

# LIFE IN A DAY

Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's '20,000 Days on Earth' presents a stunningly inventive docufiction portrait of 24 hours in the life of Australian rocker Nick Cave, merging archive footage, live performance, dream sequences and even a dose of good old-fashioned Lacanian psychoanalysis

By Thirza Wakefield

Australian musician, songwriter and author Nick Cave has had a long, if intermittent, relationship with cinema. He played the part of the prisoner Maynard in – and was one of a number of co-writers on – John Hillcoat's feature debut *Ghosts of the Civil Dead* in 1988, five years after the break-up of his post-punk band The Birthday Party. In the interceding time, he'd formed the Bad Seeds with guitarist Blixa Bargeld and Mick Harvey, while living in West Berlin. His first solo screenplay came much later in 2005 with his script for Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, and the pair continued their collaboration in 2012 with *Lawless*. Cave has acted in a handful of other films – twice with Brad Pitt, in *Johnny Suede* (1991) and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) – and he and the Bad Seeds featured in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987), playing a set in a Berlin bar. Cave has also composed numerous film soundtracks with extant Bad Seeds member Warren Ellis. Now he stars in a new film, as himself.

But who exactly is he, himself? He's a musician whose music is populated with a multitude of persons, real and unreal: out of the Old and New Testament, and the Southern gothic tradition: Stagger Lee; the inhabitants of 'The Carny' ('Dog-boy, Atlas, Half-Man, the geeks', the circus hands and a horse named Sorrow); Johnny Cash's 'The Singer'; Henry Lee; the death-row inmate of 'The Mercy Seat'; and women, lovers past and present. These characters throng the body of his work, spanning four decades, and are brought to thrashing life in Cave's charismatic performances. They partake of the portmanteau myth of Nick Cave, the rock icon who appears unassailable and unavailable on stage, stalking around like a demented preacher.

The innovative *20,000 Days on Earth* by contemporary artist couple Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard puts another Nick Cave on the dais – the mortal who





**GHOST WRITER**

Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's *20,000 Days on Earth* documents the creative process of Nick Cave, whom Pollard describes as 'the hardest working, most progressive, professional, down-to-earth, yet crazy-big thinker that we've ever met'

meets everyday appointments and drives around his adoptive home of Brighton like Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger'. When, in the opening minutes of the film, the musician stands chest-naked before his bathroom mirror, his is a body like any other. "My face is finished," he sings in Grinderman's 'No Pussy Blues'. This is thin and skin Nick Cave, flesh past 50, with a bloodshot eye.

*20,000 Days on Earth* is hard to classify. Co-written by Cave, it was unlikely ever to be a behind-the-scenes, tell-all rockumentary. In the broadest sense, *20,000 Days* is docufiction: it emboldens fact, compresses it more densely than it appears in the pedestrian passage of normal life. While on the one hand, it imagines an ordinary day in the life of Nick Cave (disciplined artist, family man) from the moment of his waking till night's fall; on the other hand, it engineers a hyperreality, simultaneously suggesting the truth, but leaving us asking, "Can this really be?"

One critical ingredient in the project is Nick Cave's voice. His vocal, like his stage presence, is inseparable from his music; as integral to the myth as his dyed and shined black hair, and imposing suited stature. Cave narrates in voiceover, when not in direct conversation with figures from his past (Kylie Minogue, the German musician and one-time Bad Seed Blixa Bargeld), whom he daydreams into being to sit alongside him in his car.

Cave speaks frankly and lucidly about his method of work, his numerous collaborations, his childhood and formative experiences ("those moments when the gears of the heart really change"), but he also speaks of abstract things: fragmentary musings like the seeds of ideas that sometimes make it into full-blown songs, sometimes stay entombed in his notebooks. Forsyth and Pollard have disinterred a few of them – it was one such idea that gave the film its title: the germ of a song that Cave couldn't make work, and was abandoned. The resulting voiceover is a rigging; a mesh, oblique and non-narrative like Cave's best songs, which give off a mood like musk, and spasm with meaning.

