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## Post-punk Attitudes to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland

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## 1. Introduction

Ireland's culture and history have usually served as inspiration for artistic expression, particularly for musicians. Indeed, one of the most notable features of Irish culture is its musical tradition, which has not only contributed to showcasing other aspects of the culture but also as a platform to comment on and denounce the sociopolitical situation at the moment of creation. Similarly, musical genres such as post-punk serve this purpose since they were born out of the desire to make political art. In the twenty-first century, then, Irish bands associated with post-punk can be said to continue this practice by presenting, analysing and urging to solve the problems derived from the Irish sociopolitical context.

This essay aims to explore how two of those bands, Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital, expose and analyse some of the problems of contemporary Ireland through their lyrics, as their works serve as an attempt to make people take both notice of this and action. This is, then, a study on how problems such as the gentrification of Ireland, the mutability of Irish culture and suicide are discussed in the works of these bands, and how their particular context affects the topics dealt with and the approaches the bands employ.

The analysis of song lyrics not only in content but also in form will help to understand how these songs constitute a sociopolitical commentary and a call to action. Nevertheless, it would not be possible to extract all the meaning of the song only from song lyrics. For this reason, the analysis will also take into account how meaning is made from the material conditions and ideologies of each band, the sociopolitical context in which the songs are created and even musical and performance characteristics. This way, it will be possible to carry out a more comprehensive analysis of the songs and the intentions of the band in creating and performing them. In doing so, this essay will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of bands as social commentators and political agents, and how music is still a political tool. The bands described and their works will serve as examples of this by embodying a spirit of change and challenging their audience to take part in changing the situation.

This essay can be considered to be a continuation of the *Culturas de las Islas Británicas* subject of the Bachelor's Degree in English Studies, as it analyses cultural

manifestations of the Republic of Ireland in the twenty-first century by linking them to the historical context in which they have been created. These cultural manifestations serve as chroniclers of the problems and preoccupations of Irish people both in the Republic and abroad and can contribute to a better understanding of Ireland's past and present events and how these shape the country, its culture and its people. Parallely, this essay accounts for a study of the different elements that come into play in the meaning-making process of songs.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Contextualization

### 2.1. Methodology

The first thing that needs to be addressed in this essay is a problem regarding how to analyse lyrics. Scholars discussing the analysis of song lyrics have often come to the same conclusion: there is a mistake in decoding these texts as if they were poems. In his book *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular* (1996), British socio-musicologist Simon Frith argues that, unlike poems, the analysis of song lyrics cannot be carried out focusing only on the verbal component since meaning-making in songs depends largely on the performance framework where the words are produced. Song lyrics are not emitted in a void, they are part of a performance where the words, the artist's voice, the melodies and the instrumentation surrounding them, among many others, contribute in order to make sense of a whole song. Any content analysis of song lyrics that ignores this will be flawed and incomplete.

This performativity aspect, however, is not an exclusive feature of songs. Frith considers that there is "continuity between poetry and song, rather than a clear division" (1996, p. 178) and part of it comes from rejecting the idea that the written or the oral format is what distinguishes poetry and lyric (*ibid.*). On the one hand, it is common to encounter song lyrics printed on the sleeves of albums, and popular music lyrics which seem literarily interesting are often compiled as poetry anthologies. A clear example of this is Bob Dylan, whose lyrical work has been not only the object of literary analysis and publication (Frith, 1996, p. 177) but also deserving of the Nobel Prize in 2016. Those two reasons described, especially the second, would prompt the public to misconceive song lyrics as printed material and equate song lyrics to poetry. On the other hand, there is also performance in oral poetry; this is, poetry that also relies upon a wider performance framework in order to produce meaning. The difference, then, as Frith concludes, lies in that performance in poetry is encoded in the words themselves (in their stresses, the rhythms words create...) rather than in music, as in the case of song lyrics; thus reassuring that neither lyrics are poetry nor song words can pass as printed texts (1996, p. 181).

Taking this into account, the analysis of song lyrics that will take place in the following chapters does not focus solely on the words. Song words are heard in an environment alongside other meaning-maker factors that cannot be ignored. These

factors can be represented in the notion of performance that Lars Eckstein describes in *Reading Song Lyrics* (2010). Performance, as understood by Eckstein, refers to the way events are mediated and staged (2010, p. 36). For this essay, then, it corresponds to the conditions in which a song takes place. The analysis will focus on studio versions of the songs, for which performance conditions are more difficult to pinpoint than with live recorded performances. For this reason, contextualisation in this case implies the need to combine both real factors such as the identity and politics of the artist with potential or approximated conditions of performance such as the type of audience or the physical space where the performance occurs.

Eckstein outlines three categories formulated by John Miles Foley upon which the performance of verbal art is articulated. These are performance arena, register and communicative economy. Eckstein resorts to Foley's words to define the "performance arena" as the "locus in which some specialised form of communication is uniquely licensed to take place" (1995, as cited in Eckstein, 2010, p. 38). That is, the interpretative space where the performance occurs, which includes the physical space but also the conventional setting of the event, its structure and the roles of participants (i.e.: the social context). The focus shifts towards participants with the concept of "register": "major speech styles associated with recurrent types of situations" (Eckstein, 2010, p. 39). Here, the participants in the performance gain relevance as the language and style used is determined by their background, their relation and what they consider appropriate for a particular performance arena. The ways in which these two concepts interact are manifested in "communicative economy", which can be defined as the strategies used for efficient communication. Variations in either of those parameters will trigger changes in what the performer considers more effective for each situation, thus shaping the meaning encoded in lyrics (Eckstein, 2010, pp. 39-40). The context of performance, then, is made out of the interplay between these three factors whose particularities work along with lyrics to encode meaning in each song.

The contextualisation of the performance –that is, the specific settings, language and relationship of the participants and strategies of communication– largely determines its genre, which can be described as the formal and technical conventions that rule a set of musical events (Eckstein, 2010). Although much discussion is held about the limits between genres, it is important to have a notion about what sounds and

conventions qualify as a specific genre since there are some contributions to meaning to be found in the attitudes or ethos of artists that are grouped together. This becomes particularly relevant in the case of genres such as punk or post-punk which have been traditionally linked to the ideology of a subculture or movement. In that case, the analysis of performance would be incomplete if genre is not taken into account. Similarly, the specifications of the place and time in which a genre is developed as well as the particular artist authoring or performing a song are of relevance when analysing song lyrics since they can contribute to determining the most accurate interpretation. Once again, this is likely to happen in punk and post-punk as genres that represent (and denounce) situations of the real world. What is relevant about contextualisation, especially for this research, is that lyrics will often refer to the state of the world, the politics governing it and its real events.

Apart from understanding songs as cultural manifestations produced in a given context, it is relevant in this case to attend to them as communication processes. Regarding this, Dave Laing explains that communication takes place at two different levels. The external level corresponds to what has been described so far: the context of the performance and the conditions where this communicative process occurs. Recalling some notions of linguistic theory, Laing describes this level as the act of uttering or “*énonciation*”. But there is also an internal level of communication between the protagonist and the addressee of the lyrics: the “*énoncé*” or the “*statement made by the song lyric*” (Laing, 1989, pp. 87-88). Despite the existence of these two levels, the performer in the *énonciation* and the protagonist of the *énoncé* can be and are often identified as one. Laing discusses that this tends to be the case when the subject of the *énoncé* is identified by the first-person singular pronoun “*I*”. In this sense, the analogy of subjects in the performance and lyrics reinforces the ideology conveyed by the performer (Laing, 1989, p. 88). The identification of the protagonist with the performer becomes particularly relevant –and can even be assumed– in the case of punk, where the music is supposed to “*articulate the values of the punk subculture*” (Frith, 2016, p. 167). The two levels are related in a way that the conditions where the *énonciation* occurs determine a particular meaning and interpretation of the song lyrics, but it is through the *énoncé* that the meaning is extracted for its interpretation. To conclude, it is necessary for this essay to bear in mind the existence of these two relationships and

communication processes since it involves the analysis of lyrics (internal level) and performance (external level), as well as the relation that exists between the levels as the backbone of the analysis.

Understanding songs as part of a communicative process and their performance as an act of uttering would mean that lyrics are utterances or at least some of the utterances contained in songs (it is argued whether and how music conveys meaning). Doing this allows reading song lyrics as speech acts and distinguishing between the three types of acts that Austin assigns to them (Eckstein, 2010, p. 32). This discussion of song lyrics as speech acts constitutes part of Eckstein's analysis of the performativity of songs (in his case, of *Scarborough Fair*) (Eckstein, 2010). The focus of this essay is on two of those acts: the locutionary act and the illocutionary one. The locutionary act would correspond to the meaning that can be extracted from song lyrics, what is stated in the words performed; whilst the illocutionary act could be attributed to the performer's intentions by using those words. Although they are related, it is necessary to distinguish between these two levels and put a particular emphasis on the illocutionary act since, as seen throughout this chapter, it is in the context surrounding the words (the period, the genre, the performer...) that their meaning becomes clearer.

