

Breaking Joy Division's "Glass": Reading Song Lyrics as Literature

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There are various difficulties in reading the words of songs as literary texts. Principal among them is the relation of those words to the story (or star-text) of their author. The life of Ian Curtis as written by his biographers and the songs he wrote for his band, Joy Division, exemplified as they are by the symbolism of breaking glass, are a case in point. Ultimately, more than with any other literary text, their meaning depends on their refraction, analogous to that of the shards of a broken mirror, through multiple other texts and audiences.

Keywords: Joy Division; song lyrics; pop/rock culture; text analysis; intertextuality; reading

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Rompiendo "Glass" de Joy Division: la lectura de letras de canciones como literatura.

La lectura de letras de canciones como textos literarios presenta diversas dificultades, siendo una de las principales la relación entre esas letras y la historia de su autor como estrella. Este artículo aborda el simbolismo de romper cristales en la vida de Ian Curtis, tal como aparece en sus biografías, y en las canciones que escribió para su grupo, Joy Division, como caso ilustrativo de la complejidad de leer letras de canciones modernas. El argumento es, en definitiva, que el significado de las letras de canciones, aún en mayor medida que el de otros textos literarios, depende de su refracción, a la manera de un espejo roto, a través de una multiplicidad de otros textos y públicos.

Palabras clave: Joy Division; letras de canciones; cultura pop/rock; análisis de texto; intertextualidad; lectura

1. INTRODUCTION: SONG LYRICS AS/AND LITERATURE

This article uses the idea of *breaking glass* to discuss an aspect of the mythologization of Ian Curtis of Joy Division, the oversimplification involved in seeing him as a poet whose lyrics transparently reflected his life. In doing so, it draws intertextual connections between the writing of history and biography, culture and popular music, while also exploring the notion of *broken mirrors* as a way to represent faulty understanding and the way literary meaning may become fragmented and assembled in tangential ways.

Popular song lyrics are seldom considered an object for literary study, except within the fields of popular music studies (e.g., Frith 1988; Longhurst 1995), cultural studies (as witnessed, for example, by the numerous proposals of papers studying song lyrics to the Cultural Studies panel of AEDEAN conferences), and musicology. There is still, however, no general theoretical framework for analyzing pop songs in literary criticism, cultural studies (though critics from Theodor Adorno to Lawrence Grossberg have made key contributions in cultural politics) or musicology. One of the current musicologists producing surveys for the reading of rock songs, Allan F. Moore, argues that if such a theory existed it should insist on the fact that the primary text of songs is purely musical, and everything else, the words of the songs and any commentaries on them, particularly rock criticism, is secondary to their meaning (Moore 2001, 1). While Moore's argument denotes a musicological prejudice that needs qualification from a literary perspective, it places an emphasis that should not be entirely dismissed. The lyrics of many pop or rock songs themselves point to the uselessness of words to express their own meanings, or at least their inability to capture the singer's emotional states: think of The Who's "I Can't Explain" (and also their whole rock opera *Tommy*), F. R. David's "Words," or Aerosmith's "Let the Music do the Talking." Rod Stewart's "Every Rock 'n' Roll Song to Me," after calling his "Sexy Thing" an assortment of popular song names, from "Strawberry Fields" to "Bat Out of Hell," justifies the parody by admitting: "Now what I'm saying to you may seem quite absurd, but it's from the heart, baby, so please, please don't analyse the words!" (Stewart 2015). As Simon Frith put it, "[p]op songs celebrate not the articulate but the inarticulate, and the evaluation of pop singers depends not on words but on sounds—on the noises around the words" (1983, 35). Thus purely semantic or literal analyses could not really account for the meaning of songs.

Among the obstacles to their literary analysis are the traditional distance between popular culture as a whole and literary criticism; the triviality or purposeful difficulty and ambiguity of song texts; the fact that they do not make complete sense independently from the music they were written for; the meaningful texture of their original creator's voice; the image and iconography associated with the song; factors related to music production, and the occasions on which it was performed or recorded. In the case of Joy Division, while their songs and the history of the band has generated great interest, it has only been among music journalists and filmmakers.

That said, some of the music journalists who have written frequently about Joy Division, such as Paul Morley and Jon Savage, have a distinctly literary quality to

their writing, and betray a combined awareness of literature and rock music culture. Savage wrote a newspaper article on the literary influences of the singer and author of Joy Division's lyrics, Ian Curtis, whom he portrays as someone who "devoured offbeat literature," as well as books by Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Kafka and Burroughs (Savage 2008). Savage subsequently co-edited the singer's lyrics and notebooks (Curtis 2014) with Curtis's widow and foremost biographer, Deborah Curtis, laying much emphasis on his reading and literary influences. Deborah Curtis even states in her "Foreword," perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek, that she fell for Ian because of his literary ambitions: "I was hooked; the romance of him being both a poet and a writer was too much to resist" (2014, vii), and she refers to his enjoyment of classics such as Chaucer, Wilde and Poe, his carrying a plastic bag with his writings in it around with him, a bag which he kept next to his books at home, and the importance he attached to having a room of his own for writing (see also Middles and Reade 2006, 147-148). Savage, in a separate "Introduction," discusses the literary qualities and influences of Ian Curtis, but then concludes that his "lyrics—both draft and complete—were written to be sung with loud music that was at once brutal and unwavering, futuristic and increasingly sophisticated," and that it is impossible to determine exactly how Curtis's "distinctive writing talent" might have flourished (Savage 2014, xxvii), as he committed suicide at the age of 23.

