

## IAN CURTIS AND THE GERMAN AUTUMN<sup>1</sup>

The lyrics of Ian Curtis have typically been interpreted in two ways: either as a somber illustration of his psychological struggles (including his struggle with epilepsy) emphasizing his personal, ‘inner world’ and recognizing ‘his words as a literal cry for help’;<sup>2</sup> or as a social and political reflection of Manchester’s desolate, post-industrial spaces and of the economic and political transformations attending the emergence of the Thatcher era and its ‘authoritarian populism’,<sup>3</sup> capturing the frustration and despair of the British working class and their ‘winter of discontent’. This concluding perspective is expressed in a most evocative way by Jon Savage who wrote in a *Melody Maker* review of *Unknown Pleasures* in 1979— explaining both Joy Division’s sonic idiom and the sensibility infusing the lyrics of Ian Curtis— that Joy Division’s spatial, circular themes’ [were a] ‘perfect reflection of Manchester’s dark spaces and empty places: endless sodium lights... vacant industrial sites— the endless detritus of the 19th century... [communicating] the reactions of individuals caught in a trap they dimly perceive— anger, paranoia, alienation, feelings of thwarted power... [and] control everywhere.’<sup>4</sup>

And by Chris Ott as well, by the time of his writing expressing the by then standard view that as personal and emotional as Curtis’s lyrics were, the sense of despair and frustration that they conveyed had broad implications in the England of the late 1970s, where hopelessness was a very real sensation. The economic downturn resulted in labor strikes ranging from garbage workers to nurses to gravediggers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay appeared in the form of a didactic poem in: *Epizootics! Online Literary Journal for the Contemporary Animal*. Issue I, November 2016, 42-51.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Ott, *Unknown Pleasures* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004), p. xii. For the basis of these comments, see Deborah Curtis, *Touching from a Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> As this evolving era was characterized by Stuart Hall. See Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, *Marxism Today*, January 1979, pp. 14-20, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Savage, *Melody Maker*, July 21, 1979. Reinforcing this idea in his Foreword to *Touching from a Distance*, Savage states that what Joy Division captured in their music was ‘De Quincey’s Manchester: an environment systematically degraded by industrial revolution... with oblivion as the only escape... [Curtis] remains the city’s greatest song poet, capturing its space and its claustrophobia in a contemporary Gothick.’ See Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Ott, *Unknown Pleasures*, p. 82.

And Savage once more: '[Curtis] felt the human cost of the economic and social restructuring that was occurring in the late seventies— and that still casts its malign shadow today.'<sup>6</sup> While such interpretations generally stress that Ian Curtis and all the members of Joy Division 'were raised in a decaying industrial landscape of vacant chemical plants and mild-to-severe poverty',<sup>7</sup> the significance of their working class backgrounds have not been explored beyond preliminary observations of the kind expressed by Savage and Ott and this is likely because a strong case cannot be made for such significance. For example, Jake Kennedy remarks early on in his book in a revelatory way that 'Social class is not a topic that you might expect to open a discussion of Joy Division. But delve into the dim and distant pasts of the four members, their surroundings, or even just the geography of their upbringing, and the long-entrenched attitudes of a city... bubble up to the surface.'<sup>8</sup> Yet Kennedy does not continue the discussion or direct any analysis to this end, leaving the reader suspended.

Those interpretations which concoct a 'psychiatric report', explaining the lyrics of Ian Curtis as a symptom of his melancholy, personal instability or as an effect of his epilepsy, are not only repressive in a way that Curtis would deplore<sup>9</sup> but delimit and constrain the range of his writing which is not only a reflection of singular personal states but also a warning sign regarding general social and political conditions.

This is why the second variety of interpretation is more expansive. It is undeniable that the lyrics of Ian Curtis express the psychological states of 'thwarted power' and 'hopelessness', and that one of his principal themes is 'control', hence his admiration for William S. Burroughs, who coined the term 'control' to define a newly emerging social process,<sup>10</sup> and J. G. Ballard.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is rather extreme to dismiss this variety of interpretation as 'imaginative historicism', since the 'trauma' and 'degeneration' declaimed

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<sup>6</sup> *So This is Permanence: Ian Curtis, Joy Division, Lyrics and Notebooks*. eds. Deborah Curtis & Jon Savage (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), p. xxviii.

<sup>7</sup> Ott, *Unknown Pleasures*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jake Kennedy, *Joy Division and the Making of Unknown Pleasures* (London: Unanimous Ltd., 2006), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of Curtis's adverse reaction to the reviews in the music press which he found 'disturbing' because they read 'like psychiatric reports', see Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* (Vol. 59, Winter 1992), pp. 3-7, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> It may be noted that there were books in Curtis's personal library by authors with similar preoccupations: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* and Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*. See *So This is Permanence*, pp. 248-