To sum up, so far, this chapter has discussed the relevance of the context of both song and performer for the interpretation of the meaning behind lyrics. Lyrics cannot be analysed in isolation and they need the input provided by the context of both the lyrics within the performance and the performance within time, space, genre and artist frameworks in order to understand the meaning of a song. For their analysis, 8 song lyrics of two different bands within the same context will be put in relation to their performance (in which context is the song conveying meaning) and performativity (what is attempted to do with the song). The analysis part will consist of mapping the songs in a particular context in terms of performance arena, register and communicative economy. This will include placing them in spatial-temporal coordinates, attributing them to a musical genre and analysing the artists performing them. Additionally, the illocutionary force of the song lyrics (the intentions of the performer) will be taken into account as a crucial factor for meaning-making. For better monitoring of the songs analysed, the lyrics analysed will be included in an annexe after the references list.



## 2.2. Contextualisation

It is not uncommon for those who theorise about punk and post-punk at both professional and amateur levels to crash against the rock of defining those terms. The diversity of conceptions around them ever since their origin has multiplied over time, creating heated debates about how to define punk and postpunk, and, something even more controversial, what qualifies as any of those genres. The lack of consensus on these definitions not only creates some problems in terms of their study but also derives some implications for those who wander around in those underground spheres. The diversity of conceptions of these terms, however, should not be seen as something entirely negative since they imply a multiplicity of approaches to understanding them. Punk can be conceived as a subculture, a music genre, a fashion, or an attitude, and all those conceptions overlap, interact and shape each other, without the need to try and single a “right definition” out. This research paper will first adopt a sociological stance for the definition of punk and post-punk.

The sociological approach to punk begins with Dick Hebdige and his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), in which he describes the newborn style as a subculture. This analysis is a first-hand testimony of British punk taking the form of a cultural response to mainstream society at the time. Hebdige is concerned with giving a theoretical depth to punk as a movement that will be the basis for other authors to further discuss how the genre and post-punk relate to the world and context in which they take place. One of the key aspects highlighted by Hebdige is how punk at the time went beyond music. Understanding punk as a subculture implies that at one point, it worked “as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 76); this is, it is a reaction to mainstream culture consciously articulated from a marginal position, rather than from an opposite one as counter-culture does.

Punk, however, is thought to have stopped being a subculture, or at least what was understood as a subculture (Clark, 2004). It is important to sieve the hows and whys from all the claims of punk being dead or not rather than focusing on the state of the cat in the box. Clark states that, if treated as a subculture, punk died when “it became the object of social inspection and nostalgia, and when it became so amenable to commodification” (2004, p. 224). The death of the classical subculture by its

commodification –its assimilation by the establishment– is said to have paved the way for punk to rebirth under the same name but under different strategies. “Long after the ‘death’ of classical punk, post-punk and/or punk subcultures coalesce around praxis. For contemporary punks subcultural membership, authenticity, and prestige are transacted through action internal to the subculture” (Clark, 2004, p. 233). Punk as it was first conceived may have died but some sort of political intentions associated with the musical style prevail.

In lieu of “subculture”, one potential term used by its participants, academics and journalists to discuss punk and post-punk is “genre”, but, in this context, the term can pose some problems. “Genre” seems to be an adequate term, it refers to and helps distinguish particular music styles and is perhaps the most used way of categorising music. The problem with understanding punk and post-punk as genres is that they have their origin outside of the academic world. As Crossley states, both genre labels “were devised in the heat of the action, by participants, on the basis of practical interests” (2015, p. 6). He then introduces Paul Dimaggio’s classification processes, which help define schools and genres, to analyse how the categorisation of punk and post-punk took place: administrative classification, commercial classification, professional classification and ritual classification (Crossley, 2015, pp. 6-7). Out of these four processes, it is important to at least briefly explain the last three.

First, commercial classification can be defined as how journalists, record labels and shops classify music and use the labels in order to gain some benefit from it (either economic or reputative) (Crossley, 2015, p. 6). Music press and independent record labels were some of the main agents in the propagation of both punk and post-punk and in shaping what qualified as such (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 84-85) and still are nowadays. Secondly, ritual classification is closely related to the previous one. Part of commercial classification, especially the use and creation of new names for genres, generally comes from the audiences articulated around bands within the same scene (Crossley, 2015, p. 7); that is, the public that gathers around bands with a shared style or ethos or mutual affinity. The last process, professional classification, refers to bands’ self-adscription (or not) to a genre. This process must be taken into account for the simple reason that it marks the desire for distinction or association to a movement on behalf of the bands and independently of what critics, labels or fans say (ibid.). Therefore, “genre” can be a

deceiving term because, although it serves to classify similar sounds and styles under an apparently objective label, the labels answer to too many agents or participants with their own interests. Additionally, and this is especially relevant in the case of post-punk, genres cannot be understood as a closed single stylistic grouping, because bands may participate in more than one genre as part of an ever-fluctuating state of sonic change and evolution (Haddon, 2023, p. 11). This will be better explained later with the notion of “movement”, as it is one of post-punk’s defining features.

In order to discuss post-punk as a movement, it is necessary to discuss some of the differences between punk and post-punk. It is not uncommon to think of post-punk as a continuation of punk, especially when considering the possibility that punk might be dead. Still, this linear thinking is not a valid interpretation for some chronological and continuity reasons: some post-punk bands predated and coexisted with the first new wave, and even were reactions to the defined punk style (Haddon, 2023, p. 161). Post-punk shares without a trace of doubt some genetical material with punk, but it was a turn on a movement that was already becoming stale: “Post-punk emerged out of punk, partly inspired by it, partly reacting against it or what it was becoming, and drawing upon its networks and resources to do something different” (Crossley, 2015, pp. 10-11). On a similar note, Crossley highlights the relevance of geographical localisation for the interactivity between punk and post-punk as part of the shaping process of the latter (2015, p. 11). It is important to note, however, that, as established, post-punk bands did not necessarily descend from punk, and, despite all their shared context, there are some differences present.

The points where post-punk differs from punk begin with the semantic implications of the construction of the term “post-punk”. Haddon discusses an interpretation of the “post” in post-punk closer to “going beyond” rather than the usual “what comes after”:

This last interpretation of the “post” in post-modern may be applied to the “post” of post-punk to great effect. The “post” in post-punk does not necessarily refer to the music that came after punk. Rather, while the word “punk” allows post-punk’s constellated community to belong to the punk/new-wave field and share its historical space, the “post” allows this community of musicians, audiences, journalists, and present-day commentators to step back, signaling an awareness of

and/or a denunciation of punk/new wave's perceived shortcomings. To "post-punk" is to post or announce punk's shortcomings, and turn toward music that offers a corrective to such shortcomings. (Haddon, 2023, p. 161)

This "going beyond" in punk, then, would refer to transgression in more senses than the purely temporal, and indeed, post-punk is said to have achieved "punk's uncompleted musical revolution" (Reynolds, 2005, p. 1). Part of this revolution is reflected in the musical, literary and artistic inspirations of each genre (Reynolds, 2005, pp. 2-4) and the diversity of specific musical styles that were originally labelled as post-punk, which makes it difficult to pin down what can pass as such (Crossley, 2015, pp. 5-6). On a similar note, Gracyk acknowledges that diversity and suggests using the term "movement" as used in art history to refer to post-punk as a category where diverse styles but shared themes and values are expected (Gracyk, 2012, pp. 78-79). This diversity is partially the reason why post-punk does not fit under the classical subculture label as neatly as punk does: in all its diversity of styles, post-punk is said to contain some subcultures<sup>1</sup>. It could be understood, however, in the sense that was described earlier: subculture as praxis.

The last difference between the genres that need to be described refers to a topic central to this essay: the relation of punk and post-punk to politics and their context. Punk and post-punk –both in the United Kingdom and the United States– were born in times of political and social restlessness. The years of Thatcher and Reagan's mandates prompted punk and post-punk to articulate their music as political responses from a sort of libertarian left-wing perspective (Wilkinson, 2016, p.46-47); however, the distinct stylistic features of each genre shaped how they discussed politics. Post-punk was as overtly political as punk, but rather than relying on "raw rage and agitprop protest" and the bluntness and preachiness of punks, post-punk bands opted for a more sophisticated approach (Reynolds, 2005, p. 6). This is visible not only in the lyrics –which often departed from plainly denouncing the situations in favour of getting to the root of problems and exposing the power dynamics that shaped them, taking the "the personal

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<sup>1</sup> Crossley argues: "We might perhaps say that post-punk involved various subcultures, including goths, new romantics, rude boys, psychobillies, cow punks and futurists but it wasn't a single subculture in the CCCS sense" (Crossley, 2015, pp. 27). He continues by stating that although some of these subcultures were politicised, others were not (Crossley, 2015, pp. 27-28). "CCCS" stands for Birmingham's 'Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies', the British research centre which paved the way for a new understanding of subculture.

is political” ideas to another level– but also in the music style (ibid.). The innovations regarding the language and narrative of post-punk music became another political tool as they meant a new way to approach the problems of the world as well as a subversion of expectations and a further challenge to musical canon. Both this aesthetic turn in contrast to the minimalism of punk and the sophistication of themes in the lyrics make post-punk an interesting subject for analysis in terms of political content (Reynolds, 2005, pp. 6-7) and locates them nearer to movements such as Situationism. Situationism, in short, explored the possibilities of art to challenge “the orthodoxy of everyday life and countering its ‘alienations’” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 436), thus attempting to make a radical change in the world. This can be seen in bands such as The Pop Group, who “saw radical art and political revolution as inseparable” (Reynolds, 2005, p. 43)<sup>2</sup>. To sum up, the different approaches to politics found in punk and postpunk are key in the musical and artistic production of the bands. Whilst, in punk, politics served more as a background from which to jump to demonstrations or organised struggle, the political project embodies the post-punk work.

