

# Dialectics of longing: on pain, beauty and familiar foreign bodies in Nick Cave's love songs

---

Žurić Jakovina, Iva

Source / Izvornik: **Nova prisutnost : časopis za intelektualna i duhovna pitanja**, 2023, XXI, 367 - 382

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

<https://doi.org/10.31192/np.21.2.8>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:186:606044>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-01-05**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



## Dialectics of longing: on pain, beauty and familiar foreign bodies in Nick Cave's love songs

Iva Žurić Jakovina\*

[izuric@ffri.uniri.hr](mailto:izuric@ffri.uniri.hr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1736-8309>

<https://doi.org/10.31192/np.21.2.8>

UDK / UDC: 78Cave, N.

82-146.2:159.947.5

Prethodno priopćenje /

Preliminary communication

Primljeno / Received: 30. studenog 2022. / Nov 30, 2022

Prihvaćeno / Accepted: 31. ožujka 2023. / March 31, 2023

*This paper examines the concept of longing in Nick Cave's love songs. The notion of longing is an ambiguous term, and as such is presented here through perspectives of psychology, psychoanalysis and popular musicology, more precisely through sociology of music and cultural studies. Starting point of this analysis is Nick Cave's lecture on love songs where he points out two related terms regarding the feeling of longing, Saudade and Duende, as words that portray the feeling of longing and sadness that exist in certain works of art. Apart from them, the German word Sehnsucht, defined as life longing, is also presented as a synonym for sadness. No life is possible without life that we do not live, as much as no profound experience of love is possible without pain and beauty – that is the main thesis of this paper that includes dialectics of longing.*

Key words: *longing, love songs, Nick Cave, authenticity, dialectics.*

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of longing in Nick Cave's love songs. The notion of longing is an ambiguous term, and as such is presented here through perspectives of psychology, psychoanalysis and popular musicology, more precisely through sociology of music and cultural studies.

---

\* Iva Žurić Jakovina, PhD, Assis. Prof., University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Cultural Studies; Address: Sveučilišna avenija 4, HR-51000 Rijeka, Croatia.

Starting point of this analysis is Nick Cave's lecture on love songs *The Secret Life of The Love Song*.<sup>1</sup> In his lecture, he points out two related terms regarding the feeling of longing – *Saudade* and *Duende*, Portuguese and Spanish words that embody this »inexplicable sadness that lives in the heart of certain works of art«,<sup>2</sup> namely love songs. Apart from them, the German word *Sehnsucht* defined as life longing is also presented in this paper as a synonym for this transcendent sadness. Developmental psychology of *Sehnsucht* will serve as a psychological perspective on the concept of longing in everyday life, which also sheds light on the two terms mentioned earlier. This paper also asks questions in what ways can Nick Cave's love songs make an effect of longing in his audience, or to put it more precisely – what are those artistic qualities in creating and performing his love songs that induce *Saudade* and *Duende* that audiences can experience as »yearning of the soul«?<sup>3</sup>

The psychoanalytic perspective on our unlived lives serves as a welcomed niche that encompasses those feelings of longing, sadness and loss. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in his book *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*<sup>4</sup> argues that lives we do not live define the lives that we live, and putting emphasis on our unlived lives gives us more insight on the kind of life we actually live. The lives that we live, in this way become an echo, an elegy, a longing for unattainable needs, sacrificed desires, and rejected possibilities. He also presents the idea that falling in love often reminds us of the frustration related to our childhood formative relationships, and we experience our lovers as »familiar foreign bodies«. Therefore, all love stories, depicted in love songs, become stories of frustration, of longing. No life is possible without life that we do not live, as much as no profound experience of love is possible without pain and beauty – that is the main thesis of this paper, the one that includes dialectics of longing.

Lyrics referred to in this paper that show such dialectics are selected in Nick Cave's love songs: »Brompton oratory« and » (Are you) the one that I've been waiting for? « from *The Boatman's call* (1997), »Distant sky« and »I need you« from *Skeleton Tree* (2016), »Bright horses« from *Ghosteen* (2019) and »Shattered Ground« and »Carnage« from *Carnage* (2021). This paper includes not only semantic analysis of Cave's love songs, but also analysis of his artistic identity observed by the perspective of popular culture theory in order to better understand the concept of longing.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nick CAVE, *The Secret Life of the Love Song and The Flesh Made Word: Two Lectures by Nick Cave (King Mob Spoken Word CDs)*, Audio CD – Audiobook, London, Ellipsis London Pr., 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Federico GARCIA LORCA, *In Search of Duende*, Translated by Christopher Maurer, New York, New Directions, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cave, *The Secret Life of the Love Song...*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Adam PHILLIPS, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

## 1. *Dialectic of the pain and beauty: On Saudade and Duende in love songs*

An acclaimed Australian singer-songwriter Nick Cave and his band The Bad Seeds transgress belonging to just one genre of contemporary music. He is a musician and performer who appeared with his band in a time of post-punk, gothic and industrial genres.<sup>5</sup> During his long career, he has become an icon in the alternative rock scene (especially during the 1990s) and I argue that this status brings him into academic focus and discussions, especially through diverse perspectives of cultural studies theories. His impact on contemporary popular music is undeniable, and the trace that he has left on popular culture and its idea of love, can be thoroughly marked through analysis of his love songs. Before focusing on his idea of love songs, we can briefly see what the social functions of popular music are, with the intention of connecting them to the work of Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds.

