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Noel McLaughlin

## **Another Green World?: Eno, Ireland and U2**

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores a neglected area of popular music scholarship: the different aspects of *auteur* producer Brian Eno's often complex relationship with Irish rock band, U2 and their home nation. It considers the cultural and political significance of Eno's technical, aesthetic and philosophical innovations in his work with U2 in relation to wider debates about Irish cultural identity as articulated through music. It also explores how U2 and the Irish context may have reciprocally influenced aspects of Eno's approach to artistic production. The article also seeks to situate these ideas within broader popular historical discourses that frame the Eno and U2 relationship.

Key Words: Brian Eno; U2; Bono; Ireland; Irish rock; Irish popular music; colonialism; post-colonialism; Imperialism; Hybridity; cultural identity.

Brian George St. John le Baptiste de la Salle Eno has a well-documented working life in the arts and music that spans virtually five decades. He came to public attention as the flamboyant keyboard player/prototype sonic sculptor in Roxy Music in 1971 and in his ensuing career has been involved in a dizzying array of projects, both musical and non-musical. These have ranged from a series of solo albums - such as *Another Green World* (1975), *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* and *Music for Films* (both 1978) - which are widely regarded as giving birth to the expansive genre known as ambient music, through to a host of landmark collaborations (i.e. David Bowie; David Byrne; John Cale; Robert Fripp and Jon Hassell) that have produced work generally celebrated in popular music history and culture as breaking new ground. In addition to this Eno has worked as a producer for other music artists, and as with his solo work, has presided over some albums regarded as seminal (such as Talking Heads' *Remain in Light* [1980]). This versatility even extends to the punk movement (an aspect of Eno's history that has often been overlooked). While in New York producing Talking Heads' second album, he ended up documenting the city's 'No Wave' scene and

producing the compilation, *No New York* (1978), which featured some of the movement's key bands.

This impeccable creative résumé does not stop here however and Eno has been employed as a regular columnist for the *Observer* newspaper, while continuing to produce innovative visual art and even taking up the role of visiting professor at the Royal College of Art. More recently he has extended his portfolio into the production of creative applications, or apps, for smart phones developing his already existing concept of generative or 'chance music'. This career, then, has been marked by a consistent crossing of disciplinary boundaries, an imaginative forging of critical and practical connections, and an acute ability to envisage relationships among disparate areas of the arts and culture. Eno's oeuvre is further underscored by an overt refusal to distinguish between 'high' art and popular culture. In this respect his creative output overall represents a particularly intense example of *intermediality* – of drawing upon, referencing and exchanging ideas and communicative strategies across distinct media forms. Intermediality, as defined by Klaus Bruhn Jensen, refers 'to the interconnectedness of modern media of communication'. 'As means of expression and exchange', he argues, 'the different media depend on and refer to each other, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of particular communicative strategies; and they are constituents of a wider cultural environment' (Jensen 2008) (and in this sense, the term is closely related to earlier concepts, such as multimedia and intertextuality). Significantly, however, Eno's practical and critical demonstration of this was well in advance of the term's development, and deployment, in the academy.

Eno has produced six U2 albums (five as co-producer with Daniel Lanois), seven if one includes the more direct collaboration between band and artist, Passengers' *Original Soundtracks 1* (1995). Eno has, therefore, co-produced virtually half of the band's studio albums and U2 remains the band/artist he has worked with on more major projects than any other. Despite a working relationship of almost thirty years (and one that Eno talks about with great affection and fondness), his work with U2 has not garnered the critical praise of his work with David Bowie in the 1970s – the revered 'Berlin Trilogy' of *Low*, *Heroes* (both 1977) and *Lodger* (1979) - or the three albums he produced with Talking Heads. In fact, there is a lingering sense in England - and among so-called 'Eno-nerds' especially - that his work with U2 (and latterly with Coldplay) remains something of a blight on an otherwise exemplary artistic copybook. Eno's biographer, David Sheppard, typifies the trend by referring to U2, with just a hint of knowing condescension, as the 'anthemic Dublin rock band' (Sheppard 2008: 367), the implication being that both 'anthemic' and place of origin may be regarded, somehow, as de facto critical negatives. Indeed Sheppard continues in this vein throughout his extensive discussion of Eno's work with U2, noting the band's 'shrill, sloganeering, evangelically tinged rock bombast'. And if that wasn't enough he also proffered that the music 'played particularly well in Middle America' (ibid 368). His mix of lingering contempt for the band, their origins and the people who are presumed to listen to them, appears most strongly in the biographer's disdain for their 'voluble proselytizing' lead vocalist, Bono, whom he describes as a 'hectoring, foghorn-voiced frontman for whom rock music was not so much art as an inviolable instrument of quasi-Christian redemption and flag-waving' (ibid 368). Even when revising his opinion, and attempting to be complimentary

to the singer, Sheppard maintains the easy positional superiority: ‘Bono was no Dublin estate savant’, he avers with a barely concealed sneer (ibid 381).

Aside from the, at worst, borderline casual racism and, at best, lazy cultural superiority evident in such writing, what is especially significant here is that no other Eno collaborator throughout the producer’s lengthy career is regarded with such hostility and criticism. Let’s not be too hard on Sheppard, however, and his comprehensive and diligent biography, as what he offers here is merely - but regrettably - the reproduction of a certain orthodoxy. Even a writer as precise and thorough as the popular music historian Jon Savage reproduces this type of discourse, claiming that: ‘I don’t have a problem with Eno producing Coldplay or U2. He does plenty of other stuff besides that is interesting’ (Savage 2011). Here Savage reproduces the well-worn idea that, for the polymath Eno, U2 is something he casually tosses off in his spare time in between more complex and valuable projects. Eric Tamm in his analytical study of Eno’s musical oeuvre – the rather pretentiously titled *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound* – manages to go one further and doesn’t deem his collaboration with U2 as of sufficient merit and hence worthy of scholarly inclusion (Tamm 1995).<sup>1</sup>

