

# Apocalyptica Britannica: Themes of Critique, Nihilism, and Dystopia in Late 1970s Angular Post-Punk

Josie Garza Medina

## Introduction: The Boring (Punk) Dystopia

All around the world, a sense of despair has set in. A global pandemic announced the dawn of the 2020s, with its end never truly in sight and its repercussions including a worsening of the political reactionism of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and their peers; an uptick in the belief in outlandish conspiracy theories, many about COVID-19 and LGBTQIA+ people and containing anti-Semitic dog whistles; an onslaught of mass shootings in the United States of America; the launch of a disastrous war in Ukraine by the embittered and aging Vladimir Putin of Russia; an economic stagnation for many young and working class people, and a near-certain guarantee of death by climate change in the average person's foreseeable future. Though we in bourgeois nations amuse ourselves to death by playing *Fortnite*, shopping on Amazon, or even joining edgy Discord servers and sub-Reddits that pipeline us into extremism of both good and bad varieties, the collective human species finds its livelihood at risk, with many feeling we live in a "boring dystopia" of consumerism, death, and depression (*Fortnite* 2017).

This malaise is best expressed in the post-Brexit, post-Partygate, post-Elizabeth II United Kingdom through a revival of the post-punk sound that politicized and artistically flourished upon the sound of early punk during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bands like Squid, Dry Cleaning, Yard Act, and Black Country, New

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**Josie Garza Medina** (he/him/she/her) is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Texas A&M University – Kingsville. He is working on her master's thesis, "Modes of Gender Performance and Identity in Cyberpunk Media, with a Focus on CD Projekt Red's Cyberpunk 2077." She is also an editor at his university's literature journal, *The Javelina Express*. He has recently presented "When the Baron Is Sus: Creating 'The Baron' and His Mad Lore as a Coping Strategy During COVID-19" at the Northeast Modern Language Association Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, and "Cataloging the Queer American Theater: A Digital Project" at the CCTE/TCEA 2024 Conference in Denton, Texas.

Road have exculpated the rather anodyne rock scene of the 2010s and its milque-toast acts like Bon Iver and the National with their harsh, sharp guitar music and their irony-drenched lyrics (Squid 2021; Dry Cleaning 2021; Yard Act 2022; Black Country, New Road 2021, 2022). Though these bands are derived from a larger strain of political post-punk from the genre's original era, they are influenced, and indeed superseded, by the works of Gang of Four, This Heat, and Killing Joke. These three acts' respective albums, *Entertainment!*, *Deceit*, and *Killing Joke* captured a specific existential-political crisis of their time that bears unique resonance on the zeitgeist of the 2020s (Gang of Four 1979, This Heat 1981, Killing Joke 1980).

### **Angular Post-Punk During the Boring Dystopia of Thatcher**

A quick Google search for the definition of the word "angular" offers up a public domain Oxford Languages entry (Oxford Languages 2023). An angular "object, outline, or shape" is defined as "having angles or sharp corners," while an angular person is someone who moves in ways that are "awkward and jerky" which do "not [flow] smoothly" (Oxford Languages 2023). Punk music, a genre known for its squawky guitar sound and fast, scrappy method of musical performance, fits this former definition, while the latter definition applies to the stage presence of many early punk singers. The most notable example of an angular stage presence in punk, singer David Byrne of Talking Heads, is one that heavily influenced the post-punk look and sound, regardless of Talking Heads' presence as one of the original CBGB's era New York punk acts. Though the early Talking Heads LPs *Talking Heads: 77* and *More Songs About Buildings and Food* featured such culturally aware songs as "Psycho Killer" and "The Big Country," these LPs were not as specifically political as the works common to the post-punk milieu (Talking Heads 1977b, 1978b, 1977a, 1978a).

The angular signature of post-punk, coagulating in Great Britain in the summer of 1978 with the release of the Joy Division EP *An Ideal for Living* and the Siouxsie and the Banshees single "Hong Kong Garden," was political from the beginning (Joy Division 1978, Siouxsie and the Banshees 1978). *An Ideal for Living* featured a drawing of a young Hitler Youth member playing a marching drum on its cover; the band's name was likewise a Third Reich reference, a slang term for concentration camp brothels where Nazi service members and privileged figures like Kapos and Sonderkommandos could have sex with trafficked camp prisoners (Borowski 1976). In a different vein of political commentary, "Hong Kong Garden" vividly described the rapidly globalizing city on the Chinese coast with a latent critique of its new economic reality and its meaning for a changing world (Siouxsie and the Banshees 1978).

