



Practices of Verisimilitude in Pop Music
Biopics: A Conversation with Todd
Eckert and James Anthony Pearson on
Control, and Nick Moran on *Telstar: The
Story of Joe Meek*

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Abstract

Through wide-ranging discussions between five people involved in the making of two British popular music biopics, this article articulates and investigates a series of creative challenges that go to the heart of the current state of the music biopic. What emerges through these discussions is a consideration of how aspirations to verisimilitude, in terms

of historicity and *mise-en-scène*, which seek to satisfy a desire for truthfulness in the music biopic, structure the attempts to conjure up the specific ambiance of the times and places of the central subjects – Joe Meek and Ian Curtis. The films discussed by and with their makers are *Telstar: The Joe Meek Story* and *Control*. The article concludes with a consideration of how the films attempt to pay their debts: to the historical subjects depicted (both alive and deceased), to those who contributed to the making of the films through their personal recollections, and to an assumed audience, who may already hold strong emotional bonds to the music.

KEYWORDS: *Telstar*, *Control*, Joe Meek, Ian Curtis, biopic, verisimilitude.

Introduction

The arresting look and feel of two relatively recent UK music biopics, *Control* (directed by Anton Corbijn, 2007) and *Telstar: The Joe Meek Story* (directed by Nick Moran, 2008), prompts a reconsideration of questions of realism and authenticity – rationales, strategies, practices and constructions – in the historical popular music biopic. The first-hand accounts collated below highlight the ways in which the filmmakers' aspirations to verisimilitude are shaped by the production process, particularly in relation to budget, equipment and props use, contemporary or period dialogue, music copyright, and a myriad other issues and challenges relating to the production of period cinema. Verisimilitude remains the essential promise of these films: an authentic, accurate or truth-aligned insight into these revered musicians and their times. Consequently, as discussed, both films draw on primary sources and recollections to determine their narratives, and are infiltrated, Hitchcock-cameo-like, by some of the same interlopers of the original scenes. Matters of nostalgia, and the construction or codes of authenticity, are also discussed here from a contemporaneous viewpoint; each film's aesthetic was influenced by the eras and cultures they were depicting (for *Control*, Greater Manchester of 1974-1980; for *Telstar*, London of the early to mid-1960s) as well as by the actual times in which the films were produced.

Our concern is with verisimilitude (Marshall and Kongsgaard 2012), which we adopt as a usefully vaguer term than "realism" and "historicity" in respect of the biopic: the aspiration to a mostly historically correct recreation of a time and a place, as populated by based-on-a-true-story people. Dramatic license may be invoked, and may result in composite characters, unverifiable psychological characterization, and wholly fictional scenes; but the guiding principle, or "spirit" behind such fictional impulses is to remain realistic in a broad sense. At the same time, according to Fredric Jameson, realism is "... a peculiarly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, 'representation of reality,' suggest." (2011: 158) Consequently, realism, like verisimilitude, can be read as an aesthetic vernacular, a set of conventions recognizable to an audience.

In this respect, both *Telstar* and *Control* are akin to a certain cinematic tradition of British Social Realism: British Northern Realism, sometimes referred to as Kitchen Sink Realism, and the British New Wave of the 1960s (Taylor 2012). While the influence of the documentary-like approaches and textures of post-war Italian Neo-Realism weighed heavily on film-makers such as Lindsay Anderson (as with *This Sporting Life*, 1963), Tony Richardson (*A Taste of Honey*, 1961, and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962), John Schlesinger (*A Kind of Loving*, 1962, and *Billy Liar*, 1963) and Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1960), they all sought to marry the authenticity and verisimilitude of their Italian counterparts with the received norms of dramatic storytelling.

Similar questions about authenticity have been apparent in the field of popular musicology. Auslander (2008) highlights the idea of music as an authentic human utterance, as the voice (in all senses of the word) of the singer or performer. But even live performances are mediated. Two examples are the questionable outrage over lip-synced performances, and the late 60s shift from the authenticity of psychedelic music (with its emphasis on live improvisation) to inauthentic glam rock (Auslander 2009). What emerges from Auslander's work is that, despite the very apparentness of fakery, inauthenticity and manipulation, music that may be considered artistically worthwhile—and so deserving of our attention—needs to hold true to a sense of authenticity of expression. Or, at least, it needs to be seen to hold true to a sense of authenticity of expression.