It would be possible to fill an entire article with these types of negative comments: the oft-circulated notion of Eno as U2’s ‘fifth member’, or the casual dismissal implied in the observation that U2 couldn’t have thought up the ideas themselves for the critically revered *Zoo TV* tour if ‘it wasn’t for Eno’.<sup>2</sup> It is not that there isn’t a grain of the truth in these latter two claims, but a common factor emerges here, and it is not just the downplaying of the band’s achievement in favour of lauding Eno. Rather, what is of most critical importance in this context is the residue of national identity that trails in its wake; that is, the manner in which both artists are routinely discussed as ‘representing’ - as metonymic of - their respective countries of origin. In this sense, a crude binary opposition is invoked, one that pits Eno and England’s apparent sophistication, culture, subtlety and artistry against the autodidactic and crude Irish (U2); a binary that, of course, has a much longer history than this particular instance (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012:1-14). This type of discourse - one that can be traced back to the writings of Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century and the first conquest of Ireland - may contribute to, and exacerbate, feelings of peripherality and inferiority - perpetuating the equally longstanding myth of Ireland’s over-reliance, economically, socially and culturally (and, indeed, popular musically), on England. As Martin McLoone and I have argued elsewhere, ‘these discourses are not mere reportage, they don’t just possess a descriptive, “after-the-fact” role, but are themselves what Michel Foucault referred to as “regimes of knowledge” that create interpretative frames: shaping what is and is not Irish, what can and cannot be said about particular peoples and their music’ (ibid: 148).

The ubiquity of this discourse, particularly in England - and its framing of the Eno/U2 relationship - is unfortunate, as it has prevented a more thorough-going appraisal of the complexity of Eno’s collaboration with the band and the critical issues, both aesthetic and political, that this working partnership raises. The very particular mix of English production auteur and globe-straddling Irish rock band offered here is one very specific example of the

two countries' 'special relationship' cast in musical terms and Eno, in this relationship, is caught somewhere between benign imperialist and sympathetic creative facilitator.

### **The Egghead and the Mullet**

There is an interesting section in Barry Devlin and Meiert Avis's 1985 documentary *Unforgettable Fire*, which, as the title suggests, captures key moments in the making of U2's fourth studio album. During the recording of the lead vocal of 'Pride: In the Name of Love', with the band now ensconced in the cramped conditions of Dublin's Windmill Lane studios, Bono is framed through the control room window straining at the top of his vocal range in a sleeve-less tee-shirt; a flurry of flailing arms, the veins of his neck bulging from the effort required by the performance. It is a classic snapshot of the craft of the rock vocalist, of investing 'serious effort'; of being seen to be, in Simon Frith's words, 'working at something' (Frith 1996: 35).<sup>3</sup> It is a performance that signifies abandon and full immersion in the song and its sentiments, and as such is commensurate with many of the expectations of a 'good' performance within rock ideology. On the other side of the control window, sharing the audience's gaze on the singer is the album's co-producer, Brian Eno. The shot grammar suggests a sense of Eno-as-spectator/voyeur/critical listener, and Bono as the object of his gaze. It thus encodes a power relationship of sorts as watcher/watched, subject/object relationships often do. Eno is a picture of cool passivity, a cerebral mixture of art school lecturer and scientist.

At the conclusion of this impassioned vocal-take, Eno quips ironically that the vocal was 'a bit restrained' following the lead of a voice off camera - presumably the Edge - who suggests with equal irony that perhaps he could do it again but 'with a bit more passion'. After some further producerly guidance, Eno exclaims that 'I wouldn't like to inhibit what you're doing'. The contrasts offered in this short segment are striking: Bono's abandon to Eno's 'cool'; the singer's straining, 'naked' vocal to the producer's irony and detachment. Indeed, these oppositions can be taken further and out of the strictly musical realm: the singer's 'bad' hair and clothes (dyed mullet and skin-tight, bleached/tie-dyed jeans) to Eno's sartorial understatement and professorial reserve. It establishes, therefore, a set of ideological oppositions that dovetail and stand as a metonym for Irish/English relationships - freedom versus inhibition; abandon versus restraint; feeling versus criticism; involvement versus detachment, and so forth, all of which are consolidated in Eno *not* wanting to inhibit what the singer is doing; of preserving the 'raw material'.

Eno's attitude here calls to mind the relationship that Matthew Arnold articulated in relation to what he saw as 'Celtic culture'. While the Celtic nations were certainly less accomplished than the Anglo-Saxons (and their cousins the Germans), nonetheless, he argued, 'The Celts, with their vehement reaction against the despotism of fact, with their sensuous nature, their manifold striving, their adverse destiny, their immense calamities, the Celts are the prime authors of this vein of piercing regret and passion ...' (Arnold 1867: 75).

What Arnold tried to establish, acknowledge and praise was the deep lying contribution the Celts had made to English poetry.

If I were asked where English poetry got these three things, its turn for style, its turn for melancholy, and its turn for natural magic, for catching and rendering the charm of nature in a wonderfully near and vivid way, I should answer, with some doubt, that it got much of its turn for style from a Celtic source; with less doubt, that it got much of its melancholy from a Celtic source; with no doubt at all, that from a Celtic source it got nearly all its natural magic (ibid 69).

Despite the encoding of national differences and its dependence on racial characteristics, the famously cerebral Eno, in Arnoldian mode was to become an ardent fan of his apparently untutored Celtic charges. Indeed, the easiest rebuttal to the glib disparagement of his work with U2 is simply to refer to Eno's own descriptions of both the band and their home nation. Eno has, perhaps, been more vocally positive about U2 and Ireland than any other artist/location nexus in his entire career. This is especially evident in his diary of 1995, *A Year With Swollen Appendices*: 'What I love about Ireland is that it brings out the best in me – maybe it's U2, who do that with everyone. Fascinating to see that, after all this time, there is still such courtesy, understanding and love between them' (Eno 1996:110). And, even more strikingly, the differences between Irish and English/British are offered in the following: 'At the Dorchester the conversation was as liquid and mercurial as Irish conversations usually are – everyone talking at once, threads crossing and tangling; lots of laughter. Being a Brit in such conversation is like being a honky on a Harlem dance-floor' (ibid 245).