by Curtis might easily be attributed to the tenants of any systematically degraded urban environment, including those in the city of Manchester.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in opposition to this interpretation it can be said that there is clearly nothing overt in the lyrics of Ian Curtis of the class or 'social war' once depicted by Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* though, granted, something of the 'physical and moral atmosphere', perhaps even of the 'geography' of the Manchester Engels described.<sup>13</sup> Curtis's 'vision' may conjure up 'the low-rent squalor of a Northern industrial city'<sup>14</sup> and certainly the psychic states of the economically deprived, and there is no doubt that Curtis reflected privately, though meagrely, on the economic question of social class as indicated in a notebook entry where he refers to those trapped by their social position with 'no bright prospects for future', with no 'new emergent forces or policies likely to change'. Yet in the same entry, reflecting on the deeper problem of time and history, Curtis foresees an inevitable 'return to dark ages' and increasing social control regulated by a *calculated irrationality*<sup>15</sup> and it is this subject matter that most visibly informs his lyrics, not social class and class war as there is no direct evocation in his lyrics of either category. Curtis's unequivocal theme is the failure of modernity<sup>16</sup> with its rotation towards authoritarianism and fascism and their persistence in the 20th century. For Curtis, the modern era is nihilistic in the Nietzschean sense, where the highest values have devalued themselves; where the promise of the past has not been realized; with its 'Ideals turning to dust';<sup>17</sup> leaving us with 'A valueless collection of hopes and desires';<sup>18</sup> where 'the seeds that are sown/Are no longer your own' and the concept of the political is circumscribed by 'Holy wars' and 'broken laws.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As this interpretation has been accused by Paul Crosthwaite. See Paul Crosthwaite, 'Trauma and Degeneration: Joy Division and Pop Criticism's Imaginative Historicism' in *Litpop: Writing and Popular Music*, eds. Rachel Carroll; Adam Hansen (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2014), pp. 125-140.

<sup>13</sup> See Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 39 and 77.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Johnson, *An Ideal for Living: An History of Joy Division* (London, New York: Proteus Books, 1984), p. 32. Curtis conjures up this 'squalor' at best in 'Ice Age': 'We'll live in holes and disused shafts/Hopes for little more.' See 'Ice Age (1977)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 151-152.

<sup>15</sup> See *So This is Permanence*, p. 216.

<sup>16</sup> See 'Failures (1977)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>17</sup> 'Untitled', *ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> 'Twenty-four Hours (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>19</sup> 'Leaders of Men (1977)', *ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

Curtis possesses an exquisite historical sensitivity but occupies a cultural location that is anything but unique; only the expression is singular. He once stated in an interview that Joy Division did not have a 'message', that his lyrics were 'open to interpretation', that they were 'multi-dimensional' and that you could 'read into them whatever you like.'<sup>20</sup> Evidently this was carelessly stated as Curtis does not play such an infinitely complex language game. Even the name of the group, 'Joy Division', binds us to a rather restrictive set of events. Ian Curtis is an anti-authoritarian song poet whose lyrics manifest an immersion in the iconography, organization and system of the Nazi state and the atrocities of the Holocaust. He writes in a 'deathshroud looking back',<sup>21</sup> from the standpoint of the victim looking back over a calamitous history.<sup>22</sup> His lyrics exhibit a preoccupation with violence, power and state terror as he invites the listener to remember murder on an industrial scale; 'mass murder on a scale you've never seen'.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than viewing Curtis, in the caustically dismissive words of one commentator, as the 'fated genius' who represented 'metonymically the Mancunian environment',<sup>24</sup> it is more sensible and more accurate to regard Curtis as an anti-authoritarian song poet the span of whose entire lyrical production, and not only his early lyrics, displays 'a preoccupation with totalitarian imagery and thought'<sup>25</sup> informed by the example of Nazism. This is epitomized by his interest in the anti-Nazi photomontages of the German Dadaist John Heartfield,<sup>26</sup> in the Nuremberg trials,<sup>27</sup> and in 'his admiration

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> '(Waiting for) The Ice Age (1977)', *ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>22</sup> Taking the perspective of Benjamin's 'angel of history'. See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). Recalling the Nazi torchlight parades and their portent, Curtis writes, 'And as torches glow right thru' the night/A sacrifice for all that's right'. See 'Untitled and Unfinished', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> 'Atrocity Exhibition (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>24</sup> See J. Rubén Valdés Miyares, 'When Performance Lost Control: Making Rock History out of Ian Curtis and Joy Division'. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* (Vol. 9, No. 4, November 2013), pp. 1-13, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Savage confines this 'preoccupation' to Curtis's early lyrics. See *So This is Permanence*, p. xxi.

