

Dancing About Architecture : Postmodernism and Irish Popular Music

Stephen Ryan

'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture' Elvis Costello

Introduction

Listening to Bono of U2 in a recent radio interview, I was struck by a comment he made. He was talking about contemporary and past musics, and how the past and the present are tied up with hopes and fears about the future. It was, he argued, a case of the difference between yesterdays tomorrow and todays tomorrow.

Yesterday's tomorrow was about a confidence for the future, a belief that progress was more or less inevitable and, for music, that artistic creativity would continue to blossom and produce great works.

By contrast, today's tomorrow is characterised by a chronic lack of confidence in the future, a deep-seated questioning of the possibility of further progress, and a resigned belief that *absolute* musical creativity is no longer possible (if it had ever existed in the first place) simply because all the good music has been written already. This, for me, is crucial to the very idea of postmodern music.

However, as Elvis Costello's quote above suggests, any attempt to rationalise, analyse or intellectualise music is bound to fail. By its very nature, music is not readily suited to a written discourse. Added to this is the problem of how different sectors of the music community react to attempts of any academic approach to popular music is bound to come up against some resistance. This resistance tends to take two forms: one that comes from the music industry itself and one from academia. The industry response tends to ridicule attempts to analyse or intellectualise music as being hopelessly inappropriate to the energy, vitality and essence of the musical experience.

Academic objections, on the other hand, emphasise the lack of worth inherent in the subject matter for any kind of self respecting serious inquiry. Jackson (1996: 12) argues that only more recently has sociology, cultural studies, and communications/media studies begun to take the whole area more seriously. This interest has taken a number of forms, with postmodernism being one of the more prominent. Ironically however, much postmodernist writing on music has concentrated on high culture forms, thereby taking a remarkably modernist approach to their study of a conservative choice of material.

This article will look at definitions of postmodernism in this context and will examine how it might be relevant to contemporary Irish popular music. Specific mention will be made to eclectic mixing of styles, appropriation of older musical texts and the questions of irony and parody.

Defining Postmodernism

The term postmodernism is notoriously a strongly contested and controversial one. The very existence of the phenomenon is debated, and even amongst those who accept that it does exist in some form, there is little agreement on whether it should be seen in a positive or negative light.

The first thing that needs to be said about postmodernism is that it is obviously a relational term. The word *modernism* is inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism (Huysen, 1988: 183). The term is intended to indicate a critique and a rejection of a modernist project, a project that came under intense scrutiny because of its conspicuous failure:

This modern era was predicated on a notion of progress in knowledge, in the arts, in technology, and in human freedom as well, all of which was thought of as leading to a truly emancipator society; a society emancipated from poverty, despotism and ignorance. But all of us can see that development continues to take place without leading to the realization of any of those dreams of emancipation (Jean-Francois Lyotard, quoted in Kearney, 1988: 21).

Similarly, Michael Ryan (1989:82) states how postmodernism is cynical regarding the progressivist dreams of modernism, which hoped to shape the cultural world in the image of technology, industry and science, and is resolutely ironic regarding the enabling myths of art, culture, society and philosophy.

Andreas Huyssen has outlined four factors that have contributed to this cynicism towards modernist thought. First is the link between imperialism and modernity, an imperialism which no longer goes unchallenged either politically, economically or culturally (Huysen, 1988: 219). Secondly, he argues that the influence of feminist thinking has contributed to a radical change in the way we can now think about gender and sexual identity, as well as our perception of art forms previously accepted as being male dominated, which according to Huyssen (1988: 220), contributes substantially to revisions of the history of modernism, not just by unearthing forgotten artists, but also by approaching the male modernists in novel ways. Linked to challenges to imperialism is a growing pluralism and respect for cultural diversity that at least has the potential to develop into a type of intellectual work different from that of the modernist intellect who typically spoke with the confidence of standing at the cutting edge of time and of being able to speak for others (Huysen, 1988: 220). Arguably the most important influencing factor though, is the effect that environmental and ecological campaigning and thinking have had on existing approaches to modernity. The sense that industrial and technological modernisation are not inherently good things has contributed greatly to the view in the context of art and culture that we are not bound to complete the project of modernity (Huysen, 1988: 217).