These oppositions really come to the fore when Eno is discussing sounds and music, when reflecting on the recording sessions of Passengers' *Original Soundtracks 1*, and his reaction to hearing his own voice after recording Bono: 'disappointed hearing "Tokyo Drift" again – finding myself embarrassed by my voice. So English and analytical – like Radio 3' (ibid 154). With regard to discourses of national difference, this is an ideologically interesting comment, especially from such a revered critical listener; one with an acute understanding of how, and what, particular voices and instruments signify. Moreover, at one point while working on the Passengers' single 'Miss Sarajevo', Eno controversially deemed Luciano Pavarotti's voice as lacking in comparison to Bono's. He writes: 'In the studio to master the Pavarotti stuff... I still have problems with his voice. For me it makes the song interesting but not better. Pav's voice is weak after Bono's...' (ibid 183).

This praise for band and nation doesn't remain in the realm of observation and commentary, but has emerged in interview and in Eno's journalism where he has proactively sought to defend the band from criticism. Eno, it appears, is all too aware of both the elitist dismissal of the group's popularity and the role of nationalist discourse in this detraction:

Cool, the definitive eighties compliment, sums up just about everything that U2 isn't. The band is positive where cool is cynical, involved where it is detached, open where it is evasive.

And, in the space of a sentence, he then slips from band to nation:

When you think about it, in fact, cool isn't a notion that you'd often want to apply to the Irish, a people who easily and brilliantly satirize, elaborate and haggle and generally make short stories very long but who rarely exhibit the appetite for cultivated disdain – deliberate non-involvement – for which the English pride themselves... It is this reckless involvement that makes the Irish terminally uncool: Cool people stay around the edges and observe the mistakes and triumphs of uncool people (and then write about them) (Eno 1994: 165).

However, Eno feels the need to defend Bono most of all and it is evident in interview, as it is throughout his writing that he likes, respects and admires the much-maligned singer. Again, national discourse and the types of oppositions we have been exploring are to the fore.

Bono commits the crime of rising above your station. To the British, it's the worst thing you can do. Bono is hated for doing something unbecoming for a pop star – meddling in things that have apparently nothing to do with him. He has a huge ego, no doubt. On the other hand he has a huge brain and a huge heart. He's just a big kind of person. That's not easy for some to deal with. In most places in the world they don't mind him. Here (i.e. England), they think he must be conning them (Morley 2010).<sup>4</sup>

Two things are of significance here. The first is Eno's desire to turn the gaze back on, and to particularise, the coloniser; to reveal the *situatedness* of these perspectives of band and singer (that they are not universal, nor widely shared). In this sense, Eno is joining in a broader resistant anti-colonial project in constructing England/Britain as Ireland's great 'other'. The second, which again relates to national difference, is the notion of the 'uncool' as a strategy, as a 'critical weapon' of sorts. In other words, a working practice was formed out of a 'reading' of the modus operandi of the centre that could then be played with, resisted and ultimately subverted. But this still, nonetheless, conceals the band's importance, to their host nation, to rock and pop history more broadly and also to their erstwhile collaborator.

From the beginning, as he states in the *Unforgettable Fire* documentary, U2, for Eno, are a 'proper band': a hermetically-sealed unit based on love, friendship and trust. They are, significantly, the only band of their commercial stature that has preserved its original line-up, and for such a long period. Moreover, U2 are the only globe-straddling rock band that is not straight-forwardly Anglo-American, one that can thus be interpreted as both the sound of pre-colonial Irish ethnicity, preserved as it were in rock<sup>5</sup> (drawing upon Ireland's status as the first colony of the British Empire and the prototype for all others) *and* the sound of international 'corruption'. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of autoethnography and autoethnographic expression is valuable here, in that it describes an approach to production - in this case, music - that involves 'selective collaboration with and appropriation of the

idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror' which often constitutes 'a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant... culture' (Pratt 1991:35). U2's decision to reverse the usual trend – to stay in Dublin rather than to decamp to London in the time-honoured fashion for Irish bands – and hence to end the Irish popular musical exile narrative, was a significant one in this regard.

Here, once again, the discursive authority of 'cool' comes to bear, with the band open about resisting the trends of the centre, conscious that it might get swamped by metropolitan conceptions of musical fashion. To borrow, and bend, the famous Kinks' song title, U2, for Eno, were 'dedicated followers of anti-fashion' (however unwittingly so). Dublin and Ireland were, therefore, felt to offer just such a distance, where the band could absorb the specificities of Irish cultural life and its particular idioms. With regard to U2 and Eno's working relationship this decision meant that the vast majority of their work together was in Dublin, which necessitated Eno travelling to Ireland and immersing himself in the socio-cultural life of the island (and even staying in the Hewson family's summerhouse at the foot of the garden and taking public transport to the studio each day). In this respect, Eno was residing in an in-between culture, one that was at once familiar and different: alike, yet exotic; with a shared language and shared cultural reference points – the Irish are as familiar with British media as the British themselves – yet distinct, in that Irish culture is marked by a long history of resistance to, and a sense of separateness from, the former coloniser. And for U2, Eno offered a connection to a different, more 'European' sonic palette, a 'reading' and subsequent deconstruction of their existing sound, and an approach to practice that could take them to that elusive 'somewhere else' (although, as will become apparent, this Eno-led 'other place' had, at least initially, a distinctive 'Irish' aspect based on the producer's sense of the band's musico-cultural identity).

## **Music and Approaches to Production**

Eno's first significant influence on U2 was to take the band out of the environs of the modern recording studio for the *Unforgettable Fire* sessions and into a more 'organic' space, in this case the Gothic Ballroom in Slane Castle, a large stately home on the banks of the River Boyne. Eno, by this stage - 1984 - had become openly bored with the modern studio and the routinisation involved: the 'dead' rooms, the standardisation of space – both sonic and actual – and the blandness of the recording process. This practice of (largely) avoiding the conventional recording studio would be maintained in the creation of subsequent Eno-U2 albums.