It is because of this last difference that it is relevant to address the sociopolitical context of the bands discussed in this essay. Twenty-first-century Ireland is in several ways different to that of the 1970s and 1980s. Back in the day, punk and post-punk in the Isle of Ireland revolved mainly around living through The Troubles and how youngsters tried to escape the partisan conflict and live their own lives. For this reason, Northern Irish punk and post-punk of that era have been more reviewed, studied and discussed than their peers down in the Republic (Murphy, 2014, p. 50). This has left some uncovered ground that, in the academic world, only a few authors have tried to fill (Murphy, 2014; Shonk, 2022). Far from being the only problem aching the Isle or the only theme dealt with in punk songs<sup>3</sup>, living through The Troubles was determining for Irish punksters from North to South.

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<sup>2</sup> In a quote to Reynolds and by linking post-punk to Situationists, Wilkinson tries to make clear that one key difference between the politics of punk and post-punk is that the former is “a destructive response to boredom” and the latter, “a constructive response”: “[post-punk] was literally about making up a whole bunch of reasons to be excited, a mesh of fevered activity and discussion that made the world” (Reynolds, 2009, as quoted by Wilkinson, 2016, p. 50).

<sup>3</sup> Derry band the Undertones, for instance, chose to move away from singing about their environment and focused on escapism from that same reality (Heylin, 2007, p. 411; Hogan, 2014, pp. 265-266), something for which they were criticised (Hogan, 2014, p. 266). Ironically, on the other side of the spectrum, the

There are some other reasons why Irish punk (and post-punk) has been often overlooked: for example, bands that moved out to London to develop their careers were seen as deserters to their hometowns (Murphy, 2014, p. 53). Others claim that Irish punk bands were usually copycats of artists on both sides of the Atlantic (Shonk, 2022, p. 82). Additionally, the Irish punk scene did not necessarily part ways with pre-punk artists, getting inspiration and often finding support from blues and rock musicians of the likes of Thin Lizzy or Rory Gallagher (Murphy, 2014, p. 57). Irish punk –and, by extension, post-punk– bands, then, lived in a continuum where they shared spaces with traditional arts (Shonk, 2022, p. 82). They also had, however, their own spaces for showcasing the musical revolution that was taking place in the Republic –such as the Dark Space Festival in the case of post-punk (ibid.) or DJ Dave Fanning’s radio programmes (O’Flynn, 2021, p. 20). That is, these bands managed to establish a scene of their own right where they retained some Irish style whilst keeping a distance from “traditional Gaelic cultural tropes” (Shonk 2022, p. 83). Despite the commonalities, Irish punk and post-punk still presented a difference in their approach to politics. The latter discussed more the disenchantment with the values on which the country had been built and the rigid structures of politics and religion that had shaped The Troubles rather than merely expressing their angst for the physical situation around them (Shonk, 2022, pp.89-90).

As for today, the context is indeed different. Mainly because, in the decades that have passed, there has been less manifest violence ever since paramilitary terrorism in the isle ceased after the Good Friday Agreement. Additionally, the technological revolution of the 1990s skyrocketed economic growth in the Republic of Ireland thanks to the lax fiscal legislation for big corporations. The two periods, however, can be compared as times of social and political unrest and economic slowdown. Nowadays, the Celtic Tiger effects have worn off as a consequence of the “terrible development and planning of that era” (Mullally, 2019), leaving problems such as great social and economic inequality along with increasingly difficult access to proper housing or the deterioration of mental health. For instance, the bands analysed were born in a city increasingly sold into gentrification and an exponent of uncontrolled neoliberalism

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sections of the public that advocated for punk as a way of escape from the turbulent political situation criticised how bands like Stiff Little Fingers were preventing them from doing so (Heylin, 2007, p. 411-412). One way or another, punk was said to be “non-sectarian” and to go beyond the identity politics of the time by creating a new identity for young people to feel represented by (Hogan, 2014, pp. 264-265).

seems to belong more to enterprises than to its inhabitants (*ibid.*). This scenario adds to how Brexit affects the British and Irish Isles and the possibility of breaking the two-party system in the Republic by 2025, creating a climate of sociopolitical uncertainty (Pillely, 2023b) and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the Irish national identity is being redefined due to migratory flows, something which increases cultural hybridity in the Republic and may pose some cultural challenges (Guillaumond, 2016). It is important, however, to highlight positive changes during these decades since the Republic of Ireland is gradually becoming more accepting of social changes and attitudes that back then would have been deemed contrary to Irish tradition (Pillely, 2023b). The bands analysed here embody a spirit of change and prompt youth both nationally and transnationally to be that force of change.

Before analysing the bands, it is important then to recapitulate what is post-punk. The key might be in treating post-punk as a movement (Gracyk, 2012, p. 83) since, for the general analysis and classification of bands, the term acknowledges the diversity of sounds and styles that went beyond the simplicity and aggressiveness of punk. One could argue, though, that understanding post-punk as an umbrella term would render it void of meaning, especially as time goes by, but as the evolution of subcultures suggests, it may be more valuable to think of it as a practice rather than a category. That is, although the proximity to original punk and post-punk is now gone and the formal aspects of the music have evolved, the attitude of those original movements prevails. In this sense, it will be discussed whether the bands belong to a particular movement with great formal diversity –on some occasions “wave” would be a more appropriate term– and to an alternative guitar-based Dublin music scene (Richards, 2019; O’Flynn, 2021, p. 27). It is possible that, although the label post-punk may be too vague a term nowadays, most bands exist in a spectrum of different genres in which they participate. For this reason, the music taking place around the bands described might be a new thing altogether; nevertheless, there is still some attitude, note or sensibility in them that recalls 1970s and 1980s artsy rock.

### 3. Case Analysis

Some of the categorisation problems described in the previous chapter affect the bands under analysis in this essay directly. Both Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital have formed and gained popularity during the second half of the 2010s and into the 2020s. This is problematic and worth mentioning for a reason: they are often grouped together. In terms of scene, this should not really be a problem, both bands come from a Dublin guitar-based scene keen on sonic experimentation. That is, there are some common material conditions for their spawning, as well as some shared preoccupations in their lyrics and ideology (Richards, 2019; Roebuck, 2019; Pilley, 2023b). The complications arrive when trying to categorise them stylistically, either between them or with other bands.

Many efforts have been made to put Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital together with bands such as IDLES, Squid or Shame under labels such as “post-Brexit new wave” (Perpetua, 2021) or “crank wave” (Beaumont, 2019). Reasons for this include left-wing political tendencies, shared bills, an almost simultaneous jump to fame and “smart, modern guitar bands with a singer who sounds like someone having a psychotic episode in a debating society” (Perpetua, 2021; Beaumont, 2019) rather than an actual grounded scene. This last aspect is fundamental for one reason: most of the post-Brexit new wave bands are English –from different parts of England, even–; their context can only be compared to that of Ireland to a certain extent. And yet, these bands have been deemed a(nother) post-punk revival (Beaumont, 2019), although some authors have found this label insufficient (Perpetua, 2021). There are some vocal similarities, shared special attention to lyrics, interesting guitars, a common audience and like-minded bands, but even this may not be enough proof to confirm that they form a solid scene.

It is important to question whether those similarities listed are enough for grouping these bands together. As established before, post-punk does not represent a single style but a movement where diversity of form is accepted. There is stylistic diversity between these bands, however, there is simply not enough common ground for them apart from those slightly shared aspects. For these reasons, both Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital have rejected their being grouped under the post-Brexit new wave or crank wave, as well as rejecting the post-punk label (Gatward, 2019; Lochrie, 2022; MacMillan, 2023; Pilley, 2023a; Shutler, 2022). In fact, the bands have expressed



in some of those articles and interviews being more related to the Dublin scene despite having grown out of the sonic similarities, and have alluded to the good relationships with other local bands more often. Having said this, these two bands recognise having a similar audience to the bands figuring under the post-Brexit new wave and crank wave categories, and a common intention with their musical production. The fact that these Irish bands see themselves more along the lines of their comrades in the scene than with “similar” bands loosely tied together by journalists, is a clear indicator of the influence of the homeland in their production.