The earliest references to the term stem from the late 1950s from literary critics such as Irving Lowe and Harry Levin. It was used primarily as a criticism of modernist assumptions, rather than as a coherent set of ideas in itself; but it gradually came to be used in a more positive manner, and gained broader currency during the 1960s, becoming used in relation not just to literature, but also to architecture, dance, theatre, painting, film, and music. In terms of how postmodernism manifests itself in cultural production, Huyssen asserts that it operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first (Huysen, 1986: 216-7).

Postmodernism and Music

Two important works on postmodern music (Clarke, 1985, and Edwards, 1991) refer almost exclusively to areas of high culture, with only a tokenistic reference to the work of Laurie Anderson (Clarke, 1985: 167): ironically, an artist who has consistently challenged notions of a hierarchical differentiation between high and low culture.

In other words, part of the problem with discussing postmodernism and popular music is that a lot of the academic work on postmodernism takes a *modernist* approach in its conservative choice of appropriate material for study. Accepting this, it is still possible to piece together some components of

what a postmodernist popular music might look, or indeed sound like. Featherstone put it clearly, when he highlighted the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface depthlessness of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer and the assumption that art can only be repetitious (Featherstone, 1988: 203).

The Death of the Cult of Genius

One of the most important of these elements is the cult of genius surrounding the concept of original creation of art as being the bench mark for all true artistic endeavour. Modernism with its commitment to artistic progress and the avant-garde reinforced the dogma that radical novelty was the essence of art (Shusterman, 1991: 617). It is this unquestioned belief in the perpetual modernization of art (Huysen, 1988: 185) that has provoked the greatest response.

Many people simply no longer believe that art must be, or even can be totally new and original; the apparently original work of art is itself always a product of unacknowledged borrowings, the unique and novel text always a tissue of echoes and fragments of earlier texts (Shusterman, 1991: 617).

We began to see through the deification of the artist. Unacknowledged borrowing is borrowing nonetheless. Established artists may say that they are paying homage or tribute, but they cannot deny that they are still taking from the earlier text. In direct reference to a form of popular music - rap/hip hop - Shusterman includes: recycling appropriation rather than unique originative creation, the eclectic mixing of styles, the enthusiastic embracing of the new technology and mass culture, the challenging of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and artistic purity, and an emphasis on the localised and temporal rather than the putatively universal and eternal (Shusterman, 1991: 614).

Eclecticism

Kearney (1988: 24) places emphasis on eclecticism; thus we find the modernist view of culture as a linear sequence of phases being replaced by the postmodern idea of a synchronic polyphony of styles. He also recognises, in specific reference to music, a noticeable tendency in certain quarters to confound the conventional distinction between classical and commercial (Kearney, 1988: 355), indeed he expands on this by referring to a postmodern trend in music that not only erodes the distinction between serious and pop music but also breaks down, in certain instances, the very distinction between music and other media (Kearney, 1988: 357).

Similarly to other writers, Kearney mentions the technological advances in music recording that have facilitated a process of musical bricolage... such procedures have suggested alternatives to the modernist model of the compositional author as an individual imagination working from its own inner resources or genius (Kearney, 1988: 356). Overall, he sees a trend in pop music towards self parody, and describes the way the music is becoming increasingly an assortment of musical footnotes to itself (Kearney, 1988: 357).

Garry E. Clarke stresses the contribution of contemporary composers such as John Cage to the development of music in the last forty years. In the (in)famous piece entitled "433" (first recorded in 1952, see Cage, 1973), Cage devised a composition whereby the performer or performers remain silent for the amount of time prescribed by the work's title. Yet this deceptively simple composition - it is nothing, in essence - shows that pure silence does not exist (Clarke, 1985: 162).

The noises made by both audience and performers in attempting to maintain a silence would contribute to what is actually a complex composition (Clarke, 1985: 162). Brian Eno, the leading exponent of ambient music since the 1970s described "433" as being almost like a slogan, that piece. It's one of those pieces of music that you don't really need to hear. What you need to know is that somebody thought of it. It defines a boundary condition in music. (Eno, 1995)

In so doing, Cage helped redefine not only aspects of the relationship between artist

and audience, but also the division between what constitutes noise and what constitutes music, a redefinition that has had major implications for contemporary popular music.