Verisimilitude in the music biopic needs to strike a balance between the obligation to historicity and the obligation to entertain, via the coin of authenticity and the currency of dramatic license. Our interviews seek to explore the ways in which these tensions have been manifest in the making of the films under discussion. For example, in *Control*, only two of the four actors cast as members of Joy Division had previously played their instruments. After individual music tuition and band rehearsals with a music coach, the actors were able to perform live as a *faux* group rather than mime to original Joy Division recordings.

Control depicts the influential Manchester/Salford post-punk group Joy Division, focusing on lead singer Ian Curtis and his relationships with wife Deborah Curtis and Belgian journalist Annik Honoré. The film charts Curtis' worsening epileptic seizures and clinical depression, and eventual suicide in May 1980. *Control* was the directorial debut of acclaimed photographer Anton Corbijn. The film was made almost entirely in high-contrast black and white, and provocatively evokes Corbijn's iconic photographs of Joy Division from the late 1970s. In these, Corbijn presented darkened and hunched figures, rarely smiling, and often dwarfed and engulfed by bleak, post-industrial landscapes. *Control*'s monochrome visuals reflect the political and cultural bleakness of the group's rundown hometowns, and the discordant, repetitive sound of post-punk. However, in a counterintuitive move, the screenplay, inspired in part by Deborah Curtis's 1995 autobiographical book *Touching from a Distance*, repositions Ian Curtis as something of a regular family

man with a mundane day job, and the group as a laddish, hard-working live unit who “paid their dues” on the road. This contrasts with the aloof and iconic figures of *New Musical Express* reportage, and the dour mystique around the band. In this way, the expected narrative tension between “musical genius” and the pathos of a life cut short is reworked, and the everydayness of the film’s *mise-en-scène* places some distance between *Control* and the tradition of British music biopics established in the 1970s by Ken Russell.¹ *Control* dares to integrate boredom – “dead time” – into a sometimes immobile *mise-en-scène*: these characters are stuck in cramped and cluttered surroundings, and the camera often stays with them there, as time ticks by. This is a far cry from Russell’s composers (surveying rolling landscapes, given over to bacchanalian flights of fantasy, divinely inspired), or even the maze-like setting of Meek’s studio in *Telstar*, in which fresh lunacy seems to wait around every corner, lending a vitality to Meek’s world.

Telstar: The Joe Meek Story was written and directed by Nick Moran (best known as Eddy in the hit British crime comedy caper *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, directed by Guy Ritchie in 1998). The script was based on Moran’s 2005 West End play *Telstar*, and tells the story of Joe Meek, a deeply troubled yet innovative producer, sound engineer and composer. Meek pioneered experimental recording techniques and worked with dozens of artists in his home studio, a rented apartment at 304 Holloway Road in North London. His biggest four British hits were “Johnny Remember Me” (John Leyton, 1961), the instrumental “Telstar” (The Tornados, 1962), “Just Like Eddie” (Heinz Burt, 1963), and “Have I the Right?” (The Honeycombs, 1964). “Telstar”, named after the first communications satellite to provide a live trans-Atlantic television signal, became the first record by a UK group to reach number one in the US singles chart, in December 1962.

Telstar was intended as a realistic and historically accurate portrayal of a key figure in early British pop music. The script was constructed, in part, via interviews with Meek’s contemporaries, and attempted authentically to recreate the unique atmosphere of the period: the dawning of a culture of contemporary rock and pop music, the development of new recording techniques particular to those musical forms, the ways in which homosexual subcultures were beginning to break surface in tandem with the popularity of popular music with post-war youth, and Meek’s particular and shocking fate as anticipating the psychological disintegration of “visionary” artists in the Swinging London period and its aftermath.

At the same time, the film is redolent of a particular post-Britpop milieu, something indicated by its casting, and the engagement with the sense of happy amateurs and wide-boys overturning conventions and remaking a cultural scene, and so forging an identity, on their own terms. So, despite the verisimilitude of the film’s execution, it also displays a certain kind of nostalgia that looks back as much to the glory days of the mid-1990s as to the early 1960s. In this respect, the biopic identifies and extends interlocking notions of identity, history and culture, and can be considered in respect to “the legacy of Britpop (which) continues to impress itself

upon English popular music" (Bennett and Stratton 2010: 3). *Control's* contemporary resonance is more abstract. Its continuum is seemingly along less celebratory lines, from the mid-1970s to the present – listless youth with little or no traction on life, pervasive and unresolved mental health issues, and the idea of "no future". That continuum is articulated from the Sex Pistols (it is the closing refrain of their 1977 single "God Save the Queen") to more contemporary theorization about the "cancellation" of the future, or the loss of futures that once seemed possible, under the conditions of neoliberalism (Fisher 2014).