The different ideas of what qualifies as x genre or whether or not a band is considered to belong to a genre creates a problem: if these bands are not post-punk, why are they being analysed in an essay about Irish post-punk? Music genres cannot be understood as isolated from one another: bands do not belong exclusively to one genre; they participate in a wide range of genres (Haddon, 2023), sometimes in the form of a hint or echo. In the same way, post-punk cannot be understood without taking into account how it relates to punk. Perhaps these bands are not fully deep in post-punk mud, despite what journalists or fans say. This is easier to see in the case of Fontaines D.C., who consider themselves to be more aligned with punk if they have to choose a label (Gatward, 2019). Indeed, their first album, *Dogrel* (2019), ranks better along the category of garage rock, and post-punk notes are more prominent in the second and third albums, *A Hero's Death* (2020) and *Skinty Fia* (2022). Examples of these notes can be the “stabbing guitars and haunting vocal haze” described by Heather Dempsey (2020), the comparison to post-punk giants such as Joy Division, The Fall, Wire or PiL (Beaumont, 2020), or the manifest intention to combine the influence of later The Beach Boys with their volcanic guitars (ibid.). This last example gains relevance when taking into account how post-punk was often inspired by pre-punk bands that were keen on experimenting with sound. Still, the problem seems to be the first album. Nevertheless, the music in it, although minimalistic at times, is accompanied by such careful lyrics and is surrounded by sonic landscapes that it goes beyond the simplicity of punk. Similar to how the band participates in genres such as folk by getting inspired by traditional Irish ballads, Fontaines D.C. can be said to take in elements from post-punk. For fellow Dubliners The Murder Capital, it may seem harder to elude the post-punk label. Their first album, *When I Have Fears* (2019), created atmospheres full of dark overtones not dissimilar to those

of the latter Joy Division while retaining the punk aggressiveness of the Mancunian band's early records<sup>4</sup>. Darkness in The Murder Capital works can also be seen in how they discuss love and grief in their lyrics. However, they still distanced themselves from the apparent taboo genre. The band's style experienced some mutations during the COVID-19 years and when the band's sophomore album, *Gigi's Recovery* (2023), came out, the distance from Divisionesque post-punk was made more evident. This can be seen, for example, in how James McGovern, the band's vocalist, mellowed his "raspy yells" into the fullness of his lower vocal register or how the experimentation of soundscapes with guitars and synthesisers becomes "more nuanced and textured" (Pilley, 2023a).

For both bands, it is sometimes hard to ignore the fact that, had they been around in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they would have been stylistically categorised as post-punk. On top of that –that these bands have drunk from punk and post-punk at least to a certain extent–, there is one more thing that may consolidate this posture: both Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital have the spirit for inducing some change in the world, from an artsy rock perspective. They go beyond saying "These are the problems" to "This is how people are coping with them" or "This is how these situations make people feel"; beyond simple angry denouncement to trying to understand and redefine the world in which they live. This, of course, is not exclusive to post-punk, but, given the background of these bands, it would not be excessively farfetched to think of these bands as post-punk.

### **3.1. Fontaines D.C.: A Redefinition of Irishness**

One of the key elements of Fontaines D.C.'s production is the importance given to lyrics. In fact, the whole enterprise partly began because of the love for poetry the band members shared (Manno, 2019). Among the poets and authors cited, the band ranked

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<sup>4</sup> Another similarity that can be drawn between Manchester's post-punk scene and these Dubliners can be seen in Tony Wilson's –co-founder of Factory Records and a close figure to Joy Division– "interest in music's role in propelling youth unrest" (Tony Wilson, 2007) –"Tony Wilson" is not the author's name but rather a shortened version of the title of the blog post, which appears uncredited. Tony Wilson was actually interested in Situationism and tried to apply the movement's ideas to the bands he fostered under Factory Records (Reynolds, 2005, pp. 30-31). The Murder Capital, on their behalf, have expressed their desire "to allow our generation to express themselves again and to regain the community that's being lost" and are firm believers that through music, they can "affect culture and make a change" in the world (Roebuck, 2019).

W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh and the Beat Generation; literary names both national and transnational known for their special attention to how meaning is achieved through form and content and innovators in their own ways (ibid.). But far from entirely defining their work, the literary inspirations of the five-piece Dublin band serve more as a testimony of the attention put into the lyrical content of songs. Stylistically, the lyrics contain deep metaphors that are hard to crack if the text is analysed in isolation. Fontaines D.C.'s lyric writing is connected to their relation with Ireland to the extent that only by understanding Irish context and history it is possible to fully grasp the meaning of the songs. The key to understanding their songs is often found in the intricate past of the island and how it has shaped its present.

Some of the themes discussed in the songs are the gentrification taking place in the band's hometown, the ever-changing interplay between Britishness and Irishness, the search and creation of new hybrid cultural identities or the sociopolitical state of the country. These themes can be seen represented in the songs chosen for analysis: "Liberty Belle" and "Boys in the Better Land" from *Dogrel*; and "In ár gCroíthe go deo", "Jackie Down the Line" and "I Love You" from *Skinty Fia*. The exclusion of the band's second album, *A Hero's Death*, from the analysis has a reason. Although it explores the themes of dislocation and being away from home, it is harder to pinpoint the Irish context in the record. It is undoubtedly there, mainly as part of the band's background, but it is not as evident or richly explored as in the first and third albums.

The gentrification of The Liberties, a quarter in the Irish capital, is the main inspiration behind the song "Liberty Belle". The quarter can be described as a place between two states. It is possible to see how the digital hub that has been established there since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century exists alongside a more industrial and traditional world, that of breweries and family-owned markets, and even how it is preying on this traditional economy (Uncut, 2020). The arrival of a new industry in the area and the increasing gentrification of the place have affected its economic life and the culture built around the area. Grian Chatten, the vocalist of the band, describes the situation:

"We're from the Liberties, [...] "It's relatively rough, but it's not as bad as it used to be. It's kind of at the edge of the gentrification strip. It's been surrounded by a dying culture that's really potent inspiration. There's a harshness as well. There's drug

use. At the same time, everybody's so friendly. It's a combination of friendliness and harshness that's really inspiring." (Manno, 2019)

Of course, the song is not a celebration of the dying culture, but it is important to note that the band is giving an aesthetic turn to the death of the local element. The aggressive coexistence of these two worlds is not explored in an attempt to praise and preserve any of them. In fact, the song serves more as a cynical painting of the quarters, around which the band revolves denouncing the situation while expressing how easy is to ignore it.

There is a potential double-reading for violence in this song. First, there is the predatory presence of a new world, embodied in the digital hub and the gentrification of the place, along with the older, more traditional one. The violence present in this context refers to the uncontrollable expansion of one way of living into another. This shift of paradigm occurs so quickly that the prey world is left defenceless and abandoned to its own fate by authorities. The accelerated murder of the "dying culture" to which Chatten alludes is in fact responsible for the second type of violence occurring in the song: the manifest "ready-steady violence" present in *The Liberties* and in "Liberty Belle". Regarding his experience with the harshness of the place, the vocalist said: "I'd be confronted by domestic violence, bloody noses, heroin addicts curled up in phone boxes, racism" (Uncut, 2020). The poverty and violence found there is in large part a consequence of the abandonment on behalf of authorities. In times of fast technological development and economic growth, the focus is often put on maximising benefits and not on ensuring that these advancements do not threaten the social ecosystem. Indeed, *The Liberties* had traditionally been a working-class quarter for most of its history—which also implies some stagnated neglect towards the area—, but the clash of the two ways of life has increased social inequality in the quarter. This social inequality has made the place more prone to violence and the situation itself, violent; so violent that, in the song, a simple "How do you do?" cannot be uttered without cynicism.

This whole situation creates, according to Chatten, "the cognitive dissonance of seeing something and being unable to accept it as reality" (Uncut, 2020), and this is directly related to a seminal topic in the song: how people ignore and cope with what is unpleasant. The song refers constantly to the normalisation of the problems: the "same old boring conversation" is the routinisation of the acceptance of violence. Perhaps the friendliness of the people in *The Liberties* to which Chatten referred is an invitation to act

normal, to blend in with the people and ignore the situation –which, ultimately, is a way of accepting it. The air of defeat breathed from lines such as “He’s just very very tired of having / That same old boring conversation / Just like me, just like you” seems to advise the audience to take part in the collective effort of normalising the violence, because “what you gonna do about it?”. There is apathy in the content of the song. In the chorus, the band offers to ignore it as a viable and liberating alternative, as if it were harmless to do it; after all, it “happens all the time”. The voice of the song even chooses this attitude in the second chorus –here sung with reluctant resignation–, mirroring how the vocalist admitted escaping from that reality through his iPod (Uncut, 2020). Additionally, the act of ignoring the situation is, according to the song, also violent. For example, the third verse alludes to a practical tactic of distraction that is often used to keep people away from preoccupying with their own problems: gossiping about other people’s problems. When people are prevented from improving their situation, there is violence on behalf of the authorities, but the people themselves can take part in self-inflicting violence, sometimes as a consequence of inaction. When this happens, those who try to do something about it may see themselves “very ridiculed” from all their flanks by those who have “never-even-tried” –further stagnating the problem.

