat. We had to wait almost a week for the right weather conditions to be able to get the shot we wanted at the right time of day, but the real credit goes to our wonderful cinematographer, Erik Wilson, who made an incredibly complex shot look simple and magical on screen. He's a wizard.

Filmmaker: Brighton on-screen, at least for me, is strongly defined by *Brighton Rock* and *Quadrophenia*. How did you approach shooting it and did you try to avoid those kinds of connotations?

Forsyth & Pollard: We tried to focus on the Brighton we'd encountered through Nick's eyes, rather than through cinema. Nick's relationship to Brighton is quite particular, and unusual. We tried to use the place as another part of the story, we didn't want to treat Brighton as simply as a "character" in the film, but we were incredibly aware of its rich cinematic history, and there was certainly a desire to try to stand to the side of that. We filmed mostly on the outskirts, the periphery, so you don't really see the Brighton of, say, *Quadrophenia*.

Filmmaker: Many filmmakers tend to loath car mounts, but your film depends on them quite heavily. Did you find any way to streamline the process?

Forsyth & Pollard: Much as we tried, we definitely didn't find a way to make the process easy! They were especially challenging because we were very aware that we would have incredibly short periods of time in which we could actually keep the "cast" in the present moment. For each scene we devised a route of no more than ten minutes, and we planned to do two takes. So we effectively had twenty minutes to nail each of the scenes with Ray Winstone, Blixa Bargeld and Kylie Minogue. That was terrifying! Also, the weather in Brighton is an enormous challenge to shooting outdoors. It changes constantly, so it's inevitable that at some point while you're filming the rain will come. That meant we spent a stupid amount of time shooting with artificial rain so that shots would match. The weather in Brighton is a total headache; it made everything technically so challenging. The night we shot with Kylie, the moment we got her and Nick into the car we had storms so vicious you couldn't even see through the windows. No, we definitely didn't find a way to make the process easy!