The dialogues that follow are composed from semi-structured conversations between individuals who worked on each project, around three central topics: commercial considerations, narrative, and attention to detail. Both interviewees, who are co-authors of this article, contributed fundamentally to the musical elements of these biopics. Liam Maloy was the music tutor and band rehearsal coach who worked closely with the actors on *Control*. He talked to Todd Eckert (TE), one of *Control's* producers, and James Anthony Pearson (JAP), who played the role of Joy Division's guitarist / keyboardist / composer Bernard Sumner. Jon Stewart was a music supervisor on *Telstar*, and also the film's music performance consultant. He interviewed Nick Moran (NM), *Telstar's* co-writer and director.

Commercial considerations and realism

JS: Verisimilitude in historical dramas can be costly, and *Telstar* is set in the early 1960s. Was it expensive to produce a period piece? Did you have to make compromises because of the budget?

Nick Moran (NM): Adam Bohling and David Reid, our producers, were brilliant facilitators. Russell De Rozario, our production designer, and Ben Dillon, our action vehicle co-ordinator, were really important in the art department. They borrowed some things and got other things for a steal... They sourced all the correct period cars, like the Austin A40, and even a vintage Routemaster London bus with the famous 1950s advertising slogan "Go to work on an egg" painted on the side, plus a bunch of extras from various sources, fans car clubs.

There were inevitable compromises, as in any period piece. It's convenient that the police chase happens in a tree-lined country lane so there's no problem with road paintings or background scenery, and we used some cut and paste camera tricks to multiply the theatre crowds. There were only a couple of things I couldn't do. One was a journey of an electrical impulse as electricity transforms into sound. The note wobbles on the string through the guitar pickup, down the instrument lead into the amplifier and mixing desk, then across a 40-foot-wide plate reverb, and finally comes out of the speaker. I would have liked to have done that visually, but we had an Oscar-winning sound design and Foley team and they ended up just

making the right noises. The main goal was that anyone watching ... wouldn't ... think they were watching a low budget movie.

Our actual "below the line" production budget, in other words (the budget without the actors (included), was probably around £800,000. That's nothing. It included filming in Twickenham Studios and all our locations in London. (Designer) Geoff Banks made those beautiful suits for free. He didn't want money; just some press photos. That was amazing. On costume design meetings he'd talk me through it year by year: "1963 is the bum-freeze era, two-button jackets, no-one was a Ted any more (...)". So stylistically all the characters go from Teddy Boys to Mods during the course of the film, and by the end those few people who are still Teds now look ridiculous. There was just no market for it in the mid-to-late-1960s. By the time that hippy culture arrives, (and) the post-Hendrix London (Mitch Mitchell played drums for Meek at one point), Joe looks totally anachronistic with his stupid old quiff. Joe still idolised rock and roll culture but those cars with fins were now all gone and anything to do with 1950s America was totally passé.

LM: Did *Control*'s budget contribute to its realism? If the budget was higher would that sense of authenticity have been compromised? I guess every single detail would have been thought through to the nth degree.

James Anthony Pearson (JAP): *Control* wasn't a huge budget film (approximately £3 million). If it was bigger, say £10-15 million, they would never have cast Sam (Riley, as Ian Curtis). They would have cast a star – someone like Jude Law. It would have been Hollywood-ised. By bringing more money, you bring stronger voices for commercialism, which kills authenticity [...] Casting Sam Riley was a huge decision that a lot of people were against. He was an unknown actor. Financiers want to ensure [...] sales and one of the first things they ask is: who is playing the lead? So if you cast an unknown in the lead role, you straight away re-categorize the entire film in the sense of it being an "art house" film, and it gets more difficult for executive producers and funders to get their money back.

I remember auditioning for *Control*. I had no idea who Joy Division were. It wasn't my era. And also hearing that it was in black and white, and there was nobody famous in it, and I remember being told that the film wouldn't go anywhere. And it was those things that made the film completely unique.