<sup>26</sup> Born Helmut Herzfeld (1891-1968). For Deborah Curtis's account of Ian Curtis's interest in Heartfield's *Photomontages of the Nazi Period* see *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 90-91. See, also, *So This is Permanence*, p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> Deborah Curtis mentions that while working on *Unknown Pleasures* Ian watched a documentary on the Nuremberg trials. Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 78.

of the pomp and power of Germany' in general.<sup>28</sup> This preoccupation is also evident from the cover image depicting Hitler Youth on Joy Division's EP *An Ideal for Living* (released June 1978),<sup>29</sup> or in the reference to Rudolf Hess in the song 'Warsaw' whose lyrics include his prisoner of war serial number during his incarceration in England.<sup>30</sup>

'Overhead, German Gothic characters across the center of an arc-shaped sign: Women's Camp. Alongside, a postscript chalked in German hand: Labor via Joy... Joy Division.'<sup>31</sup> The very name of the group, Joy Division, indicates a fascination with the workings of the Nazi state. Joy Division derived their name from a book entitled *House of Dolls* (1955) written by Holocaust survivor 'Ka-zetnik' or 'inmate' number 135633. Joy Division (*Freudenabteilung*) referred to the section in concentration camps in which women were forced into sexual slavery, serving as prostitutes for German soldiers and who were subjected to various surgical experiments— 'various methods of castration and sterilization'— before they were admitted. As the narrator records: 'Female organs were removed from their bodies and replaced with artificial ones. On them were tried all sorts of poison tablets, which German pharmaceutical concerns sent to the chief physician to be tested on humans.'<sup>32</sup> Taking their name from this book was a political act through which the group identified itself with the victims of fascism. The complete lyrics of the song 'No Love Lost' from *An Ideal for Living* includes a revised passage from *House of Dolls*:

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. Though I doubt that 'admiration' is really the appropriate term here. This is evident in the lyrics to 'Walked in Line (1978)' which refers to the 'glory' of – ostensibly – the Nazi state but also to its 'crimes': 'All dressed in uniforms so fine/They drank and killed to pass the time/Wearing the shame of all their crimes/With measured steps, they walked in line/.... They carried pictures of their wives/and numbered tags to prove their lives/.... Full of a glory never seen/They made it through the whole machine/To never question anymore/Hypnotic trance, they never saw.' Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> As Ott more than adequately describes: '*An Ideal For Living*... emblazoned with a Nazi-era Germanic font and extraneous umlauts... its cover image of an Aryan Youth drummer boy was taken from a vintage propaganda poster... the interior foldout featured a grainy, black and white photograph of a Nazi foot soldier pointing his automatic rifle at a small Jewish child whose hands are raised in surrender'. Ott, *Unknown Pleasures*, pp. 23-24. See, also, Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>30</sup> 31G-350125. 'Warsaw (1977)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>31</sup> Ka-tzetnik 135633, *House of Dolls*, trans. Moshe M. Kohn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Through the wire screen, the eyes of those standing outside looked in at her as into the cage of some rare creature in a zoo. In the hand of one of the assistants she saw the same instrument which they had that morning inserted deep into her body. She shuddered instinctively. No life at all in the house of dolls.<sup>33</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that Curtis generally 'was writing about someone else's experience' and that 'he was capable of enormous empathy'.<sup>34</sup> Empathy of a more immediate kind emerged as a result of Curtis's work as an Assistant Disablement Resettlement Officer at Macclesfield's Employment Exchange in 1977 where he worked with people with mental and physical disabilities such as epilepsy that left haunting pictures in his mind<sup>35</sup> and inspired him to write 'She's Lost Control'.<sup>36</sup> This support for the disabled may be translated into an anti-eugenic position rejecting the negative biopolitics of Nazism. Similar to what the Berlin artist Hans Bellmer did in fabricating his disarticulated dolls as an opponent of the authoritarianism of the Nazi state so Curtis did with his own body performing his epileptic seizures on stage, like 'a puppet on invisible strings',<sup>37</sup> representing those who were judged, persecuted and exterminated as '*Life Unworthy of Being Lived*'.<sup>38</sup> 'She's Lost Control' may be interpreted as taking the position of those who were victims of the Nazi euthanasia program. It expresses a desire to break with the societies of control, replicating the dual message of Hans Bellmer's dolls, sympathy for the disabled and rejection of eugenic ideology.

What Curtis describes as an anti-authoritarian song poet is the corruption of memory, unquestioning obedience and the normalization of violence; control of the future, deception and the control of representation; and while

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<sup>33</sup> 'No Love Lost (1977)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 147-148. The original passage reads: 'Through the wire screen, the eyes of those standing outside looked in at her as into the cage of some rare creature in a zoo. She was lying naked, her parted knees still strapped to the iron rods at both sides of the table. In the hand of one of the assistants she saw the same instrument which they had that morning inserted deep into her vagina. Her body shuddered instinctively.' *House of Dolls*, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> See Deborah Curtis's comments in *Touching from a Distance*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> See Deborah Curtis's account of the 'extremely personal interest' Curtis took in his clients at this Service. *Ibid.*, p. 51. Read Ian Curtis's own sympathetic and despairing reflection on this work in a letter to Annik Honoré, in Mick Middles and Lindsay Reade, *The Life of Ian Curtis: Torn Apart* (London: Omnibus Press, 2009), p. 190.

<sup>36</sup> 'She's Lost Control (1979)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 161-162 and pp. 182-183.

<sup>37</sup> As Adrian Thrills described his performance. See *NME*, 11 August, 1979. See, also, Mick Middles who observed: 'Ian Curtis often loses control. He'll suddenly jerk sideways and, head in hands, he'll transform into a twitching, epileptic-type mass of flesh and bone.' Quoted in Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> I borrow this expression from Agamben's discussion. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 136-143.

his lyrics make numerous references to human suffering, hopelessness, isolation and failure, all of which may be invoked as general descriptions of the state of an impoverished working class, the more concrete theme of Curtis's lyrics, mediated by his historical interest in the Nazi state, is of a re-emerging barbarism in politics.

