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Transmissions: Sonic markers of difference in the sound of Joy Division

KEYWORDS

Joy Division, sound, sonic markers, vocality, popular musicology, textual analysis

ABSTRACT

Situated within the field of popular musicology, this article sets out to explore the formation of Joy Division's characteristic sound along three lines of inquiry. Firstly, I investigate the contextual framework through which the tale of Joy Division was shaped focusing specifically on their music's apparent relation to Manchester. Secondly, building on this contextual framework, I examine various aspects of the band's production aesthetics. Producer Martin Hannett is often credited with the formation of their sound, and I consider the impact of his use of technology in the studio in relation to the band's relatively roughshod live performances. Thirdly, I explore how characteristic sonic markers of production and performance can also be identified as performative strategies in Joy Division's music. Although Hannett played a significant role in shaping the band's sound, their individual performances as formally untrained instrumentalists who were apparently governed solely by a shared creative vision undoubtedly affects that sound as well. The overall aim of this chapter, then, is to display the complexity of this particular tale and especially the ways in which sonic markers of difference have played a major role in the formation of one of pop music history's sturdiest tales.

INTRODUCTION

No language, just sound, that's all we need know to synchronize love to the beat of the show.

(Joy Division, "Transmission")

In most references to Joy Division, whether they are academic, journalistic, biographic, fictional or sonic, one aspect that keeps coming up is an apparent link between Manchester and the band's characteristic sound. What is it about Joy Division's sound that prompts a

seemingly inextricable link to Manchester in the late 1970s? In this article, I am keen to focus on the sonic side of this link through close readings of five of their most popular tracks. The impact of sound in recorded music, however, can only be understood within a contextual framework. Therefore, I have structured this article along three lines of inquiry. First, I explore the contextual framework through which the story of Joy Division was shaped. As noted by Mitzi Waltz and Martin James (2009), Joy Division has been marketed through two distinct approaches. Originally, Factory Records promoted the band as an authentic, self-reflexive alternative to punk rock (thereby post-punk) with a focus on the collective: ‘Factory, an imprint whose owner Tony Wilson revelled in the concept of the whole being greater than the individual, was about the concept in its entirety; individual artists were a part of the concept’ (Waltz and James 2009: 370). Later on, the remarketing of Joy Division in the 2000s, most significantly through movies and biographies, played extensively on Ian Curtis’s epilepsy and depression (read: disability) through what the authors of these vehicles saw as a construction of Romantic authenticity (ibid.: pp. 372).¹ The documentaries, biographies and movies about the band that appeared during the 2000s supply a contextual basis for investigating Joy Division from a musicological perspective. Myth formation, then, becomes a narrative construction that comprises music’s apparent relation to place (in this case, the city of Manchester) from different angles. Second, building on this contextual framework, I am keen to explore aspects of the band’s production aesthetics. Joy Division bassist Peter Hook, among others, has credited their producer Martin Hannett with the formation of their sound, and I will look at his creative use of technology in the studio in relation to the band’s relatively roughshod live performances. Third, I shall explore how what I elsewhere have conceptualised as *sonic markers* (Askerøi 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), can be identified as performative strategies in Joy Division’s music. For, although Hannett undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the band’s sound, their individual performances as formally untrained instrumentalists who were apparently governed solely by a shared creative vision would also affect their sonic output. I will examine five songs, foregrounding in particular the relationship between Ian Curtis’s vocals, the performative characteristics of the band and the production aesthetics associated with Hannett. More specifically, I shall explore aspects of Ian Curtis’ vocality, the band’s compositional structures and Hannett’s approach to studio production in a handful of their songs.

¹ See also Church (2006) for an analysis of the use of Curtis’s disability as a means of myth construction.

'MADE FOR INSTANT MYTH'

On May 18, 1980, just days before Joy Division was to set off for their first tour of the United States, lead singer Ian Curtis committed suicide. In a matter of hours, the story of a promising and inventive young group from Manchester, suddenly became the story of Ian Curtis. Fairly or not, people immediately began to locate Curtis's personal turmoil and untimely end in his lyrics (obviously) but also in the *sound* of the band. In Simon Reynolds' words, the band's fate was 'made for instant myth' (2005: 118). As he maintains in his later book *Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews*, situating the impact of Joy Division solely in Curtis's tragic demise is insufficient at best, not least because few of his acquaintances in fact knew what was really going on in Curtis's personal life at the time:

It's really only since the 1995 publication of *Touching from a Distance*, the memoirs by his widow Deborah Curtis on which [Anton Corbijn's biopic] *Control* is largely based, that the truth has become more widely known. The foundations of the group's enduring cult were laid during a fifteen-year period in which Curtis truly was an enigma, a mystery man whose reasons for departing this mortal coil remained cloudy. (Reynolds 2009: 363)

Although this knowledge about the troubled side of Ian Curtis's life has become more widely known through Deborah Curtis's memoirs, the mythical aura associated with her late husband's horrible fate still tend to monopolize the story of the band. This might be because of the contextual implications to which Reynolds refers, but it might also have something to do with Joy Division's music: 'The manner of ending sealed the deal, giving Joy Division's music an appalling gravity and—for better or worse—an undeniable authenticity' (2009: 364).

Characteristics such as 'truth' and 'purity' nonetheless permeate most writings, commentaries and movies about Joy Division. Trent Reznor, for example, says: 'There was something pure about them: it doesn't feel like marketing was involved in that sound, or manufactured hype. It was just a pure, simple, brutal, ugly thing' (Reznor, quoted in Waltz and James 2009: 371). In a similar vein, designer Peter Saville concludes Grant Gee's 2007-documentary *Joy Division* with this: 'Joy Division in particular, Factory in general: Ian's story is one of the last true stories in pop. There are very few true stories in a business-

dominated pop culture' (Saville, quoted in Gee 2007). Alongside Gee's documentary, Anton Corbijn's biopic *Control* (2007) also tells the tale of Ian Curtis first and Joy Division second, while *24 Hour Party People* (2002), based on Tony Wilson's own memoirs of the same title, offers a humorous account of the history of Factory Records, in which Joy Division plays a central part. All of these sources rely upon the narrative transformation of Ian Curtis from band member to perpetual centre of attention. Constantine Verevis has also observed how these movies focus more on Ian Curtis as the suffering and guilt-ridden protagonist than on the band. Verevis attributes this, obviously, to 'the real-life drama behind the performance' (2010: 242), but he also remarks upon the bigger picture of that performance itself, and particularly Curtis's signature fits and spasms within it.