Todd Eckert (TE): The funny thing about *Control* is that the decisions that we made, whether it was hiring Anton, because at the time he was not a feature maker, or an unknown to play Ian, or black and white, were right for the film. They all made it, for the most part, more difficult to get the film made. I'm very proud of it. We stuck to our guns in ways that had financial repercussions.

LM: How did Anton Corbijn contribute to the artistic and visual decisions, especially the film being made in black and white?

TE: I would say, visually, Anton's all of it. Well, Anton and Martin Ruhe (the cinematographer). The black and white thing was absolutely the right artistic choice. From a commercial point of view, it... limited the life of the film theatrically. I love black and white films but people just don't go to see them, particularly Americans. So that was a... fight between me and Anton, and Anton won. I wanted to make it "bleach bypass", where it was limited colour, and he didn't want any. Ultimately it's a beautiful, beautiful film. His artistic instincts were absolutely right but there were repercussions [...] (W)hat he said, and I think it's fair comment, was that Manchester at that time was a black and white town and it's more fitting [...] There was a lot of heated discussions [...] There was never a risk of it becoming some big-budget-daft-whatever [...] but were there decisions that could have made its audience bigger? Certainly. I think what motivated me then, and it would motivate me equally today, is people's lives. You either portray them in a way that is authentic, or in a way that enhances your own commercial benefit...

Narrative and realism

JS: There's something of a tradition of Social Realism at work in both projects. Each has scenes in kitchens, cups of tea, petty arguments, drunken nights out, figures flitting through with low prospects, and a sense of somewhat ordinary people at a distance from their fame, or unlikely candidates for the fame to come. How and why did you seek to show something of your protagonists' ordinary day-to-day lives?

NM: *Telstar* was inspired by the visual world of British cinema from the time. We drew heavily on Cliff Richard films and other early 1960s black and whites. Musicals like *Expresso Bongo* (Guest 1959), *Beat Girl* (Gréville 1960), *Play It Cool* (Winner 1962) and *Live It Up!* (Comfort 1963) – plus various dramas like *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (Guest 1961), *Sparrows Can't Sing* (Littlewood 1963), *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger 1963) and *This Sporting Life* (Anderson 1963).

We used those movies as inspiration. Many have sexual references, although none of the swearing, and we used lots of details from the time to create the world such as knick-knacks in the props and scenery. I also got a lot of information from people I interviewed in preparation for the film, including items that were in Joe's Holloway Road office. Joe had a television downstairs, for example, which was really unusual as no one had two TVs in the house at that time.

JS: *Telstar* certainly has a great deal of profanity for a movie set in the early 1960s. Were you consciously challenging our nostalgia for that period? There's a chasm

between the characters' bawdy private lives and their public politeness. Is this where we see the underlying social dynamics?

NM: The idea was, basically, to make it look like a 1961 Cliff Richard movie filmed in colour [...] with swearing. It was really simple. I knew from [...] talking to my grandparents about how they used a surprising array of expletives [...] and I also spent a lot of time with Chas Hodges (of British duo Chas & Dave) and (Tornadoes drummer) Clem Cattini, during which I'd heard their stories of what it was like to be around Joe and the huge amount of swearing that went on. There are, I think, 124 "fucks" in the film. It's a lot of swearing, but at the same time that's contrasted by the deference to authority figures such as Mrs. Violet Shenton (Joe's landlady, played by Pam Ferris) and Major Wilfred Banks (Joe's business investor, played by Kevin Spacey). While Joe and his musicians were extremely crude in private conversation, there's no bad language in front of the ladies, or in the presence of anyone who demands deference, such as the Major. That contributes to the tension at key moments, particularly when Joe and the Major fall out as their business dealings unravel towards the end of the film and, of course, in the tragic murder-suicide that closes the movie.

JS: Mrs. Shenton and Major Banks seem to epitomize straight-laced politeness and personify our expectations about that time's restrictive social norms. Did you feel an obligation to be historically rigorous in other ways?