Four social functions of popular music were stated by British sociomusicologist Simon Frith in his essay »Towards an aesthetic of popular music«.<sup>6</sup> Frith claims that popular music: 1. allows us to answer questions about our own identity and place in society, 2. help us manage the relationship between our public and private emotional lives, 3. help us organise our sense of time and shapes popular memory, 4. is something that is possessed.<sup>7</sup> Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds fulfil all four functions. First, with his idea of what should every »true« love song contain, Nick Cave gives us a glimpse of the way love songs form our identity and our place in society. The pleasure of identification with the music we like, gives us the possibility of creating our own identity and acquiring specific ideas of love. Managing the relationship between our private and public emotional lives is a secondary function of popular music that Nick Cave exhibits through writing love songs, which give people shape and voice to emotions, giving them emotional intensity they need, in order to make sense of their feelings.<sup>8</sup> Most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century popular songs are love songs,<sup>9</sup> and it is important to show how they help us shape popular memory and at the same time enhance self-awareness, all that is noted in the third function of popular music. One of the aims of this paper therefore becomes the analysis of how all of this is possible through Nick Cave's love songs. The existence of a large

<sup>5</sup> See Peter WEBB, *Infected by the seed of postindustrial punk bohemia: Nick Cave and the milieu of the 1980s underground*, *Popular Music History*, 3 (2009) 2, 103-122.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Simon FRITH, *Taking Popular Music Serious: Selected Essays*, London, Routledge, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-267.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

number of fans who experience his music as their own is certainly enhancing the fourth social function of the music as something that is possessed.<sup>10</sup>

In his lecture on love songs *The Secret Life of The Love Song*, Nick Cave talks about the almost tangible experience of loss and longing that every »true« love song should contain. This lecture was written for the Vienna Poetry Festival 1998 and deals with the genesis and »true meaning« of love songs. In the lecture, Cave tells us about the traumatic experience of losing his father in his youth and about his past love relationships and unattainable longings, which he sublimated<sup>11</sup> into writing, because – »we each have a need to create, and sorrow is a creative act. The love song is a sad song, it is the sound of sorrow itself«, said Cave<sup>12</sup> and opened up the world of a »familiar unknown experience« he found in the Portuguese word *Saudade*. *Saudade* signifies the experience of an inexplicable sense of longing that lives in the inspiration for creating love songs, and lives in works of art in general, especially in love songs. Portuguese and Spanish scholar Aubrey FitzGerald Bell in his book *In Portugal*<sup>13</sup> wrote:

»The famous saudade of the Portuguese is a vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, for something other than the present, a turning towards the past or towards the future; not an active discontent or poignant sadness but an indolent dreaming wistfulness.«<sup>14</sup>

It signifies a longing for contact, for relationship, for something that once was, and no longer is, but still matters to us because it has shaped us and touched us right where we are closest to ourselves. *Saudade*, therefore, depicts the feeling of longing that remains after someone we had loved is gone, and as such can be related to unattainable and unrequited love. For cultural theorist Svetlana Boym, *Saudade* represents a kind of nostalgia, or maybe even melancholia, in a somewhat reflective manner.<sup>15</sup> Similar to that, Rodney Gallop, author of books about folk dance, describes *Saudade* in the following quote:

»Saudade is yearning; yearning for something so indefinite as to be indefinable: an unrestrained indulgence in yearning. It is a blend of German Sehnsucht,

<sup>10</sup> Frith also argues that popular music is not in itself conservative or revolutionary, and that popular music has a capacity to be a product of society and its norms, but it also has a potential for social critique. Something that is a product of a certain narrative, I argue, can be at the same time a questioning element of that same narrative. That is certainly true for Nick Cave's music, since his critical attitudes towards society and official politics generally, and mass music specifically, are probably well known to most of Cave's fans, scholars and critics (hence his web site *The Red Hand Files*, documentaries: *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014), *One more time with feeling* (2016), *This Much I Know to be True* (2022) and many of his interviews, including his lecture on love songs discussed in this paper).

<sup>11</sup> Redirected/transformed.

<sup>12</sup> Cave, *The Secret Life of the Love Song...*

<sup>13</sup> See Aubrey F. BELL, *In Portugal*, quoted in: Shirlee EMMONS, Wilbur Watkins Jr. LEWIS (eds.), *Researching the Song: A Lexicon*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>15</sup> See Svetlana BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001.