Another highly significant exploration by Cage is a collaboration with Irish traditional musicians, which centres around a recitation of one of James Joyce's most famous works. *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (first performed in 1979, see Cage, 1992, and Belfast Festival Programme Notes, 1997), combines a recording of Cage himself half-reading and half-singing excerpts from the book, with a multi-track recording of 2,293 randomly selected sounds to represent locations mentioned in the book (including city noises, birdsong, and children's cries), intermixed with the traditional Irish music of Paddy Glackin, Matt Molloy, and Mel Mercier, amongst others.

This was obviously a composition of immense complexity in its construction. The piece was performed as a sound installation at the 1997 Belfast Festival. The installation was placed not in a conventional auditorium, but in the foyers and bars of the Waterfront Hall. This aspect of the installation led to a widespread disorientation of the audience, not sure where they stood (quite literally) in relation to the performance. A sign inside the main entrance simply said 'Roaratorio' and had two arrows pointing in opposite directions. Each of the 34 speakers carried a different audio track, and as the installation could be listened to from any number of vantage points, each member of the audience was enabled to have a unique experience of the text. The lack of a conventional boundary between artist and audience was further highlighted by the difficulty in telling apart sounds that were part of the performance, and sounds that belonged to the audience (such as children running around the foyer, and the noises of children on the recording). The overall effect was one of a mesmerisingly disorientating soundscape, that brought together sounds and musics in a clearly innovative fashion. In doing so, Cage went beyond conventional ideas of how musical composition could be conceived, and laid the groundwork for later, more accessible and commercial pieces of music.

However, in seeking to examine postmodernism in music, it is always tempting to think of specific phenomena as being more or less completely new. But, as the discussion of postmodernism above showed, there is no clear cut-off point between modernism and postmodernism. Because of this, we can expect to find early pioneering examples of postmodern popular music forms before they came to be acknowledged as such. The best illustration of this is The Beatles.

So many of the postmodern attributes that will be discussed here in relation to contemporary Irish musicians had early manifestations in the work of The Beatles. For example, eclectic mixing of styles can be found in 'Norwegian Wood' (This Bird Has Flown) which was the first time a sitar was used in Western popular music, 'All You Need Is Love' which appropriated a portion of the French national anthem, as well as a line from their earlier hit 'She Loves You'. Spoken word samples were featured on 'I Am The Walrus', and 'Strawberry Fields Forever' utilised tape recordings played backwards. 'Back In The USSR' pastiched the trademark vocal sound of The Beach Boys, transferring the lyrical setting from the beaches of Southern California to Moscow and the Ukraine. Perhaps one of the most important examples though is 'A Day In The Life' which radically changed notions of song structure, by colliding together two entirely different songs that McCartney and Lennon had previously been working on separately, with an ambitious string arrangement that dramatically bridged the two halves of the song.

What is arguably different about the situation now is that such musical patterns are far more commonplace, and to an extent have become the norm rather than the exception. Another particularly important element is the influence of rap and dance musics, in terms of freeing up notions of what was considered appropriate or even possible to do with music. This covers two elements: one is the range of possible styles that can be mixed together, and the other is the way in which different types of sounds were redefined as musical.

It is here that the influence of Cage, as mediated through performers like Laurie Anderson and Brian Eno, has had a (largely unacknowledged) influence in opening up the range of musical possibilities in contemporary music. While the extreme

manner of most of his work is not represented in this influence, many of the ideas behind it are. An example here would be Anderson's use of a sample of a single vocal utterance (huh), looped around to form the basis of the entire song 'O Superman' (For Massenet), which incidentally was a major hit single in both the UK and the US, forging the first significant crossover from that branch of high brow conceptual music into the mainstream.

In a different way, rap and hip hop, originating in the North East of the USA in the late 1970s and early 1980s, have had a huge influence, even beyond the music's own fans. The rhythmic origins of hip hop lie in samples of rock songs by bands such as Led Zeppelin and these rhythms have subsequently fed back into rock music, completing the circle.