It is convincing to decipher Curtis's lyrics as a direct response to the question of German guilt that unites him with the anti-authoritarian radicalism that culminated in the 'German Autumn' of 1977, navigating the same psychic territory of German memory with a clarity that has no connection to 'an unhealthy obsession with mental and physical pain'<sup>39</sup> as if he went too far with his curiosity about the mysteries of misery a source of wonder in Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* one of his favorite tales.<sup>40</sup> The lyrics of Ian Curtis may be mapped onto the generation of post-war Germany who felt the imperative to react against the recurrence of fascism.<sup>41</sup> Curtis's psychic landscape is the psychic landscape of the post-Auschwitz generation; he expresses *their* historical memory (*their ideas were inside him too*). Like them, Curtis is remembering for someone else; through mnemonic transposition he is imagining himself both the executioner and the victim and must live the fate of both. His beautiful, elegaic 'The Eternal' brings to mind the final sequence in the 1978 film *Germany in Autumn (Deutschland im Herbst)*, the tensely silent funeral procession through the Dornhalden cemetery in Stuttgart: 'Procession moves on, the shouting is over/Praise to the glory of loved ones now gone.'<sup>42</sup>

A doppelgänger of Curtis appears in the similarly dressed Benno Ohnesorg photographed as he lay dying after having been shot by a police officer 2 June, 1967 during a demonstration in Berlin against a visit by the Shah of Iran. Gunter Grass described the Ohnesorg murder as 'the first political murder in the Federal Republic.'<sup>43</sup> Ohnesorg's death was linked with the

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<sup>39</sup> See Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> In 1967, Rudi Dutschke, one of the leaders of the SDS (German Socialist Student Union), stated: 'Our opposition now is directed not against some small 'mistakes' of the System. Rather, it is a total opposition, aimed at the whole way of life of the authoritarian state as it has existed up to now.' See Rudi Dutschke, 'On Anti-authoritarianism' in: *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 246.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Eternal (1980)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 180.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 39.

emergence of radical groups such as the RAF, Movement 2 June, the Socialist Patient's Collective and Kommune I. 'This police murder was a defining event, electrifying the student movement and pushing it in a far more militant direction.'<sup>44</sup>



Ohnesorg murdered in Berlin 1967

The collective psychological interpretation of the German student movement and its militant offshoots, such as the Baader-Meinhof group (the RAF), as a historical repercussion of their parent's failure to confront a traumatic past that consequently remained unprocessed<sup>45</sup> is by now well known. Varon states that 'members of the New Left generation felt uninformed or even lied to about events of the past that defined their parent's generation and ultimately, the identity of all Germans.'<sup>46</sup> This mood is evident in Herbert Marcuse's correspondence with Martin Heidegger. Marcuse questioned Heidegger's silence and complicity with the Nazi state because he 'never publicly denounced any of the actions or ideologies of the regime.'<sup>47</sup> The analysis of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory was crucially important in understanding this conspiracy of silence on the part of the adult generation as indicative of the persistence of the 'authoritarian personality'.<sup>48</sup> The failure to reflect on their own connections to National Socialism was the failure of the 'generation of Auschwitz' as RAF member Gudrun Ensslin called them.<sup>49</sup> Adorno had earlier scornfully referred to

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<sup>44</sup> *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History, Volume I, Projectiles for the People*, trans. André Moncourt and J. Smith (PM Press, Oakland, CA, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> See *Baader-Meinhof Returns: History and Cultural Memory of German Left-Wing Terrorism*. eds. Gerrit-Jan Berendse and Ingo Cornils (Editions Rodopi B.V. Amsterdam-New York, NY 2008), p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> See Richard Wolin, 'Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters', *New German Critique*, Spring/Summer 1991, Issue 53, pp. 28-32.

<sup>48</sup> Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Gudrun Ensslin asserted: 'This fascist state means to kill us all... Violence is the only way to answer violence. This is the Auschwitz generation, and there's no arguing with them.' *Ibid.*, p. 39.



the 'parents who must endure embarrassing questions from children about Hitler and in response... whitewash their own guilt'.<sup>50</sup> In their momentous book *The Inability to Mourn* published in 1967, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich described and criticized the 'orientation toward the unreal in German collective behavior' during the post-war period;<sup>51</sup> the 'mechanisms of defense against the Nazi past'.<sup>52</sup> This 'inability to mourn' was 'the result of an intensive defense against guilt, shame, and anxiety', and, above all, responsibility. 'The Nazi past was de-realized... emptied of reality'.<sup>53</sup> To work through guilt is to mourn they said; but 'all affective bridges to the immediate past' had been blocked.<sup>54</sup> 'No such working-through occurred. Instead, the recollection of a whole segment of national history soon faded and naturally on the individual level that meant losing segments of one's own life from memory.'<sup>55</sup> I

