Changing Ambivalences
Exploring Corporate Sponsorship in the New Culturally Diverse Artistic Practices

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This article explores the commodification of difference in relation to the corporate sponsorship of the photography exhibition, Changing Faces. At first the article considers how the exhibition’s collection of images of British Asian youth challenged stereotypical representations of Asian youth cultures, but then argues that this counter-hegemonic potential was undermined by the corporate sponsorship of telecommunications company 02. Yet that is not to say that the ethics of such explicit commerciality are immediately guaranteed; instead, there is the suggestion that the epistemological outcomes were much more complex. Indeed, the article adopts a cultural economy approach that shifts from dialectical political economy models of the culture industry and stresses the elaborate and entangled relations through which the production of culture is mediated. This article argues that it is only when these micro-processes are identified and then situated within the wider logic of global capitalism that the ethical implications of the corporate intervention in the culturally diverse arts can be more effectively ascertained.

The idea behind Presstop Creatives was to set up an agency or a marketing consultancy that brings a brand and a community together. Basically what I do is look at niche markets. I seek gaps in the market, I look at brands and see what they are promoting—whether it’s a product or a service. I try to bring them together in a very interactive way, in a very innovative way, and it always revolves around events that will create lots of column inches. I aim to get a lot of press around events which will then be a good brand association for them and will eventually lead into quantifying their results with sales. (Shazia Nizam, founder of Presstop Creatives)

This is not a gritty exposé, nor another dip into ‘eastern mysticism’ or the exotic. It will not reek of colonialism or stereotypical images using only flowing fabrics or food. O2 Changing Faces documents real-life images of an under-represented subculture, whose transition through oppression to empowerment has shaped their identities and bettered their life experience. (Press release of the O2 Changing Faces exhibition)

Today with globalization in full swing, telecommunicative informatics taps the Native Informant directly in the name of indigenous knowledge. (Spivak 1999: ix)

Changing Faces was an interactive photography exhibition that documented the lives of second- and third-generation Asian youth in Britain from the 1970s to the present day.
I visited the exhibition during its two-week run (25 July to 8 August 2003) at the Elms Lester Painting Rooms in central London, and found an extraordinarily diverse range of images that were both familiar (photos of packed weddings, domestic family scenes) and unanticipated (an Asian punk from 1977 with an uncanny resemblance to Sid Vicious, Asian teddy-boys with sharp suits and quiffs). As the press release stated, the central aim of Changing Faces was ‘celebrating British-born people from south Asia’. For the exhibition, the co-curators—marketing consultancy Presstop Creatives and cross-media agency MeWe—trawled through archives and commissioned new pieces that depicted the real lives of British Asian youths, with the sole focus on documentary images. The interactive element of the exhibition was derived from the exhibition’s sponsor, mobile communications company O2, and involved a numerical code or keyword printed next to certain photos alongside a phone number which the viewer could text on their mobile phone and receive SMS information about the photograph in question. Such texts would either inform the viewer about certain themes relevant to the photo such as ‘hijab’ or ‘Southall’, give information about the photographer, or describe the event occurring in the image.

The Changing Faces exhibition, in a certain sense, represented the quintessential post-colonial hybrid moment in the way it challenged racialized stereotypes of Asian youth in Britain. However, it was the explicit corporate involvement of O2 that disoriented my reading of the exhibition. As I found out shortly afterwards, the concept behind the exhibition originally emerged from conversations between O2 and marketing consultant Shazia Nizam of Presstop Creatives, an agency specializing in niche marketing, about a creative idea in which to market O2’s SMS service to the Asian community; the concept of a photography exhibition being one of many ideas that Nizam pitched to the company. In fact, Changing Faces was to become one of the first projects launched from O2’s new ‘ethnic communications strategy’ that detailed how the corporation would market to specific communities. Thus, from the corporation’s point of view, the aim of the exhibition was to promote the O2 brand to British Asians.