Conversely, as a producer, he was interested in 'capturing' the peculiar 'quality' of rooms, and hence of emphasising the specificity of place, a move that may be regarded as going against the homogenisation of space, place and sound often read as a symptom of postmodern culture. In this sense, the Eno of this period is a little like Jean-Luc Godard filming the Rolling Stones in *One Plus One* (aka *Sympathy for the Devil* [1968]) with the producer critically scrutinising from a distance, observing the process of composition and

recording. Eno, of course, can't remain wholly detached, but also gets involved in, rather than just merely watching/listening to - and 'capturing' - the performances for recording and his work with the band is punctuated throughout with this dynamic - between detachment/critical distance on the one hand and participant involvement on the other.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly this first Eno/U2 collaboration is marked by greater tonal and timbral variety than the three previous studio albums, and by what might be described as a 'calming down' of the strident and affirmative upwards drive of the U2 sound. This is especially apparent in a newly- found delicacy, the creation of musical 'space', a minimalist paring away of their existing sonic palette – as with 'Bad' for instance - and the resultant 'cinematic quality' the band was striving for. Similarly 'Promenade', arguably the band's first overtly sensual/sexual track, avoids the 'verse-chorus, verse-chorus, middle-eight, chorus' structure of the classic pop song and is thus episodic and abstract – more sketch than finished song – with attention drawn to the sonic textures and its sculpted, painterly qualities. Dynamic contrast is more extreme than elsewhere in U2's oeuvre to date: conforming to the oft-used description of Irish music's ability to jump 'from a whisper to a scream'.<sup>7</sup> This point is supported by Sheppard who claims, not entirely unpredictably, that Eno effectively 'rescued' the track, which was originally, and perhaps not unsurprisingly, more strident in execution (Sheppard 2008: 372). As many commentators have observed, the producer would often record the band unawares and save discarded material which he would then work on in private, thus 're-presenting' the band to themselves, offering his version of how they might, or should, sound. Indeed, one of the productive tensions in the working relationship from the outset, and a very particular example of the art-commerce dichotomy, was U2's concern for what could be played live and for radio-friendly hit singles against Eno's blatant disregard for both.

But 'Promenade' and Eno's role in its creation is also interesting for the manner in which it connects U2 to more longstanding Irish popular musical traditions and, in particular, its intertextual, yet oblique, invocation of the quieter, more introspective, moments of Van Morrison's first solo albums, such as 'Slim Slow Slider' from *Astral Weeks* (1968) and 'Almost Independence Day' and 'Listen to the Lion' from *Saint Dominic's Preview* (1972). As Bono has recalled, Morrison was a primary reference point during the making of the album, followed by Lou Reed and even Philip Glass, resulting in, as the singer put it, an 'Enoesque' 'mixing of the avant-garde and the soulful'.<sup>8</sup> Eno's concern with the textural and the painterly is clearly influential here, with consequences for the lead vocalist and his approach to the material: just like Morrison before him, Bono is as much concerned with the somatic qualities of the voice – the use of words-as-*sound*, as with words as *meaning* (and Eno frequently encouraged him to improvise at the microphone).<sup>9</sup> This took the band away from their overt concern with rock 'message' and the 'statement', towards an aesthetic where the voice and lyrics were more embedded in the overall sonic architecture of the album. A related feature here was the more overt use of the multi-track recording machine and the mixing desk as instruments in their own right: the slowing down of the rhythm track of what eventually became 'A Sort of Homecoming' and 'Elvis Presley and America'.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, Eno was adamant that certain tracks should not be overworked, that 'imperfections' and

an ‘unfinished quality’, as he put it, should be preserved. This mix of improvisation, critical listening and an unfinished quality, have their critical/theoretical corollaries: the value of preserving imperfections and incorporating improvisation loosely equates with the ‘impure’, the hybridised and the unconscious. It is indeed interesting, and not merely ironic, that on their first album with Eno, U2’s work takes on a more distinctly ‘Irish’ ambience, with the episodic images offered in Bono’s lyrics invoking Irish canonical poetry, especially William Butler Yeats, and polyrhythmic motifs – such as Edge’s guitar at the beginning of ‘Wire’ - which simultaneously draws upon, invokes and modernises Irish traditional music;<sup>11</sup> and, as such, more than a simple move from the strident to the ambient. Indeed, from an Irish perspective, U2 - and here irony is the appropriate designation - deployed an English producer to capture, and reconfigure, an existing Irish musical seam.

More obviously, but just as importantly, Eno introduced the synthesiser, sampler and electronic textures into the U2 sound, most noticeably throughout the album’s second single and title track (evident in its atmospheric and delicate opening keyboard arpeggio and rising orchestral string samples). This, in itself, would not be especially salient in the popular soundscape in England of the period, but in Ireland – framed within a dominant ‘organic paradigm of Irish rock’ that valued the ‘organic’ over the ‘plastic’ (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012: 2) – synthesisers were frequently met with a degree of suspicion and scepticism (hence the virtual absence of synth-pop artists in the Irish popular musical canon). As the late Bill Graham, Ireland’s premier rock critic and U2’s most influential domestic commentator put it when reflecting on Irish rock’s legacy up until the early 1990s: ‘On the issue of authenticity: I always feel that the British could have done with more, and we could have done with less’ (unpublished interview with the author, 1995). In fact, Graham’s critical influence on U2, his particular reading of Irish/British relationships in musical terms, may have transferred to Eno, thus shaping the latter’s approach to working with the band. Eno’s championing of the uncool and affirmative/positive in the band is remarkably similar to Graham’s terms of reference.

However, the synthesisers on this album, and the first for the band, were pressed into servicing an organic conception of Irish rock – the electronic in the service of the authentic, as it were. Despite the sonic innovations, the album largely conforms to the dominant Irish imagistic repertoire of rural windswept landscapes and heightened emotional outpouring (even if this dominant paradigm is modernised in distinctive ways and is at some distance from the ubiquitous folk-rock-trad register). Indeed, one would have to wait until 1991’s Eno/Lanois produced *Achtung Baby* and its sister-album and successor, *Zooropa* (1993) to witness electronic forms being used in a more overtly subversive and anti-authenticating fashion. Nonetheless, despite this pastoralisation of technology, the album took U2 to that elusive ‘somewhere else.’ As Bono, quoted on the band’s website, U2.com, reflecting on the finished record, put it: ‘*Unforgettable Fire* was a beautifully out-of-focus record, blurred like an impressionist painting’. These innovations notwithstanding, Sheppard was, once again, less than enthusiastic, with this first collaboration neither disgracing nor distinguishing the producer’s artistic résumé and hence damned by faint praise (Sheppard 2008: 375).