Reading the lyrics alone, it may seem that the song has a pessimistic approach to the situation of The Liberties and, possibly other working-class areas of Dublin. It may seem like an anthem to inaction and resignation. But the lyrics cannot be accounted for making all the meaning in songs and so, it is paramount to have in mind how music affects the text. The sped-up tempo of the song may induce some anxiety into the message, to the point that it evidences the preoccupation with the situation on behalf of the band. The aggressiveness of both instrumentalisation and rhythm, which recalls punk rock standards, far from telling people to accept the situation and deterring them from making a change, seems to prompt the audience to wake up to what is happening.

Another song based in Dublin, “Boys in the Better Land”, also paints a picture of life in the city. The song can be understood as describing the attempts to make or find meaning in the modern world. Bassist Conor Deegan III, “Deego”, discussed the song being “about scrutinising the way people sell things and market things to you” (Gatward, 2019). In today’s consumerist culture, the sale of appearances or lifestyles has established itself as a new market. Heavily operating through social media, it is hard to

escape from the marketing of either an ideal of living rather than a product, or a product in order to reach an ideal of living. This helps to cope with the problems of day-to-day life. It is a particular way of escapism, imagining that a life that exists beyond the factually achievable is actually reachable. Additionally, it makes the buyer think they are something which they are really not, and this illusion fills a void of dissatisfaction. In a similar way to the “marriage of the socialite” in “Liberty Belle”, there is also an attempt to focus on menial things in life as a strategy for coping with life or to distract people from their problems found in “Boys in the Better Land”. Furthermore, some of the grievances of the modern world that prompt the need to search or create meaning present in this song are possibly the same dying culture and gentrification found in “Liberty Belle”. The topic of letting oneself go by marketing or slogans also recalls another song of the band: the lead single of their second album, *A Hero's Death*, in which slogans and motivational phrases create an illusory reality where everything is possible.

In this song, the band presents this general topic in some sort of whirlwind, almost as if they were depicting city life itself. The first lines introduce the audience to the world that has been created. If one does not comply with its rules, they will not be or feel alive. It seems better to hop on this spinning world where words do not seem to stick than be left out of this. So, the method for coping with the dizziness of the world seems to rely on the stories of success that are fed to the people. These stories of success talk about the eponymous boys in the better land (i.e.: those who have gotten out of the staleness of daily life) –possibly via migration<sup>5</sup>. Through this, what is being marketed in the modern world is the idea of fame and success as self-realisation. According to the song, engaging in the attempts to reach these lifestyles is “refreshing the world in mind body and spirit”<sup>6</sup>. In that way, it is easier to abstract oneself from the problems around and to fall for and dedicate to the quest for luxurious life standards that are unattainable. This, actually, can be also read as part of the alienation process of the working classes in order to prevent them from fighting to have decent life standards in their own country (Bowers, 2023a; SDG Watch Europe, 2019). On the one hand, there is the mythification of lifestyles being fed to the people, which creates the desire to take part in that stratum

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, these migration stories out of Ireland to develop a career apply to Irish punk bands of the 1970s such as The Boomtown Rats or The Radiators from Space (Murphy, 2014) and Fontaines D.C. themselves.

<sup>6</sup> This line is directly extracted from a Coca-Cola slogan, as confirmed by Conor Deegan (Gatward, 2019), which puts even more emphasis on the commercial aspects of these lifestyles.

of society. On the other hand, this is merely a distraction, the possibility of individual success prevents people from participating in the fight for community betterment.

The idea that success is to be found outside of Ireland is a recurring theme in the song. One prominent figure in the narrative of this song is what has been dubbed the “Anglophobic cabbie” (Uncut, 2020). The cabbie can be seen as the voice that recommends getting out of there regardless of the job. Within the narrative of the song, he is but another channel through which those lifestyles are sold, “always talking about the boys in the better land.” This apparent obsession with those who have succeeded abroad can be understood as another victory of the consumerist culture, having not only indoctrinated another individual into “buying” those lifestyles but also by talking positively of them to others. The stories about success are a way of coping with the hopelessness of the Irish situation. There is some sort of national reading embedded in the lyrics. Since the Irish population, especially youngsters, cannot realise itself in the country, they opt for searching that realisation abroad. This is in part related to that mythification of lifestyles. There is some romanticisation of those who migrate and find success abroad, and this creates some sort of pride in the nationals who stay, almost as if the migrants left a mark wherever they go. Therefore, there is some sort of life meaning recovered from it. This would explain the cabbie’s Anglophobic shout and how he “only smokes Carrolls”—which is an Irish brand of cigarettes. Chatten explained the cabbie figure to *The Guardian*:

He has suddenly found a bit of meaning in considering himself to be Irish and Anglophobic or anti-British [...] It’s just to show how flippant these things are and how much they are based on ego and wanting to feel part of something, as opposed to a genuine hatred of something else. (Van Nguyen, 2019)

The nationalism displayed by the cabbie is linked to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish nationalism only to a certain extent. In a way, the sectarian partisanship of The Troubles has been left behind. Here, the reasons for national pride are others, even if they cannot be found in Ireland itself. Consequently, this nationalism is not aimed at a violent conflict as it happened during The Troubles, but at escaping from an unsatisfactory reality and creating an illusory one—similar to the escapism sung about by some 1970s Irish punk

bands. With this song, then, the band intends to criticise this marketing apparatus, warn about the deceit found in advertising and prevent the listener from falling for it.

During this first period, the band expressed how the city inspired them and how their music “sounds like Dublin feels” (Van Nguyen, 2019). When writing about Dublin, then, there is some ambivalence present for the band. *Dogrel* is at times an ode to the city, but they also express some bitterness about what it has become. Being “absorbed” and “just really consumed” by the city (ibid.) presents these two aspects: the romanticisation and the idea of a lost Ireland and the idea of the rat cage, where people are only partially free (Gatward, 2019). The record serves both as a mourning for “the fracturing of the city’s bohemian character under the weight of capitalism and gentrification” (Van Nguyen, 2019) and a panegyric for what it was. This disillusionment with the state of the city is better represented in the last song of the album: “Dublin City Sky”; but it has proven to be the main inspiration for the album. The pessimistic view of the city expressed by the band, however, often contrasts with the instrumentalisation, which, far from being upbeat, seems loaded with the energy that the situation demands for it to be changed. Indeed, regarding the musical style, *Dogrel* is the least post-punk record in the band’s catalogue and presents some formal characteristics that are closer to punk. Nevertheless, there is still some complexity in the form and content of the lyrics (and in the music, as well) that distances them from the simplicity of punk.

Other elements of the Irish diaspora are also discussed in the band’s third album, *Skinty Fia*. The album was created and released at a time when the band had matured as artists. After some world tours and moving to London, it explores in depth the anxieties of preserving Irishness in what was the neuralgic centre of the British Empire. The conflict between Britishness and Irishness, as commented before, is at the heart of the record, which often alludes to the pervasive distrust coming from both sides, resentment and how all of this affects the displaced Irish population in England. This record, then, focuses on how Irish culture mutates into something new while in a new location, in their personal case, England (Amanpour, 2022). Coming from the second album’s immersion in post-punk’s brooding voices and glum lingering guitars that have been compared to The Fall’s (Dempsey, 2020), *Skinty Fia* evolves this sound into the exploration of drum ‘n’ bass, folk ballads (Gannon, 2022) within a much poppier light (Lochrie, 2022). Those post-punk elements of the second album do not disappear but



rather are stretched into experimentation in what could be compared to the renovation spirit of the post-punk ethos.