This article argues that the corporate agenda from which the exhibition was conceived created tensions between the ethical, aesthetic and epistemological, producing sources of ambivalence within the public sphere. Much has been written about the commodification of race and how the celebration of the post-colonial hybrid identity is itself part of the ‘logic of difference in global commodity capitalism’ (A. Sharma 1996: 25), and this point becomes more insistent when we see the frequency of which O2’s brand appears on the Changing Faces promotional material. However, there is a danger that such a view premature forecloses the political potential of the exhibition, which I believe is situated within an important anti-essentialist trajectory that begins with Stuart Hall’s (1996: 443) famous declaration of ‘the end of innocence… the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject’. Certainly,
the explicit corporate involvement forces us to ask questions about the relationship between
the economic, the aesthetic and the ethical. In order to unpack this, I held an in-depth inter-
view with Shazia Nizam of Presstop Creatives and considered the ways in which she described
her working relationship with O2, in terms of the effects (if any) the corporation had on the
actual creative processes, and in terms of broader issues of niche marketing and ‘ethnic’ mar-
kets. I will draw from the accounts produced in the interview throughout this article, which
will map my efforts to locate the sources of ambivalence that emerge from the corporate
sponsorship of Changing Faces.

SECOND GENERATION: THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION
AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF DIFFERENCE

Changing Faces followed in the same cultural ‘movement’ that began with what can be loosely
described as the ‘second generation’ moment that emerged in the mid-1990s. It is easy to be
cynical of the concept of second generation, especially when you consider its overuse in the
media, as a blanket term that refers to any young Asian who dares to do something against
the cultural norm. However, I wish to reclaim the concept and highlight how the ‘second
generation’ still articulates a specific cultural moment in the history of the South Asian
diaspora in the West, where the first generation of Asians born in the UK forced their way into
the mainstream and forged a (third) space from which to produce and invent new identities,
deconstructing essentialist perceptions of Asian-ness, and resisting prevailing culturalist
notions and regressive shifts to ethnic particularisms (S. Sharma 1996).

The story of Asian identity in Britain begins with silence, with Hall’s (1991) recognition
that the politicization of the term ‘black’, as a way of empowering people from all ethnic
backgrounds (which was vital to the anti-racist cause of the 1970s and 1980s), had the adverse
consequence of sidelining the particular experiences of Asian people. Subsequently, preceded
by a blatant absence in mainstream youth discourses, the emergence of bhangra in the 1980s
was a key moment for many young British Asians, as for the first time they had their own
unique form of expressive culture. However, as Sanjay Sharma (1996) describes, the bhangra
scene was unable to escape the neo-Orientalist white ethnocentric gaze of the media. As the
first visible British Asian musical expressive, bhangra inevitably suffered from essentialist
readings and became generalized as ‘Asian music for Asians’. For the Asian youth who did not
relate to bhangra, this celebration of the new Asian youth culture alienated them further.
And it was those who felt this alienation that were responsible for the emergence of ‘post-
bhangra’ musics which were aesthetically different to bhangra, underpinned by an attitude
that defiantly challenged the continued re-representation of Asian youth as ‘uncool’, studious and conformist (Huq 1996; Prashad 2000). The new music—whether the chilled-out drum and bass of Talvin Singh, or the lo-fi punk racket of Cornershop—was characterized by the fusion of Eastern musical reference points with Western popular music genres, and thus, for many, perfectly epitomized multicultural cosmopolitan Britain (despite the scene’s London-centric focus) and the newly-found confidence of British-born Asians. The moment of the second generation effectively performed the (anti) anti-essentialist strategy elaborated by Gilroy (1993), where the diverse range of influences and representations, whether purposely or not, at once deconstructed and exploded conceptions of Asian identity.