In fact the figure of Ian Curtis has been increasingly associated with the world of literature: in Anton Corbijn's film *Control* (2007) about his life, there is footage of Curtis reciting Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up" to Deborah, although she never mentions Wordsworth either in her memoir of her husband, on which the film is largely based, or in her literature-focused "Foreword" to his writings (Curtis 2014). Of course Curtis would (probably) have read Wordsworth at school like many British children did, but Corbijn in the film is simply linking the mythical Curtis to romantic sensibility, as Ott does when comparing him to "Goethe's infamous creation, Werther" because of Curtis's potentially malign influence on suicidal youth (Ott 2010, 94), whereas his inclinations as a reader and writer (as Savage would probably confirm) exhibit a much greater affinity with the existentialism that enticed contemporary writers like J.G. Ballard, than with either Goethe or Wordsworth's romanticism.

The analysis of the literary influences Curtis might have had falls beyond the scope of the present article, which focuses instead on various texts, both literary and filmic, some of which Curtis might have read or seen, in order to explore the connotations and intertextuality of one significant image in Joy Division's songs, that of glass and its breaking. My approach is based on the notion of "embodied cognition" as developed by Allan F. Moore (2012, 237-238), drawing on Mark Johnson (1987). The essay concludes by referring to Derrida's *Glas* (1974), an anti-book which Curtis could not have read (its English translation was published in 1981 after his death), whose title has no lexical relation to the English word "glass," but which exemplifies how disparate texts can be juxtaposed, or, according to the Derridean notion that largely informs this

article, *grafted* onto other texts, in order to open up new meaning.¹ In our case, various texts (songs, novels, films) concerned with symbolic “glass” are used to demonstrate the significance of this image in Joy Division’s lyrics and the stories written about Curtis, in an attempt to explore in general the possibilities of, as well as the limits precluding, the literary reading of song lyrics.

2. IAN CURTIS’S HEART OF GLASS

If the fixure of *Momus’s* glass, in the human breast, [...] had taken place, [...] nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man’s character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, [...] and look’d in,—view’d the soul stark naked;—observ’d all her motions,—her machinations;—traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth; watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, her capricious; [...]—then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to: But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet. (Sterne [1759] 1983, 59)

Shortly after making *24 Hour Party People* ([2002] 2003), the film which refloats the story of Joy Division for the present century, Michael Winterbottom directed an adaptation of Laurence Sterne’s famous anti-novel, under the title *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* ([2005] 2006). This will lead me to my first *grafting* operation: a juxtaposition between a particular detail in the life of Tristram Shandy and the biography of Ian Curtis. The comic actor Steve Coogan was cast in the lead role in both films. Both characters have traits in common, since Tristram Shandy, like the earlier film’s narrator-hero Tony Wilson, chief owner of Joy Division’s record company, Factory Records, is a self-reflective narrator often speaking frontally to the camera and commenting ironically on the autobiographical narrative. Such self-reflectiveness, though with no hint of irony, can also be found, in hindsight, in Ian Curtis’s lyrics for the band he fronted as chief vocalist. In order to illustrate the opacity of a man’s character for the biographer, Laurence Sterne alludes to Lucan’s story (in *Hermotimus or Concerning the Sects*) that when Hephaistos made man, the god Momus blamed him for not putting a window in his breast; because of this criticism Momus was banished from heaven (Sterne [1759] 1983, 549). Curtis may never have heard of Laurence Sterne; Tony Wilson, who (at least in his novelization of the film *24 Hour Party People*) sometimes acted as Curtis’s literary mentor advising him to read Yeats, for example (Wilson 2002, 88), certainly had (94).²

¹ Derrida offers *grafting* as a model for thinking about the logic of texts in “The Double Session” (“La Double Séance,” in *La Dissémination*, 1972; English translation 1981), which, taking the juxtaposition of different texts as a starting point, purports to be talking about the relationship of truth, memory and imagination, as well as an interpretation of mimesis. In a footnote quoting Gaston Bachelard, Derrida also refers to the connection between the concept of textual *graft* and human psychology, imagination and art (Derrida [1972] 1981, 203, note 21).

² Tony Wilson, who had a degree in English from Cambridge, shows a recurrent concern with the connections between pop culture and academic literary culture in *24 Hour Party People* (2002, 109, 181-182, 186, 196-197).

Momus's glass might recall the opacity of Ian Curtis's heart, which made the people closest to him fail to understand his many expressions of an earnest death wish, and his despairing call for sympathy, for what they now really seem to have been. Consider, for example, the last stanza of "Twenty Four Hours," from their final album *Closer* (1980):

Now that I've realised how it's all gone wrong,
Gotta find some therapy, this treatment takes too long.
Deep in the heart of where sympathy held sway,
Gotta find my destiny, before it gets too late. (Curtis 1995, 180)

The song, interpreted with a funereal rhythm, an eerie atmosphere of synthesizers, and the singer's characteristic crooning, today sounds like an earnest urge to shorten his suffering and despair (see Hook 2013, 350). However, the reader must be aware of the pathetic fallacy in song words (Moore 2012, 208). Tony Wilson found it "disgusting the way some people [including himself in his novelization] quote Joy Division lyrics to explain Joy Division things" (Wilson 2002, 82). On the other hand, it has also been said that Curtis admired Lou Reed for actually doing what he sang about (see Nolan 2007, 36). When Curtis hanged himself, many people decided that this is what he was writing about in his songs.

The moment one hears of the young singer's suicide, it becomes part of Joy Division's star-text, that is, of the band's public image and its reception. It was certainly the case for most of Joy Division's audience outside the UK, since their one and only major international hit, "Love Will Tear Us Apart" (1980) was not released until after Curtis's death as a 12-inch single. Once impressed by the singer's fatal end, the listener tends to understand the lyrics Curtis wrote for Joy Division, within the mood of tragic empathy that many of those texts seem to encourage in terms of the possible circumstances leading him to make such a decision.