The album's opening track, "*In ár gCroíthe go deo*", has its origin in a real-life story that was reported in the news. The story related how the family of an Irishwoman living in Coventry wanted to commemorate her Irish heritage by putting an epitaph in Gaelic on her gravestone which read "*In ár gCroíthe go deo*" – "In our hearts forever". The Church of England ruled it as a potential political message and a provocation, forbidding the family to do the homage (Ehrlich, 2022). The band found the story particularly shocking as it had not taken place in a period where British-Irish relations were more tense (such as in the 1970s), but merely at the start of the pandemic (ibid.). What the story unveils, then, is a sense of distrust on behalf of the British and towards Irish people, and is a revealing example of how the colonial mentality persists. Part of the hegemonic position of Britain comes directly from the construction of relations upon the differences between colonisers and the colonised (i.e.: othering). This set of irregular relations, far from having disappeared once the political decolonisation processes took place, still prevails in the mentality of both the British and the Irish. Although this othering is not based on manifest political or economic colonial hegemony, there is the legacy of that relation represented by social discrimination. Chatten described some instances of his life in London as a Dubliner to *Rolling Stone* magazine:

His name isn't Paddy, but that doesn't stop bullies from calling him that. Then there are the jokes about the IRA, the leering men asking him to say, "Top o' morning!" when he's just trying to have a quiet drink with his girlfriend. And the people blatantly telling him: "Go home." (Ehrlich, 2022)

This discrimination, which transpires from the story behind the song and into the lyrics, is only a small figment of the Irish experience in the United Kingdom, which is the central topic of the album.

The epitaph, apart from giving the name to the song, is a central element in the lyrics. Sung in a choir-like style, it is a background refrain that repeats throughout the whole song which raises a solemn atmosphere. Within the song's narrative, what is "in our hearts" may not be the Irishwoman of the story, but Ireland itself as an abstract concept. The idea of "home" is a recurring topic in diasporic identities and cultures.

There is an attempt to not forget one's roots and think fondly of the homeland, often under the impression that its memory is the only thing that perdures. In this sense, Ireland is always in the heart of migrant Irish as part of their coping mechanism for being displaced, despite how much time passes. The passing of time in the song, mainly represented by the chorus lines "Gone is the day, gone is the night, gone is the day", is constantly repeated as an attempt to emphasise that the feeling of fondness for the homeland goes beyond the mortal life of the migrants, possibly due to the desire of passing down some cultural legacy to the next generations. This connects with the idea of the epitaph as a refrain and is another theme present throughout the album: the relation between culture and its participants in terms of decay and death. Therefore, one main theme in this opening song is the need for Irish migrants to feel part of something and identification with their roots. In a way, it reads like a letter of undying love under the light of the fear of losing that part of identity.

The relationship with the homeland, however, is not easy. On one hand, the voice of the song considers it to "define the only reason for feeling". There is a reassuring element in those lines which alludes to the search for an identity in one's roots experienced by Irish migrants and the idea of home while being abroad. The homeland defines "the only answer" in the idea of one's roots. The migrants adapt the idea of home to what they need to carry on. On the other hand, there is some side-effect to this. For example, there is some guilt present when the voice utters "I never had the time", as if they had not been able to find ease in the idea of their homeland until it was the only thing left for them to grasp. Once they do, there is also the feeling that other people have been taking the best bits of the homeland during this time, while the voice has only been a participant from a distance. The idea of being away from the homeland is rendered into guilt on behalf of the band (Lochrie, 2022). This feeling worsens with the attempt to marginalise the Irish culture abroad, reducing it to mere stereotypes and rejecting those cultural expressions of Irishness that are deemed dangerous and provocative by the locals.

The feeling of Irishness in another country is also the central theme of "Jackie Down the Line", but it is presented in a different manner. If "*In ár gCroíthe go deo*" expressed the unnerving need to embrace the idea of a home while being abroad, "Jackie Down the Line" is the mutation of Irish identity in its diaspora in Britain and an

evolution that is conscious about its own history. Unlike in *"In ár gCroíthe go deo"*, where there was the subtext of the binary separation of cultures, this song seeks some compatibility and the creation of a new identity by merging both cultures. The expected Irishness in the voice encounters some Britishness because of both Irish history and living abroad, but instead of a violent conflict between them, the song explores how a third identity emerges from the gradual erosion of its components. The compatibility between cultures is not positive, it is being achieved through mutual wear. This allows for a more carefree and brazen shot at reproaching how the old colonial relations are still present in British-Irish interactions whilst acknowledging that there is no going back to keeping both cultures separate. The general statement of the song is that the coexistence of cultures is usually neither peaceful nor balanced and that when an oppressed culture keeps being threatened, the best way to level up the situation is to unapologetically stoop at the oppressor's level. This, however, comes with mixed feelings on behalf of the band. As Chatten expressed to *Vice* magazine, the song is "a deceptively infectious and jangly treatise on [...] 'misanthropy and being unable to escape being a piece of shit'" (Gannon, 2022).

In the song, there are three participants: the voice, identified as Jackie, which is a pejorative term used to refer to Dubliners (Gannon, 2022); Sally, who embodies the former colony; and the receptor of the in-song narrative, the once colonial power. Jackie is aware of the crimes committed by the colonial power since Sally has commented about "[getting] away with murder / Maybe one time, maybe two". Part of the physical violence inflicted upon the former colony came from the colonial power not getting what it wants from the colony in a peaceful way. The colonial system was entirely articulated for the benefit of the colonial power, leaving no preparation for a viable future for the former colonies. This way, when they stopped being productive –i.e.: the colonial power gets bored of them and cannot get its entertainment, as the song puts it– or when colonial rebellion became a serious threat to the colonial power, a new cycle of violence started, making hell for the former colony. It was at this point that the colony found itself weakened, and that is when Jackie invites the colonial power to come down to where the colony lies and "see her spirit in decline". With no possibility for a future, all that is left are the mourners of the land and the culture, which had been silenced and suppressed in favour of profiting from the colony ("They hawked a beating heart for a

sturdy spine”). However, the tone of the song is not of pity for the declining colony nor of sheer angry denouncement as it would be in a punk song. Here, the tone is arrogance, or the type of confidence that, paradoxically, might be gathered as a response to centuries of attrition. This is better represented by Jackie in the chorus.

The first idea of Jackie’s attitude can be found in the second verse when they warn the colonial power not to expect even a good word coming from them. “I can’t find a good word for ya / Does it come as a surprise?” not only sets the mood of the song but also indicates that, in this new narrative, the agent is Jackie. Jackie also reminds the colonial power of the impossibility of both cultures living in peace. There is no possible world where “they rhyme” and this is what prompts all the violence exercised by the colony in return. The tables, rather than have turned, are now at the same level through all the hurting, deserting, hating and debasing that Jackie intends to inflict upon the colonial power up to the point of breaking it. All this sung violence, however, is not necessarily represented by manifest violence against the British. It is not a call for arms for the IRA, as much as it is the colonial legacy taking its toll on the colonial power. After a whole century of trying to endure and after experiencing the political decolonisation processes, the colonial power keeps having to face a reality where the mental frameworks of colonial times are being dismantled. But since the ideas or lifestyles associated with the former colony have been eroded too, the only possibility for its migrants in the metropolis is to accept the hybrid identity that is articulated as a consequence of the diaspora. Nevertheless, this hybrid identity does not necessarily emerge from the balance of reconciling both cultural elements; it is often the result of ravaging both sides of the self and allowing something else to bloom. Despite the apparent demise of the colony and the weariness of the colonial power and this process of identity annihilation and rebirth, the colonial relationship is far from over. Some traces of it persist, such as the story of prejudice behind “*In ár gCroíthe go deo*” or the palpable tension of this song.

The last song to be analysed in this section, “I Love You”, also explores the relationship of Irish migrants with their homeland. According to the band, this is their “first overtly political song” (Kreps, 2022) and it reads like a love declaration to Ireland. When writing the song, Chatten considered that he needed to give the influence his country and culture had had on his career back to them. He hoped that rendering his

affection for how his background has shaped him and his art and transforming it into a song would help him and others to understand that process (ibid.). This love, however, comes with a sense of guilt. In the words of Chatten:

I've moved from that country. I'm now living in a country that is responsible for a lot of the chaos in the country that I'm from, that still kind of looks down on that country. I feel guilty for having left. I feel like I've abandoned Ireland to some extent. (Kreps, 2022)

After all that he has taken from his homeland and its culture, it feels wrong for Chatten to write this song since he lives in the country that exploited Ireland for 800 years. In that declaration, there is some acknowledgement that he is privileged to have left Ireland on his own terms. That privilege worsens the situation because, given his position, it implies that he has chosen to leave and, in his own internal narrative, abandon Ireland. Therefore, this song does read like a love letter, but also as an apology for not living up to what he thinks he owes to his homeland. Given the socioeconomic situation of the country, Chatten's internal conflict becomes more painful, because, beyond anything he might owe to Ireland, he feels that the country and its people need him.