French *nostalgie*, and something else besides. It couples the vague longing of the Celt for the unattainable with a Latin sense of reality which induces realization that it is indeed unattainable, and with the resultant discouragement and resignation. All this is implied in the lilting measures of the fado, in its languid triplets and, as it were, drooping cadences«. <sup>16</sup>

Talking about another, similar term called *Duende*, Famous Andalusian poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca said, quoting flamenco singer Manuel Torre: »all that has dark sound has Duende, that mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher can explain«. <sup>17</sup> *Duende* is a reaction experienced in the body when witnessing an artistic performance, particularly an expressive one – such as Nick Cave’s concert performances. Philosopher Sarah Wishart in her article »Nick Cave: The Spirit of the Duende and the Sound of the Rent Heart« <sup>18</sup> writes that *Duende* is a connection between a singer and an audience, as a form of communication and exchange between them, a place where people at the concert can lose their identity, in almost Dionysian way. <sup>19</sup> *Duende* is inspiration and magic, often obsessive in nature. In a transcendental manner <sup>20</sup>, it can transpose us to past emotional experiences, kind or heavy ones, and through that experience of *Duende* we have an opportunity to accept the pain and beauty of love itself. Therefore, it possesses a dialectics of darkness and light, pain and beauty, ultimately acquiring the fact that love involves all those feelings. If *Saudade* is linked to the feeling of longing, *Duende* is related to inspiration, expression and artistic performance.

All love songs must contain *Saudade*, or Lorca’s *Duende*, because a love song is never truly a happy song, its task is to embrace the potential for suffering, Cave continues, and only if the artist is able to explore the dark regions of the heart, he will be able to authentically portray what is miraculous in love – beauty – the one that ultimately redeems. A love song must arise from the domains of the irrational, the melancholic, the obsessive and the insane, because infatuation and love are always in part a form of madness. <sup>21</sup> Melancholy as a feeling, apart from *Saudade* and *Duende*, that describes Nick Cave’s love songs is depicted in cultural theorist Tanya Dalziell’s article »The Moose and Nick Cave: Melancholy,

<sup>16</sup> Rodney GALLOP, The Fado: The Portuguese Song of Fate, *The Musical Quarterly*, 19 (1933) 2, 199-213, 211-212.

<sup>17</sup> Garcia Lorca, *In Search of...*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah WISHART, Nick Cave: The Spirit of the Duende and the Sound of the Rent Heart, in: John H. BAKER (ed.), *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays*, Bristol, Intellect, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Referring to the Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of Apollonian and Dionysian as a philosophical concept in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*. Dionysian represents a state of intoxication and absorption with the world, where boundaries between »me« and the world are liminal, where the dissolution of the boundaries take place through the liberation of instinct.

<sup>20</sup> The term transcendent is used in this paper in the sense of rising above a purely physical or emotional experience, regarding the experience that connects past memories with the present moment and provides an experience of dialectics as transcending opposites.

<sup>21</sup> See Cave, *The Secret Life of the Love Song...*



Creativity and Love Songs« from the book about cultural studies perspective on Nick Cave and his work called *Cultural seeds: Essays on the work of Nick Cave*.<sup>22</sup> »I'm happy to be sad«, Cave continues, explaining this seemingly paradox by saying that the songs he writes are his companions in suffering on the path to experience of longing, magic and imagination. I argue that there are dialectics of pain and beauty in Nick Cave's love songs, because he emphasises the notion that love cannot be explored without the presence of pain and beauty. Accepting pain and beauty is what *Saudade* and *Duende* are showing us with their notion of a struggle between painful and joyful experiences.

Semantic analysis of the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds song »Brompton oratory« from their album *The Boatman's call* shows such dialectics within these words:

»And I wish that I was made of stone  
So that I would not have to see  
A beauty impossible to define  
A beauty impossible to believe  
  
A beauty impossible to endure  
The blood imparted in little sips  
The smell of you still on my hands  
As I bring the cup up to my lips.«<sup>23</sup>

Beauty that is almost unbearable, impossible to define and fathom, is such beauty that Nick Cave sings about in his songs. It's such a beauty that brings tears of joy and pain, in fact, a mixture of both, to the experience of love. This song depicts the notion of a lost love, a love that once was, but now is gone, referring to the notion of *Saudade* as a feeling of longing that remains after someone we loved is gone. It is a moment of yearning or longing that it reveals. As if the pain of the protagonist is present in the songs, but the protagonist itself is somewhat aware that within this deep pain lies the unbearable beauty of the contact that once was, and has left traces to the present. Another example from the same album *The Boatman's call* is a song » (Are you) the one that I've been waiting for?« where a protagonist is aware of the necessity of pain for achieving greater depth in ourselves, as it is seen in the following lines:

»Out of sorrow, entire worlds have been built  
Out of longing great wonders have been willed  
They're only little tears, darling, let them spill.«<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Tanya DALZIELL, The Moose and Nick Cave: Melancholy, Creativity and Love Songs, in: Karen WELBERRY, Tanya DALZIELL (eds.), *Cultural seeds: Essays on the work of Nick Cave*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009. Tanya Dalziell is a Professor of English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia and her article on Nick Cave gives us a cultural studies perspective on the connection between melancholy and creativity and is fruitful research on the meaning of melancholy in Nick Cave's work.