Throughout the 1980s the relation between Joy Division's story and their singer's suicide was shrouded in rumor and legend (Wilson 2002, 102). His songs were believed to be a faithful reflection of his personal tragedy: for example, "She's Lost Control" (from *Unknown Pleasures* 1979) was about his own epilepsy (though he had written it before being diagnosed with the disease); "Atrocity Exhibition" (from *Closer* 1980), about feeling like a freak on show, especially when he began to have epileptic seizures during gigs; and "Love Will Tear Us Apart," about his tormented love life, which was presumed to have destroyed him. Then, in the 1990s, Deborah Curtis's memoir decisively emplotted her husband's life as a fashion victim of the rock and roll culture industry and the myth of dying young, and by 2002, with Winterbottom's film, the band's story had crystallized into a pivotal episode in impresario Tony Wilson's history, and therefore as a product of Factory Records and its attempt to revitalize Manchester's culture (Wilson 2002, 54-56). No matter how much Paul Morley, the music journalist who is supposed to have been closest to the band, tried to open up that history in all

its ambivalence,³ Curtis' life was the tragedy at the heart of the predominantly comic history of Factory. This was only one step away from turning Curtis into the savior figure of Manchester's cultural life, as Middles and Reade's biography (2006) and Grant Gee's documentary (2007) implicitly do.

Accounts of Curtis's life tend to be dominated by conceptual metaphors, conforming a discourse on Joy Division which draws on their lyrics and is often based on binaries like outside/inside, as in the design of *Unknown Pleasures* (1979; see Valdés Miyares 2016, 90-91), in the chorus of "Atrocity Exhibition"—"This is the way, step inside"—and in the title of Peter Hook's memoir *Unknown Pleasures* (2013); distance—as the title of his wife's biography of him, *Touching from a Distance* (a line from their song "Transmission" (1979)—and closeness—as in the 1980 album *Closer*);⁴ and control and its loss—as in their song "She's Lost Control" (1979) and the film *Control* (Corbijn 2007). These *image schemata* can be regarded as representing aspects of the lyricist's embodied experience, which are in turn adopted by those who write about it, such as Curtis's biographers and documentary and film script-writers. Glass-breaking imagery, expressing a feeling of physical fragility and transparency shattered, is far less conspicuous in the lyrics than in biographical incidents. However, I shall consider it a schema in terms of it being "a recurrent pattern, shape and regularity in, or of, ongoing ordering activities [of our experiences]" (Johnson 1987, 29). My reading will suggest that these cognitive metaphors of embodied experience tend to take on an open-ended meaning.

3. JOY DIVISION'S *Kristallnacht*

As an admirer of German culture and a cinemagoer, Ian Curtis might have seen Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1979), whose dwarfish hero Oskar Matserath—bearing a faint resemblance to the Hitler Youth drummer boy on the original sleeve of Joy Division's first single *An Ideal for Living* (1978)—has the power to shatter glass with his shrill screaming when he throws a tantrum. The poster for the film featuring the dwarf drummer is a grotesque distortion of the iconic Nazi drummer boy, while Joy Division's original single cover (replaced in the 12" re-edition by artwork featuring scaffolding) could be interpreted as a provocative celebration of Nazism as 'an ideal.' Oskar Matserath's strange talent might also seem to be a symbolic allusion to the Nazis' *Kristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass" of 1938, so called for the large number of windows of Jewish owned shops shattered by the Nazis that night across Germany. The sinister rise of Nazism is also the background to Fosse's musical *Cabaret* (1972), where the decadence of Weimar Berlin is shown reflected on a

³ The blurb of Morley's book (2008) claims that he is "the man who knew Joy Division best." His way of rendering the history of the band as quite open has to do with his performative approach to history writing, as argued by Valdés Miyares 2013, 2-3.

⁴ Reviewer Mark Ellen also used the binomial close/distant: "Close up, Joy Division are quite intriguing, from a distance, they're oppressive as hell" (*New Musical Express*, 17 November 1979, quoted in Nice 2010, 81).

distorted glass in the final scene. Deborah Curtis said they went to see *Cabaret* “a dozen times” when she started going out with Ian (in an interview with Jon Savage quoted by Middles and Reade 2006, 24). The band’s interest in Nazi imagery, expressed even in their choice of their name “Joy Division,” the name given to the brothel section for soldiers in concentration camps, forced them to refute accusations of their support of fascist ideology throughout their career (Hook 2013, 5 and 92; Sumner 2014, 84). It is now widely accepted that attraction to Nazi icons was common in the punk culture from which Joy Division emerged, where, as Savage points out (2014, xxii), it was “possible to be fascinated with the topic without taking on the ideology.”

Curtis might also have heard about J.G. Ballard’s *The Crystal World* (1966)—a novel narrating how the earth turns to crystal, beginning with the crystallization of a forest in Africa—given that he took the name of his song “Atrocity Exhibition” from another of Ballard’s titles (1970), though he admitted that he had not read the novel when he copied its title—in an interview with Alan Hemsall cited by Savage (2014, xxiii). He is also likely to have seen or heard of Werner Herzog’s *Heart of Glass* (1976), which the German filmmaker released the year before *Strazek* (1977), the film Curtis is known to have watched on the evening before he died. *Heart of Glass*, an apocalyptic fable of post-industrialism, is about a small Bavarian community, whose prosperity is based on the manufacture of beautiful glassware but is in decline due to the advanced age of the only man who knew the formula for glass making. Senseless violence is represented by a man who breaks a glass tankard over the head of the friend he has been drinking with, starting a fight for no apparent reason. The decline of an industrial community would have had resonance in a post-industrial city like Manchester, probably much more than Ballard’s crystalline apocalypse did. Whether Curtis knew these stories or not, the story of his life is curiously filled with incidents which have to do with violence and glass. This is not to say that these images of glass might have inspired him, but rather that they were part of an imagery on which some of his songs drew, and which also influenced several episodes in his biographies.