This notion of anti-essentialism was implicit in the production of Changing Faces. In Shazia Nizam’s view, representations of Asians were still limited, despite the progress made in recent years and the visibility attained by certain key figures. Thus, the purpose of Changing Faces was attempting to capture the broadest range of British Asian experiences visually, on both a spatial and temporal plane:

I had worked with a lot of Asian artists who had done well for themselves, from Nitin Sawhney, to Sanjeev [Bhaskar] and Meera [Syal], so I had seen those sorts of visual representations, but I guess it’s still really narrow. I still don’t think people knew what Asian youth culture was and what it meant; in fact what were their opinions of it? Were we still seen as submissive, people from the Dark Continent? (interview with Shazia Nizam, 13 July 2005)

Diversity was the central theme to the exhibition, made very clear in the selection of photos, from domestic scenes (families relaxing at home), to political protests (middle-aged Asian female workers on strike; Bangladeshi youth on anti-racist marches), to specific subcultures (Asian punks; gays and lesbians at Club Kali). Despite her reluctance to talk explicitly in terms of ‘politics’, I would argue that her views on using the exhibition to challenge existing perceptions and educate people articulated a different sense of cultural politics that—as I shall explain further in this article—echo the strategies outlined by Stuart Hall (1996):

It wasn’t set out to be a political statement, it was meant to be educational, informing and opening and inviting. I think if you use the word ‘political’ it’s a really stern word, and you’re basically becoming belligerent with that word and the point of the exhibition wasn’t that—it wasn’t meant to be a statement. It was to say, ‘This is a history, this is a history you don’t know about and it’s a really interesting and rich history.’ (interview with Shazia Nizam, 13 July 2005)
Certainly, the most positive reaction to come out of the exhibition for Nizam was the way in which it created a forum for inter-cultural exchange and for people to reflect on their own experiences as well as the achievements of South Asians in Britain in general:

What I really liked about this was that people were talking, engaging in conversation, dialogue was coming up.... It was really serving its purpose: people were reminiscing about their own childhoods, some people were like, ‘I never knew that happened.’ It was amazing that people were engaging in that dialogue and talking about it, and that for me showed me it was a real success. (interview with Shazia Nizam, 13 July 2005)

When translated through the language of post-colonial theory, the very strengths of second-generation moments such as Changing Faces lie in their inherently ‘hybrid’ qualities. I have already described how the new British Asian cultural forms can be typified by the ‘fusion’ of South Asian and Western influences. Changing Faces, in its visual depiction of Asian communities forging new spaces and identities within Britain, provided real stories of this cultural intermezzo in action. Interestingly, the curators of Changing Faces seemed well-versed in post-colonial discourses, as demonstrated in the quote from the exhibition’s press release that I used to open the paper. Certainly, this quote further highlights the ease with which one can map the counter-hegemonic potential of Changing Faces onto post-colonial models of resistance. If we consider Hall’s (1991) strategies of counter-politics—opposition to the given order, recovery of broken histories and the invention of appropriate narrative forms, locating a position from which to speak from—then Changing Faces appears to have ticked all the right boxes.

Indeed, the ability of the arts to produce counter-narratives that challenge dominant nationalist/neo-colonialist discourses has been a subject of interest for post-colonial theorists. For instance, Okwui Enwezor (2002), commenting on the Documenta 11 exhibition (of which he was artistic director), discusses how it was designed to unravel the spatial and temporal relationship between globalization and the postcolonial, and reveal new locales for resistance. Enwezor believes that the representation of the ‘nearness’ of the postcolonial as the dominant position from which to understand the present condition of globalization challenges ‘the narrow focus of western global optics’ (ibid.: 44). Similarly, Bhabha (1997) declares the ‘minoritisation’ of the arts, or the construction of a form of vernacular minority cosmopolitanism, as a crucial cultural strategy. For Bhabha, ‘minoritisation’ in this sense represents a new form of global citizenship and a way of forging solidarities, which has the effect of transcending the polarization of the local and global, the diverse and homogeneous. The minoritization discussed by Bhabha is echoed in Hall’s (1997) reflection on the explosion of black and Asian arts. Hall considers how ‘marginality has become a productive space’, producing
a new form of culturally diverse artistic and cultural practices, which disturbs the notion that ‘people come from originary whole cultures, who can only speak from, be responsive to and represent only those cultures of origin from which they came’ (Hall 1997). This quote carries a special resonance when considered in relation to the myriad cultures and subcultures on view in the Changing Faces exhibition. The potential political and cultural impact of the exhibition is summed up in Hall’s assertion that the new culturally diverse artistic and cultural practices not only mount a challenge to dominant majority cultural tradition, but have the effect that ‘Britishness cannot be what it was before’ (ibid.).