Part of this real-life drama derives from the fact that Curtis himself was epileptic. This illness haunted him throughout his career and was severely intensifying towards the end of it. It also derives from his lyrics. According to Chris Ott, Ian Curtis wrote the lyrics for 'She's Lost Control' while he was working at the Macclesfield Employment Exchange, where an epileptic woman would often turn up: 'Curtis wrote the comparatively normal, descriptive lyrics about her, but as his own epilepsy took hold, the song grew to have awful implications, especially after he learned she'd died' (Ott 2006: 70). In this way, Curtis's personal drama is present in the lyrics but not in a directly autobiographical sense. On several occasions on the other hand, Jason Toynbee notes, Curtis was forced to leave stage or suffered attacks while onstage, both of which created uncertainty in the band's audiences:

Blurring the line between rock act and real-life affliction, he [Ian Curtis] invested Joy Division's cold presence with a frightening ambivalence. It was never clear whether the singer was having an epileptic fit, or rather simulating an attack as a way of expressing some otherwise undisclosable inner tumult. (Toynbee 2000: 34)

Curtis's presence on stage, then, was in many ways directly linked to aspects of his personal life. At the same time, if, as suggested by Reynolds (2009) as well as Waltz and James (2009), Joy Division audiences were generally unaware of the underlying 'medical truth' (Waltz and James 2009: 372), the frightening ambivalence to which Toynbee refers would have been perceived as almost otherworldly rather than immediate. This had implications for the music and, by extension, the band's sound. In live performances, Curtis's dancing derived from the dynamics of his vocal performances and grew more pronounced as the transcendent moments in their songs arrived.

Regarding this last point, it is relevant to briefly revisit a particular live performance of ‘Transmission’ from the BBC2 show *Something Else* on September 15, 1979.² Here Curtis’s vocal and gestural presence appears to be literally directing the musical dynamics (which in turn emphasizes musically his navigation between strength and vulnerability). Surrounded by his serious, deeply focused band mates, Curtis delivers a vocal performance that stands apart, literally and figuratively—a fact that is recognized by the television production team. Following the musicians in order of appearance, the camera begins by zooming out from a close-up on Peter Hook’s Hondo bass as he plays his four-bar intro.³ It then shifts to the drummer, Steven Morris, as he kicks in with a hectic semi-quaver beat, and then the guitarist, Barney Sumner, as he completes his guitar theme. First appearing after about forty-five seconds, Ian Curtis sings with his eyes half closed, proclaiming the opening words ‘Radio, live transmission’ in his calm, yet slightly unsteady baritone voice. For about two minutes, the camera devotes equal time to each musician. After a final zooming out on the whole band, however, the camera spends the last minute of the performance focused almost entirely on Curtis. After commanding the audience to ‘dance to the radio’, and just as Morris plays his first drum fill, Curtis introduces a spastic, shuddering gesture, which he then repeats. These seemingly uncontrollable twitches appear between his vocal lines, forming recurring tension-release patterns. The intensity in his vocalization builds each time, and towards the end of the song, he is screaming his command. Though his spastic body movements do not correspond rhythmically with the main pulse of the music, they do coincide with the drum fills as bass and guitar continue the song’s D-C chord progression. Curtis’s physical disruption of the band’s steady, driving pulse and reserved presence monopolizes audiovisual attention. He at once leads and follows, in the sense that he appears always on the verge of losing control as a result of the music and/or his own contribution to it.

While acknowledging that Joy Division was contingent on a compelling construction of its singer’s authorship, we must also measure that construction against (and in competition with) an equally compelling backdrop—that is, the city of Manchester. What, then, makes Manchester such an evocative context for Joy Division’s music? In his book *Manchester: The*

² This live performance is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZwMs2fLoVE> (date accessed: September 12, 2020).

³ Hondo made affordable copies of the famous Rickenbacker 4001 bass, allowing for Hook to buy himself a bass despite a poor economic situation. In the movies, however, Hook’s impersonators play Rickenbackers.

Story of a Pop Cult City, Dave Haslam (1999) compares the sonic characteristics of *Unknown Pleasures* to life in Manchester in the late 1970s:

Through the first album there was an unsettling battle between the controlling drums, the rippling bass, the downplayed monotone vocals, and the flailing guitars straining in and out of the mix. It was like a soundtrack to the aftermath of some urban disaster; which was presumably why it connected so strongly with life in Manchester, England. (Haslam 1999: 125f)

As the stories about Joy Division became conflated with ‘truths’ about the band and its hometown through the media, a host of contextual factors were associated with musical traits in ways that affected the legacy of the band and the story of that place—the latter of which Andy Bennett (2002) labels the *urban mythscape*. Bennett introduced this term to describe the romanticized notion of place that results from the decontextualisation of cultural signifiers. Empirically focused on the signature sound associated with Canterbury, Bennett illustrates how the transformation of a physical landscape into a mythscape involves a three-stage process that is centred on Appadurai’s idea of the mediascape as a ‘product of the electronic dissemination of information around the world’ (Bennett 2002: 89). According to Bennett, the mediascape ‘offers individuals the potential to construct particular, and often highly romantic, ideas and images concerning the nature of places’ (Bennett 2002: 89). The remarketing of Joy Division in the 2000s exists within such a mediascape. As argued above, the movies and documentaries about the band provide different versions of the truth about it. The subsequent transformation from mediascape to mythscape reengages the band’s context along the way:

Decontextualized images and information are recontextualized by audiences into new ways of thinking about and imagining places—the result of which is a *mythscape*. The mythscape in turn begins to take on a life of its own—stories, discussions and anecdotes being linked to a place entirely in relation to that place’s representation as a mythscape. (Bennett 2002: 89)

One example of this process can be found in Grant Gee’s documentary *Joy Division*, where several connections are made between Manchester and the band’s sound—connections that serve to strengthen both the city and the band’s mythological position. Paul Morley, for example, describes Joy Division’s music as ‘a science fiction interpretation of Manchester.