The biographies of Ian Curtis relate various glass incidents in the singer’s life. Sometimes they seem to have been a means of calling attention upon himself or venting anger and frustration. This is what happens in a Campus novel the singer is not likely to have read, Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* (1975), about a trendy professor of sociology called Howard Kirk at a fictional university in northern England. Kirk’s friend Henry Beamish, and then, at the end of the novel, Kirk’s wife Barbara, each express their unhappiness and despair at his callous opportunism and infidelities by putting their arm through the glass of the bathroom window in subsequent scenes, a repeated self-destructive gesture that Kirk himself dismisses as mere accidents. Like Curtis’s audience before his suicide, Kirk fails to read the subtexts. The novel can be, in Derridean terms, *grafted* on the biographies of Curtis: when the discourse of the novel is bound to that of the biographies, using the key word “glass” as the *grafted scion*, it produces a “reverberation, as does a tympanum”

(Culler [1982] 2007, 134), which in this case will transmit the image of a suffering man inflicting violence on himself, while the people around him fail to get the message or empathize.⁵

Curtis's widow depicts his self-directed violence through a number of incidents; when he broke a glass door during an argument with her, smashed glasses, or was so manic on stage he was not bothered about rolling around on broken glass (Curtis 1995, 17, 24, 45, 53). Joy Division's bass player Peter Hook recalls Curtis "on the dance floor and he was sort of kicking broken glass around [...] and moving round to the music [of the German electronic music band Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express*] at the same time" (Hook 2013, 6), to allay his anxiety before the band's first gig using the name "Joy Division" (which had replaced their previous name, "Warsaw"). Curtis was thrown out, and the other three members of the band had to convince the bouncer to let him in to sing (7). Hook also remembers him once after a particularly bad epilepsy seizure, "his eyes all glassy," still refusing to be taken to hospital (239). The use of the word 'glassy' may be incidental, and it is not even semantically related to "glass breaking." Yet when it is read from this embodied cognition schema, Curtis's glassy eyes compellingly express the extreme fragility of his condition by recalling the vulnerability of glass.

We may catch glimpses of possible symbolic significances of glass in the singer's career, culminating at the concert in Bury which "turns into a riot, as if to symbolize to Curtis a world that was disintegrating, a life that was over" (Morley 2008, 20). The gig was held the day after Curtis had attempted to kill himself by overdosing on prescription drug. Joy Division's manager Rob Gretton convinced him to be at the gig, even if only to sing a few slow songs. The riot resulted from an attempt to replace Curtis with another singer, after letting in a large crowd of rowdy youths. It was started by someone in the audience throwing a bottle at a Victorian crystal chandelier hanging above the stage: those standing below "got completely showered with shards of glass and bits of chandelier" (Middles and Reade 2006, 227). Curtis, suffering from severe depression, blamed himself for the disaster: "Weeping uncontrollably [...] [he] in all likelihood crossed a boundary on the night of April 8th from which he never returned" (Ott 2004, 112). The image of the singer breaking down backstage would become a key part of his myth and fan cult: the embodiment of "the 'raw' emotions of Curtis, captured on film in his various forms of breakdown (now available on T-shirts, girly-tank tops, and dresses)" (Otter-Bickerdike 2014, 172). It was what I would like to call, linking our key image schema with the band's ironic

⁵ I am making no factual claims here, only using a reading strategy from deconstructionism. Post-structuralism has always insisted on cancelling the distinctions between fact and fiction. After all, novels are very often based on so-called "facts" and the actual experiences of the writer to an indefinite degree, and biographies are always organized according to fiction-writing strategies such as narrativization and the meaningful arrangement of facts, or emplotment. The difference between fiction and memory is no less blurred, as memory, like fiction, also needs to select, rationalize, recreate and construct the "events." For a classic discussion of the use and senses of *grafting* in Derridean deconstruction, see Culler ([1982] 2007, 134-155).

association with Nazi imagery, Joy Division's true "Night of Broken Glass." Unlike the Nazis, of course, Joy Division's only victim, if there was one, was Ian Curtis. The singer hanged himself 40 days later, on May 18, 1980.

4. BREAKING BOWIE'S GLASS

The metaphor of breaking glass was a particularly current one at the time, as in David Bowie's song "Breaking Glass" (1977), a song Curtis was certainly familiar with, and Brian Gibson's film *Breaking Glass* (1980), whose heroine and songwriter Hazel O'Connor was, along with Joy Division themselves, among the artists who performed at the Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park, London, on 3 and 4 April 1980 (Nice 2010, 104), where Curtis suffered an epileptic fit and collapsed onto the drum kit (Hook 2013, 317). The interpretation of Bowie's song lyrics is notoriously difficult, as they convey a disjointed message which may be related to a fractured personality when the artist was going through a drug-driven period, as well as his personal involvement in the experience of schizophrenia (Wilcken 2005, 76-82).⁶ The first part of the song seems to be spoken by a guilt-ridden individual who finds a means of self-expression in creating forms with broken glass, while the second represents an authoritative, scolding voice which chastises such behavior with ostracism. The influence of the edgy performer Bowie as Curtis's role model has often been noted (Middles and Reade 2006, 22, 24), and, for example, Bowie's song "Drive-In Saturday" (1973) plays non-diegetically in the score of the biopic *Control* the first time the character of Ian Curtis appears (Corbijn 2007). In addition, the dichotomy of the creative individual on the one hand, and other authoritative persons in control of his life and career on the other is essential in accounts of Ian Curtis's life and death, including *Control*, which is an adaptation of Deborah Curtis's memoir of her husband, *Touching from a Distance* (1995).