The film is diverse in its approach to its subject: integrating archive footage, live concert recording, material archive – a room full of boxes, custom-built for Cave to explore in person – and a session with a Lacanian psychoanalyst. It plays out like an enormous scrapbook riffled by a gust of wind from an open window, with memories, influences, souvenirs and aspirations pasted into its pages. Its purview is rich in counterpoint: are we watching a day or a life? Is this a film about fixedness and constancy or about "transforming" and "vibrating", as he sings on 'Jubilee Street'? Is it about the genesis of a song or the cycle of an album? Is it a psalm or creation story? The film is a little of all these things. Its aesthetic is busy, but clean; its assemblage of stuff (Cave's photographs, found things) – "important shit for me at the time" – diagrammatic, like the atomisation of a life.

This is the first feature from Forsyth and Pollard, whose background is in installation art with an emphasis on sound and music. Mid-career, they became interested in the re-enactment of culturally significant performance events, which reached a pitch with their 'A Rock 'N' Roll Suicide' (1998) – in which they used actors for an exact, live restaging of David Bowie's farewell concert as Ziggy Stardust at the Hammersmith Odeon. This practice has given them a deep understanding of the atmospherics of



**THE DRIVER**  
Jane Pollard, Iain Forsyth, Nick Cave and his wife Susie Bick on set (above); Cave (opposite, from top) in *20,000 Days on Earth*, with Blixa Bargeld, Ray Winstone and Kylie Minogue

the live music event, and it shows here: their editing of compiled concert footage as Cave performs the finished 'Jubilee Street' is electrifying. The pair have worked with Cave before: most recently, on a soundtrack to the audiobook of Cave's novel *The Death of Bunny Munro*. And it's possibly because of the friendship born out of their collaboration with Cave that the filmmakers show no interest in indexing his inspirations in an effort to lay naked the makings of his talent, but wish instead to inspire the audience by his example. At the end of the film, the mystery of the human mind, buried under bone and viscera, remains intact and as beguiling as ever.

**Thirza Wakefield:** Do you conceive of yourselves as two distinct artists working in collaboration – like Nick Cave and Warren Ellis – or do you feel more like the artist singular, fused and channelling one inspiration?

**Jane Pollard:** We have worked together for 21 years. We don't know any different. We were at college when we started working together, doing our BA at Goldsmiths, so it's man and boy for us. It's what makes us quite good at working with other people – whether that's Nick [Cave] or Scott Walker or whoever. We have to externalise things. There is no real internal process for us in terms of the creative process. It has to be spoken about. And, because of that, you soon get very used to how ideas can fly and fail.

The thing I really like about the way Nick talks about the creative process – and the way, therefore, the film does as well – is that he neither demystifies nor mystifies it. What it does show is that it isn't this magical thing that only a small percentage of gifted people have access to. If you have a small idea and you protect it from influences that could knock it off track, and see it through, then that is it. That is the creative process. It's not about a perfect idea being dropped on you from the gods. It's a very real, workable thing.

**TW:** How did your approach to making a feature differ from your approach to your earlier installation artworks?

**JP:** When we're making art stuff, we always come up with the feeling we want the audience to have when they experience it, because with art it's not 90 minutes, it's three minutes, so you have to work in a single feeling. Even if the piece has a narrative thread, there's a feeling –

a tone – the whole thing has to have. And we didn't know any better, so we approached the film like that.

**Iain Forsyth:** But that's really a product of when we were at college. The time that we were at Goldsmiths was just after the big YBA (Young British Artists)/Damien Hirst art explosion, which in one respect was an amazing thing and opened up the art world. But for art students it also created this idea of a fast-track to success – that you could go to college, do your time, leave and become a kind of art star. So there was this pervasive idea, about a lot of the work that was being made at that time, that if you could intellectualise it, if you could talk about it and frame it within the context of the right philosophers, the right thinkers, then actually it didn't matter what the work was. It didn't matter what your emotional engagement with it was.