In this failure to work through the past lay the sheer destruction and effacement of memory. Adorno articulated and expanded upon the problem as follows:

that fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.<sup>56</sup>

This view, ultimately a mainstay of the Frankfurt School, was absorbed by the German Student Movement and the various militant political organizations at its perimeter. Varon comments on how in Germany 'students and youth pointed to the considerable linkages in personnel between the Nazi regime and the new German state as evidence of "fascist continuity"... [since]

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<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past' (1959) in: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press 1998), p. 100.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1975), p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', p. 98. On what it means to 'work through the past' Adorno writes: 'The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.' *Ibid.*, p. 103.

some high-ranking officials in the Federal Republic had been Nazis.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the German Federal Republic still 'contained substantial remnants of the Nazi past.'<sup>58</sup> Germany was perceived by the post-Auschwitz generation as a continuation of the fascist state. One account emphasizes that some elements of the Federal Republic— 'its institutions, many personnel— seamlessly persisted from the Nazi period.' The judiciary, for example, 'was almost 100% restored as early as 1946.'<sup>59</sup> On the perimeter of the German counter-culture, the RAF desired to overthrow the German government not through the political act of remembering<sup>60</sup> but through political violence— a redemptive violence. Varon states that 'lethal violence promised to liberate RAF members from the psychological and political burdens of the past and break the chain of German guilt.'<sup>61</sup>

Ian Curtis occupied the same psychic terrain as the post-Auschwitz generation in Germany; speaking to: 1. the weight of the fascist past and guilt for the Holocaust; 2. fascist or authoritarian continuity in the present; 3. the possibility of redemptive violence in confronting it; and 4. the failure of political organization.

The evidence is made circumstantially stronger by the fact that another Factory Records group who often shared the stage with Joy Division, Cabaret Voltaire, recorded a track called 'Baader Meinhof'. The demo of this track is more interesting than the final recording because of the acoustic clarity of its lyric content. The track incorporates German radio announcing on October

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<sup>57</sup> Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> *Baader-Meinhof Returns*, eds. Berendse and Cornils, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> *The Red Army Faction*, pp. 3-5. In a conversation with Joseph Cuomo, W. G. Sebald remarks on how former Nazis had been re-integrated into the German University system: 'The humanities were particularly compromised. The law profession as well, practically all... there was a very deeply ingrained authoritarianism.' Joseph Cuomo, 'A Conversation with W. G. Sebald' in: *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), p. 107.

<sup>60</sup> Somewhere along the lines of the German writer W. G. Sebald. Arthur Lubow comments that 'Having been born in Germany in 1944 and raised in a society that willed itself into amnesia, [Sebald] regarded remembering as a moral and political act.' See Arthur Lubow, 'Crossing Boundaries' in: *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 13. The following comments summarize key points I have stated above: 'The studies of the Frankfurt school on fascism, particularly the concept of the authoritarian personality, left a strong impression on this generation of young Germans. Inquiry into the Holocaust and its historical and sociopsychological origins became a preoccupation for the student movement, and the students rigorously challenged their grandparents' and parents' amnesia about this part of German history. That a successor to Hitler's NSDAP, the NPD, emerged again in the 1960s, was not declared unconstitutional, and was voted into several state legislatures... added to the younger generation's anxieties that fascist mentalities had survived beyond 1945'. See Sabine von Dirke, 'All Power to the Imagination!': *The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 36.

18, 1977 the deaths of RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe, all found dead in their cells in Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart—the so-called ‘Death Night’. Their deaths were immediately and vengefully followed by the murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer who had been kidnapped by the RAF on September 5, 1977. Schleyer was the head of the West German Federation of Industries and the Chairman of Daimler-Benz. He was also a former member of the SS<sup>62</sup> and thus ‘a perfect symbol of the integration of former Nazis into the postwar power structure;’<sup>63</sup> ‘a living symbol of what the RAF asserted was the continuity between the Nazi Reich and the Federal Republic.’<sup>64</sup> The lyrics of the Cabaret Voltaire ‘Baader Meinhof’ 1977 demo track communicate the suspicions, political accusations, probing questions and doubts circulating during those leaden times:

Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader  
both died in a prison cell.  
Who fired the gun that killed Baader?  
Who pulled the trigger?  
International loudspeakers that told the world of their exploits  
stay silent about the legal mass murder known as war.  
Urban guerrillas seeking solutions with bombs and bullets.  
Gun runners. Hijackers. Bankrobbers.  
The Baader-Meinhof army are the descendents of a previous generation of fanatics.  
Do they feel the guilt of their Nazi ancestors?  
Or are they the bored middle class seeking outlets for their frustrations?  
Are these the heroes or the villains of the modern world?



The Murder of Andreas Baader, Odd Nerdrum

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<sup>62</sup> See *Baader-Meinhof Returns*, eds. Berendse and Cornils, p. 43.

<sup>63</sup> *The Red Army Faction*, p. 470.

<sup>64</sup> Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p. 197.

