'Grime' music video production as radical ethno-cartography
'Can't Wait Till This Day's Ours' (MC Nyja 2017)

Orson Nava

Abstract

In this article I draw on theoretical paradigms from the studies of the cultural industries and ethno-cartography to examine grime music's status as a micro-creative industries sector, in which music video production operates an as a system of radical counter-mapping that challenges hegemonic systems of spatial control. In a time of increased post-Brexit nationalism, BLM and heightened levels of racial exclusion in the media industries the grime music sector represents a space of contestation, where moving image technologies are deployed by young black creatives to claim urban space and disrupt the managerial processes of the post-industrial 'creative city'. In my analysis, these music video texts are not simply 'produced' out of a particular physical context but also operate to metonymically anchor their producers in the urban topography they inhabit. It is this imperative that has powered the growth of grime as a youth culture and fueled its creative disruption, as both a semi-autonomous cultural industries sector and as a set of transgressive symbolic practices.

'With grime there's no limits.. you can be yourself, that's freedom of speech innit'

MC Nyja 2019[1]

Since its emergence at the beginning of the millennium UK grime music has been represented as both a threatening criminal counterculture,[2] and as an exemplar of entrepreneurialism and creativity.[3] In this article my aim is to explore grime culture's enabling potential, both as a creative industries sector that contests dominant systems of ownership and control, and as an instrument of radical ethno-cartography through which racialised subjects can lay claim to urban space.

The concept of ethno-cartography has predominantly been identified with indigenous rural communities and their contestation of colonial or corporatised systems of spatial regulation, often with an emphasis on sustainable environmental development and participatory communal mapping processes.[4] As an ethnographic discourse or model, it has not been widely applied to diaspora communities in an urban setting. As a conceptual paradigm it may be considered potentially problematic in that, like other ethnographic approaches, it can operate to 'other' its analytical subjects and centre the Eurocentric position from which 'they' are viewed,[5] and is a product of an academic discipline that has historically operated as an instrument of colonial governance.[6] However, despite that, in its more critically informed contemporary iteration,[7] it may still have value as a way of understanding how processes of mapping and spatial regulation

can become the site of racialised domination and contestation. In this way its application as a conceptual framework to the representational practices of black urban youth cultures such as grime may offer insight into its radical and enabling potential.

Grime music originally emerged out of the housing estates of Bow, Poplar and Mile End in East London and has been described as akin to Punk Rock music[8] because of its avowedly 'do it yourself' ethos, and anarchic energy. It's typically characterised by sparse stripped-down production and often territorial and confrontational lyrics, all delivered with a defiantly British accent. As a musical form grime echoes earlier diasporic musical forms such American hip-hop, UK garage and drum & bass, and also older British-Caribbean forms such as 'toasting' and reggae sound system collectives.[9] The music videos that accompany grime tracks often emphasise the shadows, brutalist municipal architecture and rough-hewn textures of the Victorian east end. In doing so they act as a deliberate aesthetic counterpoint to the sparkling hyper-reflective tropes of American hip-hop visual culture.[10]

In the early 2000's grime's direct musical predecessor, garage music, was driven underground after a widely reported series of shootings[11] at live events and the arrest of several members of the genres most commercially successful music collective, the So Solid Crew. Previous work has effectively explored how emerging black musical forms can be evacuated of both their radical potential and the loyalty of black consumers when they are appropriated and commercialised by the mainstream music industry.[12] However, while this process might have played some role in the untimely demise of garage music, I would argue that it was more attributable to other factors. Rather than garage simply losing momentum it was the exploding moral panic around black music collectives, combined with the illegal music downloading crisis at the beginning of the millennium, that resulted in the commercial music industry's tactical disengagement from black British popular music. In this way grime music emerged at the intersection between stringent forms of exclusion and risk management on the part of the commercial music industry, and the increased availability of low-cost video production equipment and distribution platforms.