**JP:** Very 'emperor's new clothes'. If the right circle of people nodded and permitted the conceit, then that was all right. Gladly so, from our point of view, because I don't think our career would have happened without it. We just got really angry with that, and most things we've done have been born out of that anger.

That feeling that we wanted *20,000 Days on Earth* to leave you with was... inspiration. We wanted the film to inspire people, but inspire people very particularly: with the feeling that Nick inspires in us. He is the hardest working, most forward-focused, progressive, professional, down-to-earth, yet crazy-big thinker that we've ever met. And it's just inspiring when you come up against that and you look at his body of work and how he's still challenging himself daily. He still puts in the hours, and he's still trying to reach something that he doesn't think he's attained yet. We just wanted people to leave feeling that they should see that thing through. Do more, try harder, be better.

**TW:** Cave is working hard, in part, because he feels chased by time – as he says, he's afraid of losing his memory. There's fear in his industriousness. In thinking about time, at what point did you decide the film would take this framing device – the thread of a single day?

**IF:** It came quickly... Nick had two or three notebooks he'd been writing lyrics in, and we were going through them. One of the things we found – that we later learned was a song he'd started writing and abandoned when it wasn't working – was a note that read something like '19,922 days on earth'. There were all these weird calculations next to it, so we asked him about it. He said he'd started this song, and done a mental calculation: "How long have I been alive?" So he phoned his PA and said, "Can you work it out for me?"

**JP:** Poor Rachel!

**IF:** So Rachel worked it out and phoned him back and said, "You've been alive for this long, but – interestingly – on the day you started recording the album, you'd been alive for exactly 20,000 days." What struck us was this measuring of time in a different way. It seemed significant: what is the measure of time, what time do we have, and what do we choose to do or not do with the time that we've got?

**JP:** We had concerns about how to structure the film. Given that anger-fuelled background of reacting against insubstantial art, there was a real worry about being seen as pretentious or abstract, obtuse or obscure – all those things you associate with an art or 'arty' film. And so

we needed something very real to pin our structure on. Having found the title, the idea of a day on earth was that thing that we were looking for.

**TW:** That last shot with the camera receding over the sea is moving – the closing of another day echoing with the completion of another song. Can you tell me about the ending?

**JP:** It would have been very easy to climax the film with the stage performance, to cut at the point where he's transforming and he's at his peak. And yet we had this real instinct that we weren't going to be making the standard concert film. We couldn't finish here; it was too easy. Yes, when he's on stage, it's like he's conquered the world, but really he's just one man in a very big world. What interested us is that, even being so small, he manages to have this presence and this impact on the world.

**IF:** That a tiny thing – a tiny body of work in the grand scheme of things – can have such resonance is incredible.

**TW:** I'm interested in your use of the close-up – not just in this film, but in your other works too.

**IF:** A lot of it comes from that time when we first became aware of the potential to use moving image as a medium... We had a huge passion for the performance artists that came out of New York at the tail end of the 60s and early 70s, who had become interested in video as a medium: Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman...

**JP:** Dan Graham...

**IF:** The way a lot of those guys were using cameras

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was in creating a feedback loop: having a camera in front of them and a monitor next to it. They would do something in front of the camera, which usually meant they were quite close to it, and would be watching it back as they did it.

**JP:** They could use the edges of the monitor as a frame, like the frame of the performance space. A lot of our really early work came out of those influences... And if it's a performance you're recording, then, yeah, head and shoulders is the obvious choice. That's where all the communication is: it's eyes, it's hands; it's all the bits you need.

**TW:** *Below the waist is dead.*

**JP:** Yeah, newsreader style! The crew sets something up, and makes us take a look, and we're like "Yeah... get in closer!" Our using close-up probably also comes from not having a history in filmmaking; not being used to having art directors or production designers on set. So, in our experience, a lot of what's around the person you're filming isn't that interesting. The thing you're filming – the person – is.

