



Director
Anton Corbijn

Starring
Sam Riley,
Samantha Morton,
Alexandra Maria Lara

Certificate 15
UK 2006, 2h2m

Recent years have seen the biopic reassume its traditionally popular status with cinema audiences. Within that general phenomenon a strain of films documenting the lives of celebrated musicians has proved especially successful: *Walk the Line* (James Mangold, USA, 2005) narrates the tempestuous early life of Johnny Cash to the point of his iconic *San Quentin* and *Folsom Prison* live albums and marriage to June Carter in the late '60s; *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, USA, 2004) covers the remarkable life story of Ray Charles, and, most recently, *La Vie En Rose* (Olivier Dahan, Fr/GB/Cze, 2007) does the same for Edith Piaf. Photographer-turned-filmmaker Anton Corbijn's *Control* is the latest addition to this trend. Corbijn's film is a biopic of Ian Curtis, the lead singer/songwriter of seminal post-punk Mancunian band Joy Division. Joy Division recorded only two studio albums, *Unknown Pleasures* (1979) and *Closer* (1980), the latter released two months after Curtis took his own life. Despite (though, paradoxically, also in part because) of the curtailed nature of Curtis' life and output, he has become one of the most celebrated and influential figures in the history of British popular music.

Two facts, both apparently mundane, about *Control's* making are salient to our understanding of the film's approach to and portrayal of its central human subject. Firstly, Corbijn's film is released in cinemas in 2007. 27½ years after Ian Curtis' death at the age of 23, the myth (brilliant but tragic poet of the post-industrial North) has now lived longer than did the man. *Control* explicitly represents only the latter, yet it does so motivated by an attempt to explain the roots and lasting, overweening power of the former. Secondly, *Control* is directed by Anton Corbijn. Many biopics are in thrall to the myth of their subjects; few are made by those partly responsible for making such myths in the first place. In 1979/80, early in a career during which he became one of the most celebrated and recognisable of all rock photographers, Corbijn took several iconic shots of Curtis and Joy Division for the cover of the *New Musical Express*. In 1988, as the growing mythical flotsam surrounding Curtis' life and work afforded Joy Division's music a commercial potential it generally lacked when Curtis was still alive, Corbijn directed a now-famous, funereal promotional video for the single re-release of 'Atmosphere', a Joy Division track first issued as a single in 1980. Visually speaking, *Control* appears a belated continuation, in both form and content, of Corbijn's earlier images of Joy Division. The new film deploys once again the trademark pristine black-and-white aesthetic that makes the latter so memorable and arresting: mourning becomes monochromatic. Thematically, however, *Control* often seems inclined to challenge, rather than continue, the terms of Corbijn's previous representations of Joy Division. The latter worked (at times accidentally, at times deliberately) to mythologise the life and art of Ian Curtis; *Control* seeks to anatomise these things instead. The film sets itself a clear central question: what made a mentally unstable young man living and, ultimately, failing to cope with the pressures of a seemingly unremarkable 1970s urban working class life (teenage marriage, suburban two-up, desk job down the dole) an artist whose work possesses qualities of ellipsis, austerity and beauty to such a remarkable degree?

Watching *Control*, however, you are struck by the fact that it's much easier to offer a quasi-empirical account of an individual life than it is to account for the origins and allure of that person's art and wider cultural significance. Corbijn's film is never anything less than intelligent, involving and elegantly made. Ironically, however, it is also at its best when failing to meet the terms of the brief it sets itself. At one point, for instance, we watch Curtis and

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his wife Debbie directly acknowledge for the first time the parlous state of their marriage; the opening strains of Joy Division's most famous song, 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', intrude immediately over the soundtrack. Here we are perhaps perilously close to the banal mindset afflicting so many biopics, especially those of talented artists. Too often, the distinctive content and character of their creative output is 'explained' as a form of barely displaced autobiography, (their) Art = (their) Life. By contrast, *Control* is at its very best elsewhere, when it simply foregrounds, rather than trying to intellectually bridge, the yawning chasm between the cramped, all-too-familiar nature of Curtis and Joy Division's day-to-day social milieu, the band's emotional naïveté and inexperience, and the expansive, moving and avant-garde nature of the music they made. In a sense, the more one learns about Curtis' life by watching *Control*, the less possible it seems to explain major aspects of his art with reference to it. In this regard, perhaps the film's most telling line of dialogue comes towards its end when, his emotional anguish and confusion ever-deepening, Curtis remarks that the individual depicted in contemporary footage of Joy Division represents a human body and personality he himself cannot recognise. Similarly, the film's most eloquent and telling image is its final one, a stark visual metaphor for the elusive, inexplicable character of the relationship between individual creativity and experience, not to mention the limits of biographical knowledge and enquiry.

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