Curtis's starting point as a lyricist is an awareness of the evolution of the authoritarian surveillance state, viewed as continuous with Nazi Germany: 'Two way mirror in the hall/They like to watch everything you do/Transmitters hidden in the walls/So they know everything you say is true';<sup>65</sup> Considering the four tracks on Joy Division's EP *An Ideal for Living*, 'Failures' conveys the terminal, cultural diagnosis (while the other tracks describe the symptoms): the rotation towards authoritarianism and fascism in the 20th century whose origins Curtis rightly discerns in the Caesarism of the 19th century; the source of modern mass politics and mass psychology. 'Taken from Caesar's side'<sup>66</sup> new leaders appear— 'Born from some mother's womb'— to infiltrate the imagination. 'Thousand words are spoken loud/Reach the dumb to fool the crowd.' And politics is organized on the medieval, theological basis of good vs. evil; and wars become religious wars of extermination.<sup>67</sup>

Curtis speaks for the 'Sons of chance' who 'take good care/For all the people not there';<sup>68</sup> who act for those who were exterminated and those not yet born. In this respect his lyrics attempt to process the traumatic past of the Nazi state, bearing the burden of 'the shame of all their crimes';<sup>69</sup> bearing the weight of the fascist past and taking upon himself the guilt for those who suffered and died in the Holocaust. 'I'm ashamed of the person I am.'<sup>70</sup> 'Over each mistakes were made/I took the blame.'<sup>71</sup> His guilt mimics the guilt and blame of those who had to live with the mistakes of the generation of Auschwitz, who carried this 'weight on their shoulders' and were 'Pushed to the limit'.<sup>72</sup>

*Unknown Pleasures* (1979) begins to mark off a territory of values in opposition to authoritarian statism. The spirit that guides him gives him the right 'To mess with your values/And change wrong to right.'<sup>73</sup> Curtis is on the offensive here: 'all you judges beware'.<sup>74</sup> He speaks within a political wilderness of 'one sided trials';<sup>75</sup> and his words call to mind the assassination by the RAF of

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<sup>65</sup> 'No Love Lost (1977)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 147-148. This track also contains the modified excerpt from *House of Dolls*, hence the link to the Nazi state.

<sup>66</sup> 'Failures (1977)', *ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>67</sup> 'Leaders of Men (1977)', *ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>68</sup> 'Insight (1979)', *ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>69</sup> 'Walked in Line (1978)', *ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>70</sup> 'Isolation (1980)', *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>71</sup> 'New Dawn Fades (1979)', *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>72</sup> 'Decades (1980)', *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>73</sup> 'Candidate (1979)', *ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>74</sup> 'Insight (1979)', *ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>75</sup> 'Wilderness (1979)', *ibid.* p. 163.

Federal Prosecutor Siegfried Buback, a former member of the Nazi party, on 7 April 1977 and, more remotely, the bomb attack by the RAF on Judge Buddenberg of the Karlsruhe Supreme Court on 16 May, 1972. Curtis portrays the concentration camp as the *Nomos* of the modern, the political space in which we dwell.<sup>76</sup> In 'Interzone' we see 'A wire fence where the children played,'<sup>77</sup> signalling fascist or authoritarian continuity in the present.

There is another dimension to the lyrics of Ian Curtis. They are not all hopelessness and nihilism but express a destructive 'impulse to clear it all away',<sup>78</sup> with a discriminating (or indiscriminating) political violence driven by purity of conviction (or at least not one that can be morally condemned) acting for the overall good of society. Because of a crisis in values and their legitimacy,<sup>79</sup> Curtis is unable to condemn political violence. As he writes in 'Candidate', 'We're living by your rules/That's all that we know'; indicating that the same tactics used by the state (and constituting state terrorism) may be justifiably used by any political agency. Action is right when it is decided upon. Action is forced by the 'spirit'. Resolve is necessary as there is 'no time to waste.'<sup>80</sup> For Curtis, political violence is an authentic reaction to the force of the pressures and strains and the weight of the past referred to conspicuously in 'Glass', 'Candidate', 'The Only Mistake' and 'Decades'; political violence is not entirely condemned as Curtis ironically intones in 'New Dawn Fades': 'A loaded gun won't set you free. So you say.'<sup>81</sup> Subsequently the irony is discarded in 'These Days': 'Spent all my time, learnt a killer's art/ Took threats and abuse 'till I'd learned the part.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> For insightful comments on this dwelling place see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 166-180.

<sup>77</sup> 'Interzone (1978)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Kill (1977)', *ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>79</sup> In 'Heart and Soul' life is represented as a struggle between value systems; but values are not grounded in eternity: 'Foundations that lasted the ages/Then ripped apart at their roots.' See 'Heart and Soul (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 178-179. See, also: 'Eternal rights we left behind' in 'A Means to an End (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>80</sup> 'Interzone (1978)', *ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>81</sup> 'New Dawn Fades (1979)', *ibid.*, p. 161. What I am claiming regarding Curtis's position on political violence is concisely synthesized by Marcuse: 'In the face of the scope and intensity of... sanctioned aggression, the traditional distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence becomes questionable. If legitimate violence includes, in the daily routine of "pacification" and "liberation," wholesale burning, poisoning, bombing, the actions of the radical opposition, no matter how illegitimate, can hardly be called by the same name: violence. Can there be any meaningful comparison, in magnitude and criminality, between the unlawful acts committed by the rebels in the ghettos, on the campuses, on the city streets on the one side, and the deeds perpetrated by the forces of order in Vietnam, in Bolivia, in Indonesia or Guatemala, on the other?' See Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 76-77.

