

# Control: The fate of Joy Division's Ian Curtis

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Directed by Anton Corbijn, written by Matt Greenhalgh, based on *Touching from a distance* by Deborah Curtis

Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007, *Control* is Anton Corbijn's first feature film, based on the life and death of Ian Kevin Curtis, the late frontman of the post-punk band Joy Division. This is one of several movies that have come out in recent years about the band, including a 2007 eponymous documentary.

In stark contrast to the stale "rock 'n' roll biopic," Corbijn's work comes off as a serious work of art. He portrays Ian Curtis, his wife and friends as real human beings who have to live and work in the bleak environment of late 1970s Britain with the only escape being the dream of pop stardom. Sam Riley, who plays Ian Curtis, successfully captures what it's like to be a morose youth dealing with the pressures of growing up in a confusing and hostile world. He transforms his character into a three-dimensional personality with genuine problems and concerns.

Corbijn, heretofore a professional photographer, originally from the Netherlands, worked intimately with Curtis's band, photographing them in the 1970s and directing several of their music videos as well. *Control* was thus a very personal project for him, prompting Corbijn to pay for half of the production out of his own pocket.

Shot in beautiful black and white, the film starts in 1973 in the uninspiring town of Macclesfield, in northwestern England. In 2004, the *Times* named Macclesfield the most uncultured town in Britain, based on its lack of theatres, cinemas and other cultural venues. Ian, at 17, lives with his parents in a gloomy block of flats.

Ian only finds refuge in his room, where he listens to David Bowie, smokes cigarettes with his "gang" and applies eyeliner in imitation of his glam-rock heroes. He also has developed a talent for poetry, which he shares with his friends.

In real life, Curtis was awarded a scholarship to attend the King's School, Macclesfield, at age 11. He later decided not to pursue an academic career, but instead became more attracted to art and literature, and eventually music.

Curtis suffers from epilepsy, which makes him socially awkward and depressed. He daydreams in class, to the point of staring into oblivion; in later years, he suffers from uncontrollable seizures.

In secondary school he meets Deborah (played by Samantha

Morton), and the two quickly fall in love after seeing a Bowie concert. He soon proposes to her and she accepts. When they marry, Curtis is 19, Deborah, 18. Almost inevitably, things turn out differently than either expects. Ian soon becomes estranged from his wife, writing poetry in his room while she decorates the house.

By 1976, punk, angry and evocative music expressing the alienation and frustration of working-class youth was taking hold of the public imagination. After seeing the Sex Pistols perform in Manchester, Ian meets Bernard Sumner (James Anthony Pearson), Peter Hook (Joe Anderson) and Terry Mason (Andrew Sheridan). After the three complain about their current lead singer, Ian suggests he become the new vocalist. They agree and recruit Stephen Morris (Harry Treadaway) to play drums, while Mason takes over managerial duties. The new band is named Warsaw.

With a new sense of self-respect and the word 'HATE' inscribed on the back of his jacket, Ian goes to his job as a civil servant at the Employment Exchange. His band sets out to record a demo, for which Ian and Debbie pay 400 pounds. Only this time, they play under the name Joy Division.

The name of the band was taken from the brothels operated by the Nazis in various concentration camps. While Curtis was not flirting with neo-Nazism, some of his bandmates indicate that they had a fascination with fascism at the time, and the whole thing suggests unseriousness and irresponsibility, as well as a growing social nihilism.

The band's demo EP, "An Ideal For Living," featured a Hitler Youth member pounding a drum on the cover. The inside artwork is the infamous picture of Jews with their hands up in surrender during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

"I like it," Ian explains "It's thought-provoking." This critical stance, however, does not prevent their shows from being overrun by skinheads and accusations of the band supporting fascism.

Much has been said of the atmospheric and sad sound of Joy Division's music. It is usually described as depressing; others like to think of it as cathartic. Like the elephant in the room, the knowledge of Curtis's eventual suicide hangs over the band's music, and the film, like a long shadow. The story is not unlike that of Kurt Cobain and his band Nirvana, who underwent a similar process of achieving fame and ultimate disillusionment.

When playing a show, Curtis dances in a weird robotic

fashion, jerking his arms about, almost in violent contortions. At other shows Ian will collapse and go into seizure, and the audience, thinking this is part of the show, applauds. No one takes such episodes too seriously and they only add to the band's fame.