NM: My strategy was to interview everyone I could find connected to Meek. Initially I didn't think anything was going to come of it. I just spent a long time in a series of pubs chatting to people, or hanging out at Joe Meek Society social events. The historical accuracy came from those introductions, and meeting with everyone, and the detail they put into describing and re-telling their anecdotes. I tried to tell everybody's story as was told to me and trusted that they would all interlink [...] All these things will marry up if you tell the truth. It's actually more complicated to manufacture stories, much easier to learn them and just copy them.

LM: I'm interested in how issues of authenticity in *Control* may have demythologized Joy Division. You get to see behind the scenes – like when your character is in the car with flu, wrapped up in a sleeping bag, and people drinking tea and farting, and the mundanity of being in a band. You get to see the human side of an iconic figure like Ian Curtis, who is often held up as some sort of poet or artist

JAP: It's really nice to know that those moments were real but in a way it doesn't matter if those depictions of life did happen or not. The one thing I've come to realize is that history is all story – always one person's interpretation of a world.

You can't just put facts in film; it would just be boring. At the same time, it doesn't mean it's not true because one person's experience is their experience.

The weird art-imitating-life moment was the day we went to Ian's house in Macclesfield to do the exterior shots. His house was on a hexagonal corner. When we turned up Debbie Curtis was there because she was the exec [producer] and she was walking back to this house where this horrendous experience of discovering her husband's hanging happened. And the [...] neighbour came out and [...] looked at Debbie and recognized her. He was like "Debbie – it's me!" [...] And then filming the scene when Samantha Morton (as Debbie) goes into the house and comes running out screaming for help because she's just found Ian, and Debbie sitting behind the camera watching Samantha playing herself in this horrendous moment. It was surreal.

LM: It really struck me that even on set in Nottingham, where part of the film was made, that there were people being depicted in the film who were still alive. Tony Wilson came down with his two dogs, and Natalie Curtis (Ian and Debbie's daughter) was there as well. And obviously you got to meet the surviving members of Joy Division. We talk about *Control* being a period piece but this is relatively recent history.

JAP: The films of recent history are ones you really have to get right for that reason. I'm having that very thing at the moment with *Evelyn* (a film on deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie, which James is currently developing). I've been following her around Europe while she was playing gigs. I've also been interviewing a lot of people around her – agents, old friends and boyfriends, her mother – and because they are all alive, you have to get it right. Ultimately, you're making a film that you want people to buy tickets to, and that's a balance because if you make something that is super authentic then you are really only appealing to people who will recognise that, so you are narrowing your audience.

Harvey Weinstein distributed it and he's more of an art house film distributor – very different from somebody like Warner Brothers. I don't think the producers would have made millions of pounds from *Control* because that's not the kind of film that they wanted to make.

TE: Pre-Internet, people would tell stories about artists – like: how did Marc Bolan die? Or what's Bryan Ferry like? What's Bowie like? – and you would have all these sensationalistic stories floating around about guys like Ian Curtis, almost all of which were pure fabrication. So you say, if we're making this film, this is the artefact by which people understand the truth, so that's absolutely where we have to start – again out of loyalty to a guy who couldn't defend himself.

[The book] *Touching from a Distance* was a starting point, and Debbie's vision of Ian as a human being was incredibly important because music biopics have a

tendency of telling very much the same story. Somebody is unknown, they want the world to hear their voice and [...] but it's actually no more interesting than someone who wants desperately to be a clock builder or a cobbler [...]. So if you say "What's deeper about this story?" then it's Ian's [...] impetuosity – of being so young and saying let's get married – which is totally true. Ian's life was so brief [...] so the insight that Debbie gave us was really important for understanding Ian as a person which informed, overall, Ian the artist. It took a long time to negotiate the rights to that book. The first time that we met Debbie, which was eight months after we started talking to her, we said "We think your book is great", because it is – it's not like any other books of that sort – but we want to tell the entirety of Ian's story, because we think it deserves being told. But that means the epilepsy is in there. That means Annik is in there. That means things that you weren't necessarily present for have to be in there and if, because of that, you don't want to give us the rights to the book, we totally understand it and we're very respectful of that but we, in a similarly respectful fashion, will not make the film.

JS: *Telstar's* narrative has its own complications, relating to 1960s working class subcultures and Joe's sexuality.