<sup>82</sup> 'These Days (1980)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 171-172.

Curtis believes in the possibility of redemptive violence but not violence without end. This is evident in his exceptional 'Day of the Lords' which evokes RAF violence, representationally applicable to the Hanns -Martin Schleyer abduction ('only sheets on the wall'... 'the bodies obtained') and to his pathetic fate in Mulhaus France on the rue Charles Péguy ('This is the car at the edge of the road') where Curtis raises the anguished question: 'Where will it end?'<sup>83</sup> As the simultaneous staging of multiple perspectives 'Day of the Lords' in fact combines images from both the Holocaust ('bloodsport and pain', 'no room for the weak') and RAF violence, certain of them with a double function, revealing the intrinsic relational dynamic between the violence of the Nazi state and the redemptive violence of the post-Auschwitz generation; opening an affective bridge between the two events. 'Through childhood, through youth, I remember it all'.<sup>84</sup>

Joy Division's metronomic 'A Means to an End' is a fervent praise of friendship and community; trust in the final goal— 'Committed still I turn to go'— even though it may result in defeat and death: 'Where dogs and vultures eat'.<sup>85</sup> Jon Savage is correct in writing that 'Curtis's lyrics oscillate between hopelessness and the possibility of, if not absolute need for human connection'.<sup>86</sup> But what Savage misses is the idea that Curtis's salient need for human connection is specifically a need for political connection, the need for political organization. Yet failure to achieve this is the unfortunate and seemingly inevitable conclusion, as many of his lyrics are infused with the theme of ineluctable failure in which a hope is expressed for something else but no viable alternatives present themselves: 'the memories of a future everyone shared/But when the time came... Nobody cared'.<sup>87</sup> Thus too the inevitable failure of political resistance as declaimed in the conspiratorial 'Shadowplay' where the willingness to sacrifice one's body, to fuse the community through violence is expressed but ends in bewilderment: 'And with cold steel, odour on their bodies made a move to connect/But I could only stare in disbelief as the crowds all left'.<sup>88</sup> Yet there are real reasons for

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<sup>83</sup> 'Day of the Lords (1979)', *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> 'A Means to an End (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>86</sup> *So This is Permanence*, p. xxviii.

<sup>87</sup> 'End of Time (1978)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>88</sup> 'Shadowplay (1979)', *ibid.*, p. 162-163. Note that in 'Shadowplay' Curtis refers to 'the assassins all grouped in four lines, dancing on the floor'; the 'four' mirroring the four incarcerated RAF members who died or were wounded during the 'Death Night' in Stammheim Prison: Baader, Ensslin, Raspe and Möller.

this failure: that individuals are used or manipulated for other interests or ends of which they are not aware<sup>89</sup> or that rebellion becomes ‘childlike’.<sup>90</sup>

In summary, Ian Curtis occupied the same psychic terrain as the post-Auschwitz generation in Germany; speaking to: 1. the weight of the fascist past and guilt for the Holocaust; 2. fascist or authoritarian continuity in the present; 3. the possibility of redemptive violence in confronting it; and 4. the failure of political organization. I would like to return to the first point and make some additional, concluding comments.

The mood of guilt that pervades the lyrics of Ian Curtis may best be described as ‘metaphysical guilt’, a term coined by Karl Jaspers. The strongly correlative metaphysical guilt that Curtis expresses is the collectively-shared guilt of an individual who lacks the power to change society and who is unable to escape the cycles of history. It results from the inability to act such as to nullify the cycles of history, the return to barbarism and ‘dark ages’.

In 1945, while the Nuremberg trials were in progress, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers delivered a series of lectures on German national guilt in which he declared: ‘We have to bear the guilt of our fathers’;<sup>91</sup> ‘there can be no doubt that we Germans, every one of us, are guilty in some way.’<sup>92</sup> In these lectures Jaspers distinguished four types of guilt and the degree of responsibility associated with each: ‘criminal guilt’, ‘political guilt’, ‘moral guilt’ and ‘metaphysical guilt’. He delineated the traits of these four types of guilt as follows: those who were criminally guilty violated both natural and international law; those who were *politically* guilty (in fact, the entire German citizenry) were responsible for the actions of their government; those who were *morally* guilty were those who in the aftermath of the war felt guilty before their own conscience; and, finally, those who were *metaphysically* guilty felt guilty for those who during the war suffered or lost their lives. (The latter two, he stated, could not be radically separated.)<sup>93</sup> For Jaspers, to

