
Music Review: When Dreams Begin Again: A Reflection on New Order's 'Dreams Never End'

*Sammy Garcia III**Department of Sociology**California State University, Los Angeles*

It is essential before we begin this review to speak about New Order's origins. Joy Division's origins trace back to the post-punk era of late 1970s Manchester, England—a city immersed in industrial decline, unemployment, and social unrest. The band emerged as part of the punk rock movement but soon developed a distinct sound that fused punk's raw energy with a darker, more atmospheric and introspective musical style. Originally formed in 1976 under the name Warsaw by schoolmates Bernard Sumner and Peter Hook, Joy Division took shape when they recruited drummer Stephen Morris and lyricist/vocalist Ian Curtis, solidifying their lineup in 1977. The name "Joy Division" itself is steeped in controversy, as it referred to the sexual slavery units depicted in *The House of Dolls*, a novel about Nazi concentration camps, signaling the band's willingness to confront dark and taboo subjects in their work. The group quickly became known for their minimalist yet haunting sound, blending sparse guitar work, Hook's melodic basslines, Morris's robotic drumbeats, and Curtis's distinctive baritone voice. Under the guidance of their producer Martin Hannett, Joy Division's sound took on a more experimental and ambient tone, which was showcased in their seminal 1979 album *Unknown Pleasures*. Songs like "She's Lost Control" and "Disorder" combined cold, detached instrumentals with Curtis's deeply introspective and often bleak lyrics. His writing reflected themes of isolation, anxiety, and existential dread, resonating with a generation confronting the uncertainty and disillusionment of post-industrial Britain.

While the band's rise to prominence was swift, it was paralleled by the growing struggles of Curtis. Curtis suffered from severe epilepsy, a neurological disorder that caused frequent debilitating seizures. His condition worsened as the band's schedule intensified. He had been diagnosed in 1979, shortly after the release of *Unknown Pleasures*, and was prescribed various medications, which came with severe side effects, including mood

swings, depression, and memory loss. The disorder significantly impacted his ability to perform, as his seizures became more frequent and often coincided with live performances. Despite his efforts to manage his health, Curtis's condition grew worse over time, exacerbated by the pressures of fame, touring, and his complex personal life. His tumultuous mental state was further strained by the disintegration of his marriage to Deborah Curtis and his affair with Belgian journalist Annik Honoré. This personal conflict, combined with his deteriorating health, pushed Curtis into a deeper state of despair. Many of the songs on Joy Division's second album, *Closer* (1980), reflect this increasing sense of doom. On May 18, 1980, just before Joy Division was scheduled to embark on their first North American tour, Curtis took his own life at the age of 23, hanging himself in his home in Macclesfield. His death shocked the music world and cut short the burgeoning career of one of post-punk's most innovative bands. In the wake of Curtis's suicide, Joy Division's remaining members—Sumner, Hook, and Morris—were left reeling, grappling with the future of the band and the legacy they had begun to build.

After Curtis's death Joy Division disbanded, but like a phoenix rising from the ashes came New Order. Moving forward, they carried over with them something more than the weight of their music. They bore the legacy of Curtis, the memory of a lost friend taken far too early, and the weight of expectations from a world still in mourning. "Dreams Never End," the first track on their 1981 debut album *Movement*, acts as a turning point for the band and those who followed. It is a coming to terms with the past, a meditation on themes of loss and identity, the relentless pressures of modern existence, and more of an introduction to the New Order. At first listen, "Dreams Never End" seems like a continuation of Joy Division's brooding post-punk sound. The song begins with Hook's distinctive bassline, a driving force that propels the track forward with a rhythmic intensity reminiscent of Joy Division's best work. It's not hard to imagine this track fitting into the darker catalog of their previous band. As the song unfolds, subtle differences become evident. While it retains the same atmosphere, there's an underlying sense of hope and renewal that sets it apart.