<sup>23</sup> NICK CAVE AND THE BAD SEEDS, *The Boatman's call*, CD, London, Mute/Reprise, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

*The Boatman's call* is itself an album almost entirely dedicated to loss and longing, but it also shares a notion of acceptance of the pain as the leitmotif of the entire album.

On the most recent albums, such as *Skeleton tree* (2016), *Ghosteen* (2019) and *Carnage* (2021) such acceptance of pain is transformed into a dialectic of longing. *Skeleton tree*, although almost entirely written before Nick Cave's son Arthur died, contains an almost foreboding sense of tragedy, especially in the song »Distant sky« where he explores the existence of souls on some other place, far from this world:

»Let us go now, my only companion  
Set out for the distant skies  
Soon the children will be rising, will be rising  
This is not for our eyes«. <sup>25</sup>

That sense of tragedy is especially present in the song »I need you« where the protagonist anticipates the loss: «I will miss you when you're gone/ I'll miss you when you're gone away forever«. <sup>26</sup>

»Carnage« is a song from the album of the same name that was released in the midst of a pandemic in the 2021, where the author shows us a protagonist burdened by the chaos of the pandemic and the aftermath of the death of his son. Love still echoes pain, only to find more dialectical view on the notion of living life with longing and acceptance:

»And it's only love  
With a little bit of rain  
And I hope to see you again«. <sup>27</sup>

*The Boatman's call*, together with *Skeleton Tree*, *Ghosteen* and *Carnage* depict more clearly dialectics of longing considering the entire discography of the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and that is a main reason these songs were chosen for analysis in this paper. More songs from the last two mentioned albums will be analysed in the next chapter of this paper in terms of onomatopoeia and materiality of the voice.

<sup>25</sup> NICK CAVE AND THE BAD SEEDS, *Skeleton tree*, CD, London, Bad Seed Ltd, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Nick CAVE, Warren ELLIS, *Carnage*, CD, London, Mute, 2021.



## 2. *The sound of longing and sorrow: »Authenticity« and »grain of the voice« as the fundamental formal aspects of Nick Cave's love songs*

Interviewing Nick Cave back in 1987, English music journalist Simon Reynolds stated that Cave was »in search of a more troubled, troubling kind of 'authenticity'«. <sup>28</sup> Apart from the previous semantic and sociocultural analysis of the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds love songs, this chapter presents elements, such as »authenticity« and »grain of the voice«, that shape the two main formal aspects of the narrative of his love songs. How do we, as an audience, connect with love songs and how do they create themselves? Which formal aspect of Nick Cave's and his band's music and performance shape the »grain« of the love songs? Those are the questions this chapter addresses and aims to offer guidelines for answers.

In his previously mentioned essay »Towards an aesthetic of popular music«, Simon Frith addresses the value of popular music and argues that sociological perspective on popular music includes aesthetic theory. He argues that popular music can be »good« or »bad«, conditionally speaking of course, because labelling some music good or bad can be a bit problematic without employing necessary criterion for such conclusions. Frith finds such a criterion in authenticity. He argues that good music »is the authentic expression of something – a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience, a *Zeitgeist*. Bad music is inauthentic – it expresses nothing«. <sup>29</sup> He also argues that popular music is more valuable as it is more independent from the social factors that enable it. <sup>30</sup> As I stated earlier, Frith argues that popular music has four social functions, and when he tries to answer why some popular music is better than the other, he states that this is related to how successfully songs fulfil the suggested functions. Overall, good or successful popular music provides an experience that transcends the mundane, everyday life, and can take us »out of ourselves«. <sup>31</sup> That way, it encourages a form of self-awareness, something that Frith calls self-recognition that frees us from everyday routines and expectations woven into our social roles. Music has value to us if we can gain such a transcendent experience. Transcendence

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Simon REYNOLDS, Interview with Nick Cave, *National Student Magazine*, 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Frith, *Taking Popular Music...*, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Frith is surely aware of the »myth of authenticity«, that is why, I suppose, he sometimes uses the term authenticity conditionally, with quotation marks, which I strongly support. Sociologist David Grazian, who is a popular culture theorist, wrote a paper about authenticity as a myth in his paper »Demystifying authenticity in the sociology of culture« (2019) where he argues that authenticity is a social construct with moral overtones, rather than an objective and value-free appraisal. See David GRAZIAN, Demystifying authenticity in the sociology of culture, in: Laura GRINDSTAFF et al., *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Second edition, London, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Frith, *Taking Popular Music...*, 268.

therefore becomes not just an experience in a spiritual way, but also in terms of self-perception and self-recognition that gives us a different, richer view on our lives and ourselves. Singer's or performer's authentic expression can enhance such an experience and we as audience can recognize it as such. In his web page *The Red Hand Files* created for communication with his fans by answering their questions, Nick Cave described such artistic musical performance as transcendental experience, which gives as a glimpse into what could be an insightful representation of authentic experience:

