Manchester, 1976: Documenting the urban nature of Joy Division’s musical production

ABSTRACT
Whereas the band Joy Division (Unknown Pleasures, 1979; Closer, 1980) is widely recognized as one of the foundations of the style of music known as post-punk, their music speaks also to the nature of contemporary urban life. Melding both cultural analysis and urban theory, this article first unpacks the urban reading of the band presented in the recent underappreciated documentary Joy Division by director Grant Gee (2007) – whose emphasis on the band’s connection to and representation of Manchester has gone relatively unnoticed by critics. Subsequently, following Gee’s urban contextualization of the band (evident in both the documentary’s form and content), the article then approaches Joy Division’s musical production itself through a range of urban theories (Georg Simmel, Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Friedrich Engels, Andy Merrifield, Marc Augé, Jane Jacobs, David Harvey, Guy Debord/the Situationists, Jacob Riis). In the end, while undoubtedly of interest also for frontman Ian Curtis’s epilepsy and tragic suicide, Joy Division’s music speaks more broadly to the influence the modern city has exercised
INTRODUCTION

I don’t see this as the story of a pop group, I see this as the story of a city that once upon a time was shiny and bold and revolutionary and then suddenly thirty odd years later is shiny and revolutionary all over again. And at the heart of this transformation is a bunch of groups and one group in particular.

(Director Grant Gee, voice-over from the second minute of his Joy Division documentary)

Merely from watching the initial two minutes of Grant Gee’s 2007 documentary chronicling Joy Division’s ‘meteoric rise and fall’ it is evident that the film’s director is intent on subjecting the band and its musical production to an urban reading. First, the film opens with a black screen featuring an unexpected quotation in white from a foundational work of contemporary urban cultural studies, Marshall Berman’s All That Is Solid Melts Into Air:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.

([1982] 1988)

Berman notably pursued a vision of modernity that was not only inflected by Marxian thought (the title of his book is lifted from an oft-cited passage in the Communist Manifesto) but that was also in tune with the extension of contemporary neo-Marxism into the importance of the city (Lefebvre, Harvey), reading works of literature against their urban contexts. Just as would its counterpart in a written text, this cinematic-epigraph foregrounding Berman’s description of a chaotic modernity definitively directs the reception of this visual work, commanding the viewer to make sense of the documentary from an urban perspective.

Second – on the heels of the Berman quotation – the apocalyptic tone of the film’s carefully edited if sparse sounds (which evoke the collision of building materials) is compounded by another explicitly urban reference through an audio clip introduced after the cinematic-epigraph has faded away – a disembodied voice that speaks slowly while instrumental music gains in volume:

Oh, God, grant us a vision of our city, fair she might be; a city of justice, where none shall prey on others; a city of plenty where vice and poverty shall cease to fester; a city of brotherhood where all success shall be founded on service, and honor shall be given to nobleness alone; a city of peace, where order shall not rest on force, but on the love of all for the city, the great mother of the common life and weal.

(unbilled quotation from Rauschenbusch 1909)

This urban prayer – notably penned by Walter Rauschenbusch, an acquaintance of the same Jacob Riis who famously documented the misery of
turn-of-the-century tenement life in New York (Riis [1890] 1996) – once again situates Gee’s documentary within a tradition of urban thought that sees the city through the contradictory terms of modernity. For Rauschenbusch (just as for urban theorist Henri Lefebvre [1968] 1996), the miserly modern city is at once the product of the material and social conditions driven by unfair patterns of wealth accumulation and also a potential source of collective action yielding the promise of a more just society for all.

Third, if this were not clear enough, Gee makes his directorial vision explicit, driving the point home in his own subsequent voice-over: ‘I don’t see this as the story of a pop group, I see this as the story of a city’ (epigraph, this article). This urban aspect of the film – and as we argue below, extending Gee’s argument, of the band’s musical production itself – is, importantly and lamentably, overlooked in Mark Sinker’s review of the documentary published in Sight and Sound (2008). There are, of course, many ways of approaching the band: first among them, perhaps, is to prioritize the story of frontman Ian Curtis – including his epilepsy and his eventual tragic suicide – interpreting his lyrics (and by extension the band’s music and appeal) as a narrative of personal depression. While this approach continues to be rethought – as evidenced by the recent article ‘The (re)marketing of disability in pop: Ian Curtis and Joy Division’ (2009) by Mitzi Waltz and Martin James (published in Popular Music) – it is an error to completely ignore the necessary and prominent connection that exists between a band and its wider socio-cultural milieu, in this case the urban environment of Manchester.

As the essays collected in The Popular Music Studies Reader (2006) showcase, recent music criticism has opened to a variety of approaches that integrate readings of music as both sound and text with cultural approaches that draw on established interdisciplinary frameworks (including subcultural/diasporic analyses, everyday life, the culture industry, the connections between music and other media, matters of gender and sexuality, and so on). Whereas writings on punk and post-punk have tended to reference urban environments in passing (e.g. Hebdige 2003; O’Hara 1999; Reynolds 2006), few critics have thoroughly engaged a wide range of urban theory in their readings of music.