Sumner's debut as the lead vocalist, a role he initially struggled to embrace, is marked by a voice that is more subdued and ethereal than Curtis's baritone. His delivery adds vulnerability and a dreamlike quality to the song, aligning with the lyrical ambiguity that invites multiple interpretations. Lyrically, "Dreams Never End" is abstract, allowing listeners to project their experiences and emotions onto the song. Lines such as "**A given end to your dreams**" and "**A fractured smile that soon dies**" can evoke themes of personal loss, existential searching, or broken relationships. The subjective nature of the lyrics—compounded by the fact that variations exist in different versions of the song—invites reflection on how we engage with art. Is one interpretation more valid than another? Or does the fluidity of the lyrics reflect the fluidity of meaning itself? In many ways, "Dreams Never End" mirrors the human experience: each listener can interpret the song based on personal life experiences, adding a layer of personal relevance that evolves over time. Beyond individual interpretation, "Dreams Never End" also carries sociological significance. By employing Durkheim's concept of anomie, Goffman's theory of self-presentation, and exploring the themes of agency and resilience, we can delve into the deeper meanings of the song. These sociological theories offer a structured framework for understanding both the band's internal struggles and the broader human condition.

SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: ANOMIE, SELF-PRESENTATION, RESILIENCE, AND AGENCY

Erving Goffman was a Canadian-born sociologist, social psychologist, and writer, considered by some the most influential American sociologist of the twentieth century. His theory on Self-Presentation applies to this song 'Dreams Never End' and it shows how the theory is based on the idea that life is a performance, where people adopt different roles depending on the situation, maintaining a facade to shape how they are perceived. New Order's formation post-Joy Division required the band to adopt a new public identity, one that both honored Curtis's legacy while forging a new path for themselves. Goffman's theory can be applied to explore how New Order, especially Sumner, navigated this delicate balance.

According to Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), "the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others." This concept of alienation directly connects to the emotional tension in New Order's "Dreams Never End," particularly in the lyrics "**A nervous bride for your eyes**" pointing to the act of concealing inner emotions while maintaining an outward facade. This resonates with Goffman's concept of self-presentation, showing how we craft our public identities, even while internally grappling with confusion or pain. Here, the metaphor of a bride evokes an image of someone expected to perform a certain role under societal scrutiny. Just as a bride is expected to appear joyful, composed, and radiant on her wedding day, the band was expected to maintain composure and grace as they moved forward after Curtis's death. However, the word "nervous" betrays the tension between their outward appearance and their inner emotional state. This reflects Goffman's theory of front-stage behavior, where individuals (in this case, the band) put on a performance to align with societal expectations, while backstage, they may be grappling with inner turmoil and uncertainty.

Goffman's concept of impression management (Nickerson 2022) emphasizes controlling how we appear to others, a process that undoubtedly occurred within New Order. They had to reinvent themselves not only for their audience but also for themselves, presenting a composed, coherent image that concealed the internal chaos and vulnerability they experienced as individuals. Sumner's understated vocal performance on "Dreams Never End" serves as a form of impression management. His vocals lack the gravitas of Curtis's delivery, signaling a quiet, almost reluctant step into a new role. This delicate balance between outward presentation and inner tension is reflected in how the lyrics themselves are delivered—subdued, ethereal, and almost hidden within the mix, mirroring the act of masking one's emotions behind a façade. This act of self-presentation is crucial to understanding New Order's early career. By continuing under a new name, they essentially managed how they were perceived by the public. They were not just Joy Division without Curtis; they

were a new entity, striving to balance respect for their past with the desire to move forward. This aligns with Goffman's idea of shifting between frontstage (public performance) and backstage (private emotions) personas, as New Order had to project an image of resilience while grappling privately with the grief of losing their bandmate.

ANOMIE & "DREAMS NEVER END"

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist and was the first academic sociologist. He formally established the academic discipline of Sociology along with Karl Marx and Max Weber, who are commonly cited as the principal architects of modern social science. According to Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1984), anomie is defined as a state of instability in an individual or society that results from a breakdown of values, standards, or a lack of purpose or ideals. This concept of anomie can be applied to New Order's "Dreams Never End," where feelings of disconnection, purposelessness, and instability resonate deeply within the lyrics. After Curtis's death, New Order—formerly Joy Division—was thrust into such a state. Curtis's passing left both the band and their audience grappling with emotional turmoil, uncertainty, and a fractured sense of identity. The band's transition from Joy Division to New Order represents a societal and emotional rupture, which we can frame within Durkheim's concept of anomie.