NM: An important aspect of the play and film in that respect was I wanted to write a love story where nobody mentions the lead character's sexuality in a disparaging way [...]. It's really about a remarkably everyday experience: a fat, older guy who's fallen in love with someone younger and prettier. Due to his success Joe is able to woo people who would never normally go near him. Then, as his career wanes, he loses his cultural and erotic capital (and) is unable to quench his unrequited love [...] Everyone's been in a position where they're infatuated with someone unobtainable. It's so powerful. Most people can appreciate that. Their sexual orientation may or may not be different, but that's why no one talks about *Telstar* as a gay film [...]. It's really just a romance – the ugly one in love with the pretty one, the pretty one enamoured with the older one's power. Joe was not politicised about his sexuality and not out. Joe was never going to be on any kind of liberation march. That was just him. "Not like other people", as he used to say [...]. We were just telling the story.

JS: Joe Meek's story arc is certainly not as convenient as Hollywood would like.

NM: Joe has success, then massive success, then things are OK for a while, then he starts to get down, then his life really goes wrong. Meek's narrative is all about survival. He was always struggling to keep his head above water. That's not your traditional Hollywood biopic story arc. A lecturer at the Savannah Film Festival (hosted by the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia) actually told me, "of course – you know this film should not work... but it does." I also met with a

well-known American film studio boss at the Hotel Du Cap in Cannes who asked in all seriousness:

Studio Boss: "Does this guy *have* to be gay? I can get Cameron Diaz on a contract."

Me: "Well... it's not really a gay film."

Studio Boss: "Trust me: it's a gay film. These British fag movies, do they make money?"

(Pause)

Me: "*The Crying Game*?" (Jordan 1992).

Studio Boss: "OK. Some of them make money!"

JS: There's also an economic imperative to Meek's actions. It's quite rare for music biopics to reference such prosaic music industry issues such as royalties, copyright, the cost of blank tape, the Musician's Union...

NM: Everybody forgets what *Telstar* is really about [...]. It's not success or failure – it's the middle ground between the two points. Joe's first number one is his first real success, then he enjoys mega success, and that's the set-up point where any story would normally begin or even end [...]. Joe enjoys tremendous success but does it come via an accident, a fluke of luck, his talent, or his ability to tap into secret messages, via the ether? How does anyone maintain that level of achievement when they can't back it up or reliably reproduce it? *Telstar* is a film about that journey.

JS: There's a kitchen sink drama element to *Telstar*. A class and regional thing of a country boy done good in the city, now suddenly out of his depth.

NM: Joe behaved appallingly, irrationally, and missed several opportunities to straighten things out – but he also brought about his own end. In that sense this is more of a Greek tragedy... all those attributes that made the protagonist a king – his power and strength and self-belief – suddenly become huge disadvantages [...]. The main difference is that in classic Greek tragedy, at least according to Aristotle, the action takes place over one or two days whereas *Telstar* covers six to eight years. I made the play five acts, each of one day, one year apart. It was a really useful device for the stage. In film you don't have the same time limits so we see the years roll by. You can also mess around with time as a structural cheat, to some extent. We are constantly changing the audience's perception of [setting in time] throughout the film.

JS: In that respect *Telstar*, like *Control*, is very much a psychological journey.

NM: It's based around the early 1960s Zeitgeist – that there's something in the ether responsible for our creative impulses. I included a visual motif of a shooting star every time someone has a bright idea. It's rather camp and trite, but good humoured and strangely reflects the way people thought the world worked back then. Geoff Goddard [who wrote Meek's first number one hit song "Johnny Remember Me"] announces "it came to me in a dream" as a shooting star flies above his head. The same motif appears when Joe gets out of bed to write theme for "Telstar" – a shooting star streaks across the back window. It could be the Telstar satellite itself, but this shows how they believed all our inspiration comes via the ether [...]. Sometimes, in Joe's case, this was from séances and other such nonsense. This was a nice way of triggering those things: a handy visual device. Ironically, Telstar communication satellites and compressed radio waves actually became, or came to realise, the idea of the ether. They did allow communication and the spread of ideas, but in a much more realistic way than the supposed ether.

Attention to detail

LM: James, you said that you tried hard to be accurate in playing Joy Division's Bernard Sumner, and you got to meet him. You also had voice coaching to get the accent right. So is there a tension between actors and individuals doing what they can to create an authentic characterization, and other people's visions, and the constraints of the priorities on a film shoot?