You could recognize the landscape and the mindscape and the soundscape as being Manchester. It was extraordinary that they'd managed to make Manchester international, if you like, make Manchester cosmic' (Morley, quoted in Gee 2007: 34:04). Here, Morley emphasizes the importance of Joy Division's music in the process of rebuilding Manchester as one of the UK's main centres for musical innovation.

Jon Savage, journalist and screenwriter for the documentary, goes even further in emphasizing how sonic aspects of the band's performance and production can be related specifically to Manchester:

Joy Division's spatial, circular themes and Martin Hannett's shiny, waking-dream production gloss are one perfect reflection of Manchester's dark spaces and empty places, endless sodium lights and hidden semis seen from a speeding car, vacant industrial sites—the endless detritus of the 19th century—seen gaping like rotten teeth from an orange bus. (Savage, quoted in Gee 2007)

Both Morley and Savage seem to be suggesting some immanent quality in the band's sound that evokes the city—some necessary connection, that is, between life in Manchester in the late 1970s and the music of Joy Division. The 'spatial, circular themes' that Savage regards as characteristic of Joy Division's sound apparently supply an audible link to the band's place of origin. While such a distinct way of sound tracking Manchester might be relevant to people acquainted with conditions in the city in the late 1970s, it does not necessarily explain Joy Division's global impact, however international Manchester became in their wake. Lest we forget, of course, both Morley and Savage were close to the band and well aware of the context in which they operated. In this regard, although Savage makes his claim without further demonstration of it, the fact he is compelled to link music and place in the first place says a lot about the process through which musical characteristics become identifiable as sonic markers of place thanks to particular historical episodes. It is through this narrative's dependency on Manchester as a contextual backdrop that Bennett's concept of the mythscape becomes applicable to the story of Joy Division. Moreover, while decontextualization works as a basis for Bennett's concept of the mythscape with reference to the Canterbury sound, the myth about Manchester seems to derive instead from a *hyper*-contextualization of Joy Division's music. Peter Webb concludes that a theoretical understanding of the development of particular musical milieus can be achieved only by 'tracing their individual histories and movements across and through different spaces of musical, artistic and aesthetic development,

and [looking at] how the narrative of each particular milieu became entwined and utilized in their music' (Webb 2004: 80).

As argued so far, contextual and biographical factors undoubtedly play a vital role in the story of Joy Division, a story that is *also* continuously linked to aspects of the band's music, largely because their contemporaneous witnesses—designers, producers and writers—instinctively connect contextual factors and biographical details to a specific sonic potential in the music. I am not arguing against any of these observers, but I am keen to demonstrate how this sonic potential converts to sonic markers in Joy Division's music. For, as Reynolds reminds us, 'Ultimately it's the music that keeps any of us still enthralled, nearly three decades on' (Reynolds 2009: 366). Although historic live recordings are made available on YouTube, it is perhaps still the studio recordings that form the basis for understanding their characteristic sound. Bennett's model goes far in suggesting new ways of understanding how music, through sonic markers, plays a role in narrative constructions. As initiated by Haslam, Morley, Reynolds and Savage, the correlation between Joy Division and a local knowledge about Manchester can be traced to a relationship between the spatiality in the music (a sonic marker) and the notion of space associated with post-industrial Manchester (the mythscape). In other words, Joy Division's characteristic *sound* has also played a major role in this myth formation. But what is it that characterizes their sound and why does it fit so well with the common impression of Manchester at the time? This will be the subject of the next three sections of this article.

PERFORMATIVE TEMPERAMENT AND PECULIARITIES

In popular music, artists must manoeuvre between the deeply personal and the powerfully idealized, or, as Jason Toynbee suggests, between 'being ordinary, typically of the people, and being marvellous, showing what life could be like 'if only'' (Toynbee 2000: x). As argued so far in this article, this form of navigation is very relevant to the story of Ian Curtis and Joy Division. I will now investigate whether it is likewise linked to the way in which Curtis appears to direct the dynamic progressions in the band's songs. The argument in the following section, then, is that Curtis's vocal temperament or vocalization appears to have a profound effect on the music, both aesthetically and dynamically.

Singers produce particularly contested performances in this regard, because, as Stan Hawkins notes, 'It is through the voice that we get in touch with the artist first on an intimate level' (Hawkins 2009: 124). In his book *The British Pop Dandy*, Hawkins conceptualizes the 'temperamental peculiarities' of the act of vocalization in order to explain the intimacy that

can arise between singer and audience. Hawkins theorizes vocalization as ‘a prime mediator of identity construction, connoting subjectivity through regularized norms that become the trademark of the artist’ (Hawkins 2009: 124). At the same time, the aesthetic effect of temperament must be historically located. Building on the writings of Charles Baudelaire, Hawkins argues that ‘when artistic originality is rooted in temperament, its aesthetic appeal always stands in relation to a wider historical relativity’ (Hawkins 2009: 40). Regularized norms in the sense of vocal temperament would thus be identifiable through the ways in which characteristic markers of vocal expressions are appropriated to the extent that they become part of a musical vocabulary. The aesthetic appeal of Ian Curtis’s vocalization must therefore be interpreted in a historical and biographical context. As listeners today, we are aware of the medical truths behind his problems, and, most importantly, we also know the tragic outcome of his life story.