The disengagement of mainstream commercial sectors with vernacular black music cultures in the early 2000s, led by necessity to a remarkable level of economic self-sufficiency in the grime music sector.[13] Grime music's initial consolidation as a significant cultural phenomenon in east London, and online on dedicated websites (such as GRM Daily ,[14] Link Up TV,[15] and SBTV),[16] was made possible by the increasing availability of low-cost digital video cameras, especially DSLR cameras, and non-linear editing software like Final Cut Pro and Premiere Pro that could run on domestic PCs. These affordable technologies facilitated the formation of a DIY independent music video production sector linked to the subcultural music scene. This process mirrored the impact of an earlier shift in music production technologies where PC based software like Q-base, Session 8 and others heralded the home-recording revolution of the 1980s.[17] However, in this later cultural iteration in the early 2000's the availability of low-cost HD video cameras and non-linear editing software added a significant new dimension by enabling the emergence of a vibrant moving image sector that could augment the music production. The other transformational shift came in the form of the distribution platforms provided by the internet. The music videos produced using these newly available production technologies could now be streamed to a global audience numbering hundreds of thousands, and sometimes millions over the internet, and in doing so bypass the need for institutional and economic support from record labels and terrestrial television broadcasters. Hit underground

grime music videos by music collectives Such as Roll Deep[18] Ruff Squad[19] and More Fire Crew[20] were early exemplars of the enabling potential of these emerging technologies.

I would argue the creation of a multimedia micro-creative industry sector, including digital music video production and web distribution, is one of the defining characteristics of grime as a youth subculture. Other subcultures have of course been defined by distinctive patterns of cultural consumption and been identified with particular musical genres -- Teddy Boys with rock and roll, Mods with soul music, Skinheads with ska etc.[21] -- but it is rare that the mechanical production and distribution of these musical forms have been so central to a subculture, and even more exceptional that the production of moving image texts (music videos) should be such an identifying feature of that milieu.

On its surface grime culture might seem like the 'mechanism of semantic disorder' par excellence.[22] However, as Joy White points out it's apparently concussive and conflictual signifying practices belie what is often a highly structured system of production, distribution and internal regulation.[23] Early independent grime producers succeeded in wresting the means of symbolic production away from the record labels and broadcasters to create a production sphere of remarkable creativity and cultural autonomy. In some senses the grime music scene might even be characterised as an ideal template for the creative industries as a whole. Grime music 'crews' tend to be flat, cellular, web savvy cultural collectives that can mobilise consumer loyalty and skilfully deploy digital technology to monetise their own 'subcultural capital'.[24] However, while grime music crews might represent an innovative and agile model of creative entrepreneurialism, well-tailored to the online era, they have still often been regarded with trepidation by the commercial music industry. Despite the success of solo artist such as Dizzy Rascal, Kano and Stormzy, grime music collectives composed of multiple members remain largely consigned to highly localised underground music sectors, rather than the commercial mainstream.

Grime's collectivist ethos and embeddedness in the local have been at the core of its development as a musical and moving image culture. More than with other musical forms, I would argue, a particular type of spatial cartography is central to the visual aesthetic of grime music videos. These videos often operate as a form of audio-visual 'deixis' whereby MCs (rappers) spatially position themselves in the urban topography and mark out collective affiliations and micro territorialisms. The high-rise, the street, the crew have become the staple visual grammar of the grime video. As well as acting to anchor their producers in particular urban spaces this approach is also highly pragmatic given the prohibitive costs of studio or special effects-based productions, and the relative availability of urban exterior locations. The use of DSLR cameras, available lighting, handheld camera work, and easily accessed locations such as housing estates, underpasses and basketball cages has contributed to the creation of a distinctively recognizable visual style. One within which the use of identifiable locations clearly marks the out the geographic location or 'endz' from which the artist hails. While hip-hop music videos often combine markers of 'authenticity' such as the neighbourhood from which the artist comes, with aspirational props such as luxury cars and houses grime music videos often eschew these materialistic excesses in favour of a more 'realist' semi-documentary approach to the artists lives and locality.[25] As Lee Barron states 'Grimes back-catalogues of recorded material represents a documentary legacy of urban commentary' and constitutes a valid form of participant ethnography.[26]

In his work, 'Music, Media and Urban Mythscapes', Andy Bennet cautions against an overly deterministic notion of music as a transparent reflection of its producer's physical locale and everyday lived reality.[27] For Bennet 'an urban mythscape' is constituted by discourse, representation and the perception of consumers, and often misleadingly links musicians and performers to the geographic space out of which they emerged. It is a view of 'musical space' as constructed, consumed and understood through other fictive and romantic systems of representations, discourses and forms of symbolic production.

