

## SPEAK MEMORY

### Reflections on the Doppelgänger Trilogy

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I an Curtis, whom I discovered post-suicide in 1987 (I was five when he died in 1980), had already become a cult icon through the ascension of New Order into the mainstream. His public persona was largely based on a couple of dark, moody photographs taken by Kevin Cummings and Anton Corbijn, and a little-known and -circulated Factory Records video “Here are the Young Men.” Joy Division’s recorded sound was impeccable, due to the genius production of Martin Hannett. Its album covers and posters were sparsely and sublimely designed by Peter Saville. But it fell into a sort of technological black hole in terms of video, and hardly any performance footage exists. I attribute this to the crossover period where tube video cameras (recognizable by the ghost images they tend to produce) replaced super-8 film as the public’s (or the fan’s) means for transmitting images. It appears (or more accurately *disappears*) that there was a technological lag, gap, and stutter before the audience learned how to speak memory. *Factory Archives* was created to fill this void. The beta still at the beginning of the video announces it as a fragment from the Factory vault. Simultaneously attempting to blend the look of super-8 and tube videos, it supposes the existence of their unreleased archives, the type of “extra” that is so willfully committed to DVDs these days.

In some ways, the original form of *Factory Archives* did desire the fate of the DVD extra. In 2000, my close friend, Michael Stock, optioned Debbie Curtis’s (Ian’s widow) 1996 memoir *Touching from a Distance* and wrote a script based on it, *Transmission*. Stock’s excitement rubbed off on me and consequently the Doppelgänger, Benjamin Brock, whom I had just met. Once I had turned him onto Joy Division, Ben became obsessed with playing Ian in *Transmission*. He self-recorded an audition tape using my Hi-8 camera in his basement in Ohio, blacking out all the windows, walls, and light with garbage bags, and precisely reenacted Curtis’s “crazed chicken” dance. To this day, four years later, Stock is still negotiating with producers and Debbie Curtis in a project that can only be gently described as a nightmare. In 2001, a year and a half after he made it, I found Ben’s audition tape in a box in my closet. I re-watched the tape, touched again by its charm and fantasy. A relic of failure, I altered it vastly and degraded it further until there was almost nothing left, nothing visible, except for a ghostly “Ian” slowly dancing through *Decades*.<sup>1</sup>

While *Factory Archives* is an attempt to fantasize the terrain of a defunct record label's vaults, *Phantom Release* navigates the virtual landscape of an über-fan's website: [www.digitalnirvana.net](http://www.digitalnirvana.net). Like ghosts, phantom releases are thought to exist, yet their existence is unproven. When Nirvana broke, home (VHS-c type) camcorders were blossoming on the market. As a result, there is a ton of amateur footage. Since Nirvana erupted right when I turned sixteen and became a catalyst for my burgeoning teen angst, I decided to portray the band (in script, cinematography, and editing) as I experienced it as a teenager—with images and performances culled and homogenized from my memories of MTV, concert documentaries, magazine covers, Saturday Night Live, and three concerts I had seen in San Francisco.

Nirvana was actually strangely boring and underwhelming on stage. They didn't move around much, Kurt never spoke to the audience, and the only remarkable event I remember was Kurt climbing onto a stack of p.a.'s and jumping into the drumset at the end of a show. I decided against recreating a specific, cathartic moment. Instead I focused on what I thought was most remarkable: the music, and the energy it created within its adoring fans. You didn't go to a Nirvana concert by yourself, you went with ten people, all your friends, because they were the only band everyone could agree on and everyone loved. It was this shared Dionysian experience that was Nirvana. *Phantom Release* links itself directly to the fans. It looks as if it were culled together from a fan's lost and found super-8 basement footage (just where I found the obituary magazines I had collected from 1994 that I used in the STONED & DETHRONED show) of an undated, unknown performance that could have stood in for countless performances and memories. (Ben, like Kurt, is left handed, and plays guitar. I copied Nirvana's instruments and clothes, so that even the most hardcore fan would not be disappointed by a dumb mistake in detail)

Curtis and Cobain are fallen heroes, mythically revered and catalogued. Their lives were extinguished in one fatal blow. Michael Jackson is a different sort of monster, slowly declining over the last fifteen years. The decision to take on the celebrity of Jackson was made in the spirit of the Great Challenge. After watching the Doppelgänger randomly and magnificently bust some MJ moves learned from his childhood while rehearsing for the Cobain piece, I saw an impossible challenge strategically present itself. Could we pull off Michael Jackson? After the Cobain piece, I needed to do something unexpected and surprising, something that wasn't in the Curtis/Cobain "Indy" rocker lineage.

Jackson, after all, became supremely famous in 1984 when I was nine. He was my first introduction into the realm of the rock star and with it, the worship factor, so there was a slight connection to the other two icons. Every kid wanted to be him, tried to moonwalk and pretty much failed; yet here was the Doppelgänger, fully able to do the moves. We dissected countless hours of video, and Ben spent months breaking down Jackson's dance steps. (Most of the wow factor, he revealed to me, is in the camera tricks, and MJ's repertoire can be broken down into three basic moves.) After much deliberation and many false starts and scripts, I decided to isolate Jackson in a theatre (in the Lamb's Club, now a church, midtown

Manhattan) and have it look like a Chaplin silent film. I shot it on super-8 black-and-white film using one of the op Canon cameras from the seventies.

With all the controversy currently swirling around Jackson, the energy felt very dark, uncomfortable, and uncontrollable. And sure enough, that energy would nearly destroy the film and the project. After a processing lab “break,” the first accident of its kind in fifteen years at the only super-8 lab in the city, I was devastated. Six out of nine rolls were partially or completely destroyed—unthinkable and unbelievable. Yet, when I viewed the remains of this accident, my initial heartbreak became joy. The destruction and subsequent transformation of surface and intent is an exacting metaphor for Jackson’s own transformation and demise. *Recorded Yesterday* records Jackson’s epic fight to keep dancing through time and space as he hopelessly disintegrates in front of our eyes. The piece awakens our humanity; his struggle becomes ours again in a way that the real Michael Jackson has yet to reassimilate. Jackson has gone from beloved to freak as *yesterday* forever stalks him, joining Curtis and Cobain as another example of a cultural assassin, assassinated by the very culture that loved him to death.

Another important element in the trilogy, in fact, the most important element, has been the growth of my relationship with Benjamin Brock, the Doppelgänger. Initially cast in late 1999 after repeated déjà-vu meetings in clubs, Ben has completely worn in his role as my Doppelgänger: each new role is an exciting, absorbing, and evolutionary experience for both of us that in some ways says more about the human drama than it says about me or him or any icon. It is this transcendence of time, place, space, and persona that continues to make me feel that this is a vital project; one that I enthusiastically pursue today.

## NOTE

1. The last song from Joy Division’s final album *Closer*, it appeared at the introduction of *Here are the Young Men*.