What this article proposes is thus novel in two senses. First, as part of a larger project reconciling musical production with the continuing legacy of nineteenth-century urbanism, it suggests the appropriateness of listening to music through the trope of urbanized consciousness, fusing an analysis of music as text and sound with a theoretical perspective on the modern city in which music is more often than not produced, recorded and heard. Second, as an attempt to read similar musical content across distinct cultural forms (here both the documentary film and the album), it acknowledges the importance of what media scholar Henry Jenkins has recently identified as Convergence Culture (2006). If, as Jenkins argues ‘We are already learning how to live betwixt and between […] multiple media systems’ ([2006] 2008: 223), it is important that cultural critics remain ready and able to sustain interpretive strategies that acknowledge the formal specificity of productions in distinct media. For this reason, one part of this article will focus on the documentary’s (urban) presentation of the band while another will take on the band’s musical (urban) production – passing from the visual to the aural.

In order to properly situate an urban reading of Joy Division, it is first necessary to briefly highlight those aspects of urban theory relevant to subsequent discussions. To those unfamiliar with the breadth of the field, ‘urban studies’ may seem to point merely to the arrangement of the built environments
of cities alone, what is at stake is recognizing that the effects of cities and city-planning go well beyond their physical infrastructure – ultimately encompassing the mental, social, cultural and immaterial aspects of modern life that arise in the context of urbanization. Despite the nineteenth-century legacy of city-planning as a bourgeois science intent on dealing with the built environment of cities alone (Lefebvre [1968] 1996; [1970] 2003), an entire tradition of thought has evolved asserting the ubiquitous effects of the forces of urbanization (e.g. Wirth 1938; Williams [1973] 1975).

One of the most useful strains of urban theory, in this regard, is that which highlights what has been called the ‘urbanization of consciousness’ (e.g. Harvey [1985] 1989). Although David Harvey has popularized this notion, it builds on a long tradition that emphasizes the relevance of human consciousness to urban studies. Georg Simmel, for example, pointed out in his article ‘The metropolis and mental life’ ([1903] 2000) that the sensory overstimulation characteristic of the modern city produced a certain blasé attitude in the urbanite, who had to become somewhat detached in order to cope (‘the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates’ (Simmel [1903] 2000: 150)). Walter Benjamin in his The Arcades Project (and notably later Michel de Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life) returned to the figure of the nineteenth-century flâneur as a way of emphasizing the importance of employing ‘A different topography, not architectonic, but anthropocentric in conception’ (Benjamin 1999: 86) when approaching the city (see also Merrifield 2002). In the 1950s, Guy Debord and the Situationists took this ‘anthropomorphic’ topography of the city to its logical conclusion in their concept of psychogeography and the ‘Theory of Drift’. Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 work The Death and Life of Great American Cities ([1961] 1992) established her reputation as an iconoclastic woman who turned the (then male-dominated) world of urban planning upside down, famously compared the life of the sidewalks to an urban ‘ballet’, similarly defining the city in terms of movement and complexity (Fraser 2012, 2009a).

What is clear is that the urban is an irreducible, complex phenomenon that is not purely material (Latham and McCormack 2004). If this is the case, then it remains to be seen how the problematic legacy of urbanism and the contestation of the city as a purely material phenomenon can be mapped onto musical criticism. This article offers one path to realizing this reconciliation of music and the urban.

**GRANT GEE’S JOY DIVISION AND THE STREETS OF MANCHESTER**

Approaching Joy Division in context means travelling back to Manchester, 1976. This date reflects their earliest iteration, as Curtis joined up with Sumner and Hook’s ‘nascent band’ in December of that year (Ott [2004] 2010: 6–7). In preparation for and during their early gigs (beginning in 1977: including such venues as Rafters, the Squat and the Roxy Room in Pips nightclub on Fennel Street in Manchester City Centre) the band changed names several times – from to Stiff Kittens to Warsaw, finally settling on Joy Division in late 1977 (see Ott [2004] 2010: 6–21; also Johnson [1984] 1986). The first recording released under that name was An Ideal for Living (1978) – which featured Ian Curtis (vocals), Bernard Albrecht [Sumner] (electric guitar and vocals), Peter Hook (bass guitar), and Steven Morris (drums). Although Sumner was from
nearby Salford and Curtis lived in Macclesfield, the band’s connection with the wider Mancunian music scene cannot be ignored, nor can we ignore the fact that ‘Manchester is an international music city’ (critic Jon Savage quoted in Curtis [1995] 2007: xi).