> Decontextualized images and information are recontextualized by audiences into new ways of thinking about and imagining places – the result of which is a mythscape.[28]

Bennet's analysis is undoubtably valid in a general sense, however in the case of grime it is nearly impossible to separate its evolution as a musical and visual form from its relationship to local urban space and the ethnographic impulse. While grime artists may well be constructing musical 'mythscapes', they are doing so in a way that is deliberately operationalised to mark out and symbolically claim physical urban space, and contest existing racialised hierarchies, institutional structures and urban power relations. This process operates both in contradistinction to hegemonic space and also in relation to competitive micro-territorialisms vis-a-vis other grime crews. In this conception the representational practices of grime artist, are intimately linked to their physical context of production, and can be seen as a compensatory response, in the form of both auto-ethnography and fantasy, to structures of exclusion, and a precarious sense of ownership when it comes to urban space. This spatial precarity is most clearly visible in the way grime artists have been systematically prevented from performing in live music venues by the metropolitan police's strategic application of their notorious 696 health and safety form, which they used tactically to shut down events featuring grime music artist and force them further underground. Seen this way urban space becomes a site of struggle for symbolic ownership, one in which grime music, and grime music videos in particular, operate as indexical tools that metonymically anchor the identities of its young, predominantly black exponents to particular streets and physical structures in the urban topography they inhabit, a kind territorialised multimedia version of graffiti 'tagging' if you like. In this way, like graffiti art, grime music video production constitutes:

> 'a 'claim to urban space', an intervention in the practice of everyday urban life that attempts to make and use urban space to represent more than merely the interests of capital, finance or institutional power.'[29]

I would argue that the way East London functions as a locational resource, a set of signifying practices, and a physical context of production for grime music and music videos mirrors the role Brooklyn plays in relation to American hip-hop. In both cases the local urban topography becomes both a literal and symbolic asset for it black diaspora populations. One that they can deploy to contest hegemonic representations of the city. In her book, 'Naked City', Sharon Zukin examines Brooklyn and the way it has operated as a semantic reservoir for African American rappers who celebrated its authenticity and 'grittiness' through their music.[30] She also looks at how it served a similar purpose for black filmmaker Spike Lee who transformed it into a cinematic trope that stood in for a broader sense of the African American community and 'brought the boroughs gritty black neighbourhoods into the virtual core of popular culture'.[31] Zukin's view of hip hop and the films of Spike Lee is similar to my understanding of grime music tracks and music videos. In this framing these creative forms utilise urban space as a

symbolic resource, and function as mapping technologies that link specific physical locations to particular artists, and more generally to a generic sense of 'place' and communal identity. However, significantly Zukin does also point out that:

> Black Brooklyn neighbourhoods do not benefit from the growth machine of cultural production. Though they are the birthplace of rappers they don't have the critical cluster of clubs, radio stations, cable access tv stations, record labels, and mix tape producers that supports Manhattan's hip-hop music industry.[32]

In this sense while it may operate as a representational trope or 'brand' Brooklyn it does not contain enough actual production infrastructure to truly constitute a black creative hub. This is relevant in that it indicates that access to the actual physical means of symbolic production is critical for black creative producers, and that access to a form of locational cultural capital existing solely on the level of representation is not sufficient in itself. This is why the proliferation of low-cost digital technologies was the crucial component in transforming the multi-racial East End of London into, not simply a symbolic resource or musical 'mythscape', but an actual factory of subcultural moving image production.