Irish Music: Appropriation (Decade Blending)

While much has been written about the global success of recent Irish recording acts, little has been said about some developments in Irish music over the last ten to fifteen years. What I intend to demonstrate here is the variety of phenomena that could be defined as being postmodern, and that characterise much of contemporary Irish music. Recycling material from earlier forms is one such element of postmodern cultural production. In some cases this can take the form of copying elements of an earlier piece, or more explicitly, it can be a sample of an actual earlier recording. This latter approach, facilitated by improvements in recording technologies, and in particular, digital technologies, highlights rather than apologises for the borrowing in question. Shusterman argues that postmodern forms of music like rap undermine the modernist (false) dichotomy between original creation and derivative borrowing, because of its upfront thematising of its appropriation of earlier musical texts. This demonstrates that borrowing and creation are not at all incompatible. It further suggests that the apparently original work of art is itself always a product of unacknowledged borrowings, the unique and novel text is always a tissue of echoes and fragments of earlier texts" (Shusterman, 1991: 617).

This view has gradually become more widely held, and practised, with many artists not just openly borrowing from other sources, but much more importantly, celebrating the fact that they have stolen from others. This crime takes two broad forms: one is digital sampling of earlier recordings, the other is covering other artists' songs. Both have noticeably increased in popularity over the last ten years. Irish artists have experienced this from both ends of the relationship, so to speak.

A memorable recent example of sampling in Irish music is that of Fourth Dimension, a Kerry techno band who sampled a Sharon Shannon tune, and reused it within their own composition, setting it to a strong, up-tempo dance rhythm, while relying on the sample for melody. Viewed from a modernist perspective, this would represent a simple lack of creativity, evidenced by the need to take an idea from another artist. However, when viewed as a postmodern ploy, it can be seen as attempting to be judged on a new standard of creativity: that of successfully taking from the old in order to produce a new work.

This new yardstick of creativity is also at work in relation to cover versions. In a way, the upsurge in numbers of cover versions in the charts harks back to pre-Beatle days, when the norm was for bands to record songs either specifically written for them by record company song writing teams, or else simply to record songs by other (usually) less well known artists.

The cover version has undergone a sort of renaissance of interest and of critical acceptance. The real measure of creative work is not so much whether or not an artist records a cover version, but rather how innovatively, or radically they deconstruct the song, in order to make it their own. This can be done either with a conscious ironic agenda, or simply with the intention of updating the song for a new listenership.

Two examples of the former are The Fatima Mansions cover of Bryan Adams' 'Everything I Do (I Do It For You)', the Hollywood blockbuster soundtrack song, and huge hit single, and their cover of R.E.M.'s hit 'Shiny Happy People'. 'Everything I Do...' is turned from a schmaltzy lighters-held-aloft ballad into a tripped-out dance track, with dispassionate vocals marking itself out from the over-done heartfelt

delivery in the original. The cover of 'Shiny...' is even more radical. Gone is the bouncy, cheerful demeanour of the original, to be replaced with a darkened, almost menacing sound, bizarrely married to a waltz time signature. The archtypically catchy pop chorus of the original is disguised under a heavy layer of distortion, and most of the happy-go-lucky lyrics are replaced by condemnations of the complacency the band felt the R.E.M. song represented. The spoken word samples used are deliberately designed to provoke, with one commenting specifically on the music business that both R.E.M. and The Fatima Mansions occupy: 'Fuck Your Showbusiness'.

This approach is clearly one of making a virtue out of their deliberately perverse choice of material to cover. The Fatima Mansion's own songs are decidedly left-of-centre mixes of rock, pop and dance influences, with a predilection for hard-hitting lyrics. This only makes their decision to cover Adams' schmaltzy ballad, and R.E.M.'s saccharine pop ditty more interesting. By attempting to shock their audience with their risky choice of material, they are also saying that they are capable of making even the worst music from their point of view, into something not only palatable to their tastes, but something that is positively making a statement about the ability of more marginal, peripheral bands such as The Fatima Mansions to take on the commercial might of Adams and R.E.M., and to so totally appropriate their material as to render the covers virtually unrecognisable from the originals.