It is imperative to see Manchester as one of the first ‘modern’ cities, or at least as ‘the site and center of the first Industrial Revolution, a new kind of city in which the formation of a new kind of human world seemed to be occurring’ (Marcus 1974: vii). Friedrich Engels had, of course, famously used the town as a living laboratory for research beginning in 1842 and leading to his landmark treatise The Condition of the Working Class, originally published in 1844. As urban critic Andy Merrifield has written in Metromarxism (2002), for Engels, ‘great cities possessed a peculiar dialectical quality’:

They bore the brunt of capitalism’s penchant for uneven development; however, they were also ‘the birthplace of the labor movements,’ piling like people together, forging a mutuality of the exploited, sparking a class-consciousness whereby the working class could pit its will and resources against a rich and powerful bourgeoisie.

(2002: 34)

As Engels documents the powerful social effects of the implementation of new technologies under a capitalist mode of production in his now classic 1844 text (the jenny, the steam engine, modern manufacturing techniques), the image of Manchester that emerges is one where workers live in ‘cattle-sheds’ ([1844] 1950: 51), alienated from one another in an urban social environment where more traditional social bonds have been stretched to the limit if they have not been abandoned altogether (particularly Engels [1844] 1950: 45–54; also Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 33–38; Marx and Engels 1999). The first modern city is thus an emblem not solely of the zenith of technological progress but also of the nadir of urban ruin.

Just as Manchester deserves top billing as ‘the first manufacturing city of the world’ (Engels [1844] 1950: 53), Joy Division is also an acclaimed ‘first’ of sorts as it is the band that has come to be most widely associated with the musical subcategory known as post-punk, producing songs with the energy of punk but a more introspective, even pop-leaning tenor. As Simon Reynolds puts it in his Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-1984 (in this case referencing Joy Division in particular), ‘Shedding punk’s fast, distortion-thickened sound, the music grew stark and sparse’ (2006: 110). Following the punk explosion of 1975–1977, the period of 1978–1982 represented the prime years of post-punk, with ‘bands such as PiL [Public Image Limited], Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle, Contortions, and Scritti Politti’ (and of course also The Fall) embracing ‘electronics, noise, jazz and the classical avant-garde, and the production techniques of dub reggae and disco’ (Reynolds, 2006: x–xi, 1). The song ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ rose to the Top Ten (as did the album Close), and today Joy Division remains one of the touchstones of the post-punk legacy.3 Having given birth to New Order – the band formed by the remaining members after Curtis’s suicide – Joy Division has been influential if not formative in the development of styles such as New Wave and Dance/Electronica.

It is perhaps reasonable to conclude that a special kind of affinity might exist between both landmark city and pioneering band, between Manchester and the music of Joy Division. Nonetheless, whereas this conclusion may be
These images include: a mountain of debris, trash in the process of burning, a girl walking through a narrow alleyway, two boys playing with a destroyed stroller in faded colour, a boy playing with a toy plane on stone tiles, another playing with a dog on the same tiles, an entire street scene with dogs, people walking in the distance, and old-model cars, a boy walking on a dirty street next to old brick unkempt house, boys betting on something in ‘off,’ a group of seven young children sitting atop a discarded car chassis and so on.

reasonable, it is also unnecessary – as director Grant Gee has reached it for us, bringing it to life through a captivating visual cinematographical document. His Joy Division documentary is no different than other music biographies in many respects – it is packed with slow tilts over items written by Ian Curtis (e.g. the lyrics to the hit single ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ [Closer], 61’48”), close-ups of other relevant written materials (e.g. the book House of Dolls by Ka-Tzetnik 135633 from which the band name was lifted, 10’40”), footage of crowds at live performances (e.g. 10’00”), shots of the locations where the band played (e.g. The Electric Circus, 9’40”; Pips Nightclub, 12’00”; the Manchester Apollo, 47’00”; and it also includes de rigueur references to other key bands and figures of the period including Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks, The Clash and even William S. Burroughs. Nonetheless, the formative importance of Manchester’s urban environment constitutes the heart of the film. From the very beginning of Joy Division, images of the city where modern manufacturing was born compete for top-billing with the personal stories shared by band members and music critics. The end of Rauschenbusch’s prayer for the city (above) overlaps with an overhead aerial shot of Manchester, illuminated by a haze of streetlights in which specific urban forms are almost indistinguishable (1’30”). Through a series of slight camera movements and subtle zooms, one shot of the city at night dissolves into another throughout the duration of Gee’s initial voice-over (epigraph above), definitively highlighting the importance of the urban for his documentary.