It should be borne in mind that the words of one of Joy Division's most celebrated songs, "She's Lost Control" (1979), were based on his experience of seeing a woman suffering an epileptic fit, the condition that would later affect him. Gibson's film *Breaking Glass* (1980), on the other hand, contains a clear message on the artist's need to remain in control of her own life and career, particularly by relying on the support of the right manager. Chapter twelve in *Touching from a Distance*, entitled "Decide for me," describes the moment when Curtis gave up control of his own life, letting others decide. The following chapter, "My timing," narrating his suicide, explains that people

⁶ There is a brief forum discussing Bowie's "Breaking Glass" at songmeanings.net. A strain of schizophrenia ran through Bowie's family which affected several members on his mother's side. His brother Terry, who was a key influence on his early music career, developed it in the mid 1960s and spent the rest of his life institutionalized, until he jumped out of a window of his psychiatric hospital in 1985 and died (Bowie's 1993 single "Jump They Say" is about this). On the negative side, Bowie seems to have lived in fear of developing the condition himself, while on the positive, he often used schizophrenic notions as creative motifs. Cocaine probably exacerbated his obsession. During the 1970s, as Wilcken argues "Bowie certainly drugged himself into a state in which schizophrenic-like behaviour emerged" (2005, 79).

(particularly his wife, his mistress, Tony Wilson, and his manager Rob Gretton) were competing to decide who should attend the funeral: “Even after his death we were jostling for possession, importance, affection—call it what you will” (Curtis 1995, 134). In the film, “Breaking Glass” is the name of the band whose lead singer is Kate (Hazel O’Connor). It is probably an allusion to the band’s disruptive post-punk stance, while also suggesting the fragility of the artist in the greedy hands of the showbiz machinery, and therefore tying in with the plot of Deborah Curtis’s memoir. Once again, I would like to make it clear that I am not arguing for a mutual influence or causation between the two texts, only that the film and the book may be brought into intertextual alignment for the sake of cultural analysis.

Some contemporaries of the band have noticed that glass-breaking was an appropriate metaphor for Joy Division’s music, and not just for the life of their lead singer. Paul Morley has written of “the glass-smashing and capering Bernard Sumner guitars” as the guitarist’s distinctive contribution to the band (2008, 248 and 269). A spirited review of *Unknown Pleasures* by Max Bell for the music paper *New Musical Express* concluded that it “is an English rock masterwork. Listen to this album and wonder, because you’ll never love the sound of breaking glass again. This band has tears in its eyes. Joy Division’s day is closing in” (*New Musical Express*, 19 July 1980, quoted in Nice 2010, 69).⁷ The glass imagery was probably suggested, above all, by the glass-smashing noises which producer Martin Hannett introduced into “I Remember Nothing,” the album’s closing song, as sonic anaphones, as defined by Moore (2012, 253), the lyrics of which stressed a sense of violence, estrangement, despair and embittered oblivion:

We were strangers, for way too long.
Violent, more violent, his hand cracks the chair,
Moves on reaction, then slumps in despair,
Trapped in a cage and surrendered too soon (Curtis 1995, 165)

The noise of glass smashing breaks through the tense atmosphere created by synthesizers at the beginning and at the end of the song. Musically “I Remember Nothing” is reminiscent of The Stooges’s “We Will Fall” (1969), their front man Iggy Pop being one of Joy Division’s key influences. But there is very little thematic resemblance in the lyrics, except in the feeling of surrender, expressed as a willingness to not fight, to be weak and to fall in the Stooges song, which in turn is akin to the despairing Joy Division lyrics. The glass-smashing noises, however, which do not feature in the Stooges song, seem to make a key suggestion of impending personal tragedy.

⁷ Bell’s closing in is an allusion to a line in Joy Division’s song “Digital” (1979), which however is not included on the album he was reviewing. On the other hand, the statement that “Joy Division’s day is closing in” sounds eerily prophetic in perspective, since the band’s next album, *Closer* (1980), also happened to be their *closing* album, due to the singer’s untimely end, which brought Joy Division’s career to a close.

The first song, perhaps, exhibiting the most distinctive Joy Division sound, recorded together with "Digital" in October 1978 for the compilation *A Factory Sample* (1978), was called "Glass." While some of the songs' titles appear in the chorus or are significantly repeated in the lyrics, in "Glass" the semantic link between title and lyrics needs to be inferred:

Hearts fail, young hearts fail
 Anytime, pressurised
 Overheat, overtired
 Take it quick, take it neat
 Clasp your hands, touch your feet. (Curtis 1995, 156)

The rest of the stanzas of the song stress a sense of urgency and hyperactivity through repetition ("Take it quick, take it neat [...] Do it again and again and again"), with variations suggesting exhaustion ("Anytime, wearing down"), persecution and danger ("On the run, underground / Put your hand where it's safe") (Curtis 2014, 29-31). As the title of the song is "Glass" the reader would tend to assume (though alternative readings are always possible) that 'Young hearts fail' probably because they are fragile like glass, in spite of which they (young people?) will wish to 'do it again,' that is, getting 'overheat[ed], overtired.' The word "glass" is not mentioned in the song itself, nor, for that matter, in the entire corpus of Joy Division's lyrics. Thus the title contextualizes what the song may be assumed to represent, exactly like in the case of Annie Lennox's "Walking on broken glass" (1992), according to Moore (2012, 254). In the context of Curtis's biography it suggests the way he would keep on playing at gigs even though they were contributing to his own self-destruction.