My framing implies that the creation of visual texts may be more concretely anchored in physical space and the machinery of symbolic production located there, than the oft cited concept of the 'floating signifier' might suggest.[33] This conceptualisation, in which systems of signification bear a largely arbitrary connection to their material referents, can be useful in disrupting the notion of a transparent, innocent, directly causal relation between a material 'reality' and the means through which it is represented. However, it may also limit our understanding of how representational strategies can emerge out of certain specific spatial contexts and can themselves be deployed instrumentally to condition the subject's relationship to those physical spaces. In this way grime's representational practices, imagined tropes and myths, can be understood as tools through which the 'real' is structured and claimed, and the physical urban topography rendered meaningful and habitable. An analogous, though far less counter-hegemonic function, might be attributed to the American 'Western' where the 'wild' (as opposed to highly managed urban or rural space) is semantically claimed and occupied through a set of fictive mythologised tropes. In this way the 'Western' film genre operates as a technology of retrospective symbolic occupation in the service of white settler colonialism. In the case of grime music however these forms of radical ethno-cartography act to contest hegemonic systems of spatial regulation and ownership in an urban setting. They lay claim to urban spaces which are, in actuality, owned and controlled by international capital, local government, the police and private property owners far more than they are by the young grime artists themselves. This does not however prevent grime artists from incorporating those urban spaces into their own audio-visual texts, and in doing so taking symbolic possession of them.

Seen this way grime's aesthetic form can work as a locational device that situates its producers in the urban topography and can also act as a system of semantic resistance that disrupts normative symbolic regimes and contest the processes of 'spatial purification' through which racialised minorities are expunged from urban space.[34] MC Nyja who features in my documentary *Multicology?*[35] describes grime music as 'gutter,' a description that seems to consciously celebrate the symbolic dissonance of its 'grimey' visual and musical tropes.[36] It is a conception of grime in profound semantic opposition to any 'sanitising' system of spatial regulation that might be imposed on it by the dominant culture, commercial music industry or the police.

This is not to say grime music videos act as an overly literal form of cartography. Their mapping processes are intertwined with forms of fantasy and imagination, but they are none the less spatial claims and orientations that position their subjects in the urban topography. These countermapping operations can be viewed in antagonistic (though sometimes dialogic) relation to the mainstream media reporting and draconian policing strategies that they have been used to contest and subvert.[37]

Cultural theorists Sarah Thornton critiqued the application of traditional media moral panics theory to dance music, arguing these panics can in fact imbue counter cultural music sectors with 'subcultural capital' that add to their status.[38] However, as she herself admits, her account primarily relates to 'the cultural worlds of the white majority' and that 'despite the fact that black and white youth cultures share many of the same attitudes and some of the same music, race is still a conspicuous divider'.[39] It is clear, as Thornton states, that divides do exist between black and white youth subcultures. However, I would argue the most significant distinction between them lies not in the areas of musical taste and attitudes but in the societal and police response to them.

In the case of the grime sector, while some grime crews might have reveled in their notoriety, the forms of policing and regulation have been far more stringent and aggressive than those applied to other subcultural music scenes. Any 'subcultural capital' that grime crews might have derived from their renegade status has largely been counteracted by the forms of state media censure, police surveillance and spatial regulation that have been imposed on the grime scene over the last two decades. These media and, state and policing strategies have been animated by visceral anxieties not targeted at white youth subcultures and their impact has been more dramatic.

Media reporting and police regulation have consistently operated to demonise and criminalise the grime music sector by conflating grime crews with street gangs.[40] Over the last fifteen years the metropolitan police have engaged in an unprecedented form of spatial regulation and informal cultural censorship through their use of the 696 health and safety form.[41] While no longer in use this procedure was deployed selectively by the metropolitan police force to close down grime music venues thereby making live performance impossible. This process effectively displaced the grime music scene out of urban music venues and onto dedicated websites. These virtual enclaves were both enabling and delimiting for grime artist in that it allowed them to access global audiences without the participation of major record labels and broadcasters, while simultaneously testifying to their spatialised displacement from the city, and live music venues in particular. This process has created online versions of what Foucault termed 'heterotopias', i.e. strictly demarcated physical or virtual spaces which the subject could inhabit and where they could see themselves reflected, but which powerfully and symbolically attest to their enforced absence from everyday society.[42] Foucault perceived these heterotopic spaces as having a potentially counter hegemonic function in that they reflect and yet disrupt the normative values of the worlds that exist outside them. He describes them 'As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live'.[43] Heterotopias, in this sense operate as a technology for the expulsion of the 'abject', the disruptive and the untenable, from hegemonic space, but also one in which normative values could sometimes be challenged. In this way dedicated grime music websites such as GRM Daily, SBTV and Linkup TV have historically operated as sites of creative contestation but also as evidence of grime's exclusion from the commercial media sectors and from hegemonic urban space itself.