The sensibility of Curtis’s voice—which I have referred to as the biographical presence in the voice—is, on the one hand, mediated through the singer’s apparent attitude, temperament and degree of presence in that voice. On the other hand, although the voice figures as the prime mediator of the subjectivity of its *owner*, the band matters too. At the same time his primary focus falls on the voice and its peculiarities, Hawkins also demonstrates, with reference to the work of Antony Hegarty, how the affective qualities of vocalization are also defined through generic choice—that is, the choice of musical genre through which the voice is conveyed. The question of pitch, for example, would seem to be completely dependent upon aspects of the performance and production of the music:

For generic choice is all-defining and . . . Hegarty’s tendency towards “torch song” is significant as it is . . . appropriated by a number of gay singers. Conversely, the tautness of vocality, produced by the stridency of a falsetto tone, in much heavy metal is suggestive of the phallocentricity associated with conventional masculinity.

(Hawkins 2009: 122)

Certainly, the effect of vocal register (baritone versus falsetto) is more or less overruled by the choice of musical genre: Hegarty’s baritone voice is conveyed through ‘torch songs’, a choice that reinforces his gendered ambiguity, as torch songs are often considered to be a ‘female’ genre. The falsetto tone, on the other hand, situated well within the domain of the female vocal register, ends up as a marker of masculinity due to its generic placement in heavy metal. Temperament, then, exists in the domain of vocalization but is also mediated through a

dialogue with the music as a whole, via generic choice. Pop artists use the context of the pop song to frame their pop singing (and, by extension, their pop identities), and this negotiation is as various as the songs themselves.

In addition to Hawkins's model for evaluating how music can serve as a catalyst for gendered ambiguity, other scholars have conceptualized similar relational strategies on a more general level. Allan F. Moore (2005) suggests replacing the dichotomy of melody and accompaniment with that of *persona* and *environment*, so as to acknowledge the narrative function of music as a product of *all* of the related sound sources. Through a range of examples, Moore observes how the entire sonic environment, including the production, contributes to the meaning of a song and the persona of its artist. Referring to the sound quality of John Lennon's piano on 'Imagine' Moore notes: 'The sonically unfocused quality of the production of the instrument's sound supports a similar fuzziness in the singer's ideology, which has contributed to the debates about the degree of realism, and the self-delusion, which surround Lennon's song' (Moore 2005: 9). Likewise, in the Rolling Stones song 'Satisfaction', the non-resolving I-IV chord progression underpins Mick Jagger's inability to feel satisfied. The environment may also contradict the persona, although Moore does not provide concrete examples of contradiction in his article. Yet, as discussed earlier, Hawkins observes a remarkable contrast between the dark narrative of the lyrics and pictures and the euphoric energy of the music in the Cure's 'Just Like Heaven' (Hawkins 2009: 83). In this regard, the generic choice, or environment, does not have to simply echo the singer but instead can serve a wide range of narrative purposes in a recording. Temperamental peculiarities, in short, emerge from the *relationship* between singer and song.

In Joy Division's music, such peculiarities emerge from a sort of *untrainedness*. As we will continue to see in the analysis section, this is an overall sensibility that can be traced to the performances of each band member. But that is not all—the sense of *agency* actualized by such untrained performances must be refracted by an aesthetic framework that allows for such peculiarities to have an effect. These frameworks encompass Hawkins's *generic choice* and Moore's *sonic environment*. On this basis, then, I pose the question: how do generic choices provide an environment for conveying Curtis's persona? With Joy Division, the band's generic choice must be read against its relation to, but most importantly its departure from, punk. Matthew Bannister insists that both punk and post-punk were reactions to a paradigmatic set of notions that seems to have governed the music scene at the time:

Of course, it was these very paradigms—rock as progressive, as art, as “sterile” studio perfectionism—which punk and post-punk music was reacting against with its “back to basics” approach. However, such an approach could easily blend into existing ideologies of artistic distinction; for example the post-punk musician could be represented as being relatively autonomous from market demands, and thereby more of an artist. (Bannister 2006: 36)

By decontextualizing some of punk’s characteristic trademarks, Joy Division reshaped them into sonic markers of a deeper emotional sensibility. In other words, the band members transcended punk and created something of greater complexity through their appropriation of musical codes that became identifiable markers of their generic choice. Arguing this point, Wilson notes that post-punk in general, and Joy Division in particular, contributed to a refinement of punk’s DIY attitude:

Punk enabled you to say ‘Fuck You’. But somehow it couldn’t go any further. It was just a single venom, a one-syllable, two-syllable phrase of anger, which was necessary to reignite rock & roll. But sooner or later, someone was going to say more than “Fuck you”. Someone was going to want to say, ‘I’m fucked’. And it was Joy Division who were the first band to do that. They used the energy and simplicity of punk to express more complex emotions. (Wilson, quoted in Gee 2007)

Both Wilson and Bannister note that post-punk is often associated with a higher cultural status than punk, despite their common ground. Joy Division would appropriate punk’s attitude, energy and simplicity but express something different and perhaps subtler, and the difference is audible. Early songs such as ‘Warsaw’ and ‘Digital’ would serve as examples of punk translated into post-punk through the preservation of generic traits but the alteration of the attitude through voice and lyrics.

Originally released on the Factory Records compilation album *A Factory Sample* in December 1978, ‘Digital’ was the first song Joy Division recorded with Martin Hannett. In many ways, it marks Joy Division’s first step away from punk and towards a signature sound. Although the tempo of the song might seem relatively quick compared to later tracks (168 beats per minute (BPM)), some distinct style traits include its simple, punk-derived I-IV chord progression and its overall structure built upon slight variations of a characteristic bass motif (Figure 1).

able to project in his mind what it could be' (Saville, quoted in Gee 2007). Yet space is a challenging term in music, particularly with regard to sonic markers. Peter Wicke (2009) emphasizes the longtime presence of spatiality in music composition, from the sizes and layouts of church buildings and concert halls to the character of the recording studio. In pop music, it was the development of tape technology that first introduced spatiality as a tool for composition: 'With electromagnetic sound storage . . . it became possible to inscribe this dimension in the very medium of sound and, combined with echo and reverb, to fix it there as a design feature' (Wicke 2010: 157). Recording technology went through a tremendous phase of development after World War II. Jason Toynbee (2000), among others, observes how the idea of a *signature sound* became a viable means of identifying those stylistic traits that were particularly associated with individual studios or producers. Phil Spector's signature 'wall of sound', for example, derived from a specific construction (and use) of space during the recording process: 'The key factor in Spector productions was precisely a lack of isolation between the discrete sound sources' (Toynbee 2000: 88).