The line, "*A given end to your dreams*" from "Dreams Never End" poignantly reflects the emotional desolation experienced by the remaining band members after Curtis's death. It suggests a finality, a moment when the aspirations and dreams of the group as Joy Division were brought to a sudden halt. Durkheim's theory fits here because anomie is often marked by the end of established structures, just as the group experienced a disruption of their identity and purpose. As they transitioned to New Order, this disorientation mirrors the anomic breakdown Durkheim described, where the existing norms and paths disintegrate, leaving individuals (or bands) to reconstruct a new way forward. The lyrics "*A fractured smile that soon dies*" can be interpreted as the mask or facade of normalcy cracking under the weight of grief and loss, reinforcing the state of disconnection the

band members may have felt during this period. The fracture here signifies not just emotional loss but also a breakdown of social cohesion within the band, where each member must grapple with individual and collective uncertainty about the future. Durkheim's concept of anomie illuminates how these lyrics encapsulate a broader loss of societal norms, which, in this case, include the norms that previously structured the band's musical journey and identity.

RESILIENCE & AGENCY IN "DREAMS NEVER END"

Resilience is the ability to withstand and recover from adversity (Besley 2020). It's not just about surviving hardship but also about adapting and growing stronger from it. Pierre's concepts of habitus, field, and capital can help us understand resilience as a dynamic process rooted in the structures around us. In the context of New Order, resilience is evident in their ability to not only endure the loss of Curtis but also to transform that loss into artistic growth. The evolution from Joy Division's dark, post-punk sound to New Order's more hopeful and electronic-driven music reflects this resilience. The lyric "*No looking back now, we're pushing through*" perfectly encapsulates the band's resilience. It speaks to the forward momentum required to heal and rebuild, acknowledging the difficulty of the past while emphasizing the importance of perseverance. This line also reflects the agency that resilience requires. New Order's ability to act, make decisions, and redefine their sound despite the emotional devastation of Curtis's death demonstrates their resilience. They chose not to disband but to push through the pain, creating music that paid homage to their roots while moving into a new sonic direction.

In sociology, resilience isn't just about individuals returning to their former state; it's about adaptation and growth. This adaptation is evident in "Dreams Never End," where the song's post-punk foundation gradually gives way to New Order's more electronic sound, hinting at the future direction of the band. The use of synthesizers and a more polished production style in Movement suggests that the band was not just surviving but evolving. Their transformation mirrors the sociological process of resilience, where communities or groups must adapt to new realities in the face of trauma or disruption. The song's upbeat

tempo, driven by Hook's bassline and Morris's rhythmic drumming, conveys a sense of energy and movement—emphasizing that resilience is not passive but active, requiring effort and forward thinking.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make choices and exert control over their actions within the constraints of social structures. Agency involves “the ability of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices” (Cole 2014). ***“Now I know what those hands would do / No looking back now, we’re pushing through”*** represents a pivotal moment in the song, encapsulating the theme of agency and the conscious choice to confront rather than retreat from past experiences. The phrase ***“Now I know what those hands would do”*** suggests an awareness that comes from lived experience. The hands metaphorically represent actions taken in relationships, highlighting the consequences of past decisions. By acknowledging what these hands are capable of, the speaker recognizes the weight of their history—be it pain, love, or regret. The subsequent phrase, ***“No looking back now, we’re pushing through,”*** emphasizes a crucial decision to prioritize progress over nostalgia. The insistence on not looking back signifies a rejection of regret or the temptation to linger in the past. This refusal to dwell on previous experiences reflects a significant exercise of agency. The term ***“pushing through”*** evokes a sense of resilience and determination, indicating a willingness to confront challenges head-on. It's an empowering declaration that the speaker will not allow past hurts to dictate their present or future; instead, they are committed to navigating their emotions and circumstances actively.

This choice also aligns with the broader narrative of coping with loss and moving forward. In the aftermath of trauma or heartbreak, individuals often face a crossroads where they can choose to succumb to despair or actively seek healing and growth. The speaker's decision to push through can be interpreted as a metaphor for personal growth, resilience, and the continuous journey toward self-discovery. It resonates with the listener, reminding them that while the past may inform who we are, it does not have to define our path forward.