Having in mind this feeling of guilt, the lyrics begin with a repetitive reaffirmation of the protagonist's love for Ireland –which, in this case, can be easily identified with the performer's– that will be present throughout the song. In one sense, it is a manifest love declaration, but it also serves as a reassurance for the protagonist and their interior conflict. This love, as it happened with "*In ár gCroíthe go deo*", is promised to go beyond the protagonist's mortal life ("And if you don't know it, I wrote you this tune / To be here loving you when I'm in the tomb"). In this song, this sense of the ultra-terrestrial can also be interpreted as part of the protagonist's desire to preserve a cultural legacy, but given the context, this idea is mixed with the performer's being in debt to the homeland. This idea is emphasised later in the song when the protagonist states "And I'll love you 'til the grass around my gravestone is deceased", reaffirming, once again, his love both to the homeland and himself. As established before, the guilt that comes from being abroad ("I've eddied the heart now, from Dublin to Paris") prevents the protagonist from enjoying his relationship with the homeland while being away ("And if there was

sunshine, it was never on me / So close, the rain, so pronounced is the pain”). As Orlait Darling proposes, the protagonist’s perspective is possibly a reflection of “Chatten expressing his love of Ireland in terms of self-harm and martyrdom” (Darling, 2023). All these reiterations of the protagonist’s love compose the chorus, sung in a heartfelt honest manner that recalls pop ballads. The verses of the song present a contrast from the chorus in two key aspects: the music and the voice become more aggressive and the lyrics content go from a sincere declaration of love to a political rant.

The verses of the song are seemingly sung to “the man who profits”, a representation of the institutional figures that are profiting from Irish problems and at the expense of the Irish people. The verses are not a rant against Irish nationalism in particular, but they condemn how the powers that be have benefitted from it through populism. This way, political parties like Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil are, in the eyes of the protagonist, responsible for appropriating nationalist values in order to obtain some revenue rather than a political objective (“Selling genocide and half-cut pride”). The man who profits can also be identified with the sharks with children’s bones in their jaws, although this seems to be a more specific reference. The presence and power of the Catholic Church in the history of Ireland is unquestionable. One sample of that power is institutions for “fallen women” such as Magdalene Laundries or maternity homes. These Roman Catholic Church-operated institutions acted as internment centres for women who were pregnant or had had babies out of wedlock up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In there, the women were forced into labour and separated from their babies, who were often killed and buried or sold for adoption (Carroll, 2023; McIntosh, 2023). The Roman Catholic Church, then, can be considered to be represented in the figure of “the man who profits”, both economically and ideologically. The corruption of the religious power is ironised later in the song with another love declaration from the protagonist “And I loved you like a penny loves the pocket of a priest”.

The protagonist, however, still acknowledges their guilt in this situation, as he regrets not being in the homeland in order to make a change. Instead of stepping up in their homeland, the protagonist went abroad and up in the “clamber of the life”, letting themselves go and following the rules of the fame game (“I sucked the ring off every hand / Had 'em plying me with drink, even met with their demands”). In a sense, they can feel that, by doing so, they are also responsible for playing along with “the man who profits”

and having benefitted from Ireland, given the heavy influence it has on Fontaines D.C. (“When the cherries lined up, I kept the spoilings for myself”). The revelation becomes more painful when they realise that they are also suffering the problems affecting the Irish population and that they are only watching from a distance (or, in the song, “the shelf”). But, unlike “the man who profits”, they seem to care, because they both “love the land” and “feel it go to waste”. The protagonist is aware of the problems of the homeland, such as the lack of opportunities in the land (“Hold a mirror to the youth and they will only see their face”) or the high rates of young (especially young male) suicide (“Makes flowers read like broadsheets, every young man wants to die”). They take notice that the homeland is not well and, at least, try to do something to change the situation. They know that the power to change does not reside in “the man who profits”. They have to take action by their own hand, because “the man who profits” is not willing to do anything about them (“Say it to the man who profits, and the bastard walks by / And the bastard walks by, and the bastard walks by / Say it to him fifty times and still the bastard won't cry”).

This section, then, has analysed some of the thematic contents of Fontaines D.C.'s lyrics and put them in relation to the context in which they have been produced with a particular focus on the performers. In general, the different topics discussed allude to the Irishness of the band, first in Dublin –the hometown of the band itself, but not of all the members–, and, second, abroad. Within Dublin, Irishness and Irish working-class identity are manifested through the critique of the gentrification of the city, and its embracement can be a potential result of the search for meaning and the need for an identity in the modern world. In this sense, Irishness abroad also relates to the search for an identity, but with the aggravating factor of being away from the source of that identity. In this context, the search might be managed by either the attempt to reconciliation with the mother culture or through the creation of a new hybrid identity. Through their discography as of June 2024 (except covers and the few released singles of their upcoming fourth album), the band has gone from a punk-influenced sound and approach to even surpassing post-punk. There is, however, some depth and sophisticated exploration of themes in their early records and the presence of some of the sonic and ideological characteristics of post-punk in the latter ones. For this reason,

It is worth considering this band as part of a post-punk canon or at least as one participating in post-punk.

### **3.2. The Murder Capital: We Remember Why We Die**

Despite not being compared to Joyce or Yeats as Fontaines D.C. –a comparison that they find sickening– (Gannon, 2022), The Murder Capital also dedicates some distinctive attention to the lyrics. Even so that some of them first appear as poems (Roebuck, 2019; Shutler, 2022). The band’s special relationship with poetry can also be seen in other aspects. The suicide of Irish poet Paul Curran, a friend of the band, inspired their first album: *When I Have Fears*. However, to say that this event prompted them to write more poetic lyrics would be demeriting the band’s own creative will. If anything the influence of Curran’s suicide is more patent in the content of the lyrics, as well as the dark musical atmosphere in which they are produced (MacMillan, 2023). Additionally, the name of the album recalls the almost homonym poem written by John Keats: “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be”. The band has even projected the poem on the background of a performance-turned-concert film (The Murder Capital, 2019b), something which can be seen as exploring the political possibilities of both music and film simultaneously. This projection, once again, is neither arbitrary nor a whim, as the poem deals with topics that are recurrent in that first album and that reflect the state of the band members at that time.

Apart from the differences in the topics discussed in the lyrics, the band differs from Fontaines D.C. in their approach. Instead of exploring issues specific to Irishness, they focus on more universal topics, written from their own perspective, and keeping in mind that these problems are also taking place in Ireland. In *The Murder Capital*, there is no explicit discussion or reference to Ireland, but its problems are present in the background as the stories that have motivated the records. With only two LPs and a few singles released, as of June 2024, there are two separate stages in their career. The first one is profoundly marked by the death of Paul Curran and corresponds to the aforementioned album *When I Have Fears*. For that reason, thematically speaking, it revolves mainly around grief, loss and pain, which are even more darkened by the unfortunate conditions under which the decease occurred (Shutler, 2022). This will be explored in the songs “On Twisted Grounds” and “Don’t Cling to Life”. The second stage



corresponds to their second album, *Gigi's Recovery*, which, far from being rooted in mindless positivity, implies coming to terms with one's own past in order to take "control of the few things that matter" (Pilley, 2023a). In this sense, its lyrics reflect the maturity of accepting the slings and arrows of fortune and building positive things out of them. The song that better represents this album and mentality, and therefore, the one that will be analysed, would be "Only Good Things". Either way, introspection is a key element across their catalogue and part of their intent to express how is life for young Irish males such as them (Roebuck, 2019).

"On Twisted Ground" is a heartfelt expression of mourning. One of the natural responses to mourning is not being ready to let go of the being who has died, particularly when one becomes flooded with memories of the time spent with them. For the protagonists, the inability to accept someone's passing seems to paralyse life: "So the moment folds / Into permanence / And the clouds amass / Not a breath of wind / But a final gasp / All engulfed within". From these lines, it can be understood that the grief for the loved one seems to be in an overwhelming stasis until the protagonist eventually releases all their sorrow all at once. In a sense, that final gasp is prompted by an epiphany: they cannot move on until they stop recreating themselves in their memories. Still, the prospects of the situation getting better seem dark, hence the question in the second verse: "Will we always be / On the twisted ground / Of our horrid dreams?". In some way, the answer is given also in the second verse before that section in how the pain will eventually disappear when taking some distance from the moment of loss. This process, however, is fraught. Trying to understand the suicide of a loved one becomes impossible after their death. As the song puts it, it feels as if the deceased had been sailing on a violent sea, which contains all their troubles. With no answer to either the reasons for the suicide or if the protagonist will move on, they cannot bring themselves to think of anything but grief, as the first verse has announced from the beginning. For the moment, they can only lament the things which the loved one could have watched.

Another interpretation of that chorus would suggest that the loved one could have watched the protagonists grieving and understand that they were loved. "On Twisted Grounds", then, constitutes one of the most depressing pieces of The Murder Capital's first album, reflecting on how devastating is loss for those who loved the deceased. The already pessimistic tone in the lyrics is accompanied by a distorted

unnatural instance of James McGovern's voice, on the verge of breaking into tears throughout the song, and guitars that seem incomplete. At times it seems more like a demo song rather than the final elaborate work, except for the eerie droning guitars during the second half of the song. This feeling of incompleteness might serve as a mirror of how for those around someone who has committed suicide, the deceased's life seems to have been incomplete.