Unlike Spector, Hannett very much favoured discrete sounds. According to Reynolds, '[He] demanded totally clean and clear "sound separation", not just for individual instruments, but even down to each element of the drum kit' (Reynolds 2005: 184). Steven Morris recalls: 'Typically on tracks he considered to be potential singles, he'd get me to play each drum on its own to avoid any bleed-through of sound' (Steven Morris, quoted in Reynolds 2005: 184). This had a significant effect on both performance practice and final product—for one thing, it contributed to the impression that Morris played like a machine, because it was simply not natural to the young drummer to play just one drum at the time, without having the rest of the drum kit to stabilize his patterns. On the production side, this sound separation allowed Hannett to add significant amounts of reverb or delay to individual elements, such as the snare drum or the vocals, without affecting the rest of the mix (this, as I will return to later, is particularly evident on songs like 'Disorder' and 'She's Lost Control').

Thus, a particular recording quirk involving the drums adds an affective quality to the aesthetic environment of the entire song. On several tracks, the snare drum is delayed by reverberation, but this delay does not quite connect to the actual snare drum strokes, producing a sense of detachment. In an interview with Jon Savage for the British music magazine *Mojo* in 1994, Hannett emphasized two preconditions, which defined his role as Joy Division's producer. First, he pointed out that the band members had no knowledge of studio production: 'When I did the arrangements for recording, they were just reinforcing the basic ideas. They were a gift to a producer, because they didn't have a clue. They didn't argue'

(Hannett, quoted in Savage 1994: 3). Second, he points to the AMS Digital Delay (hereafter simply AMS), a technological artifact upon which he depended (and to which he had even contributed): ‘The *Factory Sample* was the first thing I did with them: I think I’d had the new AMS delay line for about two weeks. It was called digital; it was heaven sent’ (Hannett, quoted in Savage 1994: 3).⁴

By refining the band’s sonic raw materials, Hannett played a major part in constructing its characteristic sound. Though each band member was both formally untrained and pointedly stylized in their performance practice, Hannett’s production brought with it both considerable polish and a technological aloofness that complemented the band’s native immediacy.⁵ Through the process of recording, Joy Division’s music and sound were purposefully shaped, but without undermining the band’s attitude, temperament or presence. As I will demonstrate in the following section, this removes songs like ‘Disorder’, ‘She’s Lost Control’, ‘Transmission’ and ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ from the realm of punk without situating them anywhere else in particular—musically, Joy Division is just Joy Division—yet filling them with a sense of place regardless. The coldness associated with the effect of one specific technological artifact, the AMS, evokes the socio-political conditions in Manchester in the late 1970s. It also added distance and detachment to the music itself, which resonated with the personal and professional proclivities of Ian Curtis and the other band members. Having identified sonic markers at the level of production aesthetics, I shall now turn to how this relates to matters of personal style, through close readings of four musical examples.

CONSTRUCTING DIFFERENCE—MUSICAL ANALYSES

Reynolds insists, ‘Joy Division’s originality really became apparent once they slowed down’ (Reynolds 2005: 110), referring specifically to the point at which the band started collaborating with Martin Hannett. This statement also evokes the musical parameter through which Joy Division departed from punk acts like the Sex Pistols and the Buzzcocks, which in fact transcends tempo alone—compare the tempo of the Sex Pistols’ ‘God Save the Queen’

⁴ AMS-Neve introduced their digital delay in 1978 as the first microprocessor-controlled delay machine. For more details on this machine, see <http://www.ams-neve.com/about-us/History/The70s/70s.aspx> (date accessed: March 16, 2012).

⁵ Stan Hawkins (2009: 135–38), for example, addresses the question of “polished untrainedness” and its potential for mobilising empathy with the audience in his discussion of Pete Doherty’s “Albion”.

(about 150 BPM) to Joy Division's 'Disorder' (171 BPM), for example. It is instead a new expressive dimension in performance that makes Reynolds draw this conclusion, as we will see from the following analyses.

'Disorder' (*Unknown Pleasures*, June 1979)

'Disorder' was the opening track on *Unknown Pleasures* and represents another example of the band's signature repetitive, motivic weaving and a dynamic progression initiated by Curtis's vocal styling. At the aforementioned relatively high tempo (171 BPM), the song constructs a sense of musical untrainedness already from its opening snare double-strike on the fourth beat of a bar which would come before the opening of the four bar intro drum phrase (an anacrusis, in other words). The effect is rather as if the producer had pushed the record button a bit too late. Sonically, the drum kit sounds quite 'dry' (untreated, that is), but there is a delay on the snare drum that causes it to linger in the right speaker channel. The prolonged sustain, soon both spatially and temporally detached from the original sound source (the snare drum), provides the song with an arguable sense of industrial space right from the beginning. After what could be counted as three-quarters plus three plus one-half bars, the bass commences a driving four-bar motif that progresses from Eb to G, down to Bb for one bar and back to G again. Although focused on the ground-notes of the song's chord progression, all the notes are played on the same string. The sliding between the notes attests to this, and further underlines the large leaps between the notes.



Figure 2: 'Disorder' (171 BPM): Motivic weaving (00:18–00:23).