Another facet of this is dance remixes of songs, which is in effect a band covering one of their own songs. This has become increasingly common in recent years, with bands using it both to explore other dimensions of their music and perhaps more cynically, to demonstrate their credibility with a younger audience and with critical opinion.

One Irish pioneer of this phenomenon was That Petrol Emotion, a Derry/Seattle band that was based in London. Their 1987 album *Babble* contained the single 'Big Decision' which was one of the earliest attempts to fuse strong rock guitars with dance rhythms. That a largely Irish band should have taken this route was perhaps surprising considering the conservative guitar-based approach of most of their Ireland-based contemporaries. Similarly, That Petrol Emotion was one of the first Irish groups to explore the use of remixes for their single releases. *Tingle*, released in 1991, featured two 12" vinyl singles and one CD single that contained five separate remixes of varying degrees of radicalism.

At the other end of the spectrum of commercial success, U2 have been criticised in some quarters for jumping on the dance bandwagon by having their songs remixed by prominent DJs such as Howie B, for example *Discothèque* (see U2, 1997, in the discography). Even if some of the music critics are right that this is simply a cynical exercise in seeking credibility, a move of this nature by a band of U2s stature is significant both in terms of popularising this approach and indicating the growing influence of remixing in mainstream popular music.

Irish Music: Eclecticism (from Nina Simone to the Aphex Twin)

One of the most striking aspects of postmodern music is the mixing together of styles that previously would have been considered not just unlikely, but actually incompatible. A breaking down of previously respected categories and boundaries within music has gradually taken hold, being replaced with a determined curiosity to experiment with new or novel potential eclectic combinations. Once again, The Beatles are responsible for a landmark song - 'Norwegian Wood' (This Bird Has Flown). George Harrison's addition of sitar to John Lennon's otherwise comparatively unremarkable acoustic guitar track, transformed the song, but far more importantly, it also transformed the future possibilities of popular music. By bringing together two previously totally distinct styles, they not only created a new hybrid, they also created a template for future experiments in eclecticism.

The sources of musical styles do not have to be ethnic or folk musics. Many contemporary artists simply plunder the range of genres that surround them, taking in styles as diverse as country, jazz, classical, techno and hip hop. One of the most striking examples of this approach is the young American musician Beck (who has sampled Van Morrison's 'Them' covering Bob Dylan's 'It's All Over Now', 'Baby Blue':

see Beck's 'Jack-Ass' in discography), with his trademark radical mixing of blues, country, hip hop and rock, frequently within the same song.

Two of the earliest and most influential examples of eclectic mixing of styles were from The Horslips and Thin Lizzy. Working in the early Seventies, The Horslips set about melding Irish traditional music with the heavy guitar sound that was fashionable in rock music at the time, most notably in songs such as 'Dearg Doom'. Thin Lizzy, with their hit single 'Whiskey in the Jar' (recently played in the karaoke section of one of U2's recent Popmart 97 Dublin concerts) further broadened the appeal for this kind of musical cross-over.

It has been argued that Irish music is, for historical reasons particularly suited to certain eclectic relationships:

one of the things you have to realise is that it's an old musical tradition that goes back behind the present classical tradition. And if you impose classical type influences on it, they don't fit well, because it actually has more relationship to Indian or North African music - the use of the natural scale. (Ivor Browne, quoted in Waters, 1994: 232).

A pioneering figure in this context is Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, the academic and composer who has explored the possibilities of mixing traditional Irish tunes with classical string arrangements as well as Indian instrumentation (see Ó Súilleabháin, 1989 in discography). One of the most interesting examples of this relationship to Indian and African musics is Sinéad O'Connor's cover version of Philip King's 'I Am Stretched On Your Grave'. King's original song was written in the traditional Irish *sean nós* a capella style, evoking a long history of Irish traditional singing, and introducing it to a new audience, many of whom would have heard very little of the genre before.

The song was recorded by O'Connor on her second album *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*. She reworked the song by upping the tempo, and more interestingly by adding a hip hop rhythm track that gave the song a more contemporary edge. This effect was then offset by the addition towards the end of the song of a fiddle track that drew the song back to its traditional roots. The release of *Earthapella*, a club-only remix CD with several versions of the song included, developed this direction for O'Connor, with a later song 'Famine' attempting to further progress this sub-genre. The overall effect is one of updating and renewal, through the unexpected convergence of two music styles previously held to be too divergent to make proper partners.