»Music is the supreme exemplar of art as pure meaning because it directly animates the soul. All other art forms aspire to the religious condition but music is the utmost conduit to the truly transcendent encounter. To walk on stage and perform a series of songs is an attempt to invigorate the collective soul of an audience. Whatever is happening to the soul of the audience is also happening to the soul of the performer. This mutuality is a circular and escalating intaking and outpouring of love.«<sup>32</sup>

The other crucial recognized aspect of Nick Cave's love songs is the use of the voice. Frith argues that the audience is most able to make a connection with the singer through their voice, in order to feel that emotion or an idea communicated through singing.<sup>33</sup> The tone of the voice, he states, in this sense is more important than the lyrics. That is why I view this formal aspect crucial, apart from purely semantic or content analysis, in analysing the value of Nick Cave's love songs embedded in his dialectics of longing.

In chapter 2 »The Performance of Voice: Nick Cave and the Dialectics of the Abandonment« of the book called *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays* edited by John H. Baker which contributes to the growing field of so called »Cave studies«<sup>34</sup>, Carl Lavery, Professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Glasgow, argues that voice is a material or sensible phenom-

<sup>32</sup> Nick CAVE, *The Red Hand Files*, Issue 183, February 2022, <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/> (23.11.2022).

<sup>33</sup> See Simon FRITH, *Taking Popular Music...*

<sup>34</sup> Carl LAVERY, The Performance of Voice: Nick Cave and the Dialectics of the Abandonment, in: John H. BAKER (ed.), *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays*, Bristol, Intellect Ltd, 2013, 29. »Cave studies« here refers to a potent and expanding field of scientific books and articles published about Nick Cave and his creative endeavours that portrait his multifaceted career. Such publications include critical studies, popular cultural perspectives, cultural studies examples, philosophical, literary and theological analysis, theatrical and musicological contributions, psychological and pedagogical insights on his career as a songwriter, musician, novelist, screenwriter, curator, critic, actor and performer. Such publications are: *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse (Studies in Popular Music)* by Roland Boer (2013); *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave* by Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziel (2009); *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays* by John H. Baker (2013); »The Gothic and the Romantic in Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds« by Donald Burke (2021); »'Now, who will be the witness/When you're all too healed to see?': The Sad Demise of Nick Cave« by Emma McEvoy (2007); »Religion, Creative Practice and Aestheticisation in Nick Cave's The Red Hand Files« by Sarah K. Balstrup (2000), and many others.

anon. He is searching for authenticity in Nick Cave's music analysing the place where voice meets text. This rendezvous of the two elements, voice and text, is a place of authentic musical expression and experience. The materiality of the voice echoes and draws reference to an important and notable essay by Roland Barthes »The Grain of the Voice« in the book *Image Music Text* selected by Stephen Heath.<sup>35</sup> Barthes argues that what he states about the grain »will, of course, be only the apparently abstract side, the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing«.<sup>36</sup> For him, the grain is the signifier, a place where voice meets text (language). The grain of the voice for Barthes is not only a timbre or a pitch, but a material presence of the sound, the materiality of the singing voice. He uses an interesting metaphor describing the grain: »The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs«.<sup>37</sup> One of the aims of this chapter is finding this place of the signifier, the grain of the song where voice meets text in Nick Cave's love songs.

How do love songs create themselves? In answering this question, we have to look at Nick Cave's love songs where his voice and his vocal performances showcase itself, where they draw attention to themselves, where the singing shows itself to the audience. We can find this materiality of the song on his recent album *Carnage*.<sup>38</sup> Cave made *Carnage* working only with Warren Ellis, an Australian musician and composer, an experimenter with sound and materiality of the voice. The richness of instruments and rhythm that is usually expected from Bad Seeds does not exist on this album, but we, perhaps more than ever, realise that Nick Cave always carries his instrument with him - and that is his voice. Nick's voice is an instrument in itself, like Barthes' »grain of the voice«, a body in a voice as he sings, and he doesn't seem to need either the Bad Seeds or Warren Ellis, as he proved this to us at a solo concert at Alexandra Palace in London.<sup>39</sup> The penultimate song from *Carnage* called »Shattered Ground« stands out more clearly than the others, especially through showing the materiality of the voice in onomatopoeia. As if he is showing a world that is in a state of anomie, where old values have disappeared, as if they have disintegrated on »shattered ground«, and new ones are just being established. This, of course is woven into the narrative of a love song, where a protagonist is lost after his love is gone, in pain, longing for the time that was, and is not anymore:

<sup>35</sup> Roland BARTHES, The Grain of the Voice, in: Stephen HEATH (translated by), *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Nick CAVE, Warren ELLIS, *Carnage...*

<sup>39</sup> At Alexandra place in summer of 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic, he held a concert only with piano and without an audience.