Hook's trebled bass sounds slightly distorted but features a timbre nevertheless that seems to emerge directly from his energetic performance—one that is free of the compression provided by a bass amplifier—which adds to the band's perceived DIY aesthetic. Accidentally, Hook hits two strings simultaneously at one point, but this “mistake” only adds to the energy of the recording. Rhythmically, the quarter notes that begin every bar in the bass are emphasized to such an extent that the following quavers are slightly pushed together, further contributing to the sense of untrainedness in Hook's playing. Hannett's so-called secret weapon, the AMS Digital Delay, appears as a separate effect—almost as an additional instrument of sorts—through a feedback wave in the sixth bar.⁶ This would add to the music's sense of spatiality, as earlier described by Savage, and thus potentially supply a link to Manchester as the recording's contextual backdrop.

After eight bars of drums and bass, Bernard Sumner's electric guitar simultaneously contradicts and complements the bass line both tonally and timbrally by adding an alternating fifth and octave motif (Figure 2) that is heard with a sharp, metallic distortion. In addition, the pattern established between the hi-hat cymbals and the guitar creates a rhythmic tension as well.



Figure 3: 'Disorder': Bass turnaround (00:52–00:54).

The only major change in the song's form comes after the first verse, when the bass supplies a two-bar turnaround (Figure 3). When the bass returns to the same pattern, the guitar theme starts on the opposite chord from the vocals—almost as if by chance. As Curtis begins the

⁶ For lack of a better term, I use 'feedback wave' to describe the way in which a delay processor generates a feedback loop. On analogue equipment, such as the Roland RE-201 Space Echo and similar devices, this wave can be generated by setting the repeat rate to full in order to generate the feedback; the intensity knob helps in controlling the pitch.

second verse, then, the guitar motif is positioned contrary to how it was in the first verse. This happens without confusing the harmonic foundation of the song. In general, the impression is that even though each element is in fact carefully prepared, they appear to arrive at random. In this way, even as the motifs remain the same, the slight dislocations among them reinforce the sense of detachment initially suggested by the lyrics and vocal performance. ‘Disorder’, then, simplistic as it might appear, in fact demonstrates a form that is relatively detailed. While the instrumental motifs in themselves might come across as quite simple, they are brought together in a variety of patterns around Curtis’s voice. In effect, then, this type of *motivic weaving* of these untrained, repeated performances supplies a detached, industrial environment for Curtis’s vocalization.

‘She’s Lost Control’ (Unknown Pleasures, June 1979)

In ‘She’s Lost Control’, Moore’s conception of *environment* (Moore 2005) best describes the double dimension of the accompaniment—that is, the band’s post-punk musical aesthetic and Curtis’s uninflected singing and overwrought performance style. The song is built around Peter Hook’s four-bar melodic bass riff (Figure 4). In the choruses, the guitar contradicts the bass line by moving upwards from the tonic, and its distorted, sharp sound and contrapuntal motion add to the general instability of the arrangement.



Figure 4: ‘She’s Lost Control’ (145 BPM): Bass motif (00:11–00:18).

Apart from the signature bass line and the electronically filtered snare drum sound, the most significant sonic marker in this song is the extensive application of delay on the vocals and its corresponding impact upon Curtis’s compelling biographical presence.⁷ As Peter Doyle

⁷ I am working with the album version of the song, not the twelve-inch version that is included on most compilations. The latter is a bit longer, and the use of effects on vocals and drums has been toned down significantly.

observes, ‘Echo suggests at once the possibility of a deep, extended reciprocity between the self and the world, just as it indicates a total imprisonment of selfhood’ (Doyle 2005: 32). Processing vocals with echo or delay was not a new thing in 1979, of course. In fact, as Doyle further observes, the use of echo, and particularly the slap-echo, in the 1950s became a trademark for recording studios such as Sun and Chess. At the same time, altering the voice with various effects has always made a strong impression on audiences. For example, I would argue that delay had a pronounced effect on Ian Curtis’s already laconic vocal delivery in the way it practically smears the mix with the sustain of his voice. In particular, the word ‘control’ receives extended treatment, as to dispel any doubt that ‘she’ has, in fact, ‘lost’ it. Sometimes sustain is panned from left to right and back across the soundscape. Other times, Hannett purposely reduces the tempo of the delay, gradually pitching down the voice. In terms of Curtis, then, the effect of this delay is to exacerbate his alienation, from society and even from his own band. In the context of the repeating motivic weaving of the instruments and the eerie narrative presented in the lyrics, the result evokes Doyle’s description of a ‘total imprisonment’ of his own selfhood, if not in a literary sense then in a musical and technological sense.

‘Transmission’ (non-album single, November 1979)

Another example of motivic weaving appears on the non-album single ‘Transmission’ (1979).⁸ Establishing the tone and tempo for the song in his four-bar bass intro, Hook this time presents a ‘ground bass’-type line. As in ‘Disorder’, Hannett processes the snare drum with a delay that lingers in the right speaker. The delay’s attack kicks in on the offbeat, establishing a sense of space in an otherwise dry soundscape. In ‘Transmission’, the bass playing might read as somewhat less melodic than the thematic line from ‘She’s Lost Control’, and the processing of the snare drum is not pushed to the levels of ‘Disorder’. At the same time, the repetition and intertwining of instrumental motives construct an identifiable sonic marker (Figure 5), giving form and dynamic progression a major role once again in this song. As discussed earlier in relation to the television performance, this song’s form is a good example of a long dynamic build-up, which Curtis dictates through his singing and specifically his heated dialogue with the electric guitar. ‘Transmission’ came out in 1979, and

⁸ Joy Division’s singles were not included on the full-length albums, and, apart from collector’s copies of the original singles themselves, these songs are only available on compilation albums.

I would argue that it thoroughly establishes this form of dynamic progression as a tendency, or a sonic marker, in Joy Division's music.



Figure 5: 'Transmission' (157 BPM): Motivic weaving of electric guitar, bass and drums (00:14–00:19).