In fact, there are areas where one can hear the direct influence of Eno (and here he does become, for U2, a sort of invisible keyboard player) – the distinctive Eno-ambient signature, as it were - on the finished track. One example is the similarity between the openings of ‘Bad’ and ‘Promenade’ from *Unforgettable Fire* and ‘With or Without You’ from *The Joshua Tree* (1987). These three tracks share a sonic frame redolent of the opening of ‘The Carrier’ from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Eno’s critically lauded 1981 collaboration with Talking Heads lead singer, David Byrne (an album that is frequently taken to pre-figure the cut ‘n’ paste strategies afforded by sampling and to mix what latterly became known as ‘world music’ with ambient experimentation). However, this strategy of referencing, either explicitly or implicitly, past Eno work is not the approach most deployed in the producer’s formidable strategic repertoire. More often, especially on *The Joshua Tree*, a different approach is at work. In this context, as revealed on the *Classic Albums: The Joshua Tree* documentary, a very different, even reverse, strategy is in evidence. Eno would contribute bespoke synthesiser textures that played an embryonic, and sometimes pivotal, role in setting a mood, or ambient frame, for the track in process. In ‘Running to Stand Still’, for example, the producer’s sustained Yamaha DX7 synth pads creates a cinematic context for the band’s transposition of the Velvet Underground circa ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ to a song ostensibly about Dublin’s heroin problems in the 1980s. What is noteworthy here though is that Eno’s highly apposite keyboard sounds – sounds that would not have disgraced the final mix by any means – were removed and do not feature on the finished track. This is clearly because any ‘synthetic’/electronic textures would have detracted from the album’s ‘organic’, earthy feel: the desert hue, the desert as arid space – the recurring lyrical allusions to earth elements - and the rust-inflected, ochre-tinged images that both song and album synaesthetically invokes.

In this context, Eno is subservient to, and in the service of, the overall emerging identity of the album – literally erasing his own compositional and performance contribution for the greater goal of the right result, the elusive ‘it works’ of artistic practice. But the use of synthesiser pads, or a pre-programmed rhythm, in working-up a song, of establishing a context, and their subsequent removal, is a common working method in the U2/Eno interface (leaving the producer as something of an absent presence, or lipstick trace, on the finished material).

In one vital sense, U2 and Eno working together was a risk each of the artists shared. Indeed, Eno was initially resistant to the band’s approach. As a marker of this, Bono recalls playing Eno the 1983 live album from the *War* tour, *Under a Blood Red Sky* and how the producer’s ‘eyes glazed over’. Bono adds: ‘I now realise how awful the sight of a rock band in full flight was to Brian’ (McCormick 2008:185) (and this, of course, echoes the control room window scene described earlier during the *Unforgettable Fire* sessions, where Eno is witnessing the rock singer in ‘full flight’). Eno, therefore, risked his not inconsiderable popular musical and ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1995: 115) working with the ‘uncool’, unfashionable and strident Irish band, that was popular in middle America; whilst U2 gambled with interrupting the steady, but increasingly steep, commercial momentum of the first three studio albums, with the (very real) possibility that Eno could take them in a more

esoteric, but less profitable, direction. As a symptom of this, Island Records founder and label boss, Chris Blackwell was reported to be exceedingly sceptical about the band's choice of producer, anxious that it could result in commercial suicide (McCormick 2008: 151). However, with the luxury afforded by hindsight, the group's choice of producer was to allay such fears, with Eno and Daniel Lanois producing *The Joshua Tree*, the follow-up album and their biggest seller to date (and U2, in turn, furnishing Eno with the most commercially successful work of his career, and with it, a higher public profile). *Unforgettable Fire* produced U2's highest UK singles chart placements in their career up to this point, with 'Pride' and the title track reaching 3 and 6 respectively. *The Joshua Tree* would of course reproduce this singles chart success in the all-important U.S. market.

*The Joshua Tree* was U2's most conspicuously 'American' album in tone, texture and 'feel', to date. But the album is not a mere facsimile, or pastiche, of American musical trends and as such governed by strategies of imitation and mimicry. Rather, the album is based on a 'reading' of American musical forms and a critical engagement with them. Here the language of cultural hybridity is particularly useful. U2 and Eno/Lanois took the sounds of the centre – blues and country (forms seminal in the birth of modern rock), adapted these to their own designs, and then offered them back to the centre in a wholly unique form. This is especially apparent on both 'Where the Streets Have No Name' and 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For', with the latter track constituting a novel hybrid of country and gospel with the Edge's non-traditional guitar – an approach to guitar that has its roots in the innovations of the immediate aftermath of punk – and Eno's ambient textures. Here, long established generic material is re-positioned, set in a different frame: less a case of the space between the notes as a hybrid space between the genres. As Bono reflecting on the track for the *Classic Albums: The Joshua Tree* film has put it: 'one of the problems we had, was when you've got an old gospel tune, how do you bring it into the century, into the moment that we're in? I think we did it by weaving in various abstract guitar parts'. In the same documentary, the album's engineer, Flood, recalls of the production process that it:

... was very different from anything I'd ever approached before. It was a first for so many things. The whole process was totally different. For a start we weren't in a regular recording studio. The type of sound they wanted for the record was very different from anything anybody had asked for: open, ambient, a real sense of space, of the environment you were in. Not normal requests.

Thus a series of hybrids begin to emerge out of the conflict – the productive tension – between producer(s) and band around recorded performance versus live; hit singles versus ambience and so forth. This gives rise to the hybrid of conventional songs and ambient experimentation and textures; of tradition and modernity; America and Ireland; blues/country/gospel and post-punk experimentation; avant-garde and popular, which in turn, results in a novel and tension-ridden experience (conforming to Eno's oft-stated desire to find 'new territories'). Once again 'cool' and its related cluster of concepts are the *bête noire*, creating an important dialectic between critical reading and approaches to production. As Eno put it in the *Classic Albums* film:

I had got a real sense that this band was capable of making ... something that was self-consciously spiritual to the point of being uncool, and I thought uncool was a very important idea then, because people were being very, very cool. Coolness is a certain kind of detachment from yourself; a certain defensiveness - in *not* exposing something - because it's too easy to be shot down if you're exposed. Of course, everyone was in the process of shooting U2 down. They were not favoured, even though they had a big public following, but critically they were thought to be rather "heart on their sleeves".