»I will be all alone when you are gone, all alone when you're gone  
 And I will not make a single sound  
 Not make a single sound, not make a single sound  
 But come softly *crashing down*  
 Come softly *crashing down*, come softly *crashing down*  
*My pieces scattered all around*  
*Scattered all around, scattered all around*  
*Toppled on the shattered ground, on the shattered ground*«. <sup>40</sup>

Words in italics in this stanza are performed by Cave in a manner of directly imitating the sound of crashing down, pieces being scattered all around, toppled on the shattered ground. His voice produces himself; it shows itself as the sound of crashing, scattering, toppled on the shattered ground. Onomatopoeia as imitating sounds from nature here serves its purpose of producing the very meaning it conveys. Alliteration as another poetic device, in repetition and emphasising consonant »d« at the end of the verse, also produces the meaning through the materiality of the voice.

In another song called »Bright horses« from the album *Ghosteen*<sup>41</sup>, the music in the background prepares and imitates the arrival of »bright horses«, metaphorically describing the author's longing and sorrow arising from the loss of his son, whilst at the same time dreaming of his return. It is possibly the saddest song on the album, where sadness is alleviated by hope in the lyrics: »I can hear the *whistle blowing*, I can hear the *mighty roar*, I can hear the *horses prancing* in the pastures of the Lord«<sup>42</sup> where he emphasises the words »whistle blowing«, »mighty roar«, »horses prancing« in a way of imitating the sounds of blowing, roaring and prancing. Here, Cave uses his voice to imitate what he sings about, the grain of voice in imitation of the sounds. The singer, the protagonist of the song has a hope, and his hope is contained in the expectation of a loved one who died to return, emphasising the sound of a train coming, a horse prancing in order to prepare himself for this arrival. It is described as a magical and mystical return, hence the name of the album *Ghosteen*, as well as the whole album is esoteric in musical and textual sense, where the materiality of Cave's voice brings the audience closer to the feelings of loss and love.

Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar argues that singing brings voice to the foreground, sometimes to the detriment of meaning, voice becomes the signifier itself, the grain that puts itself before the listener.<sup>43</sup> The argument of this chapter lies in the claim that Nick Cave's voice in his love songs is often transposed into the sound of sadness itself.

<sup>40</sup> Cave, Ellis, *Carnage...*

<sup>41</sup> Nick CAVE AND THE BAD SEEDS, *Ghosteen*, CD, London, Mute, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See Mladen DOLAR, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, MIT, 2006.

### 3. On *Sehnsucht* and frustration: longing for »familiar foreign bodies«

This chapter deals with the analysis and application of the term *Sehnsucht* in everyday life in order to give a broader perspective on the dialectics of longing.

First theoretical conceptualization and empirical operationalization of the term *Sehnsucht* is given in the paper »Toward a Developmental Psychology of *Sehnsucht* (Life Longings): The Optimal (Utopian) Life« by psychologists Susanne Scheibe and Alexandra M. Freund.<sup>44</sup> In German dictionary *Sehnsucht* is defined as

»a high degree of intense, (recurring), and often painful desire for something, particularly if there is no hope to attain the desired, or when its attainment is uncertain, still far away«.<sup>45</sup>

Scheibe and Freund analysed this concept in terms of life longings from a life-span developmental point of view and made a developmental psychological conception of the psychology of *Sehnsucht*. What draws this concept to *Saudade* and *Duende* in love songs is the fact that artists themselves emphasise the positivity of the concept. They believe that *Sehnsucht* is a motivator for artistic creation because it helps to define and understand human losses and gains.<sup>46</sup> *Sehnsucht* as a concept connects search for progress and utopia with the idea of the fundamental unattainability of optimal states and essential imperfection of human life.<sup>47</sup> Thus, this concept refers to the dialectics of longing, because it encompasses pain and beauty in the process of artistic creation in love songs. This dynamic of loss and gain, of the longing for something greater and different and at the same time understanding the unattainability of it, is what makes *Sehnsucht* so applicable to this dialectic. The imperfection of human life, the impossibility of realisation of all desires and potentials during the course of a lifetime draws attention to the idea of *Sehnsucht* as a fantasy fulfilment, as a compensation for unattainable desires. Practical search for actual fulfilment in life is transformed by the concept of *Sehnsucht* in imagined fantasy life, where we go to meet this need. This duality of searching for fulfilment and accepting the pain is a form of dialectic that helps people to recognize and transgress these contradictions. Searching for new solutions or new understanding is a

<sup>44</sup> See Susanne SCHEIBE, Alexandra M. FREUND, Toward a Developmental Psychology of *Sehnsucht* (Life Longings): The Optimal (Utopian) Life, *Developmental Psychology*, 43 (2007) 3, 778-795.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob GRIMM, Wilhelm GRIMM, *Deutsches Wörterbuch Bd. 1-33* [German dictionary Volumes 1-33], Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, Reprinted from German Dictionary by Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, 1854-1871, Leipzig, Hirzel, 1984, 157.