These processes of spatial regulation and exclusion do in some areas, appear to be abating. After more than decade of opposition from the grime community the grip of the 696 form over artists' opportunities to perform in live music venues has weakened.[44] However, the 'heterotopic' online world of grime music videos remains a site of moral censure and anxiety, and this has been aggravated by the growth of highly confrontational and territorial 'drill' music videos on the web and the Metropolitan police forces' attempt to censor them.[45]

Current representations of grime music remain ambivalent. On the one hand underground grime music collectives remain demonised, threatening and the subjects of intense police scrutiny and regulation, not just in physical space but also in virtual online space. On the other hand, individual solo grime music artists like Dizzy Rascal, Kano and now most notably Stormzy have penetrated the 'mainstream' to be signed by major labels and achieve commercial chart success. This has created a split both in terms of the economic structures of grime music production andalso the way it is perceived in popular culture. There is a growing representational disjuncture between 'good' acceptable individual grime artists and unacceptable dangerous and threatening collectives who are conflated with criminal 'gangs' in the minds of many record executives, police officers and broadcasters. Thus, success in the commercial sector for grime artist becomes synonymous with individuation, with the shedding of collective affiliations, and the abandonment of the 'crew'. This mirrors the decollectivised precarity of cultural labour in general and testifies to the way an atomised labour force can be more easily managed by the commercial creative industries. According to Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton:

> Neo-liberal capitalism has destroyed many independent structures of production and distribution during recent years with the relatively frictionless integration of subcultural capital into the cultural industries.[46]

However, despite ostensibly reproducing normative structures of entrepreneurial enterprise grime, in its collectivised rather than its individuated form, has remained stubbornly indigestible for the 'mainstream' commercial music industry. Unlike the East London 'Asian underground' music scene of the 1990's that Anamik Saha,[47] refers to in his work on the post-colonial creative industries grime has rarely been the subject of an 'exotising' gaze, that renders it seductively marketable. It has more often been viewed with anxious reticence by major record labels. That is not to say it has never been the subject of fetishising processes, only that it has more often been characterised as just too menacing, destabilising and fundamentally risky to be easily assimilated or commoditised by the mainstream cultural industries.

Grime's commercial exploitation by major commercial record labels has been an ambivalent process. Key to understanding this process is an awareness of how black cultural forms can be treated by the commercial creative industries as both economically 'risky,' and also sometimes useful for mitigating economic risk. David Hesmondhalgh identifies the cultural industries as capital-intensive high-risk sectors that utilise existing genres and acknowledged stars as devices to reduce the intrinsic financial hazards entailed in these forms of industrial production.[48] It is within this framework that black genres, producers and performers have typically been characterised as 'high risk' in that they embody 'minority' cultural interests and may not appeal to a mass market. Hesmondhalgh identifies how black musical forms can be prone to appropriation and exploitation on their journey to the 'mainstream' however this analysis can be further extended to understand how these processes operate as forms of risk mitigation akin to the use of familiar genres, stars and narratives in the commercial cultural industries.[49] In this

framing the creative sectors will often harvest, and mass produce cultural forms that have already been field tested in subcultural or BAME communities as a technique for minimizing the intrinsic riskiness of the new. Seen this way black subcultural creative sectors effectively operate as unfunded research and development laboratories or pilot zones for the commercial industries. As demonstrated historically with musical forms such Jazz and the blues the cultural products that have emerged out of these black creative industries sectors are often most effectively exploited commercially when they are uncoupled from their original context of production.[50] In the case of grime this has meant extracting the music's formal and generic characteristics from economic structures and collectivist affiliations that generated them in the first place, or as Perry Hall puts it 'separating aesthetic innovation from its experiential context'.[51] Within this framework semi-autonomous cultural sectors like the grime scene, that maintain ownership and control of the 'means of symbolic production' and the intellectual property it produces, can present a potentially disruptive obstacle to this 'top down' form of economic expropriation.