With the close of the director’s contextualization of the film as the ‘story of a city’, the camera comes to rest at street-level (2’04”), shooting through the back window of a moving vehicle and progressively becoming more unfocused until Gee’s hushed directorial countdown from 5 to 1 coincides with a definitive fade to black (2’19”). While this initial moving shot capturing the baseness and grittiness of the city streets at night might be seen as an homage to the landmark cinematic portrayal of the urban environment in Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (1976), what follows is perhaps surprisingly a piece of archival footage of Manchester in faded colours. In the intercalated clip, the camera pans left-to-right as children walk in the dirt outside long-neglected buildings, adults looking on from a distance, seemingly at home in the bleak urban landscape. At 2’23”, Tony Wilson (co-founder of the band’s label, Factory records) begins to reminisce on Manchester in the era of the formation of the band, speaking over the images of the very city he describes, ‘I can remember very precisely what Manchester was like in the mid 70s. […] It was really grimy and dirty – dirty old town’ (original emphasis). Wilson’s words both highlight the origin story of a modern Manchester in Engelsian terms – as the pinnacle of urban blight, the flip-side of manufacturing advances under capitalism – and also introduce the collage of intercalated archival materials that come to dominate the first ten minutes of the film, thus significantly framing what is to follow in urban terms. His use of the phrase ‘dirty old town’ itself references Salford area musician Ewan MacColl’s 1949 song ‘Dirty Old Town’ that famously addressed the industrial blight of Northern England. Even under Wilson’s voice-over, Gee moves briskly through black and white images of pistons cranking, factories spewing smoke up into the sky and finally the colour-images of a young girl in 1970s attire standing in a decrepit building next to an unsightly toilet and a man standing amidst the site of a former building, now littered with debris (2’30”–2’49”). From 2’49” to 3’19” images of children in the slums breeze by, most each taking up no more than a second or two until a fade in and
The crescents, named after their designers Adam, Nash, Barry, Kent and Womersley (Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 194), soon became famous for being easy targets for burglary and other crimes and were demolished in the early 1990s at great cost.

Subsequent zoom-out (3'19"–3'26") frames a policeman on horseback in front of desolate urban landscape. This image serves as a hinge of sorts, shifting attention from the effects of urban blight to the roots of its cause in the built environment of the modern industrialized city, which is the subject of subsequent shots.

As a carefully placed comment by band member Steven Morris makes clear, to experience Manchester in the 1970s was to experience the chaos and constant change of a modern city, a modern world where, as Berman wrote invoking Marx, everything that is solid melts into air – ‘I remember that the first time [inaudible] seeing all these end-to-end [inaudible] houses, and then the next time you went it was just a pile of rubble, then the next time you went it was sort of like all this building work, and then by the time you were in the teens, there was just this big concrete fortress’ (3'29"–3'46").

Images highlighted under Morris’s words hold a microscope up to the Mancunian built environment, shifting from a still of row houses (3'29"–3'34") to the pan of a car driving by empty lot (3'34"–3'38"), a crane and half-constructed buildings (3'38"–3'39"), a low-angle shot of tall housing (3'39"–3'41"), and later other non-descript buildings (3'41"–3'42"; 3'42"–3'43"). A punctuating fade-in (3'43"–3'45") framing the title ‘From old to new’ underscores the notion of a Manchester that was (and consistently has been since the 1840s) in a period of upheaval.

While the intercalated documentary footage and black/white and faded colour images of urban scenes continue to highlight the significance of the urban environment for approaching Joy Division’s musical production, delving into one building image shown in the documentary in particular shows just how nuanced is director Gee’s concern for Manchester. That building (first appearing from 3'46" to 3'50") – although its importance is not specifically noted in the film (its name is included neither in a voice-over nor an on-screen title) – is one of the ‘crescent’ housing projects in Hulme, ‘four long, curved, south-facing blocks of flats and maisonettes connected by walkways and bridges’ (Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 194) that embodied the insufficient response to Mancunian urban blight. It soon became apparent that these and other buildings with deck access to tower living ‘had been erected too quickly, and the unfamiliar building techniques had been poorly supervised; the reinforcing bolts and ties which held panels together were found to be missing and leaks started to occur’ (Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 195). Yet the effects of living in the crescents were not merely material:

A survey conducted in 1975 indicated that 96.3 per cent of tenants wanted to leave the crescents. ‘Many people suffer from loneliness, depression and anxiety, finding the estate an intimidating place in which to live. Worry about street crime, drug abuse and break-ins makes many people, particularly women and elderly people, shut themselves up in their homes.’ (Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 195)

Gee’s film approaches the crescents and other drab buildings of the city through intercalated footage demonstrating a variety of formal qualities – panning left to right to capture the length of the curved building, still shots, hand-held close-ups and POV (point of view) shots directed out from the balconies – before spiraling into a rapid series of eight black and white still photos of decrepit housing and bleak city views and ending in a fade-to-black,
thus giving the viewer a sense of the loneliness the crescent’s tenants might have experienced, and simultaneously through its constant formal innovation evoking more generally the chaotic experience of the modern city. It is important to note that although he did not grow up in a crescent himself, he nonetheless inhabited a similar complex, as Deborah Curtis remarks in her biography *Touching From a Distance*.6