## Historicising Eno

For U2, Eno was the conduit to a longstanding English art school tradition and a related art/pop interface, a history eloquently explored by Simon Frith and Howard Horne (1987). For these writers, the English art school is of immense importance to the history of British popular music, and for two reasons in particular. First, the art school created a space where young people could form a band – an institutional context that could be put to an 'unofficial' use; a type of state-sponsored creative space (and one which begat a veritable host of rock and pop 'legends': Keith Richards; Pete Townshend; Bryan Ferry; Eric Clapton; Syd Barrett; Ray Davies and many others). Second, it offered a fertile mix of, what could be blanket-termed, art school ideas (ranging from the abstract and aesthetic to some highly politicised critical approaches) which could cross-pollinate with, and indeed infiltrate, popular musical practices.

Hence, and to move away from the dominant hagiographic conception of 'Eno-the-genius' and 'Eno-the Renaissance Man', we have the historical Eno; that is a figure who, perhaps more than any other, embodies the range of artistic, critical, philosophical and practical discourses (and their unforeseen possibilities) borne of this particular historical and institutional nexus. And Eno attended the art school arguably at its peak, the creative vortex of the mid-to-late 1960s.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, Eno is a worthy art school version of the post-war 'scholarship boy' of the 'social democratic years', of figures such as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Of course, unlike Williams or Hoggart, who were committed to a realist political project, of 'revolutionising from within', Eno's 'politics' are more formal and aesthetic (but which may have, wittingly or unwittingly, political consequences), conforming to the first of Peter Wollen's 'Two Avant Gardes': the formal/aesthetic (Wollen 1982: 92-104).

Two aspects of the historical moment of Eno's period at art school are of particular relevance here. First, the emergence of the modern multi-track recording studio, with the possibility of recording (painting or sculpting in sound) and listening back – of critically reflecting on what had been done – allowed a particular dialectic between practice and critical judgement (Eno 2004: 127-30). The second was the emergence of the synthesiser, an instrument which Eno has described as 'without a history', which meant, as it was relatively new, there was 'no correct way to play it' (Dunhill 2013). This was to permit a certain

freedom from ‘tradition’ and the established ways of doing things. And both of these were to sit alongside more specifically, yet equally salient, academic developments: the ‘new criticism’; structuralism and semiotics; post-structuralism; deconstruction; situationism and so forth.

Conditions in Ireland, however, could hardly have been more different and most academic and journalistic accounts of Irish rock culture concur about the lack of a developed recording infrastructure (see Prendergast 1987, Graham 1989, Smyth 2005, McLaughlin and McLoone 2012). Furthermore, Ireland, with its small population and limited urban areas lacked the type of intensive art school environment and its particular cluster of discourses and practices of its near neighbour and former coloniser. This lack of an art school environment may have, in part, prompted U2 to seek Eno’s assistance. As Eno recalled in his diary: ‘Bono in interview: “A lot of English bands went to art school. We went to Brian.” Flattering to think of myself as a sort of one-man version of the art-school experience’ (Eno 1996: 242). This, coupled with the cultural and political desire to articulate a sense of difference, of separateness, from the coloniser - rural to urban; catholic to protestant; spiritual to secular; chaste to promiscuous and so forth - had its own specifically musical expression of resistant otherness: organic to plastic; folk to pop; enduring to throwaway. And there are countless examples of this type of positioning in the organic paradigm of Irish rock discourse.

Significantly then, U2’s targeting of Eno as a producer, whether consciously or not, made political, as well as, aesthetic sense. It allowed U2 to break out of this dominant organic paradigm and to incorporate, via Eno, some of the ‘plasticity’ and playfulness that characterised a British/English musical history that had long operated in the interesting hinterland of rock and pop, of rock-as-art/rock-as-folk and pop. It thus laid the seedbed, or compost, to appropriate a favoured Eno metaphor (Tannenbaum 1985:72), for the increased hybridisation of the U2 sound (and the first hybrid to emerge here was between U2’s anthemic ‘heart on the sleeve’ affirmative rock and Eno’s more ambient and cerebral electronic textures). In working with Eno, U2 appear to be listening to their own sounds with greater self-consciousness.

This language of aesthetic hybridity is one Eno, himself, is familiar with (and again betrays his art school, philosophical inheritance). It is particularly pronounced in his essay, ‘Bringing up Baby’, reflecting upon the production - and the possible significance of - *Achtung Baby*. This album, widely regarded as the most radical in the entire U2 oeuvre, also played a central role (alongside its accompanying *Zoo TV* tour) in the band’s subsequent reinvention. As Simon Reynolds and Joy Press have put it, U2 detonated their ‘reputation as chaste and pompously pious’ and moved away from their role as ‘premodern missionaries’ to become ‘late C20th postmodernists’ (Reynolds and Press 1995:83). As we have seen, hybridity has already been present on the first two U2/Eno albums, but on the 1991 record it becomes much more *conspicuous* and contextually relevant, and thus registered in interpretation and pleasure, with the new, more overtly electronic and ‘industrial’ sound rubbing abrasively against the band’s identity up to this point. In the fraught early stages of the *Achtung Baby* sessions in Berlin’s Hansa Studios, Eno would ‘parachute in’ to offer the struggling band advice. Some of this mentoring was philosophical in basis – Eno’s role, in

Frith and Horne's words, as 'studio intellectual' (Frith and Horne: 118)<sup>13</sup> - especially in relation to a track that was initially entitled 'The Real Thing'. The incident is described by Eno in Sheppard's biography:

I really thought "The Real Thing" ... was not something they should be doing. The lyric originally said something like, "There ain't nothing like the real thing", and I said, "Real" is such a stupid word – come on, don't you know what the philosophers are talking about now? "Real" is not a word that you can seriously use any more! This song has got to be more ironic! I really wanted them to leave it off the record, but to their credit they didn't, and it turns out to be a good choice. But the words did change to "Even better than the real thing", which diffuses the evangelical quality of "real" (Sheppard 2008: 396).