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE LISTENER'S ROLE

The subjective nature of “Dreams Never End” invites listeners to explore their own interpretations, rendering the experience deeply personal. The ambiguity inherent in the lyrics allows for a myriad of meanings to emerge, creating a rich tapestry of emotional responses. Lines like “*Hello, farewell to your love and soul*” evoke feelings of both connection and separation, reflecting the complexities of human relationships and the inevitability of change. This open-endedness resonates with listeners navigating their own experiences of loss, transformation, and self-discovery. Such fluidity in meaning underscores the idea that art is not static; it is shaped by the listener’s context, emotional history, and lived experiences. According to the New Order Fandom page, “Dreams Never End” resonates with the themes of melancholy and introspection, capturing the existential struggles of the time. The lyrics’ vagueness allows individuals to project their own narratives onto the song, forging a personal connection that can be both cathartic and affirming. The experience of listening to this track thus becomes a collaborative process where the listener’s interpretation is as crucial as the artist’s intention.

Moreover, this subjectivity aligns with Erving Goffman’s concepts of self-presentation and the performance of identity. Just as individuals curate their public personas, listeners engage with music as a means of self-expression and reflection. The ability to reinterpret a song’s meaning allows for the exploration of one’s identity, emotions, and societal context. In this way, “Dreams Never End” serves as a canvas upon which listeners can project their feelings of loss, longing, and renewal. The significance of this interaction between music and the listener cannot be understated. The transformative power of songs like “Dreams Never End” lies in their capacity to evoke a sense of shared experience and understanding, allowing individuals to grapple with their own struggles within the larger narrative of social change. As listeners immerse themselves in the emotional landscape of the song, they find resonance in its themes, facilitating a deeper connection to both the music and their own lives. Ultimately, this interplay of subjectivity and interpretation underscores the profound impact of music as a vehicle for

personal and societal transformation, reinforcing its role as a powerful catalyst for change.

When a song like “Dreams Never End” finally reaches people, it is new for everybody. However, differently, the listeners carry their context, emotional history, and dreams into the experience, whereby the song changes. It gets personal, intimate, and reflective of the listener’s life. Subjectivity gives this song a timeless quality. It is one of those songs that grow with you; at different stages in your life, you can always go back to them and find something new every time. We shape the song just as much as it shapes us as listeners, which is why it is your song when you listen. The lyrics, emotions, and interpretations—they all belong to you, sculpted by your journey alone.

CONCLUSION

Through the lenses of anomie, self-presentation, resilience, and agency, “Dreams Never End” transcends its surface as a song about personal or collective loss, evolving into a profound sociological narrative of struggle and transformation. The concept of anomie illustrates the breakdown of norms and identity following Curtis’s tragic death, plunging the band into a state of disorientation that reflects the broader cultural malaise of post-punk England. This sense of instability echoes the societal shifts occurring at the time, highlighting how the loss of a guiding figure can disrupt both personal and collective identities. Self-presentation theory adds another layer of complexity to the song’s meaning, capturing the delicate performance of identity as the band navigated public expectations. Through the nuanced lyrics and Sumner’s emotive vocals, “Dreams Never End” serves as a subtle expression of vulnerability amidst the pressure to maintain a façade of composure and control. This interplay between authenticity and performance underscores the challenges artists face in revealing their true selves to the world, all while grappling with the expectations of their audience. Resilience emerges as a powerful theme within the song, emphasizing the band’s capacity to rebuild, adapt, and evolve in the face of profound loss. The lyrics serve as both a farewell to the past and a pledge to move forward, encapsulating the spirit of perseverance that resonates with anyone who has experienced grief. This journey of recovery

is not just personal for New Order but also reflects a broader societal narrative, illustrating how art can inspire collective healing and transformation.

Incorporating the notion of agency, “Dreams Never End” invites listeners to reflect on their ability to take control of their narratives amidst chaos. The song emphasizes the idea that while we may be influenced by external forces—such as loss, societal expectations, and cultural shifts—we still possess the agency to redefine our paths and identities. It asserts that the act of creation, whether through music or personal expression, can be a powerful tool for reclaiming one’s sense of self and purpose. “Dreams Never End” challenges us to confront our own illusions and fears. It compels us to acknowledge that while the struggle for identity and meaning is real, it is within our power to redefine and reclaim our narratives. This song not only reflects the band’s journey but also encapsulates the universal experience of navigating loss, embracing resilience, and forging a path forward in an ever-changing world. Through its exploration of these sociological theories, “Dreams Never End” resonates with anyone grappling with the complexities of life, ultimately serving as a testament to the indomitable human spirit.

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