The particularities of these works' politics did not exist in a vacuum, but rather, reflected the increasing shift of the British Overton window towards the

right. The late 1970s saw the rise of the neoliberal Conservative Party Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, elected to office a year before the election of her American ideological peer, President Ronald Reagan of the Republican Party. This one-two punch of economically neoliberal, socially conservative governance of the two most prominent nations in the Western world coincided with the decline of the punk movement in mainstream culture and the rise of new wave, a commercially accessible take on both punk and the mostly underground post-punk scene. A similar one-two punch towards the right in recent years, involving the elections of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, has led to a reverse-order rise in the popularity of punk and post-punk sounds in the British musical mainstream. The “post-Brexit-wave” sound defined by Matthew Perpetua in a 2021 NPR article, with its “U.K. bands that kinda talk-sing over post-punk music ... sometimes ... more like post-rock” and their “unmistakable feeling of shame, disappointment and pessimism about Britain's future,” heavily mirror the sound and vibe of political post-punk acts like Gang of Four, The Pop Group, This Heat, The Slits, Killing Joke, Public Image Ltd, and to a lesser extent, Wire and Japan (Perpetua 2021).

### ***Entertainment!* and the New New Left**

The clearest connecting line between the new ennui of the age of post-Brexit-core punk and the lyrical rage of older post-punk can be seen in the works of Gang of Four, an explicitly Marxist post-punk act whose funk-infused angularity has influenced many acts prior to the Brexit era, most notably Red Hot Chili Peppers and Rage Against the Machine. A revival of Marxism in the West, seen in the rising popularity of left-wing populist politicians like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, and the growth in influence of leftist YouTubers like Vaush, ContraPoints, and the controversial Caleb Maupin, has shown the relevance and continued currency of Marxist dialectic in the post-Soviet era (Vaush 2019, Wynn 2011, Maupin 2008). Though Gang of Four were an early Marxist band in the post-punk scene, they also presaged current discourses about gender and masculinity in the Left, most notably in their songs “Contract” and “Guns Before Butter.” The former, about the impotence of a man and woman in both their sexual and romantic lives, contrasts tabloid love to the reality of a marriage falling apart. “You dreamed of scenes / like you read of in magazines,” mocks the jaded narrator, who asks his partner “is this really the way it is / or a contract in our mutual interest” (Gang of Four 1979b).

Impotence is emblematic of alienation under capitalism, a symbol of the false ideal of masculinity, yet Gang of Four also criticized the myth of the strong, masculine, male proletariat in “Guns Before Butter.” “All this talk of blood and iron / Is the cause of all my shaking,” says the anti-war, subtly pro-femininity narrator of this song, which reminds the listener that the myth of masculine proletarianism can easily be retooled to make its believers into fascists (Gang of Four 1979d).

“The fatherland’s no place to die for,” he says, in a lyric that echoes and flips the barroom conflict between the emotionally disturbed, newly fascist Franz Biberkopf and his former friends in the Communist Party in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s miniseries *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Fassbinder 1980). “It makes me want to run out shaking ... If men are only blood and iron / O Doctor, Doctor, what’s in my shirt?” This use of a rhetorical question, directed at the listener-audience, once again confronts the listener by placing them in the role of a character in the song’s diegesis, the patriarchal “doctor” of an examining board or military hospital. Gang of Four refuses us the right to have “some sand to hide [our] head in” like an ostrich, requiring us to confront the dual issues of masculine aggression’s inevitable leadup to war and conflict, and how the emphasis on masculinity in proletarian cultures can degrade men’s souls (not unlike Aimé Césaire’s dialectical critique of the degradation colonialism brings on the colonizer) and oppress femininities (Césaire 2000).

“At Home He’s a Tourist” differs from these two songs in providing a Marxist critique of culture and acquisition rather than specifically gender roles (Gang of Four 1979a). The song has two characters, a male connoisseur who “fills his head with culture” and “gives himself an ulcer,” and a neoliberal woman who is “ambitious” and “accepts the [political] process.” The connoisseur overloads himself with art and cuisine, not unlike Michael Gambon’s gangster in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, or the restaurant customer whose gut explodes in *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*; in the process, he reduces art and beauty to a vapid commodity, not unlike the patrons of the disco in the second half of the first verse (Greenaway 1989, Jones 1983). In a uniquely late 1970s lyric, Gang of Four describes the process of courtship and mating in a discotheque at a time when disco music was associated with vapidness and emptiness. Combined with the paradox of sexual freedom without the fulfillment of reproduction, the disco is the locus of the dance motif that winds in and around the song, symbolizing the new vapidness under Thatcherism. The neoliberal woman of the second verse, symbolic of the traitors to 1960s revolt like the yuppies who embraced Thatcher and Reagan while supporting a watered-down feminism and rejecting anti-capitalism, is part of the Machiavellian “one percent” that the punk era stood against. The Thatcherite vapidness and corporatization of culture embodied by the neoliberal woman and the connoisseur man are deeply disconnected from social realities seen in such first-wave political punk songs as “Career Opportunities” and “Lost in the Supermarket” by The Clash (Clash 1979, Clash 1977). One can see the similarity between Gang of Four’s sound and lyrics and some of the post-Brexit post-punk acts’ political punk, such as Squid and their alienation anthem “G.S.K.” (Squid 2021b).