However, while often considered disruptive and threatening, I think it is fair to say that grime music is not inherently political or radically counter-cultural. In many ways, like commercial American hip-hop, it often uncritically reproduces the forms of capitalist free enterprise and entrepreneurialism that dominate more mainstream modes of commercial cultural production.[52] However, while it is clearly the case that cultural difference can be commoditised and interpolated into capitalist structures of commerce and relations of production, I would argue that cultural and racial hierarchies intervene to distinguish black forms of capitalist free enterprise from their equivalents in the normative 'white' enterprise economy. This might be considered analogous to gun ownership in the USA. While it may be considered part of a hegemonic conservative ideology, when practised by racialised minorities it become threatening and disruptive to existing power relations and has historically been the subject of comparatively greater regulation and control.[53] In this context capitalist free enterprise and company ownership, when exercised by black working-class communities and individuals, can also be regarded as radical in that it contests racialised forms of economic dominance. This is not to say that it is always emancipatory or that it cannot itself reproduce forms of economic exploitation, but rather that, within existing power relations, which are produced not only through economic structures but also racialised cultural hierarchies, these forms of enterprises can be considered different to, and sometimes incommensurate with, other forms of 'normative' capitalist free enterprise.

In addition to disruptive subcultural racialised capitalist free enterprise grime 'crews' also represent collectivised cultural practices. This is in marked contrast to the typically individuated precarious nature of most cultural labour, and in some ways harks back to the organised labour movements and collectivised radical political arts groups of the sixties and seventies.[54] Unlike those movements, however, grime's cultural activity is framed within a capitalist entrepreneurial framework geared towards the creation of semi-autonomous production sectors and the localised re-appropriation of the means of symbolic production, rather than broader structural change. Historically grime culture has not generally been wedded to broader radical ideological campaigns. However, despite this, in more recent years, grime has emerged as a site of political activism, personified in JME's support for Jeremy Corbyn and the 2017 'Grime for Corbyn' campaign.[55] This, along with MC Stormzy's criticism of the government's treatment of the Grenfell fire survivors at the 2018 Brit awards,[56] his criticism of Boris Johnson when headlining the Glastonbury festival,[57] and the grime community's success in forcing the Mayor's office to put an end to the Metropolitan police's use of the 696 form,[58] suggests the potential for grime to operate as a significant radical political force in a contemporary British context.

In a time of increased marginality within post Brexit nationalism and heightened levels of racial exclusion in the media industries the grime music sector represents a space of contestation, whereby emerging moving image technologies including low-cost video cameras, PC based editing software and internet platforms as are strategically deployed to claim urban space and disrupt the hegemonic managerial processes of the post-industrial 'creative city'.[59] These representational practices re-purpose dominant tropes and moral panics to self-consciously celebrate grime's status as abject, threatening and undermining of symbolic systems of regulation and 'spatial purification'. They also represent the construction of a vibrant autonomous majority black micro-creative industries sector that challenge the forms of racial and class-based exclusion prevalent in their normative commercial equivalent.

Overall, an analysis of grime music and music video highlights the usefulness of a conceptual approach where representational practices are viewed as inextricably entwined with the spatial relations out of which they emerge. In this sense film and music texts are not just 'produced' out of a particular physical context of but also act to symbolically anchor the texts producers in the spatial topography they inhabit. It is this imperative that has powered the growth of grime as a youth culture and fueled its creative disruption, as both a semi-autonomous micro cultural industries sector and as a system of radical countermapping.

Author

Dr Nava's PhD research at the University of East London focussed on Race, Innovation and the Creative Industries lead regeneration of East London. Prior to his doctoral studies he worked as a freelance director making dramas and documentaries for the BBC, C4 and ITV and music videos for record labels including Polydor, EMI and Island Records. During this time, he directed music videos for UK garage artists including Harvey from So Solid Crew, Pluto, Ladies First, Roundsounds, and Felon. Later, working in East London's underground grime music scene, he made videos for artist including Bombsquad, Mercston, Ghetts, and Lightnin' and Tension. Dr Nava has lectured in film production at MA and Undergraduate level at Sheffield Hallam University, Middlesex University, Central Film School, Ravensbourne University, the University of East London and London Film School. He is a graduate of the Northern Media School and The National Film and Television School and is a visiting fellow at the Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London.

Notes

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