This build-up is introduced by another electric guitar and intensified slightly as a synthesizer pad sneaks in on the ground note. Concluding the second verse with the words 'touching from a distance, further all the time', Curtis leaves the stage as Sumner begins his sixteen-bar guitar motif. Based upon a straightforward tonal and rhythmic structure, the solo does feature a particularly distorted sound that underpins the spacious sensibility already established, to some extent, by the delay on the snare drum. Midway through the solo, another electric guitar sound further builds tension by emphasizing the first beat of every bar. Then, when Curtis re-enters with his command, the ground has been prepared for an ever escalating moment of transcendence: 'Dance, dance, dance, dance to the radio', he shouts, first repeating the line twice on the fifth, and then, accompanied by his band mates, singing it on the ground note above. The third verse stays in this register, a tonal choice that contributes to an intensification of the dynamic progression, not only because the note itself is in a higher register than the previous verses but also because it seems as though Curtis's voice is gradually reaching its limits. At the end of the verse in the recorded version, as in the television performance, Curtis is actually screaming the words. He seems desperate to command the audience to dance, and at the same time he is almost swallowed up by the band behind him before the song ultimately dies out over a slowing drumbeat.

'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (non-album single, July 1980)

'Love Will Tear Us Apart' has become the most popular of Joy Division's songs. Released less than two months after Curtis's tragic demise, the song peaked at number thirteen on the UK singles charts. Musically, it is built around Peter Hook's characteristic two-string bass motif over a semiquaver focused drumbeat with a four-on-the-floor bass drum. This easily recognizable melody persists in the bass throughout the song, while Barney Sumner plays string synthesizer atop it, altering between doubling the melody in the choruses (Figure 6) and supplying a ground-fifth-octave line on the verses. In this way, the song's dynamic variations are not left solely to Curtis's vocalization, as seems to have been the case with the songs discussed earlier.

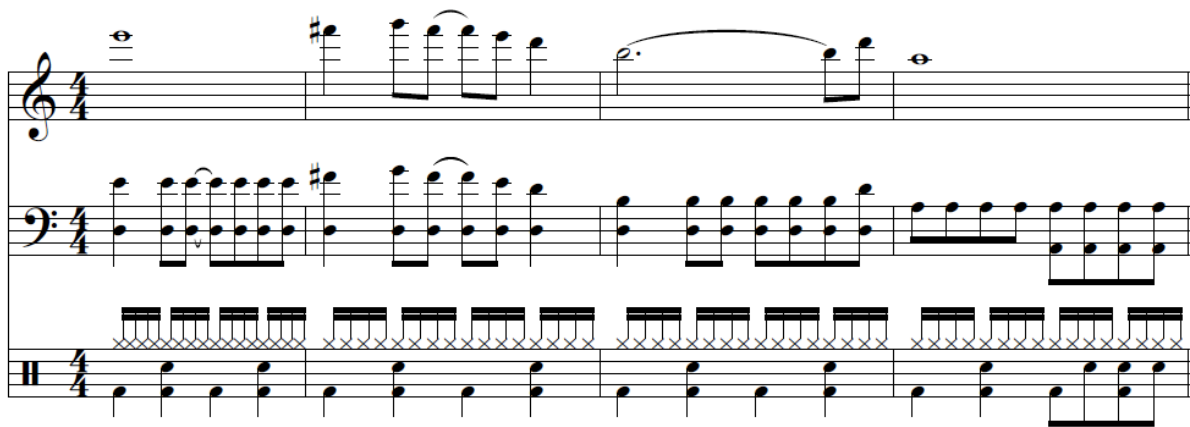


Figure 6: 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (148 BPM): Synthesizer, bass and drums (00:13–00:19).

Despite the clarity of the rhythm section parts, the harmonic progression of the song remains purposely vague, which introduces tension—in particular, its repeated choral cadences do not resolve to a tonic until the end of the song. Likewise, the melody starts on an E in the octave above the open D-string on the bass guitar, implying an open 9 (or sus2) chord. Indeed, this interval creates a tension that appears to demand release at some stage of the song. Rather than providing this release, however, the bass guitar constantly pushes downward via a minor VI chord to the dominant V. The final tonic (I) is in fact not reached until the very end, providing a final release to the tension built up both harmonically and dynamically during the course of the song. This harmonic structure is perhaps the compositional key to its long-lasting success. At the same time, its immediate reception would, of course, be closely related

to the tragic events thirteen days prior to its release. In this light, Curtis's vocalization also provides the song with an eerie biographical presence.

This presence becomes especially prominent through the crooning manner in which Curtis delivers the vocal line in the choruses. Rather than intensifying the dynamic progression of the song, as was the case in earlier examples, Curtis here does something decidedly different. In light of the contextual circumstances and Curtis's usual dynamic delivery, however, this stylistic suggestion of crooning becomes a marker of passion rather than an act of homage to a particular singing style. The first hint of this passionate display comes when he slides up to the melody's starting note from the half note below. 'Love, love will tear us apart—again', he sings, reinforcing his impression here through a slight vibrato at the end of each repetition of 'love'. This delivery recalls Hawkins's concept of pop dandy Morrissey: 'Crooning is a key aesthetic marker in Morrissey's style, which extracts themes of suffering, misery and despair' (Hawkins 2011: 316). However, while Morrissey uses crooning to evoke empathy (and thereby manipulate his audience), Curtis uses it, like David Bowie and Jim Morrison (two of his major influences—see Curtis 1995), to set up contrasts within his songs. Yet the sarcasm that inspired Bowie and Morrison, however, is less present in Curtis's performance. According to Hawkins, Bowie's vocal exaggerations always represented a playfulness that displays his subjectivity in a camp fashion: 'Often with pointed irony, Bowie lets his fans know why he is assuming a new role, as he revels in borrowed styles, mocking the pretensions of this as something trivial' (Hawkins 2009: 150ff). Curtis, on the other hand, rejects camp for an earnestness that informs his singing (crooned or otherwise), the music (through its sense of untrainedness and its pointed repetition) and ultimately his entire identity.