### Go to Sleep: *Deceit* and Nuclear Conflagration

“Ignorance is bliss,” said Orwell in *1984* (Orwell 1949). His statement is echoed in This Heat’s “Sleep,” where the chorus of “Sleep, sleep, sleep, go to sleep,” builds on the theme of consumer alienation in “Lost in the Supermarket” (This Heat 1981c, Clash 1979). Consumers of the late 1970s and early 1980s were taken in by the false promise of Thatcher and Reagan to forget the Cold War, shop, and ignore the threat of nuclear holocaust. The “stimulus and response” of a world of Pavlov-inspired technocrats and the ignorance of shimmering death is the subject of *Deceit*, the definitive album about nuclear war. It is, sadly, still relevant to our era, where false choice glazes our eyes to the implications of the war between Russia and Ukraine that threatens a global conflagration. “Comfort” and “success on a plate for you, endless promises” is the order of both 1981 and 2023, and though This Heat’s masterpiece was written with conflict between Reagan and Gorbachev, not Biden and Putin, in mind, it speaks plainly about the role of a Western superiority complex in the old and new end times (This Heat 1981a). “S.P.Q.R.” builds on “Sleep” by locating the threat of the bomb in the Western scientific tradition. Its intro, consisting of Latin verb conjugations of “love,” leads into a mockery of Eurocentrism and European brotherhood.

Comparing the nuclear age to the fall of the Roman Empire and comparing our white supremacist sense of technological “progress” and “superiority” with the imperialist global destruction it has led to, “S.P.Q.R.” destroys the tautological rationalism of 20<sup>th</sup> century science (This Heat 1981b). “Two plus two equals four, four plus four equals eight,” as we find our worth and meaning in false scarcity and isolationism. There will always be winners and losers, “I got mine, fuck you,” say the deceived under Thatcherism. Cloaked in “imperial purple” luxury, living in a “Pax Romana” easily overthrown (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq), and “suckled by a she-wolf” named Maggie, we “turn against our brother.” Internationalism loses to money and exploitation. The second refrain speaks it loudly for all to hear: “Bella, bella, bella / Bellorum, bellis, bellis / Veni, Vidi, vici / I came, I saw, I conquered;” war, conquest, and pillage. Like the artificial intelligence engineers who expected *Oppenheimer* to be more like the *Avengers* than *Schindler’s List*, our techno-tautologies and imperialist blinders leave us in Orwellian dystopia haunted by the specter of conflagration, without even the consciousness that danger is at the door (Gault 2023, Nolan 2023, Whedon 2012, Spielberg 1993).

### No New War: *Killing Joke*

Anti-war activism certainly existed in multiple contexts in 1980s music, for example, the No Nukes benefit concerts and the surprise German new wave hit “99 Luftballons” by Nena (various 1979, Nena 1983). Our current anti-war debates exist in multiple contexts – specifically, the discord over intervention in Ukraine

that has allied some members of the far left with the right, and the refusal of many young Americans to serve in the military regardless of the nation's enemy. Killing Joke, the post-punk act whose staccato intonation of lyrics and funk guitar angularity a la Gang of Four gave their anti-war, proletarian sound a boldness worthy of their bleak name, created a truly hopeful anti-war post punk song on their first self-titled album in 1980 (Killing Joke 1980a). "Requiem," with its title echoing Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and its own basis in the traditional mass for the dead, has minimal lyrics but takes great advantage of that lyrical brevity (Killing Joke 1980b, Britten 1961-1962). Opening with a "man watching video," assumedly on the new toy of MTV, the corporate music network, an ambiguous second line, "the clock keeps on ticking" contrasts the clock that ticks away the hours of the man's workday and life with the doomsday clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists ("Doomsday Clock" 2023). "He doesn't know why" he works or dies, "he's just cattle for slaughter." Here again is the motif of the political, angular post-punk of early Thatcherite Britain, alienation of the working and middle classes caused by capitalist reality and its illusions. The second verse, "when the meaningful words / when they cease to function / when there's nothing to say / when will it start bothering you?" reflects the ennui and boredom of the stasis and corporate postmodernity of the 1980s onto those who are made "woke," for lack of a better term, by post-punk and the terrible beauty and duality of the requiem. The third verse specifies this call to action within the context of liberation theology: "only a hint of religion / uncensors to its false depravity," contrasting the falsehoods and pieties of orthodox state religion and politics with those of revolutionary figures like Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu, not to mention secular revolutionaries. All this conflict, all this simmering rejection of the status of the oppressed proletariat in a pre-nuclear holocaust state of ennui and alienation, finally explodes in "the sound of breaking glass," "a reflection..." of the broader society.

### **Conclusion: (Angular) Post-Punk's Not Dead**

These three texts of angular post-punk – the Marxist dialectics of *Entertainment!*, the anti-nuclear activism of *Deceit*, and the agitprop of *Killing Joke* – speak to us from an earlier time of struggle, despair, and dystopia to offer a punk sound and ethic that awakens us to bleak political realities while offering small glimmers of hope through struggle and consciousness. Though post-Brexit post-punk has yet to find its equivalent on American shores, it will be interesting to see if acts like Squid and Black Country, New Road are copied and improved upon by musicians in this country. If so, these new post-punks would do well to listen to these three classic albums to develop a style and methodology of giving voice to 2020s-specific concerns, through the angular sound and perspective that sustained punk in the dystopian era of Thatcher and Reagan.

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