**TW:** *How have you found working with a DP?*

**JP:** It took us a while to find a DP who was happy with the way we work. The set [for us] always belongs to the actor. The crew has to pull back. We let Nick define how long something will go on. As long as he's talking and engaging and going, we don't cut. We never repeat. Everything was improvised in the film. Nothing was ever repeated. Even if it was amazing, and you're thinking, "I wish we could have got a camera round that," you don't. So everything's considered as a cutaway from that point. I mean some of it's practical. Nick can't repeat stuff without sounding self-conscious...

We met with some amazing DPs... [but] Erik [Wilson] was the only one who seemed challenged and had a glint in his eye, as if to say, "So we're doing it in one take, are we? Right then – we'll find a way around it."

**TW:** *I'd like to ask about set dressing and its place in documentary.*

**IF:** The whole thing was generally just a real blending of – I want to say, truth and untruth. But it's not even untrue, really.

**JP:** Massive construction. But in a way, Nick's entire life is like that. Nick was the perfect subject for us because we wanted to experiment with that balance between emotional authenticity and constructed reality, and his whole life is totally unreal. That life is not a normal life. He goes on stage and he performs, but he does it night after night, so it's a kind of inauthentic authenticity.

**IF:** You go out for dinner with Nick and there are people sneaking photos, so even just being in a restaurant for him is like being in a kind of performance. I think he's constantly aware that there's a critical eye on him.

**JP:** So that idea of him being very natural, very open, but in a hugely constructed environment like a set – that's totally normal for Nick; he didn't find that difficult at all. The thing he found the hardest was the archive; the fact that it wasn't all archive. There were boxes on the shelves that had nothing in them. They were just set dressing...

We said to Erik: we want the way this is filmed to make you totally aware of how slippery and unreliable memory is; how memory is this kind of construction. A lot of memories of my childhood are because of the photos I've seen or the stories I've been told. I don't have any, I don't



think, organic memory of that thing, but I remember the photograph and I remember being told the story. And in telling it again, you misremember and enhance.

**TW:** *Did you have an idea of how you wanted the film to sound?*

**JP:** Sound came before look for us. It had to be incredible. Because we knew it wasn't going to be a music film, it wasn't going to be the kind of film in which you could rely on your concert footage to bring the world of the film alive. And also because we knew we were going to do things like manifest the figments of Nick's imagination in the car. I'm yet to see a good, visual way of illustrating that. What is the special effect that conveys that Kylie isn't real; she's just in his mind? I don't know how you do that. But you can with sound. You can just stretch and distort notes, and it disturbs the pit of your stomach.

**TW:** *Can I ask what's next?*

**JP:** We're working on fiction features... We've got about three at very early stages.

**IF:** The thing we really enjoyed about this process – that's uniquely different to our process of making art... is that you're very aware with a gallery that you've got a transient audience. They're generally passing through, and if you can grab someone's attention for three or four or five minutes, you've done well. With moving-image installation, people are often coming in midway through, so the idea of a story arc just doesn't make sense. You're constantly trying to distil ideas into something not necessarily simple, but that can be grasped speedily. And a lot of the devices of storytelling aren't really available to you. You can't develop a story. You can't return to a theme and build on it. And so, suddenly, in a weird and thrilling way, it's like someone's given us a whole new toolkit. ☺

**i** *20,000 Days on Earth* is released in UK cinemas on 19 September and is reviewed on page 87. Nick Cave, Warren Ellis and Barry Adamson will be performing live at a screening of the film at London's Barbican Centre on 17 September

**FAMILY GUY**  
Nick Cave eating pizza in front of the TV with his two sons, and in conversation with psychotherapist Darian Leader in scenes from *20,000 Days on Earth* that walk a delicate line between reality and fiction

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