Manchester in the mid-late twentieth century may have been a far cry from the 1840s when its reputation as a ‘dirty old town’ was made, but it is important to point out that its problematic urban legacy persisted through the lifetime of Ian Curtis (15 July 1956–18 May 1980) and Joy Division – it was still an eyesore if not also a city still struggling to escape from its miserly history. One observer wrote in 1957 that residents of Manchester ‘avert their eyes from the ugliness of their surroundings’ (A. J. P. Taylor, quoted in Parkinson-Bailey 2000: xviii). In fact, Gee’s documentary highlights similar perspectives on Manchester’s bleakness from the band members’ childhoods – B. Sumner, for example, remarks that ‘I don’t think I saw a tree ‘til I was about 9’ and ‘You were always looking for beauty ‘cause it was such an ugly place’ (Gee 3’00”–3’07”). By the time Joy Division formed in the mid-to-late 1970s, contemporary Manchester was in ruins not only due to the legacy of poverty accompanying industrialization and modern manufacturing in the mid-1800s, but also owing to the destruction wrought by World War II – and Gee’s film transitions poignantly from stock images of the crescent buildings in the 1970s to the urban ruin of the 1940s. The city had been gravely affected by blitz raids during the war, and the City of Manchester Plan of 1945 had been an attempt to inspire hope for a brighter future that would be slow in coming. The Manchester Plan had famously ‘envisaged a city in which all the old grimy out-of-date irrational buildings of the Victorian era would be swept away to be replaced with bold, new buildings of the twentieth century’ (Parkinson-Bailey 2000: 162). Yet the new buildings that were constructed, of course, could do little to correct the town’s entrenched economic struggles that continued throughout the mid-late twentieth century – including slow job growth between 1945 and 1967, the definitive decline of the docks from the 1960s onwards, and the withholding of development incentives through the 1970s.7

Even as *Joy Division* delves further into the history and personal stories of the band members, the shots of urban blight and decrepit buildings refuse to be brushed aside and instead form a sort of vertebral column for Gee’s documentary. Well into the film, images of Manchester routinely crop up, drawing the viewer’s attention back to the necessity of understanding the band from an urban perspective. For example: at minute 24, amidst another of Gee’s characteristic urban montages, we are once again shown footage of the balcony-access complexes of flats that came to define the misery and isolation of 1970s Manchester, alongside the newspaper headline ‘City Pleads for Em[ergency] Cash as Ageing Sewers Crumble’; at minute 55, Gee seizes the opportunity to edit in moving images of a city street under Sumner’s narration of Ian’s first grand mal seizure; in minute 66, after showing the video accompanying the song ‘Atrocity Exhibition’, Gee extends the video’s urban imagery, even superimposing the image of an empty office building illuminated at night over subsequent shots; and in one of the final sequences of the film (minute 88) he returns to the film’s initial aerial shot of Manchester at night effectively linking back to the overt urban perspective and aerial images of the documentary’s beginning. Here, one hears echoes of Gee’s initial voice-over: ‘The vibrancy

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6 ‘In the late 1960s, the large community of back-to-back terraced houses behind Macclesfield railway station was demolished to make way for a new complex of council flats. Each block was indistinguishable from the next. With their long, shared balconies and lonely stairways, they were destined to become more insanitary than the housing they replaced. Unaware of their impending fate, the Curtis family were pleased to be allocated a flat overlooking the football field’ (2007: 4).

7 Parkinson-Bailey treats this period of the city in depth in Chapter 9 of his *Manchester*, noting that ‘between 1945 and 1967 metropolitan Manchester gained only 9,000 jobs (of a total regional inflow of 108,000) and lost 32,000 as a result of industrial policy guidance’ and that, ‘the growth of containerisation from the mid-1960s meant the death of the port, which was not large enough for the huge container ships’ and that ‘In spite of the tremendous loss of jobs, development incentives were still being withheld from Manchester during the 1960s and most of the 1970s’ (2000: 167).
of the city, the expectations of the city, all those things are the legacy of Joy Division’. Gee’s urban reading persists even when he treats the more intimate story of Ian’s epilepsy, as these moments are accompanied by cinematic metaphors expressing the chaotic aspects of seizures – metaphors notably borrowed from the visual lexicon of urban forms (the distortion of hazy city lights at night, confused jump shots from a vehicle rolling down city streets). The film, of course, closes with a series of slow pans over those Manchester buildings linked with the story of Joy Division, a daytime aerial shot of the city, and a steady montage of shots of buildings both under construction and in the process of being torn down – a fitting conclusion to a visual work that has advanced a thoroughly urban reading of the band, and one that remains faithful to Gee’s stated intent that the film be the ‘story of a city’ (epigraph above).

Yet the connection between the band and the urban life of Manchester is more than merely a novel urban reading pursued with great vigour and style by Gee, the director. Turning from the documentary to the band’s musical production itself reveals an intensification of this urban reading suggested by the film Joy Division. Whereas many critics signal a general connection between the urban context and the band’s music (Friskics-Warren 2006: 112; Reynolds 2006: 104), the next section performs a textual and formal reading of the band’s music grounded explicitly in a tradition of twentieth-century urban theory.

THE URBAN NATURE OF JOY DIVISION’S MUSICAL PRODUCTION

Coming from the industrial desolation of Manchester, Joy Division expressed, in uncompromising terms, the angst of the great wrong place in which we live.