Of course, the finished track was taken to encapsulate U2's so-called postmodern turn, but what is interesting in this instance, is the producer's role as critical/philosophical sounding-board - a position at some distance from the primary role of producer-as-chief engineer - but also the fact that U2 are in no sense slavishly following Eno's advice. Again the tension - the conflict - brought about in the collaboration is what produces interesting results. Moreover, in terms of interpretation, of what the song might mean, 'Even Better Than the Real Thing' has an important Irish aspect, as the song may be read as a riposte to a longstanding Irish rock culture framed within the powerful, intertwined and mutually sustaining discourses of rock and Irish authenticity (in short, less postmodern than critical postcolonial). The change of strategy and the critical reading that informed the approach to production merits further scrutiny. The 'uncool' band is now required to be 'cool' to appropriate some of the distance and ironic detachment of the centre that were formerly critical negatives; to, as it were, 'work against' what U2/Eno had set up hitherto (where it is now 'cool' for the formerly uncool band to be cool) and allowing U2 to subvert the identity consolidated over the previous five studio albums.

However, this was a not a mere reversal - sincerity to irony; organic to electronic; authentic to inauthentic and so forth. Rather, *Achtung*-era U2 offered a complex synthesis of authentic and inauthentic elements: of blues-country narratives – failed healing, partial redemption and the like – but set these in an unexpected sonic frame of dirty and distorted electronic timbres and 'industrial' rhythms (timbres that went against the grain of the established sonic repertoire of Irish rock up until this point), most evident on the all-important opening-track, 'Zoo Station'. This hybridity informed the approach to sound with 'expressive' or 'warm' instruments, such as the Edge's guitar, being routed through vintage analogue synthesisers; and, in turn, synthesisers and keyboards were fed through guitar amplifiers and effects pedals, all of which created a bespoke sonic palette. Whilst these techniques had been employed by Eno for many years, they still produced novel and unforeseen results in this context. Significantly, the mix of the 'industrial' with blues and country also worked in the reverse direction and went against the grain of much industrial music (Fast 2008:175-97). (I have discussed hybridity and *Achtung Baby*, and the album's relationship to

issues of Irishness, more extensively elsewhere [see McLaughlin and McLoone 195-213].)

Eno, then, connected the band to their more experimental post-punk roots (roots that he played a pivotal role in establishing). As he put it: finding ‘a single adjective for any song proves difficult: it’s an album of musical oxymorons, of feelings that shouldn’t exist together but are somehow credible’, with ‘Zoo Station’ even being described as ‘industrially jovial’ (Eno 1994: 170). The album therefore embodied a series of irreconcilables: authentically inauthentic; sincerely ironic; deeply superficial and so forth.

### **An-‘Other’ Green World**

I often think artists divide, as in the musical *Oklahoma*, into the farmer and the cowboy. So, the farmer is the guy who finds a piece of territory, stakes it up, digs it and cultivates it and grows the land. The cowboy is the one who goes out and finds new territories. I rather think of myself as the cowboy really, than the farmer. I like the thrill of being somewhere where I know nobody else has been, even if it is quite trivial. It’s only art. It’s not very important (Eno in Dunhill 2013).

The world hardly needs another article in praise of Brian Eno - there is enough of that already; it’s hardly, *pace* Eno, ‘new territory’, as his status as something of a national treasure is secured. In fact, what is interesting about exploring Eno, U2 and Ireland is the residue of the power relationship(s) involved. While the producer has been keen to defend both band and host nation, there is more than a mere tinge of essentialism in his comments about Ireland and the Irish. While his remarks are benign and come ‘from the right political place’, acting as an important counter-weight to the overwhelmingly negative image of the band (and especially Bono) in Britain, they still homogenise the Irish and proffer some well-worn, if ‘positive’ stereotypes of the island and its people. (Indeed some of these stereotypes can be attributed also to many of his contemporaries on the British left of the mid/late sixties.) As Richard Dyer has argued, positive stereotypes can be as culturally and politically limiting as negative ones (Dyer 1993:11-18) and it seems that Eno’s perception of the island and its people is a romantic one not untypical of British/English liberal-left ideology.

This notion, the idea of Eno as benign liberal-imperialist, also manifests itself in his attitude to production practice, with the producer playing the role of musical anthropologist with all the accompanying accusations of exoticism that this might imply. This type of thinking began to emerge in responses to the celebrated collaboration with David Byrne, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which at the time was accused by some critics of orientalism; of plundering the exotic sounds of elsewhere for the purposes of voyeuristic *enjoyment* in the west. Whether overstated or not, one seam of Eno’s working practice has been to appropriate the ‘sounds of elsewhere’ - whether folk or tribal sounds - and convert these, the (‘primitive’) raw material, into ‘art’. Evidently, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is more complex than the

‘Orientalist’ position allows and is marked by a conspicuous and playful hybridity: ‘born-again’ evangelical preachers sit cheek-by-jowl alongside middle-eastern voices; ‘tribal’ rhythms sit next to pop sounds and electronic textures and so forth. The initial, yet under-realised, concept of an overtly fake field recording also works against the reading of the album as mere exoticist plundering. Whichever way, this practice of, as it were, ‘mining’ raw material informed and underpinned the production and composition of the Talking Heads’ album, *Remain in Light*, where the ‘rough’, ‘tribal’ funk sounds of Fela Kuti and the genre that trailed in his wake, Afrobeat, were the inspiration, and were melded, in turn, with other ‘modern’ musical forms and working methods.

There is a lingering sense that Eno’s Irish band functioned in a not dissimilar fashion - as an (untutored) raw material that could be sculpted, taken and alchemically turned into art; an anthropological resource that could be shaped. This perhaps explains why Eno, again, stresses some well-worn (yet ‘friendly’) stereotypes of Irish music and attributes these to the band: hence U2’s ‘spirituality’ is constantly stressed, alongside comments such as, ‘U2 are nearest thing to a soul band in the Western hemisphere’ and so forth (although his positive comments, along with the weight of his reputation, appear to have done little to change perceptions of the band among its many detractors in Britain).