Similarly, in "Something Must Break" (1980) the title phrase is used twice in the last stanza, but its relation to previous lines can only be guessed at. Those preceding lines are "If I can't break out now, the time just won't come" (one of his characteristic despairing statements), "Looked in the mirror, saw I was wrong" and "I see your face still in the window" (Curtis 2014, 74-75). The latter is the first line in the final stanza, where "Something must break (now)" is repeated in the second and last lines. Such associations powerfully suggest that what breaks may be the window, and probably also the mirror, both of which imply the narrator's relationship to self and other, with a foreboding sense of imminent threat to his own life in the final lines:

This life isn't mine
 Something must break now
 Wait for the time
 Something must break. (Curtis 1995, 184)

The play of association and free inference is also at work in *Touching from a Distance* (Curtis 1995) and other biographies of the band which use titles from the songs as

chapter titles, inviting readers to find literal connections between the narrative in the chapter and the songs, even though, as Morley insists, Curtis's words "omit links and open up new perspectives: they are set deep in unfenced, untamed darkness" (Morley 2008, 153). Though, as I mentioned above, Wilson was disgusted at the way Joy Division's lyrics were utilized to explain the band's history, he describes himself as someone who tended to pick "[a]rtists who 'meant' it. More than meant it. Had no choice" (Wilson 2002, 49). Wilson also wrote about "Aneek" (his spelling for Annik Honoré, Ian Curtis's mistress) saying of Curtis: "He means these things, they're not just lyrics, they're not just songs, he means it" (99). The band's bass player was among those who did not heed the lyrics until Curtis died:

Later, of course, I'd listen to the lyrics and try to pick them apart, but for years in the rehearsal room all I really heard was a scream and that was what was important to me. I just thought, "The guy means it." It doesn't matter what you're playing really, as long as you mean it. (Hook 2013, 173)

What Curtis 'meant,' however, was Wilson's, Honoré's, Hook's and others' interpretation of his lyrics, not necessarily what Curtis intended to communicate. They were not listening to the lyrics, they were impressed enough hearing his impassioned 'scream.' As for the actual meaning of the songs, it is constantly subjected to a process of deferral such as that argued by Derridean deconstruction. Each song may have an overall literary meaning that might be tested by attempting to sum up its lyrics. But the more specific meanings it might have always depend on the contexts or intertexts (related or relatable texts) which are *grafted* onto the song.

By writing about feelings that might (retrospectively) seem to encourage suicide and then carrying it out, Curtis's lyrics prompt a joint reading of his songs and life. Wilson (2002, 74) suggests that Curtis's suicide was partly a response to Bowie's apparent invitation to a youthful death in lyrics such as "All the Young Dudes" (1974) which includes the line "Don't wanna stay alive when you are 25." Deborah Curtis (1995, 5 and 7) also relates it to Bowie's version of Jacques Brel's song "My Death" (1973) and Bowie's own song "Rock and Roll Suicide" (1972). But this is obviously a gross simplification of Curtis's inscrutable personal motivations and accidental circumstances,⁸ as well as of the meaning in Bowie's song. The broken glass through which the singer, whether Bowie or Curtis, invites us to look inside his heart and soul has nothing to show behind, because it is a mirror-glass mask, like the two crystals resembling eyes that the Lover finds at the bottom of Narcissus' well in the Medieval *Romance of the Rose*: like Narcissus in love with his own reflection,

⁸ Curtis's suicide was an "unhappy" or "infelicitous" speech act in the Austinian sense (Valdés Miyares, 2013, 8), since the convention of song lyrics, no matter how much they may be based on true experience, is that that they are largely fictional, like the persona that the singer embodies, such that the audience could not interpret that he was stating a real intention to end his life.

Curtis was said to be "In love with a cold but crystallized 'other self'" (Ott 2004, 101). This would tie in with the interpretation of Bowie's "Breaking Glass" as being about a fractured personality, and with Deborah Curtis's suggestion that her husband might have been suffering from bipolar disorder (Rocamora 2010). All in all, the rock artist's texts always demand a double reading, in which the songs (both music and lyrics) and his story reflect on one another in both literal (explicitly meaningful) and figurative (symbolic or ironic) ways.

5. FRACTURE, REFLECTION AND REFRACTION IN SONG TEXTS

All that is now
 All that is gone
 All that's to come
 and everything under the sun is in tune
 but the sun is eclipsed by the moon.

"There is no dark side of the moon really. Matter of fact it's all dark."

(Pink Floyd, "Eclipse," 1973)

One expects to find some reflection of real life in the lyrics of songs. The fragments of the desired "real" (in the Lacanian sense), however, are refracted in various directions, and the desired, subjective readings of songwriter and song-reader do not necessarily meet.⁹ "Eclipse" is the concluding song on Pink Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon*.¹⁰ Years later, songwriter Roger Waters explained that the song is about "some dark force in our natures," and that the lyrics address the listener, telling him or her to "know you have these bad feelings and impulses because *I do too*, and one of the ways I can make direct contact with you is to share with you the fact that I feel bad sometimes" (Dallas 1987, 107; emphasis in the original). The attempt to rationally explain away the poetic text of the song and the entire album actually materializes in the prose statement that is heard spoken in the background as the music recedes: "There is no dark side of the moon really. Matter of fact it's all dark." Waters said that the statement was based on one of the interviews that he carried out to develop dialogue that would accompany some of the song lyrics. The words are attributed to Gerry O'Driscoll, the doorman at The Beatles's Abbey Road Studios, and that he then added: "The only thing that makes [the moon] look light is the sun" (Mason 2004,

⁹ Jacques Lacan ([1973] 1994, 184) conceptualizes the real as the state of nature (of natural need and pleasure), which the child loses forever as they enter into the symbolic order of language. Because of this loss we tend to enjoy ourselves, that is, to experience what Lacan called *jouissance* as a painful, traumatic sort of pleasure, not unlike the "unknown pleasures" of Joy Division. For the relevance of *jouissance* to some of Ian Curtis's songs, see Valdés Miyares (2014).

¹⁰ However, Pink Floyd was the kind of progressive (or art) rock that a post-punk band like Joy Division would not have identified with, even if they did enjoy the technical facilities of Britannia Row Studios, in Islington, London, owned by Pink Floyd.

172). In textual terms this would suggest that one should not try to make light of lyrics (in either sense of the expression), since the only final meaning they have is intertextual: a reflection of other lyrics, much like moonlight is only reflected sunlight. They do not mean anything in themselves.