(Steven Grant, the Trouser Press Record Guide, quoted in Friskics-Warren 2006: 112)

While critics have gotten much mileage out of Ian’s personal story of epilepsy when interpreting the band’s lyrics, they have necessarily overlooked the urban content of joy division songs just as they have refused to more rigorously situate the formal qualities of their music within an urban framework. Significantly, on 20 September 1978, Joy Division gained a coveted television spot on the programme Granada Reports – and while they performed the song ‘Shadowplay’ (off the Unknown Pleasures album), bleak city images were synchronously projected as what was effectively a reinforcement of the song’s urban theme. The song’s haunting and oft-repeated phrase ‘To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you / To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you’ concisely establishes the city as a dark, lonely place just as its other lines (‘I let them use you for their own ends’) point to the lack of connection between such a place’s characteristically alienated urban denizens.

The song ‘Interzone’ (also given a prominent position in Gee’s documentary) likewise presents a somewhat aimless urban wanderer. Verses one and three (of four, total) are particularly relevant to an urban reading of the band, as Curtis sings ‘I walked through the city limits […] trying to find a clue, trying to find a way to get out!’ (republished in Curtis [1995] 2007: 164). The song begins with a faint repeated scream – almost a vocal equivalent of
arranged for Joy Division to perform ‘Shadowplay.’ With monochrome footage of a dire cityscape taken from a World in Action documentary, the song came across as exciting and different. (2007: 61)

11. The Unseen Lyrics section of the Curtis book may be of particular interest to those already acquainted with the band’s released albums, the ‘Empty Station’ of the song ‘Out of Touch’ (1977), ‘wheels are in motion’ and ‘wheels that turn’ in ‘Driftwood’ (1979) and ‘Conditioned’ (unrecorded). Untitled (1978), ‘I can hear the voices lost in echoes as they build/New homes to hide the sadness that the search for more had killed’ (194), in Untitled (1995) ‘Where some houses once stood/Stands a man with a gun’, in ‘End of Time’ (1978) broken homes built on dust and ashes (197), in ‘Johnny 23’ ‘Echoed voices bouncing off the buildings around’ (201). All page numbers refer to the appendix of Curtis’s Touching From A Distance (2007). The urban theme was also present in the original cover art for the 12” An Ideal For Living, released in 1978, which featured a photograph of building-scaffolding (Johnson 1984/1986: 26).

Edward Munch’s 1893 image – and like ‘Shadowplay’, evokes a hostile urban landscape full of danger (‘knife edged view’, verse 2), loneliness, death, isolation (‘looking for a friend [some friends] of mine’) and above all else noise (‘The car screeched’, ‘heard a noise just a car outside’, verse 2). The bleak built environment of the city is portrayed as monotonous (‘Down the dark streets, the houses looked the same’), referring implicitly to Manchester’s contemporary urban state (the depressing uniformity of iconic complexes like the crescents in the late 1960s through the mid-late 1970s) – and thus also to legacy of monotonous manufacturing techniques pioneered in the Manchester of the 1840s (newly applied to the form of urban housing). Not surprisingly, the narrative voice(s) want only to escape their urban nightmare (‘trying to find a way to get out!’). Here, just as when viewing Gee’s intercalated footage of Mancunian misery, one wonders what the future may hold for children raised in such a hostile urban environment (‘A wire fence where the children played!’).

What is so intriguing about the delivery of the lyrics of ‘Interzone’ is that every other line overlaps with the next as the product of two distinct vocalists, creating a chaotic effect that conveys the overwhelming onslaught of stimulation (the ‘intensification of nervous stimulation’ (Simmel [1903] 2000: 149) that for many urban theorists and for Georg Simmel in particular had come to define the urban atmosphere. Significantly, a perusal of both the recorded and the ‘unseen’ lyrics written by Ian Curtis included as an appendix of Touching From A Distance ([1995] 2007: 189–201) reveal a consistent preoccupation not merely with urban ruin but also with its subsequent consequences for the individual city-dweller who feels increasingly alienated from his fellow urbanites.11 To pull out one significant example, in a song billed therein merely as ‘Untitled and Unfinished’, Ian Curtis has written: ‘Buildings torn down to the ground / Replaced by new ones thought more sound’ – seemingly a reference to the upheavals of the Hulme area of Manchester if not the unsound material construction of the crescent buildings themselves.

While the more personal story of Ian’s depression, epilepsy and suicide is itself intriguing, there is reason to consider this individualistic narrative within the context of Manchester’s urban blight and even the practices and consequences of twentieth-century urbanization. As urban theorist and critic Henri Lefebvre pointed out – extending Marx’s original formulation of the concept – alienation is at once economic, social, political, ideological and philosophical (Lefebvre [1947] 1991: 249), but also urban – in The Urban Revolution he famously writes that ‘Urban alienation contains and perpetuates all other forms of alienation’ (Lefebvre [1970] 2003: 92). If we apply this conceit to Joy Division, only a perspective attuned to the urban scale can explain together the following levels of the band’s expression of alienation: first, the lyrical references to depersonalized space and monotonous urban landscapes (e.g. ‘Shadowplay’, ‘Interzone’); second, the alienation of the various band members from each other, reflected also in the band’s lyrics; and third, the way space is used within the music itself at the levels of both recording technology/album production and also song-writing/performance.