At his work, Ian notices a young woman go into an epileptic fit. Time passes and Ian goes to the hospital to see what became of her. He discovers that she died. In remembrance, he writes a song, "She's Lost Control," which is also the source of the film's title.

Indeed, many of his songs are autobiographical. Take, for example, "Isolation," which has the lyrics "Mother, I tried, please believe me. I'm doing the best that I can. I'm ashamed of the things I've been put through. I'm ashamed of the person I am." It's amazing how so few truly appreciated how revealing he was in song.

The popularity and posthumous recognition of Joy Division must be seen in the context of a specific time and place. The return of the Labour Party to power in 1974 created a new political situation. Having been told by Labour that the policies of the previous Tory government would be reversed, the working class was forced to deal with stagflation and high levels of unemployment. Attempts by the Labour government to impose pay restraints provoked the walkouts of the "the winter of discontent" of 1977-78, including the largest work stoppage since the 1926 general strike. The betrayals of Labour and the opportunism of the British "left" opened the door to the Tories and Margaret Thatcher, who benefited from a turn to the right of sections of the middle class and the disillusionment of workers.

Joy Division can rightly be seen as ahead of their time, both in their sound and aesthetic. The despair and above all, the isolation they tried to convey, was a warning essentially of things to come—or, more precisely, the reaction of certain layers of the population in the face of things to come.

In the case of Ian Curtis, this devastating pessimism seemed to be part of his undoing. As his band becomes more and more sought after, Curtis's depression only grows worse. He takes medication for his epileptic fits; the side effects include moodiness, anxiety and loss of purpose.

The drugs, along with the constant touring and alcohol, do not improve his physical and mental stamina.

After a gig in London, Ian meets an attractive Belgian woman by the name of Annik (Alexandra Maria Lara), who interviews him for a fanzine. They begin an affair.

Meanwhile, the pressure of fronting a band, an affair, his epilepsy, and now a baby daughter with Deborah, take its toll on his day job. Slumped over his desk asleep, his boss awakens him and mentions that he can either pursue his music or his 9-to-5 job, but he can't do both.

He decides to continue with his music, even though it means an unsteady income for his family.

At one concert he clearly does not want to go on stage, in

spite of the fact that the crowd is beginning to get restless. Ian reluctantly goes on, but not for long. He is unable to finish the song and walks off stage, causing angry audience members to throw bottles on stage and ending the show in a small riot.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen," Ian pleads with his manager, "Everybody hates me, even the people who love me hate me."

His marriage with Deborah begins to fall apart. She finds out about his affair and asks for a divorce, which Ian does not accept, still believing they can resolve their problems. Joy Division prepares for its first American tour, but its lead front man is about to fall off the edge.

Ian attempts suicide with an overdose of pills, leaving a note for Deborah confessing his love for Annik. When he is resuscitated at the hospital his friends try to intervene. But it seems no one can save Ian.

Here we reach the main weakness of *Control*. The spectator is shown when and how Ian Curtis became suicidal, but the deeper reasons for his despair are never adequately explored. Why, on the cusp of international recognition, would a 23-year-old artist kill himself? Ian was surrounded by friends and loved ones. He had so much to look forward to, including a newborn daughter.

Yet this did not prevent Ian Curtis from hanging himself in his kitchen, in his hometown of Macclesfield, on May 23, 1980. With so many roles to play, so many appearances to keep up, Ian was denying himself the pain of being just another tawdry celebrity. In the final analysis, "success" was the last thing his sensitive soul needed.

In an interview, Corbijn stated, "Really it was the epilepsy that did it. He felt responsibility for the band. He felt that if they went to America and he had fits on stage it would hamper their future. He felt all these things become bigger and bigger in his mind."

This is inadequate. The relationship between the social atmosphere and individual tragedy is a complex one, but with an acutely sensitive, public figure like Curtis, there clearly is one. The character of the period, the nature of the money-hungry industry ... there's clearly more to be said.

There are many artistic merits to the film. Its light touch and understated mood compensate for some very dreary subject matter, although one wishes it could have delved deeper into the life and death issues it raises. More than a quarter of a century has passed since the events depicted in the film. Why has it now been made and released? Why do the themes resonate so deeply? Perhaps because in 2008, many people the world over no longer feel they are in control.



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