JAP: Ultimately, it's down to the director and producer to decide what's important... One actor comes at it from a really authentic point of view, and the other comes at it from being an actor – and ultimately that's about casting. I remember listening to the music on the way to the final audition I went to, and Anton was really calm and quiet. I did my monologue, which was subsequently cut from the film. It was a really great monologue where Bernie is talking to Ian at the end, when he knows he's suicidal. I delivered it really slowly, and calmly, in the best Salford accent that I could do, and then Anton said something like "open your mouth more at the end of sentences like this" – and he showed me: "Bernard used to speak like this" – and then he took a Polaroid photo against the wall. I got this sense that they were really looking at me as a whole, and not just looking at my performing ability. It was lucky that I looked like Bernie.

TE: Even something like the amount of time we spent with the Epilepsy Society in the UK. Matt's [Greenhalgh, who wrote the film's screenplay] a Mancunian, but Macclesfield is actually very different, so he spent a lot of time in this really run down flat in Macclesfield trying to feel what it felt like to be skint in the mid- to late-Seventies. All of that is done because the idea that somebody has a voice or

has influence is generally only meaningful if you start wherever they started, and you go on that walk with them.

LM: I'm guessing that a lot of decisions are made on set that contribute to the level of historical and audio realism. My initial brief wasn't to get you to play as a band. It was to get you to mime convincingly. But you ended up actually being able to perform as a band.

JAP: [...] It was an absolute dream job where you've got to pretend to be rock stars. The truth is: to really be Joy Division, you have to dedicate your entire life to it, and focus, and practise [...] and get together, and want it so badly. And then to get that job as an actor, you are bypassing all that extra hard work. Even with the extras, you'd have crowds of hundreds in the audience. We're up onstage. It felt like we were rock stars for those songs. It was amazing. It was almost like some weird version of [television competition show] *Pop Idol* because we were these manufactured pop stars. But I remember when we were together in the practice room – we just really wanted to do as good as we could. I think we all really wanted to please Anton because he was such a great director.

LM/JS: There must be a compromise between factual accuracy and the fact that it's a two-hour film with a tight narrative, and not a documentary as you said.

TE: The authenticity would never have been compromised because we never would have allowed it to happen. If you look at the bit where Ian is writing to Annik – those letters are verbatim, because the real Annik gave copies of every letter that Ian sent her, to me and Matt in Belgium.

JAP: I remember the costume designer [Julian Day] being brilliant. I remember being put in these jeans that didn't flair at the bottom. There was no shape to them whatsoever. And school boy jumpers – which are really fashionable now (laughs). He knew every detail about the costumes. I had a hairpiece for the earlier days when Bernie had a mullet.

NM: It was important, from the point of view of the musicians, to get things right in *Telstar*. Get the instruments right, get the year of the guitars right, get the amplifiers and the technical equipment as correct as possible. The layout of Joe Meek's studio was in authentic detail. Those props and the circumstances of Joe's recording immediately lent itself to layout of set.

I showed John Leyton ["Johnny Remember Me"] around the set and he moved the piano. "Everything great, it's the right piano but in the wrong place!" So we moved it [...] I showed one of Joe's photographers around the sound stage at Twickenham Studios and he was shocked at how accurate it all seemed. In the end

he just screamed out “Where’s Jimmy the Monkey?” It transpired that Joe had this stuffed monkey, a little toy, so I immediately went and bought a period stuffed monkey and that appeared in the bedroom scenes.

JS: *Telstar* was consciously playful with notions of authenticity in its casting. Former 1960s artists portrayed many of the older characters. These included Tornados’ bass player Chas Hodges, drummer Clem Cattini, teen idol Jess Conrad, Meek’s assistant Patrick Pink, and singer John Leyton. Conversely, present-day performers played their predecessors at a young age. Jon Lee (of S Club 7) played Billy Fury, Justin Hawkins (of The Darkness) played Screaming Lord Sutch, and Carl Barat (of The Libertines) played Gene Vincent.

NM: The casting was great. I went to everyone I could to see if they wanted to be in the film. [The singer] Marty Wilde didn’t want to do it. He didn’t like Joe Meek at all. [The singer] Joe Brown wanted money [...] A couple of other people wouldn’t come near it. Dave Clark was very interesting. He hated Joe and because of that we couldn’t use “Glad All Over” (1964). Clark claimed Meek stole it for his last number one, “Have I the Right?” (1964), so we had to compromise around that. Lots of people did want to do it, and they jumped all over it. Clem Cattini, Chas Hodges, John Leyton, Patrick Pink [...] obviously (singer/actor) Jess Conrad was important. He was insistent he had a decent role (as manager Larry Parnes) and very keen to tell his story.