Many listeners have experienced a connection between the band’s albums and the atmosphere of the modern city – critic Liz Naylor, for example, noted that ‘When Unknown Pleasures came out, it was sort of like, this is the ambient music from my environment […] you don’t see them function[ing] as a band, it’s just the noise around where you are’ (Gee 34/20”). This can be perhaps explained by recourse to the issue of space. At one point in his book,
Simon Reynolds attributes the band’s sparseness in great measure to producer Hannett – who used a device called the Marshall Time Modulator ‘to cultivate a sparse sound’ (2006: 114) – but the truth is that the musicians themselves contributed to this minimalist aesthetic, as Reynolds himself also admits: ‘All that space in Joy Division’s music was something critics immediately noticed’ (2006: 110). This quality – the way empty space is used by the band to effectively create a musical landscape of ruin, loneliness and alienation – is the defining characteristic of Joy Division. Writer/broadcaster Paul Morley puts his finger on the way in which the Unknown Pleasures album conveyed a fundamental lack of connection not only in its lyrical content but also through its musical form: ‘Just as soon as it started [Unknown Pleasures] and the drums sounded like no drums had ever sounded, and everything seemed to belong in its own space and not quite connecting somehow…’ (33’10’’). This lack of connection resonates also with lack of close relationships among band members – according to Peter Hook, ‘one of the problems with Joy Division was that they “kept their relationships at arm’s length and so did not share any happiness”’ (quoted in Curtis [1995] 2007: 65), an alienation that was also reflected indirectly in song lyrics such as the repeated refrain ‘We were strangers’, from the track ‘I Remember Nothing’ (off of Unknown Pleasures).

Although critics have traditionally seldom gone beyond the lyrical content of songs in academic musical criticism – perhaps due to the ‘staggering’ problems of reconciling music as a cultural artefact with social organization, i.e. the fact that ‘music is an especially resistant medium to write or speak about’ (McCrary and Walser 1990: 283, 278) – this attitude has changed significantly over the last twenty years due to the work of such musicologists as Simon Frith who have suggested going beyond lyrics alone (1996: 105–06; 1988: 158–82). Similarly, Tia DeNora provides a theoretical frame for reconciling music and sociology in her suggestion that music has the power to ‘reorient consciousness’ (2003a: 59–82, also 2003b). It is, in point of fact, increasingly difficult to write about music as if it could exist ‘beyond the worlds of politics, commerce and social life’ (Connell and Gibson 2003: 18). Still, contemporary criticism has tended to approach music by privileging the individual, community and national scales of social life and ignoring the importance of the urban scale (Fraser 2011a).

The song ‘Transmission’ (originally released on as a 7” single, July 1979), provides a striking example of the value and relevance of just such an urban-scaled reading of musical form. This song, more than any other, illustrates the contribution of Joy Division to subsequent music styles such as ‘dance’ in its quick pacing, upbeat rhythm and ubiquitous reliance of the drums upon the high-hat – all while maintaining a rock-derived, punk-inflected prominent electric-guitar riff that maintains the aggressive urban feel of the band’s punk predecessors. The chorus – repetitive and hypnotic – on top of which Ian chants ‘Dance, dance, dance, dance, dance to the radio’ while accompanied (in concert) by convulsive arm-swinging (2’07”–2’31”, 2’50”–3’15”; captured in the live footage included in Gee’s documentary), suggests the robotic monotony of a capitalist modernity while pointing to the spirit of rebellion and possibility for change located therein. The fast pace and punctuating guitar riffs of ‘Shadowplay’ ‘Interzone’ and ‘Disorder’ convey this same energy – an energy that is taken to its limits in ‘Transmission’ (and that is compellingly subverted by the purposely slow cover of the song by the indie trio Low on A Means to An End). Even when, for example in the song ‘Atmosphere’, the tone is less chaotically urban and more apocalyptically redemptory, the band
still manages to capture a sense of the motion of the urban environment in that the music is strangely hurried, tense and anxious as Ian repeatedly sings ‘Don’t walk away in silence’ amidst a funereal background. The opposition between the overwhelming pop-melody of this song (and of others such as ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’) and the gritty punk inheritance of the other songs (such as ‘Shadowplay’, ‘Interzone’ and ‘Disorder’) can be read in terms of the disconnect between the people who walk the modern city streets and the ‘people like you’ who are ‘walking on air’ (‘Atmosphere’) – somehow able to escape the drudgery and danger that have come to define contemporary Manchester.