The kind of crystal-clear interpretation we can now easily retrieve from Wikipedia about a song like “Eclipse,” however, was not so easily available when it was first released. Avid fans would look for possible clues in the music press, in interviews with band members and the opinions of reputed music critics, but for the most part they would remain on the dark (side of the moon). The average listener would just finish listening to the album, the dreamy tune perhaps lingering in their head, and hear those words prompting them to reflect on our personal darkness. They would then take the album sleeve to put the vinyl back in, and look again at the famous front cover design, all black with a stylized representation of a glass prism through which a beam of light is refracted, dividing itself chromatically to form a rainbow. This is not an unfit metaphor for song lyrics. For the dark glass prism, the context in which the song is consumed, cannot really unambiguously reflect the real. All it does is *refract* the original meaning in a number of colors, as many as there are communities of listeners and individual experiences of the song. Joy Division’s most iconic sleeve, designed by Peter Saville for *Unknown Pleasures* (1979), is an even darker suggestion of song meaning: a diagram of the radio signal of a pulsar, a star which has probably burnt out but still sends out a beam of electromagnetic radiation (Christiansen 2015).

On the other hand, the words of a song can hardly be compared to a beam of light before it passes through a glass prism. They are actually fractured, and to some extent refracted, from their very inception. In the first place, popular song has always tended to narrate stories in fragments, rather than following a continuous narrative thread, giving the impression of a broken narrative structure. Scholars have noted the use of montage in the traditional popular ballad, which somehow makes them resemble cinema long before it existed (Hodgart [1950] 1962, 28). For example, Joy Division’s “Glass” (1980) falls into two very distinct parts which, taken separately, might well have made two different song lyrics: the first goes from “Young hearts fail” to “Put your hands where it’s safe,” and can be read as warning, while the second urges you to “Do it again and again,” which by juxtaposition reads as encouragement for young people to live fast and over-exert their hearts.

In popular balladry narrative montage was largely due to traditional methods of formulaic composition, balladeers tending to re-produce the text from ready-made phrases and images as if they were building-blocks. The narrative form in modern rock songs still resembles the old ballads, perhaps because they are often composed somewhat collectively by the band and adapted to the music, and they still tend to prefer allusiveness and emotional impact to narrative realism and reference. Moreover, certain pop music genres are still largely ruled by convention, and to that extent influenced

by formulas in the composition of lyrics.¹¹ In the case of rock bands like Joy Division, however, the process of composition is different: Curtis would act as the “principal editor” and “great orchestrator” of the songs (Nice 2010, 34), and Joy Division as a group would adapt his writings to rhythm, melody and in terms of what we might call the verbal impact of certain catch-words or phrases. Like in the ballads, in pop/rock songs it is the repeated chorus that can give a sense of unified meaning to the text, which, nevertheless, often looks fractured (like some films do, for cinematic purposes), compared to the smoother narrative transitions of other kinds of narrative text.¹² Finally, at the stage of song reception the meaning of lyrics is further refracted, acquiring new connotations and significance in tune with the listener’s cultural background.

6. CONCLUSION: GLASS FOR *Glas*’S SAKE

“We are dealing not with reality, after all, but that image of reality which reaches the surface through the cracked looking glass of the media” (Morley 2008, 360-361)

Songs are multi-media texts, drawing on images, noise and words: a palimpsest of fragmentary reflections, the fragments of a broken looking glass turned to words. Whether lyrics can actually be *read* depends on how they relate to the meaning of songs as a whole. In a chapter on “Texts and Meaning” of popular songs Brian Longhurst (1995, 158-190) first looks at the various layers of meaning that songtexts have, including denotation/connotation, context and performance. Then he refers to the shortcomings of content analysis, and the need for accounts which also include what Roland Barthes (1990, 293-300) called the “grain” of the voice and the pleasures of *jouissance*—in the Lacanian sense, and perhaps also in the title of Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures*, as argued by Valdés Miyares (2014)—in the audience, and finally the image or star-text of the music group or singer.

Quantitative methods (e.g., Weber 1990) may seem to offer a more scientific perspective from the linguistic point of view, but a corpus-assisted analysis of Joy Division’s lyrics, for example, would hardly alert us to the significance of the word “glass” as an image schema, until we examine the biographical accounts. On the other hand, theories for the discourse analysis of song lyrics as a social practice could be more rewarding. Their theoretical foundations are summed up by Aleshinskaya (2013): the

¹¹Reception theory, as it has been applied to the English traditional ballad, accounts for the significance of the “implied audience” (and the reader’s “consistency-building”), the “gaps of indeterminacy” of ballad texts (the “unwritten” parts of texts), the constraints in the possible range of meaning as a result of the interpretive framework embodied in the concept of traditional referentiality (the “horizon of expectations”), and the generation of meaning by metonymy from formulaic phrases and traditional themes or motifs (Atkinson 2002, 8-13).

¹²However, Peter Hook did not generally like songs with a chorus, and many of Joy Division’s songs do not have a conventional one (Hook 2013, 235): what they often have is the repetition of a catchphrase, especially at the end of the song for a climactic effect, as in “Glass” (Curtis 1995, 156): “Do it again and again and again.”

right approach would be that of multi-modal discourse analysis, which takes account of relevant social, linguistic, psychological, visual, gestural, ritual, technical, historical and musicological aspects. All these key components of song discourse are present in the image schema of “breaking glass”: in the breakthrough of post-punk bands (as narrativized in the film *Breaking Glass*), in the psychological fragility of Curtis’s energy as a singer and dancer, in Joy Division’s technical innovations (including sonic anaphones of glass-breaking), and so on.