A House, a Dublin guitar band took this principle in the direction of classical music, by sampling Beethoven, and intoned a list of influential writers, actors, and musicians for their 1991 single 'Endless Art'. In 1995, the four members of U2, with Brian Eno and a number of guest musicians and DJs released an album of collaborative projects under the name *Passengers*. The single 'Miss Sarajevo' was recorded with high profile opera singer Luciano Pavarotti. The resulting song, which on paper might have seemed a step too far for both U2 and Pavarotti, gracefully combined the rock ballad approach of some of U2's own work, with the ambient sense of space contributed by Enos arrangement, and the grandeur and emotion of Pavarotti's voice. The overall effect is a startling realisation that not only are the two music genres, opera and rock, not mutually incompatible, but that Bono and Pavarotti's very different singing styles and capabilities sit unexpectedly well alongside one another. Another important recent example in this area is Afro Celt Sound System, a group of Irish and African musicians who aim to produce not only a mix of African and Irish traditional musics and styles, but also to set this mixture to a trip hop and drum n bass setting, which acts to further alter the atmosphere of the music and update the sound. Their album *Volume 1 Sound Magic* includes *sean nós* singing, uilleann pipes, kora, and talking drums, and the CD's liner notes give a credit for Samburu warrior chants recorded on location in Kenya. This is echoed by the music of others that have also experimented along these lines, such as Kíla, while a similar interest in eclecticism has been shown by Marxman, Black 47 and Hyperborea, all of whom have explored the potential of combining dance music and/or hip hop with various Irish traditional musics.

A different direction, but very much in the same spirit of experimentation and curiosity

is some of the work by Dublin band Rollerskate Skinny. Shallow Thunder from their debut album *Shoulder Voices* featured an unusual melodic sound in the introduction. On further examination the sound turned out to be sampled from an anthropological recording of an African pygmy tribe, and speeded up. The effect is startling, with the melody being composed of many voices yet remaining simultaneously both unearthly and familiar. Not only is this an example of bringing together previously unacquainted forms, it is also an interesting thought provoker about where influences for a song's melodies can come from. One of the guitar parts for Shallow Thunder acts as a counter melody to the strangely altered tribal song, producing a result that is clearly more than the sum of its parts.

Irish Music: Irony and Parody

So much of what postmodern music attempts to do would be impossible without a sense of irony. One of the most crucial aspects of appropriating material from previous times is the ability to distance yourself from any negative associations with that material. By taking a tongue-in-cheek attitude to the material, it can be possible for acts to have their cake and eat it, by sounding like earlier styles, but remaining distant from the unfashionable excesses of the period concerned that would tinge their own contemporary musical credibility.

Brian Boyd in an article on the English joke act, the Mike Flowers Pops, attacked the type of easy-listening covers typified by Robson and Jerome. Boyd asserts that Robson and Jerome represent faux emotional sincerity, while the Mike Flowers Pops offer a knowing, self-referential aspect to their work and, crucially, they have gone beyond the campy, kitsch barrier (1996: 21). Their work is exemplified by the hit single cover version of Oasis' 'Wonderwall' that was released shortly after the original had become a huge chart hit. The cover radically reconstructed the song as easy listening, with lush production values, backing vocals and orchestral arrangements, and a video featuring the band in over-the-top Seventies clothes. Their whole rationale is not just to cover the song in an innovative way, but also to make a statement about seventies music, and our (very postmodern) harking back to that same music.

Equally interesting here is the recent phenomenon of 'tribute' bands. With origins in Australia (concert-going audiences being starved of the opportunity to see artists from Europe or the USA, let alone those who were dead), this trend has been exemplified by bands paying tribute to ABBA, The Beatles and others, often with a straight-forward reference to the original artist in the title; The Australian Doors, The Australian Pink Floyd, for instance. In Ireland, two examples stick out; The Joshua Trio, subverting U2's canon (the name is a wordplay on U2's 1987 album *The Joshua Tree*), and The Down Undertones, playing the songs of The Undertones, and wordplaying on the association of the mini-genre with Australia.