However, despite the critical purchase of the position just described, Eno’s work with U2, and his engagement with Ireland, is more nuanced than this. The type of playful and critically-informed hybridity evident in the Byrne collaboration is particularly pronounced on 1993’s *Zooropa* and on the Passengers record (with the latter posing as something of a fake soundtrack album much in the spirit of Eno and Byrne’s faux field recording). And clearly Ireland and U2 have influenced him reciprocally; hence the recurrent references to the band’s inventiveness, energy and intelligence, as well as the manner in which they have been, for their producer, a healthy ‘thorn in the side’ of lazy metropolitan notions of cool, what might be termed the parochialism of the metropolitan centre. Indeed, one is tempted towards a psychoanalytic reading here: that Eno appears to hate this aspect of himself, the ‘lack’ borne of his own metropolitan English context, a lack that the other, U2, fills and compensates for. In this regard, Eno appears to be seduced by his sense of ‘Irish time’, out of step and behind the times yet paradoxically ahead at the same time.<sup>14</sup> If there is then an informal hierarchy of places for the widely travelled Eno – Berlin Eno, New York Eno, Notting Hill Eno, ‘virtual traveller’ Eno and so forth - then Dublin and Ireland would, on the evidence of his own utterances, be near the top (with Los Angeles close to the bottom). The idea of the cowboy, and the related concept of the frontier, is especially pertinent here. Eno, by his own admission, loves new territory but the cowboy, the frontier and their ‘contact zones’ imply a degree of exploitation. The contact zones are ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today’ (Pratt 2007:4). However, Eno’s dislike of ‘purity’ - encapsulated in his critique of the perfect sound wave as ‘the most boring sound on earth’ (Dunhill 2013) and his concomitant championing of imperfection – has resulted in an approach to practice that we could tentatively call formal anti-essentialism. Thus, he found a way of working with U2

where the power-relationships - the impurities, the residue of inequalities, the differences, as it were - are embedded in the music as productive conflicts, exploitations of the site of contact (a proverbial case of good theory into even better practice).

Furthermore, Eno's work (with or without U2) is especially valuable in the current socio-economic/socio-cultural context in the United Kingdom. Eno, and the critical/institutional context from which he emerged and is a great ambassador for, helped the 'uncool' Irish as represented by its most commercially successful and much maligned band to reinvent themselves – not a mere authorial reinvention – but a reinvention that helped contribute to the overthrowing of some of most long-standing stereotypes of the nation in musical terms (new territories can indeed be very close to home). And working with U2 he has found a way of embodying the tensions in the Anglo-Irish relationship, of putting these to productive musical use. The Eno/U2 interface then is riddled with contradictions: Eno, the benign imperialist, cum anthropologist; the resistant English anti-colonial and Irish empathiser who played a key role in moving U2 out of a very particular post-colonial frame, one who deployed the language of hybridity to generate 'impurities', while still finding a global audience.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, significant exceptions. Irish music writer, Mark Prendergast, in his extensive exploration of ambient music, discusses Eno's work with U2 with considerable depth and sensitivity, and hence avoids the type of aloofness and condescension that has marked many writers' approach to the subject. See Prendergast 2000: 358-62.

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of *Zoo TV* and related critical issues, see McLaughlin and McLoone 2012: 204-19.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough-going and entertaining critique of Bono's political activism, its relationship to Neo-liberal and conservative discourses and the ideological consequences of a rock star 'meddling in things...', see Harry Browne, *The Frontman: Bono (In the Name of Power)* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> In this sense, rock is often validated in the discourse of authenticity by its ability to release the primal, to allow an essence of the primitive, the sexual, libidinal or racial to emerge that is presumed to have been repressed by, say, bourgeois and/or capitalist culture.

<sup>6</sup> The *No New York* compilation is an important example of the former approach to production. As Simon Reynolds writes: '(t)he sessions...bore barely a trace of the studio treatments and textural colorations for which Eno is famous', with the producer keen to preserve the 'raw' material. (Reynolds 2005: 59)

<sup>7</sup> This description of Irish music on the local/national scene was so commonplace that it became the alternative title for the documentary, *Out of Ireland: The Hit Songs and Artists of*

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*Irish Music* (d. David Heffernan, Daniel Productions in association with Radio Telefis Éireann, 2003) which explored the influence of Irish music internationally.

<sup>8</sup> Bono quoted from ‘U2 Talks Brian Eno, Daniel Lanois and Slane Castle: Interview’, AOL Music, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWnO25bBEy8>

<sup>9</sup> This ‘working-up’ of vocal tracks at the microphone is documented in the film, with Bono ‘feeling his way’ around the backing track, often not singing words as such. This approach – later to be termed Bongolese – where the words take shape in process at the microphone is an interesting example of the tension between the semantic and somatic. For discussion of this tension in the work of Van Morrison, see McLaughlin and McLoone 2008: 99-115.

<sup>10</sup> See Eno’s essay, ‘The Studio as Compositional Tool’ (Eno 2004) in which he elaborates on the importance of the mixing desk and multi-track recording for the non-musician and the very particular dynamic it established between critical listening and creative practice.

<sup>11</sup> As Simon Reynolds has observed, Eno undoubtedly had a considerable influence on the Edge’s guitar technique, drawing out and heightening the textural aspects of his playing: ‘On *The Unforgettable Fire*’, Reynolds writes, the Edge ‘blossomed into the guitarist-as-cinematographer’, blurring the lines between synthesiser and guitar. (Reynolds 2005:453). The Edge clearly benefitted from the producer’s reputation, in Reynolds’ words, as ‘texturologist par excellence’ (ibid xxii).

<sup>12</sup> Eno attended Ipswich Art School from 1964 to 1966 before moving to Winchester School of Art where he graduated in 1969. In fact, according to Frith and Horne, provincial and suburban art schools such as these played an especially prominent role in the emerging art/pop/rock interface, with art student/musicians feeding the 1960s live R & B and rock scenes. See Frith and Horne 1987: 73. See also Prendergast 1987:115-119 for a discussion of Eno’s early musical influences.

<sup>13</sup> The role of the producer as ‘studio intellectual’ is endorsed by Adam Clayton: ‘Eno is the person both Bono and Edge really connect with. Intellectually they can bounce ideas off him. Eno isn’t loyal to any philosophy for very long.’ (in Flanagan 1995:10).

<sup>14</sup> As an example of this, Eno writes in his diary: ‘Had a great time in Dublin – such a cultural beehive right now... Somehow the good humour and instinctive surrealism of the Irish equips them wonderfully to deal with post-modern culture. In a sense they’ve always been there (think of Joyce and Beckett) waiting for us [i.e. the English] to catch up’ (Eno 1996: 157) (second brackets added).

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## **Audio-visual Materials**

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