Pop songs are most often enjoyed with little or no attention at all to their lyrics, as when Spanish people like me heard Joy Division’s music for the first time. Even for the English-speaking public it was a revelation when Deborah Curtis’s book not only disclosed the biographical details of her husband’s life, but also included an appendix with the lyrics he wrote, some of which were hard to decipher while listening to the songs.¹³ Yet, as Morley said in purposeful overstatement, “In the end ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ is about its melody” (Morley 2008, 365),¹⁴ just as their song “Digital” could be said to be a self-reflection on the digital delay machine the band had just started using when they recorded it.¹⁵ Inevitably, however, “a writing that refers back only to itself carries us *at the same time*, indefinitely and systematically, to some other writing” (Derrida 1981, 202; my emphasis). Thus I have been trying to illustrate this intertextual phenomenon affecting Joy Division’s “glass.” The more I read Joy Division, the more I read into their reference to other texts, and this very intertextuality makes the lyrics the more meaningful.

The present article began by reading Joy Division’s songs intertextually, setting them in relation to literary works and films to which they could only be loosely connected. It will close by taking the same strategic operation one step further, *grafting* Joy Division’s “Glass” on a Derridean text which barely resembles it at the most superficial orthographic and phonetic levels. Derrida’s *Glas*, a deliberately fractured text like Bowie’s “Breaking Glass,” demonstrates how even texts from opposed fields, namely, a philosophical text, by Hegel, and a literary one, by Jean Genet, produce new meaning by being brought together, though they may never achieve a full conflation. It is a demonstration of the idea of *grafting* that the philosopher had used in other writings (Derrida [1972] 1981, 202). Derrida advocates metaphor in philosophical thought, in this case a metaphor for the double reading of sense, the reading in-between sound

¹³Joy Division’s manager Rob Gretton wrote in 1979 “we do not particularly like publishing our lyrics, because we would like the listener to put some effort in trying to understand them” (Savage 2014, xxv).

¹⁴Morley’s conceptualization of “melody” should probably be understood in the sense that Moore (2012, 20) gives to the “*melodic layer*” in the textural composition of a song, that is, only one of the layers shaping the meaning of a song, but sometimes the most important.

¹⁵According to Middleton (1990, 221), Jacobson’s theory of syntagmatic equivalence, that is, the “introversive signification” or “auto-reflection” characterizing all semiotic processes, is especially noticeable in music. In Gee’s 2007 documentary *Joy Division* at minute 26-27, graphic designer Jon Wozencroft argues that the lyrics of “Digital” are “actually digital: there’s on/off, day in/day out, and the switching is weirdly related to Curtis’s persona itself which, we now know, is bipolar.”

and meaning. In French the word "glas" means the death knell tolling of a bell, and Derrida's "knell" announced the death of totalizing logocentric philosophy, questioning the boundaries that separated different books, different genres, and disciplines, for example, literature from philosophy. What I have proposed here is to challenge the boundaries dividing song lyrics from literature, including biography and biopic.

All approaches to the level of secondary signification in structuralist terms (which is the level this paper deals with, through its focus on intertextuality) have their problems (Middleton 1990, 233): the hermeneutic analysis of lyrics must confront their ultimate ambivalence; the reconstitution of the intention of the producer(s) is haunted by the intentional fallacy and experimental testing of listener responses, such that perhaps the most rewarding reading will tend to expose the virtually infinite, context-bound, polysemy of song text. Which is not to say that song meanings cannot be discussed, indeed I have done just that in the preceding pages. Nor am I suggesting that the lyrics of, say, Kurt Cobain's "Rape Me, My Friend" (1993) or Pete Seger's "We Shall Overcome" are irrelevant to their meaning. On the contrary, not only are they meaningful in themselves, as it were in mirror self-reflection, but even more so in the proliferation of intertexts and contexts, and the refractions, that various readers and times bring to them.

As a coda, I would like to allude to a reconfiguration of Joy Division's symbolic glass in a song by New Order, the band that the members of Joy Division formed after Curtis died: "Crystal," released in 2001 as the first single off New Order's seventh album. The lyrics begin by explaining away the "crystal" metaphor in plain terms: "We're like crystal, we break easy." The plainly stated simile is a far cry from the subtle suggestion about the breaking of young hearts in "Glass," but echoes of this song are quite evident, since other details confirm that "Crystal" looks back on the early days of Joy Division: thus the official video for the song features a fictional young band called "The Killers" ("The Kill" was the title of one of Joy Division's early songs), and the music signals a departure from the synthesizers and electronic style that characterized New Order back to a more guitar oriented style, like in early Joy Division. A real band, The Killers, was named after the fictional band in the video of "Crystal," and they would openly acknowledge the influence of Joy Division on their music, and cover Joy Division's "Shadowplay" on one of their own albums. In the end, this is what the influence of a particular rock band may bequeath: either it is imitated by tribute bands (including Peter Hook and The Light, a band formed by Joy Division's bass player to play and record live versions of their songs), or it becomes a progressively faint and scattered, scarcely acknowledged influence (for example, Joy Division's influence on Editors). However, from 2007, the "Year of Joy Division" proclaimed in the press, film, documentary and book (Nolan 2007, 172), many people either recalled their experiences of listening to the band or got to know it for the first time (see also Heim ed. 2012). Their late 1970s story gained another significance in a new age, not only the "cracked looking glass" media image that Morley mentioned in the epigraph of

this final section (2008), which is part of the fandom image Otter Bickerdike names “Joy Devotion” (2014) but also the fragmented responses of all those listeners, as so many reflections on Joy Division’s “glass.” The influence of the group continues in the circulation of refracted meanings which might well constitute a definition of culture as a whole, adding the notion of refraction to Stuart Hall’s circuit model (Hall 1997, 1) as well as Derrida’s notion of dissemination ([1972] 1981). Understanding the words of songs as *literature* would therefore be a far more demanding task than enjoying them as music fans. The case study of Joy Division suggests that, more than with any other strand of literary analysis, reading song lyrics calls for an open and plural, intertextual and contextual, connotative approach.

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