It is this sense of playfulness and ironic distancing that so characterised the reinvention of U2 in the early 1990s. The band had gained huge commercial success in the 1980s, but had been the recipients of harsh criticism for their alleged pomposity, earnestness, and inability to not take themselves very seriously. For their 1991 album *Achtung Baby*, the band sought to discard much of their earnestly political image, and present themselves in a more irreverent and self-aware light. Their 1992/3 world tour *Zoo TV* encapsulated this approach.

The tour sought to comment not just on the band's role as rock stars, but also on the nature of media communication in recent years. A major theme of the visual presentation of the concerts was image saturation, and its perceived effect on us, the media audiences. Bono's attempts to update his image, and also to tackle some of the criticisms levelled at him, centred around the creation of a stage character called McPhisto. This character allowed Bono to simultaneously distance himself from the normal rock star on-stage persona that he had become over the preceding years, while allowing him to pastiche and/or parody the self-same persona. Suddenly, Bono and U2 could still be rock stars, yet remain crucially aloof from at least certain aspects of the embarrassing excesses of rock stardom, by positioning themselves as clued-in, self-aware, self-parodying commentators on themselves, their peers, and their relationship with their audience.

Another intriguing aspect to U2s reinvention was their lyrical commentary on their position. The first single off *Achtung Baby* was 'The Fly', which heralded the new direction the band had taken, both musically and attitudinally. The song is different in tone and style to earlier recordings by the band, while the lyrics are unusually self-conscious about the process of song writing. The most important line in the song in this regard is: 'Every artist is a cannibal/Every poet is a thief'. Here is an explicit recognition of the true nature of the creative process, or at least the creative process as understood by postmodernism. It echoes the critique of the cult of genius, and highlights the relatively new situation of unrepentant borrowing in a positively gleeful fashion.

Discussion

What I have tried to demonstrate in this article is that while it would be mistaken to *uniformly* characterise contemporary Irish popular music as being postmodern, there are however, a large number of important examples and landmarks that point, I believe, to changes occurring in Irish music, as they have elsewhere.

A generation of musicians and songwriters has emerged that pay little respect to many of the traditions and divisions that have dominated music for so long. A healthy refusal to be bound by either genre or generation has partially succeeded in getting around the seemingly impassable barrier of all the good tunes having been already written. Artists as diverse in both musical style and commercial success as Sinéad O'Connor, Rollerskate Skinny, Afro Celt Sound System, and U2 have all contributed to a reshaping of Irish music in the 1990s. It is no longer considered odd or inappropriate to claim a range of influences from Nina Simone to the Aphex Twin; nor is it considered an admission of creative failure to record a cover version, or include a sample or other form of reference to an earlier musical text. Sometimes in music it is simply necessary to go backwards and sideways in order to go forwards.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Tom Inglis of the Department of Sociology, UCD for his comments on an earlier version of this article, and for encouraging me to submit it for publication. In addition, I am grateful to Dónal Griffin, also of the Department of Sociology, UCD for his comments and information on The Beatles, and to Ken Griffin and Sid, formally of Rollerskate Skinny and currently of Kidsilver for their conversations about music.

References

Bibliography

- Belfast Festival Programme Notes (1997) *Roaratorio. An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake. John Cage*. Waterfront Hall. Belfast: Belfast Festival.
- Boyd, B. (1996) 'Lounge Lizards Take It Easy', *The Irish Times*, 13 January, p21.
- Chambers, I. (1985) *Urban Rhythms, Pop Music and Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan.
- Clarke, G. E (1985) Music pp 276-97 in Stanley Trachtenberg (ed.), *The Postmodern Moment. A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Coupland, D. (1991) *Generation X. Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. London: Abacus.
- Eagleton, T. (1985) Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism, *New Left Review*, 150, 61-73.
- Edwards, G. (1991) Music and Postmodernism, *Partisan Review*, 58(4) 693-706.
- Eno, Brian (1995) Interview with Paul Merton, BBC Radio 1, 1 January 1995. Available at: <http://www.nwu.edu/music/eno/ambe2.html>.
- Featherstone, M. (1988) In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5(2-3) 195-215.
- Frith, S. (1986) Art versus technology: the strange case of popular music, *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol 8, 263-79.