JS: Was it an advantage to be well known?

NM: No. I actually wrote the play as an underemployed actor. All I was doing was reading everything I could and doing a bunch of interviews. I met Clem as a kid in my early/mid-twenties. I was trying to have conversation with someone three times my age and verify what happened [...] The key people all along were: Chas Hodges, who I knew before; Clem Cattini, who I knew from the Arsenal; Pat Pink, who was working as a London Underground tube driver; and Alan Blaikley, who was doing a psychology course with my co-writer’s gran. I was a gormless twenty-something unknown actor who’d been on (the BBC’s) *The Bill* a couple of times, thankfully, otherwise they’d have asked for some money.

Conclusion: Mythology and Fetishization in the Music Biopic

Our accounts of the making of *Telstar* and *Control* illustrate the various factors at work on the interviewees, who have to keep a balance between issues and practices of verisimilitude and tendencies towards artistic licence, the need for dramatic effect and narrative organization, and creativity. These factors include: fidelity to a

sense of the particularities of the places shown, to the actions and positions of those portrayed, to the language used, to the practices of popular musical performance, the lives of popular music participants, and the situations in which music was made. This fidelity, at times, seems to be something of a debt of honour to those who lent their memories of those times, places and people to the creation of these films. At the same time, the films' financial viability depends on appealing to broader, albeit targeted audiences. Corbijn achieved this by appealing successfully to the art house crowd, whereas for Moran the attempt to fashion a popular film, particularly one that shifts from broad comedy to violent tragedy, initially befuddled critics.

In terms of the music biopic, the need to remain true to the history of the artists is particularly acute because the cultural artefacts themselves remain. This could be a matter of watching one of the films discussed here and then returning to a first vinyl pressing of one of the records featured in it. In terms familiar from Walter Benjamin (1936): while these records are mass-produced artefacts from "the age of mechanical reproduction", they retain something of the auratic quality understood to be present in non-reproduced art. Or, to revise this idea somewhat, the auratic quality continues, via a near-direct touch with the previous owners and users of this record. One could spin a crackly first pressing of Joy Division's 1979 *Unknown Pleasures* at a party, and know that kind of silent communion with all those other people at all those other parties (and bedsits and bedrooms and living rooms) who have heard this same individual record, stretching from the "year zero" of Joy Division to the present, has occurred. And so a narrative around the life of this particular and individual record, that begins in the times portrayed in *Control* (and of the most important times: the production of the record), now takes in our present, and the careful owner or custodian of this LP. In this, auratically, one places oneself in the story of Joy Division: as someone for whom Joy Division made this record, which was pressed in their times, appeared in their times in this material form, and is still being played now.² Mythologies, in this respect, draw closer to the contemporary lived moment. In this way, the music biopic is subject to, and needs to negotiate, extraordinary levels of obligation in the name of delivering, in good faith, or in spirit at least, verisimilitude, or its glosses.

Endnotes

¹ Russell's notable Monitor films concerned composers such as Elgar, Debussy, Bartok and Kurt Weill, and with a later film on Delius for the Omnibus series (*Song of Summer*, 1968). His feature film biopics include *The Music Lovers* (1970), on Tchaikovsky, *Mahler* (1974), a rock opera based on a concept album by The Who (*Tommy*, 1975), and *Lisztomania* (1975), on Liszt. Russell's music biopics were widely seen in the 1970s and, in their bombast and shock value, difficult to forget. His influence can be detected in later biopics such as *Amadeus* (Forman 1984), *Sid and Nancy* (Cox 1986) and *The Doors* (Stone 1991).

² For a parallel discussion on the importance of encountering “aura”, see the comments on the use of historical news footage for a 2007 Led Zeppelin gig (Edgar, Fairclough-Isaacs, Halligan, Spelman, 2015: 9). Or, for a discussion of aura in relation to the ways in which a sense of actual-presentness through personality projection occurs in, and to an extent structures (and is technologically enabled for) live arena concerts by young girl pop singers – hence “intimate live girls” (see Halligan, 2015: 291-307).

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