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, ‘Shadowplay’: ‘I let them use you for their own ends’, *ibid.*, p. 163 and the following excerpt from Curtis’s notebooks: ‘manipulated by anti-manipulators – socialist groups and etc.’ *So This is Permanence*, p. 179. Curtis’s pointed reference to ‘socialist groups’ in this excerpt may be an effect of his reportedly ‘Conservative’ or ‘right wing’ predilections. See Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 35 and p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> ‘From Safety to Where...? (1979)’, Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>91</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

address this German guilt was 'vital' and crucial for 'inner regeneration'.<sup>94</sup> It was imperative that Germans engage in a protracted (extra-generational) process of 'ethical self-examination'<sup>95</sup> as a way of getting their 'spiritual bearings'.<sup>96</sup> This became the responsibility of the post-Auschwitz generation. In effect, *The Question of German Guilt* reminded them of how they should feel and what they should work for. Metaphysical guilt had to be 'constantly repeated by our conscience' until it 'comes to be a fundamental trait of our... self-consciousness';<sup>97</sup> it must lead to an 'inner transformation'<sup>98</sup> and, ultimately, politically, to the affirmation of a new world order 'suggested by Nuremberg'.<sup>99</sup> Thus as Jaspers defined metaphysical guilt, it was both an inner and educational process. Because metaphysical guilt 'is the lack of absolute solidarity with the human being as such',<sup>100</sup> solidarity with other human beings needed to be taught. In a Kantian vein of perpetual peace Jaspers writes, 'There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world... if I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty.'<sup>101</sup>

Jaspers emphasized that metaphysical guilt was apt to be 'a subject of revelation in concrete situations or in the work of poets'.<sup>102</sup>

Curtis's poetic memory is German memory. He remembers for someone else, 'deciphering scars',<sup>103</sup> redressing the moral failing of the past as he recalls the victims of colonialism and genocide. In this sense he assists in the process of getting our spiritual bearings. In 'Twenty-four Hours' a need for 'therapy' is announced;<sup>104</sup> a need for collective self-examination.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 5. This was necessary, as Joseph W. Koterski writes in his Introduction to *The Question of German Guilt*, because 'Germany... [had] brought so much suffering upon others.' Ibid. pp. viii-ix. In the same respect, it can also be said that today both the American state and the Croatian state (with its recent monumentalizing of Ustasha criminal, Miro Baresic) need to get their 'spiritual bearings'.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 54. According to Jaspers, fervently, 'The essential point is whether the Nuremberg trial comes to be a link in a chain of meaningful, constructive political acts.... It will either create confidence in the world that right was done and a foundation laid in Nuremberg— in which case the political trial will have become a legal one, with law creatively founded and realized for a new world now waiting to be built.' Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>103</sup> 'Exercise One (1978)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>104</sup> 'Twenty-four Hours (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 179-180



It begins with a 'Portrayal of the trauma and degeneration/The sorrows we suffered and never were free.'<sup>105</sup> Curtis engages us in a historical analysis which is at the same time ethical and ontological. His theme is moral failure and metaphysical weakness. Not to do something when you can leads to metaphysical (and moral) guilt; 'passivity knows itself morally guilty of every failure, every neglect to act whenever possible, to shield the imperiled, to relieve wrong, to countervail.'<sup>106</sup> This mood of failure comes to predominate Curtis's lyrics. Similar to Nietzsche's formula of *amor fati* Curtis sporadically affirms the ontology of eternal return<sup>107</sup> expressing an effort to affirm an interpretation of life doomed to failure and entropy as who we are 'Reflects a moment in time/A special moment in time'.<sup>108</sup> Yet the frustration due to the lack of political alternatives forces him to escape into the past to divine a template eternally repeated— 'Watched from the wings as the scenes were replaying'<sup>109</sup> — the return or recurrence of the destruction of knowledge and of disciplinary societies, 'one sided trials', persecution of outsiders and minorities, the corruption of law. With the song 'Wilderness' his Nietzschean attempt to achieve the attitude of *amor fati* fails. The definitive proclamation is heard in 'Atrocity Exhibition'— 'This is what was and will be'<sup>110</sup>— expressing a failure to reach a post-Nuremberg world.

The lyrical trajectory of Ian Curtis assumes the following form under the weight of the metaphysical dilemma he inherits for his times: a description of the (neo-) fascist state; spiritual and physical resistance to the (neo-)fascist state; guilt as a result of the inability to act so as to nullify the cycles of history (the return to barbarism and 'dark ages'); leading to two attitudes through which to escape it: *amor fati* or self-annihilation. With the eternal return of repression and the inevitability of violence, strangeness and isolation he is unable to consecrate his life.



Hanged, Gerhard Richter

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<sup>105</sup> 'Decades (1980)', *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>106</sup> Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, p. 63.

<sup>107</sup> Deborah Curtis refers to Ian Curtis's reading of Friedrich Nietzsche and specifically his fascination with the theory of eternal return. See Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, p. 90. Curtis had Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ* in his personal library. See *So This is Permanence*, pp. 257-258. For Nietzsche's ecstatic affirmation of eternal return see, for example, *Twilight of the Idols*, 'What I Owe to the Ancients', §4-5.

<sup>108</sup> 'Insight (1979)', Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>109</sup> 'Decades (1980)', *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>110</sup> 'Atrocity Exhibition (1980)', *ibid.*, pp. 173-175.

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