At a certain moment in "On Twisted Grounds", the protagonist expresses surprise at the situation ("Oh, my dearest friend / How it came to this / With your searing end / Into the abyss"). These four lines can be read in a more political light. The protagonist is not surprised at the feeling of grief, but rather at the suicide itself, and the lines become political given the lack of awareness on mental health and suicide rates in the country. Suicide in Ireland has become a major concern. As of 2020, it has become the most common cause of death for people aged 15 to 34 years (Bowers, 2023b) and helplines have been declared to be on the verge of saturation (Feehan, 2023). "On Twisted Grounds" and the explorations of grief in *When I Have Fears* constitute the band's artistic attempt at raising awareness among both the population and governments. The artistic production also urges doing something about it since situations like Paul Curran's suicide are merely the consequence of a system that fails to provide to the population:

"It just feels like there are loads of fuckin' hotels going up over Dublin, where there could be new housing," James hammers home. "There are cranes all over the city. There's one on George's Street right now, and they're gutting this beautiful Georgian house, and I stopped and asked the builder what it was gonna be, and it's turning into a fuckin' Premier Inn.

"The hotels are only a sidenote to the homelessness, the suicide, the mental health issues. The lack of services available to people who aren't from even middle class backgrounds," he continues. "We just wanna talk about it as much as possible, and make sure that the government knows that we're not happy with the standard of where it's at. People have real issues in their lives, and they need somewhere to go and talk about these things beyond their friends and families. It feels like there's no excuses. I know bad things that have happened to people that were avoidable." (Richards, 2019)

The attempt at raising awareness about the suicide situation in Ireland is a political act on its own and another proof of the post-punk relation with the “the personal is political” ideology.

Although still focusing on death, “Don’t Cling to Life” explores a different side of the process in a less gloomy tone more along the lines of the second album. The song departs from the premise of the inevitability of death and the assumption that there is no ultra-terrestrial life. Therefore, all there is to be enjoyed takes place only during a lifetime. The song’s title, then, becomes a pretty transparent explanation of the intentions of the performer. The song is an encouragement to enjoy life and participate in it whilst advising that there should be no fear of it ending, especially during in the final moments of reckoning of one’s own death (“With hands held tight, it goes and goes / The light that once shot off the pale”) In this sense, the lyrics become an invitation to “stay close for all our days” not with fear of the ephemerality of life but with acceptance and as an attempt to take advantage of it. In fact, the invitation extends to living in the moment as a reminder of the worthiness of life in the moment of its end. Taking part in both the positive and negative aspects and moments of life is, according to the song, what the audience should recall in their moments of death. On a potential critique found in the lyrics, the band considers the enjoyment of life incompatible with the “delusion to disarm”, which can be understood as the promises of a better life at the expense of suffering in this one. Given the context of the band, this line could be referring to the Catholic Church. The topics discussed in the song already served as a contrast with “On Twisted Ground”, however, the musical form is also different. Sung and played in an aggressive, the band tries to make their message get through, urging the audience to live in the moment. With all of this, the song title becomes a mantra for accepting the ephemerality of life that already envisioned the attitude found in the second album.

It could be easy to mistake the grounded acceptance in *Gigi’s Recovery* and “Only Good Things” with mindless positivism, however, the band has warned their audience about this interpretation (Pilley, 2023a). The difference between those two approaches to life lies fundamentally in the origin of the album: introspection and self-evaluation as motors of change (New Noise, 2023). This difference is paramount for the correct interpretation of this album. Not taking into account the intentions of the performer with these songs could end up in a misguided analysis. In this sense, and according to

the band, “Only Good Things” is an attempt to “move forward from the isolation we all find in ourselves” through “love and self-assuredness” (ibid.). According to the band, the song explores two types of desire: romantic desire and desire for personal change. The first one is easily identifiable in a first-sight reading of the song, especially, since it presents the habitual participants of a love song. Is for this reason that a more superficial reading could make the audience believe that the song discusses how people focus on the positive aspects of life while being in love. In this sense, lines such as “Show me to think only good things, only good things” can be misleading. It is not an attempt to ignore the negative aspects of life and focus only on the positive ones, it is the protagonist’s reclaiming of the appreciation of the beauty of life after a traumatic process. This reclaiming is not a consequence of being in love but rather a part of loving, either a third person or oneself. The romantic desire, then, is linked to the desire for personal change. Nevertheless, it does not mean that people change when they are in love as much as it means that there can be some inherent loving in the process of change. There is an act of love, then, in surrendering to the need for personal change and attempting to construct something better. In this sense, “Only Good Things” tries to shed light on building a positive future starting from the personal.

This section has focused on analysing the themes discussed in The Murder Capital’s work, taking into account their shift of perspective in their two published LPs. In *When I Have Fears*, the songs are profoundly marked by the mourning of the suicide of Paul Curran, reflected in the exploration of loss and grief. The melancholy in the lyrics was accompanied by an equally glum musical setting, which emphasised the band’s emotional state at the time. Being the first single released upon their debut album and the COVID pandemic, “Only Good Things” showed a clear change of style and thematic content. The band’s own desire for stylistic changes and not wanting to discuss the same topics in the same light mirrors their message: that change (particularly personal change) is a positive exercise (MacMillan, 2023). However, there are still some common threads between the two works. By exploring grief and the feeling of loss but also how people reconfigure themselves in order to build something better and keep progressing, The Murder Capital catalogue becomes a celebration of life; by rooting their songs in their own experience, their work embodies the idea that the personal is political.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This essay has explored the lyrical content of Irish bands Fontaines D.C. and The Murder Capital in an attempt to describe how their songs portray some of the problems of twenty-first-century Ireland. The analysis has not been made entirely on the basis of lyrics since, as it has been proved, lyrics are not the only meaning-makers within a song. For that reason, part of the analysis has relied upon the study of the context in which these songs are created and performed.

The selection of these two bands has been made under their potential categorisation under the label of post-punk. However, this is not a fixed and definite label and it cannot be considered as a closed category. This essay has opted to understand genre labels as spaces in which a band may participate. Even though they sometimes reject the post-punk label, both bands can be said to participate in post-punk in terms of sound style and political attitudes in their music. Additionally, the differences in style and approaches to the contents explored between the bands are not dissimilar to the diversity of styles found in post-punk. Participating in post-punk, however, does not mean that they should be classified as such since they present an apparent evolution of the genre.

The analyses of the bands, although they follow a common blueprint, have differed in some details due to the bands presenting different approaches to the problems described by the lyrics, which complement their thematic content. In general, this essay has used contextual information on both the world and the performers for the analysis, proving that this can be crucial for an adequate interpretation of songs. Nevertheless, the different preoccupations and topics discussed prompt the bands to use different strategies to get their messages across to their audience, which causes some slight variations in the analysis. For example, Fontaines D.C. opted for rooting their work in the exploration of Irishness both in Dublin and abroad highlighting the history of the island, and so, the approach to the lyrics is highly referential of the Irish context. For the analysis, then, it has been necessary to explore the contextual situation of Ireland and the problems of the Irish. The Murder Capital, however, explored more universal themes coming from their own personal experience, even though the problems described affect the Irish population. For this reason, the analysis has focused on introspection and how feelings such as love, grief or loss affect one's personal life.

It is necessary to take into account a few things about this essay. First, this essay presents a limited vision of the voices and problems of the Irish population. The selection of these two bands has been made on the basis of one main aspect: the popularity of these bands. Their popularity is relevant for several reasons. For example, these bands have jumped to the mainstream alternative rock scene, taking part in some of the most popular music festivals around the world, which implies the possibility of reaching more people. Popularity also translates to the existence of more literature on these bands and their works, both journalistic and academic. That is, there were some research advantages taken into account for the band selection. This selection, however, comes with some limitations: mainly that, although the problems described by the bands may refer to Ireland, they are not representative of all the grievances of the Republic. This way, gender or racial issues and how they interact with the topics discussed in this essay have not been discussed. For this reason, one future line of research could explore the Irish alternative rock scene from a more inclusive perspective by focusing on bands discussing racial and gender issues, which would give a more nuanced approach to the problems of Ireland. Additionally, it could serve both as academic literature on intersectionality in post-punk music and as a platform for the visibility of these bands in the field of music studies. A second line of research could go beyond the analysis of lyrics and context of the bands analysed here and explore how is meaning made out of their style, scenography, music videos or recorded performances, in an attempt to provide a more comprehensive study of meaning-making in Irish post-punk.

In conclusion, this study helps to understand how meaning is produced in music, not only through the creative work itself but also through the context of creation and performance. Thanks to the analysis of these bands' lyrical content and their context, it has been proved that they are examples of the articulation of political ideas in music regarding twenty-first-century Ireland. The way of introducing politics in their lyrics –by analysing its problems and urging the audience to take action on the situation– and the sophisticated lyrics, shared influences such as The Fall and musical similarities such as the creation of asfixiant sonic landscapes and melancholic lingering guitars, locates these bands within the post-punk spectrum.

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## **6. Appendix**

In the following link, you will be able to access the appendix of this essay with the song lyrics here analysed: [Appendix TFG – Javier del Mazo García](#)