Goodwin, A. (1990) Sample and Hold. Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction, S. Frith and A. Goodwin (eds.) *On Record. Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. London: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hughes, R. (1980) *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*. London: BBC.

Huysen, A. (1988) Mapping the Postmodern in Andreas Huysen. *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. London: Macmillan.

Jackson, J. (1996) Writings on Rock in *The Irish Times*, 23 February, p12.

Jameson, F. (1984) Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, *New Left Review*, 146: 53-92.

Kearney, R. (1988) *The Wake of Imagination*. London: Hutchinson.

Keohane, K. (1990) Unifying the fragmentary imaginary of the young immigrant: Making a home in the post modern with the Pogues. *Irish Review*, 9: 71-9.

Kostelanetz, R. (ed.) (1970) *John Cage*. London: Penguin.

McClary, S. and R. Walser (1990) Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock. S. Frith and A. Goodwin (eds.) *On Record. Rock, Pop and the Written Word*. London: Routledge.

McRobbie, A. (1994) *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.

Ryan, M. (1989) Postmodern Politics, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5(2-3): 613-32.

Schumacher, T. G. (1995) "This is a sampling sport": digital sampling, rap music and the law in cultural production, *Media, Culture and Society*, 17: 253-73.

Shusterman, R. (1991) The Fine Art of Rap, *New Literary History*, 22: 613-32.

Waters, J. (1994) *Race of Angels. Ireland and the Genesis of U2*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.

Discography

Afro Celt Sound System (1996) *Volume 1 Sound Magic*. Real World.

A House (1991) *Endless Art*. Setanta.

Anderson, Laurie (1982) O Superman (For Massenet), *Big Science*. Warner Brothers.

Beatles, The (1965) Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown), *Rubber Soul*. EMI.

(1967) A Day In The Life, *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*. EMI.

(1967) I Am The Walrus, *Magical Mystery Tour*. EMI.

(1967) Strawberry Fields Forever, *Magical Mystery Tour*. EMI.

(1967) All You Need Is Love, *Magical Mystery Tour*. EMI.

(1968) Back In The USSR, *The Beatles (a.k.a. The White Album)*. EMI.

Beck (1997) Jack-Ass. *Odelay*. Geffen.

Cage, John (1973) 433" (First recorded 1952). *Nova Musicha Series*. CRAMPS.

(1992) Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake (First recorded 1979). *Roaratorio*. Mode.

Fatima Mansions, The (1991) Shiny, Happy People, *Berties Brochures*. Radioactive Records.

(1992) *Everything I Do (I Do It For You)*. Columbia.

O'Connor, Sineád (1989) I Am Stretched On Your Grave, *I Do Not Want What I Havent Got*. Ensign.

Ó Súilleabháin, Mícheál (1989) *Oileán/Island*. Virgin.

Passengers (1995) *Miss Sarajevo*. Island.

Rollerskate Skinny (1993) Shallow Thunder, *Shoulder Voices*. Placebo.

That Petrol Emotion (1987) Big Decision, *Babble*. Polydor.

(1991) *Tingle* (Limited Edition 12" Single, featuring Tingle (The Christmas In Kreuzberg Mix), Tingle (Jazz Tip Mix)). Virgin.

(1991) *Tingle* (12" Single, featuring Tingle (Hard Boppin Mix), Tingle (Hard Boppin Instrumental), Tingle (Serious Bleep Vibe)). Virgin.

(1991) *Tingle* (CD Single, featuring Tingle, Tingle (Hard Boppin Mix, Light and Shade, Hey Bulldog (Live))). Virgin.

U2 (1991) The Fly. *Achtung Baby*. Island.

(1997) *Discothèque* (CD Single featuring Discothèque (DM Deep Club Mix),

Discothèque (Howie B, Hairy B Mix), Discothèque (Hexidecimal Mix), Discothèque (DM Tec Radio Mix). Island.

Back to the [Index of Articles](#) ▼
Would you like to offer [feedback](#) to this article?