Taken together, these songs present creative solutions to disparate styles of performance that, in Joy Division's case, result in a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Drummer Stephen Morris sounds relatively frenetic, thanks to his hasty hi-hat semiquavers and slightly pushy snare drum over a tight, punchy bass drum. Bernard Sumner favors a raw guitar style characterized by down strokes and a sharp, metallic sound. These elements contribute aesthetically to a sense of coldness in the band's recordings but also contribute to the aforementioned sense of untrainedness that is one of Joy Division's most significant sonic trademarks.⁹ Simon Reynolds has described this guitar sound as follows:

⁹ Sumner's main guitars were a Gibson SG and a Shergold Custom Masquerader. These guitars, especially the SG, are known for the combination of lightweight bodies and humbucker pickups. There is less sustain to these

‘Rather than the invulnerable “Iron Man”, Barney Sumner’s guitar evokes the wounded, penetrable metal of *Crash*—twisted, buckled, splayed, torn’ (Reynolds 2005: 180).¹⁰ Peter Hook’s bass lines perhaps contribute most to Joy Division’s signature sound—at once rhythmically driving and recognizably melodic, they represent prominent instrumental markers of musical identity (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Characteristic rhythmic pattern of Peter Hook’s bass playing.

Variations on this pattern usually come in the form of syncopated notes within the bar, while the first note is almost without exception a crotchet or, on occasion, a half note. Syncopations, in addition, usually only occur as the result of melodic or motivic changes. Hook also plays with a plectrum using down strokes. With its roots in punk, this playing style signals the untrained musician, as opposed to more ‘educated’ forms of alternate picking, which demanded a higher level of technical skill. This is not to say that the band was not capable of playing their instruments. Rather it is worth noting how the effect of this playing style signifies untrainedness as a marker of authenticity, and how this, through a range of contextual implications, contributes to mobilizing empathy with the audience.

guitars than to the Gibson Les Paul, for example. For more information on Joy Division’s equipment, see <http://www.joydiv.org/eqpt.htm>.

¹⁰ James Graham Ballard’s novel *Crash* (1973) has become a cult novel and was also read by Curtis. For further discussion of this novel in relation to Joy Division, see, for example, Oksanen (2007), who describes this book as ‘an excellent example of how the feeling of the Gothic uncanny pervades late modern societies: the fantasies of dead celebrities, the media presence of accidents and estrangement of the subject to the extent that death becomes a medium of life’ (Oksanen 2007: 129).

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have extracted sonic markers, both technological and musical, that help to construct Joy Division's musical identity. Joy Division has been mythologized through their utterly unique musical transcendence of punk, their oddly powerful evocation of their hometown, and the tragic star narrative of their lead singer, Ian Curtis. All of these contributions are traceable in the sonic markers that appear in their music. In order to demonstrate how this works, I have discussed one particular live recording and four studio recordings. What makes Joy Division a challenging case study is that all of these separate elements intertwine so complexly. While the goal of this article has not been to break down or destroy the story of the band, I have nevertheless tried to unpack the complex processes at work in the formation of its musical identity, and how this was so strongly linked to their music.

On the one hand, it was particularly challenging to separate life from work here, and thus it was hard to penetrate the carefully constructed mythscape around which the whole narrative has been built. On the other hand, this is exactly what makes Joy Division such a relevant case study for the development of sonic markers as an analytical model. My main argument has been that sonic markers are constructed thanks to different forms of appropriation or re-contextualization of musical codes. In Joy Division's case, the construction and use of sonic markers can be identified in two parts of the band's narrative. First, Joy Division built their sonic image in reference to the preceding wave of punk. In this way, one could argue that the band appropriated sonic markers of punk in order to communicate something more complex, and at the same time keep its relation to punk intact. Second, Joy Division's music has been held by many to represent sonically a specific period in the history of Manchester. In this way, the musical analyses in this article reveal a potential for certain criteria to hold clues to identifiable characteristics of Joy Division's sound:

- ***Tempo***: A relatively high tempo, often between 140 and 171 BPM, characterizes most of Joy Division's songs. Tempo is relevant both because of its impact in punk and because other criteria than tempo alone in fact create the sensibility that Joy Division slowed down the pace of punk.
- ***Characteristic motifs***: Joy Division's songs are often built around repetitive instrumental motifs, and the interweaving of these motifs can be identified as a characteristic compositional trait, or a sonic marker.

- **Harmonic centre:** This points to the relevance of Peter Hook's bass playing to the band's music-making process. Hook's motifs would often have a melody on top and an open string (often the D string).
- **Instrumentation:** In this case, a conventional band line-up filled out with relatively untrained musicians, as indicated by the "looseness" of their performances.
- **Studio effects/techniques:** The use of studio effects, particularly digital delay, is a crucial element in the construction of Joy Division's sound.
- **Intensity level/dynamic progression:** In particular, this criterion engages Ian Curtis's performance practice.

In the context of this band and its larger myth, Hook's bass lines, Sumner's unpolished guitar style and sound, and Morris's frenetic drumming all announce untrainedness, which in turn becomes an important part of Joy Division's performance strategy. The short, motivic patterns persistently repeated by the band are woven together around Curtis's vocal temperament and manic lyrics. Sometimes he sounds as if he is trapped in these non-resolving, repetitive harmonic and rhythmic patterns, but then he always escapes, propelling the song forward to its semantic climaxes through the quirks and extremities of his performance. In this way, Curtis's temperament alone dictates the dynamic progression of the music, and his subjective peculiarities (and the band's projected untrainedness) come across as markers of intensity. These elements found their way to a larger audience in part thanks to the ways in which Hannett refined the sonic raw materials in the studio. Musically, then, form and dynamic progressions come over as being dictated by Curtis's vocal temperament. The constant repetition (circular themes) of the band then reinforces a sense of emotional detachment. Ultimately, all of these factors together contribute to the construction of an exceptionally durable myth.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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