Whereas the Mancunian flâneur inhabits an ironically blissful, ethereal disconnection from the gritty streets in the overly melodic ‘Atmosphere’, the heavy production – specifically the reverb – of ‘Disorder’ heightens the focus on the lights/noise/car crashes of the city, giving the sensation that each instrument (including also Curtis’s voice) is operating with a certain relative autonomy to the other – a perfect representation of the power of urban alienation signalled by Lefebvre. At the end of the song, repeated drum flourishes echo Curtis’s repeated intonations of the word ‘feeling’, although noticeably standing apart from the lyrics. This sort of relative autonomy is evident also in the song ‘Dead Souls’, where the instruments strike out in their own paths over the course of the first two full minutes of the song (2’11”), coming together only for its brief choruses. The listener, too, soon adopts the blasé attitude that perhaps undergirds the band’s musical production – his or her consciousness soon becoming ‘reoriented’ (as per DeNora) to the alienated distance that characteristically defines the psychic state of the modern urbanite according to Simmel. Here, there is a chance to acknowledge that if the modern city is able to shape the emotional state of its dwellers for the worse (as per McGaw and Vance 2008: 68), that this may be no less possible through the medium of music.

This relationship between outer socially material (urban) realities and inner subjectivity is important for the band just as it has been for urban theorists. First, what Simon Reynolds referred to as Joy Division’s location on the ‘membrane’ (2006: 104) between the interior and the exterior is confirmed as one of the band’s conscious preoccupations through the packaging of the Unknown Pleasures original vinyl release:

Unknown Pleasures was released in June 1979. Packaged in a black linen-look sleeve with a white Fourier analysis in the center, the sides were called inside and outside. ‘Inside’ contained ‘Shadowplay,’ ‘Wilderness,’ ‘Interzone’ and ‘I Remember Nothing.’ ‘Outside’ contained ‘Disorder,’ ‘Day of the Lords,’ ‘Candidate,’ ‘Insight’ and ‘New Dawn Fades’.


This juxtaposition obtains not merely in the design of their first full-length release but also in the consistency with which Ian Curtis wrote of alienated urbanites walking lonely streets and of the shifting, changing, even chaotic nature of city life. It is evident also in the very transition Joy Division embodied from the externalized aggression of punk music towards the post-punk focus on the inner spaces of an emotional subjectivity. Most importantly, however, the band’s persistent approach to space as at once interior and exterior, personal and urban, individual and social, that resonates with the theoretical perspectives of a generation of urban theorists, theorists who have harnessed
the complex and triadic view of space articulated by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal work *The Production of Space*.

In this Lefebvrian model, one explicitly recuperated by urban geographer David Harvey (1990: 218–19), the prioritized interaction and reciprocal influence between spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces powerfully undermines the tendency of thought to divide and partition experience into tidy categories (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 33). Harvey and others draw attention to the priority afforded lived space over conceptual space – simply put, ‘spatial practice is lived before it is conceptualized’ (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 34; see also Fraser 2011b, 2008) – such that what is realized is a philosophical fusion of sorts where ‘Materiality, representation and imagination are not separate worlds’ (Harvey 1996: 322). Similarly, the pioneering work by Marc Augé ([1995] 2000) on the development on the non-places produced by contemporary capitalism – permanently transitional places such as airports where a sense of belonging is discouraged (see also Bauman 2000; de Certeau [1984] 1988) – shows just how important it may be to highlight our emotional connections with place (or the lack thereof). Monica Degen has done just that in her recent work *Sensing Cities: Regenerating Public Life in Barcelona and Manchester*, noting that ‘few studies have focused their attention on the ideological importance of the senses in the restructuring of contemporary urban life’ (2008: 10). It is not unreasonable to suggest that just as the sensory is becoming an important methodological tool for urban geography, reciprocally the study of music may also have a role to play in shedding light on the sensory experiences connected with the contemporary city. From this perspective, the Joy Division lyric ‘Avenues lined with trees, strangled words for the day’ (‘The Only Mistake’, quoted in Curtis [1995] 2007: 173) points to the disconnect between individual urban experiences of Manchester and the staid renewal schemes that have repeatedly attempted to revitalize the now archetypically post-industrial English city.

In closing, Joy Division’s musical production today thus not only reflects the crucial point when post-punk began to emerge from punk – it also suggests a new way of seeing the relevance of music sociology to urban studies. In the band’s persistent depiction and denunciation of Manchester’s harsh post-industrial urban environment, in their invocation of the chaotic mental life created by the metropolis, and even through their intricate artistic reconciliation of inner subjectivities and outer material realities, the band’s lyrics and formal qualities were heavily inflected by the modern urban experience. Joy Division’s example indirectly suggests the importance of enacting anti-urbanist Jane Jacobs’ dream of the ‘sidewalk ballet’ in the call to ‘Dance, dance, dance, dance, to the radio’ – in this way not only harnessing the chaos of the modern urban experience, but also bringing attention back to the power and the potential of the people who live in the city and walk its streets in the face of large-scale forces of urbanization.

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