<sup>46</sup> See Jean CLAIR (ed.), *Melancholie: Genie und Wahnsinn in der Kunst* [Melancholy: Genius and madness in the arts], Ostfilden-Ruit, Hatje Cantz, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Scheibe, Freund, *Toward a Developmental Psychology...*

dialectical transgressing of the limitations of life. Such experience of *Sehnsucht* or life longings is present in everyday life and in love songs, in public and private discourse.<sup>48</sup> The functions of *Sehnsucht*, as authors of this article find, are self-regulation, giving direction in life and regulating the impossibility of achieving certain desires such as love, power, success, social cohesion and acceptance.<sup>49</sup> Fantasy and imagination are the coping mechanisms of the *Sehnsucht* that enable people to accept losses and the pain that accompanies it. Described in this way, *Sehnsucht* can be found in artistic impulses and creativity, where creative processes and artefacts serve as an element of sublimation.

All of *Sehnsucht's* experiences are embodied, I argue, in what British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes in his book *Missing out: In the Praise of the Unlived Life*.<sup>50</sup> In this book he explores the paradoxical relationship between frustration and satisfaction, showing us how the lives we do not live reveal the values and desires that are woven into the lives we live. The lives we live, in this way become an echo, an elegy, a longing for unattainable needs and sacrificed desires, denied opportunities, Phillips argues, potentials for experiences we cannot or must not experience, which we refuse and flee from, and how we sabotage ourselves in doing so. And that actually becomes our life – the life we live becomes a lasting reminder of what we don't have. Paradoxically, what we want and don't have determines us, and only if we allow ourselves to explore our frustration, we can become present in ourselves and ultimately authentic. Similarly, as we go through suffering, when we really allow ourselves to be present, not running away or defending ourselves from it, we can understand what beauty is – that is what Nick Cave writes in his lecture and sings about in his love songs.

All love stories, Phillips continues, are stories of frustration.<sup>51</sup> Falling in love means being reminded of a frustration we didn't even know we had. That frustration is a formative frustration, a legacy from our formative years, it includes stories about parents and children and frustration between them. It is like we were waiting for that specific person but we didn't know who it was until she came, like we had dreamed of her before she came, we had longed for her, and when she finally came, we recognized her with such certainty because in some way we already knew her. Someone new and yet familiar comes, giving us both fulfilment and frustration, just like in our formative years, and in that encounter between us and the other person, we actually meet ourselves, which

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Richard A. SCHWEDER, True ethnography: The lore, the law, and the lure, in: Richard JESSOR, Anne COLBY (eds.), *Ethnography and human development: Context and meaning in social inquiry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> See Phillips, *Missing Out...*

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



is ultimately the path we as therapists traverse with our »fellow travellers«<sup>52</sup> to help bring them closer to themselves. That is why every relationship is an opportunity for self-realisation and self-awareness building. The people we love, »they are familiar foreign bodies«.<sup>53</sup> They are echoes of experiences from before, and yet they are new. Falling in love can be frightening because it touches our deepest vulnerable parts. But falling in love ultimately means finding our own passion, exploring what unconsciously represents frustration and suffering, and all in order to meet ourselves so as to understand what fulfils us and makes us happy. Without pain there cannot be deep understanding of the beauty and love, Cave would say in his lecture and in his love songs, and Phillips confirms this exact notion in his idea that through experiencing frustration we get to know what we want. That space between frustration and desire is important<sup>54</sup>, it is a patient observing time passing by in frustration, the time for self-observing and cultivating self-awareness, just as Nick Cave's love songs are an exploration of the dialectic of longing. Paraphrasing Freud, Phillips says that »if we can't let ourselves feel our frustration – and, surprisingly, this is a surprisingly difficult thing to do – we can't get a sense of what it is we might be wanting, and missing, of what might really give us pleasure«.<sup>55</sup> Protagonist in Nick Cave's love songs is often a person burdened by loss, experiencing life longing as *Sehnsucht*, obsessed with feelings of *Saudade* expressing them as *Duende*, and ultimately searching for the mystery of love. Cave's protagonist and Cave himself are, after all, »in search of a more troubled, troubling kind of authenticity«.

### Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to show how pain and beauty depicted in Nick Cave's love songs are intertwined, each notion depending on another, creating the experience of longing (*Saudade*, *Duende* and *Sehnsucht*) in love, such as the lives we do not live, colour the lives that we do live in melancholic, yet vital manner.

If *Saudade* is the experience of an inexplicable sense of longing, *Duende* is a bodily reaction to an artistic performance that is particularly expressive. Both *Saudade* and *Duende* are important and fundamental elements of every authentic love song, argues Nick Cave in his lecture on love songs. This paper at-

<sup>52</sup> In his book *The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients* Irvin D. Yalom, American psychotherapist and novelist, says that both patient and a client are in the same existential turmoil, they are all mortal beings and struggle with the same fears and anxieties.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Phillips, *Missing Out...*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



tempted to show how the grain of the voice and authentic performance of Nick Cave and his band both contribute to creating this specific dialectic, which I call dialectic of longing. Therefore, the dialectic of longing present and portrayed in Nick Cave's love songs, represented through authentic performance and materiality of his voice, shows us how seemingly opposed notions, such as pain and beauty, are in fact interconnected. Opposition of pain and beauty can be transgressed in the idea that allowing ourselves to feel both pain and beauty of longing can lead us to greater self-awareness consequently expanding our capacities for love.

Developmental theory of *Sehnsucht* (life longing) shows us how experiencing longing in everyday life can increase our self-regulation, give us direction in life and enable us to cope with the limitations of life.

Such experienced pain has a possibility to teach us something about ourselves, about our capacity for love and for emotional depth, or the lack of thereof. I argue that such a lesson of learning about ourselves is something that Nick Cave indirectly talks about in his lecture. Creating art works, such as love songs can, in a way pose as a sublimation for the songwriter in a Freudian sense.<sup>56</sup> As a concept of spiritual redirection of instincts and impulses, sublimation through art works such as love songs can serve, I argue, as a powerful force for catharsis or even self-awareness. As Nick Cave proposes in the last sentences of his lecture:

»For the residue, cast off in this search, the songs themselves, my crooked brood of sad eyed children, rally round and in their way, protect me, comfort me and keep me alive. They are the companions of the soul that lead it into exile, that save the overpowering yearning for that which is not of this world. The imagination desires an alternate and through the writing of the love song, one sits and dines with loss and longing, madness and melancholy ecstasy, magic, joy and love with equal measures of respect and gratitude. The spiritual quest has many faces – religion, art, drugs, work, money, sex – but rarely does the search serve god so directly and rarely are the rewards so great in doing«<sup>57</sup>,

his songs are what keeps him alive in his spiritual search and that is rewarding in itself. Such a cathartic reward has surely some potential for one's self-awareness, which connects sublimation to self-knowledge and self-discovery, especially if it is consciously processed.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, experiencing the dialectics of longing obviously has certain psychological advantages and further research in that direction could show us what specific psychological qualities can such experience enhance.<sup>59</sup> Showing

<sup>56</sup> See Sigmund FREUD, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis; Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*, Essex, The Book Service, 1910/2001.

<sup>57</sup> Cave, *The Secret Life of the Love Song...*

<sup>58</sup> See Jacob L. MORENO, *Psychodrama: Vol. 1*, New York, Beacon House, 1946/1980.

<sup>59</sup> See Patrik N. JUSLIN, Daniel VÄSTFJÄLL, Emotional responses to music: The need to consider underlying mechanisms, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 31 (2008) 559-621. That

this in such research could explain why listening to Nick Cave's love songs and enjoying his performance is not only a matter of aesthetic experience, but also a valuable transformative or even therapeutic process. »Literature is escapist, whatever else it is, in its incessant descriptions of people trying to release themselves from something or other«<sup>60</sup> is a statement that not only psychoanalysts or literature theorists would agree with, but also musicologists and sociologists of music and culture, even cultural studies theorists, because art in general, not just literature, can enhance this kind of release or even psychotherapeutic change.

---

is interesting research done by two psychologists where authors present a novel theoretical framework featuring six additional mechanisms through which music listening may induce emotions. Their research could certainly be of much needed help in further analysis of specific psychological qualities that can be induced by listening to music. Musical psychologist as someone who explores the ways that music impacts our emotions, relationships, brain and bodies could certainly benefit from such a theoretical framework that this dialectic of longing offers.

<sup>60</sup> Philips, *Missing Out...*, 95.

Iva Žurić Jakovina\*

*Dijalektika čežnje: o boli, ljepoti i poznatim stranim tijelima u ljubavnim pjesmama Nicka Cavea*

Sažetak

Ovaj rad ispituje koncept čežnje u ljubavnim pjesmama Nicka Cavea. Pojam čežnje višeznačan je i ovdje se prikazuje kroz perspektive psihologije, psihoanalize i popularne muzikologije, točnije kroz sociologiju glazbe i kulturalne studije. Polazište ove analize je predavanje Nicka Cavea o ljubavnim pjesmama, gdje on ističe dva srodna pojma, *Saudade* i *Duende*, kao riječi koje oslikavaju osjećaj čežnje i tuge koji postoji u pojedinim umjetničkim djelima. Osim njih, kao sinonim za tugu uzeta je i njemačka riječ *Sehnsucht*, definirana kao životna čežnja. Nijedan život nije moguć bez života koji ne živimo, kao što nijedan dubok doživljaj ljubavi nije moguć bez boli i ljepote – glavna je teza ovog rada koji uključuje dijalektiku čežnje.

*Ključne riječi: autentičnost, čežnja, dijalektika, ljubavne pjesme, Nick Cave.*

---

\* Doc. dr. sc. Iva Žurić Jakovina, Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet, Odsjek za kulturalne studije, Sveučilišna avenija 4, HR-51000 Rijeka; e-mail: izuric@ffri.uniri.hr.