In light of postcolonial and new ethnicities’ discourses, the cultural potential of the Changing Faces exhibition becomes more apparent: its strengths emerging precisely from the diversity of the images of British Asian cultures that the curators purposefully sought to put on display. However, if I return to my own feelings of ambivalence about the exhibition, it was never due to doubts over the selection of images, which clearly evoked the hybrid (and disruptive) qualities of the new culturally diverse artistic practices discussed by Hall, Bhabha and Enwezor. Instead, it was the numerous O2 logos printed on the walls of the exhibition and on every piece of promotional material, which were a constant reminder of the actual capital invested in the project, turning my thoughts to the ethical implications of using representations of Asian youth to raise profits. Hall (ibid.) makes a salient point when he argues that while essentialism has been displaced theoretically, it has not been completely displaced politically, and in this sense the Changing Faces exhibition becomes an important public intervention. However, as Hutnyk (1996) and Ash Sharma (1996) argue, the commodification of difference undermines the political capabilities of anti-essentialist hybrid expressive cultures, and so my doubts about O2 Changing Faces began to emerge.

Indeed, John Hutnyk and Ash Sharma come from a pool of theorists within British Asian scholarship who have provided a particularly searing challenge to postcolonial conceptions of hybridity on these grounds. In particular, they have argued that since the hybrid text is produced by the culture industries, it becomes a commodity in the market and, therefore, can have no disruptive affect upon it (Hutnyk 1996; A. Sharma 1996). Hardt and Negri (2000) reach a similar conclusion (albeit using a non-dialectical approach to the new global economy that differs from Hutnyk’s Adornian model) when they argue that hybrid identities and fluid subjectivities cannot act as resistance in Empire, since the logic of the free market precisely uses this difference to sell goods and generate wealth. For the authors, this is most evident in corporate marketing practices:

Marketing itself is a practice based on differences, and the more differences that are given, the more marketing strategies can develop. Ever more hybrid and differentiated populations present a proliferating number of ‘target markets’ that can each be addressed by specific
marketing strategies—one for gay Latino males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, another for Chinese American teenage girls and so forth. Postmodern marketing recognizes the difference of each commodity and each segment of the population, fashioning its strategies accordingly. Every difference is an opportunity. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 152)

This quote appears to perfectly illustrate the market logic behind the niche marketing practices of Presstop Creatives (as described by Nizam in the quote that opened this paper), and exposes the ethical tensions at the heart of the O2 Changing Faces exhibition.

Hardt and Negri provide an astute illustration of the management of identities and difference in the new age of global capitalism; however, as John Hutnyk (2004) argues, their analysis remains on an abstract macro level and their notion of resistance suffers by over-determining the influence of Empire. But the problem of determinism can equally be applied to Hutnyk’s own argument regarding the commodification of difference, as I shall consider again shortly.

In my view, a more nuanced understanding of the links between the aesthetic, the economic and the epistemological appears in Michael Keith’s (2005) exploration of the relationship between multiculturalism, the culture industries and the spatial arrangement of the city. Keith argues that we can gain a better understanding of contemporary multiculture and globalization by looking at the interrelations between the spaces of the city, the cultural industries and culture itself. Observing the clustering of cultural hubs in inner-city spaces populated largely by ethnic communities, Keith considers the multicultural futures of urbanism in relation to the market advantages of diversity. The crux for Keith is the relationship between multicultural and the entrepreneurial spirit of the cultural quarter: do these contact sites represent spaces for hybridity and inter-cultural dialogue, or are they cultural forms drained of political change? Essentially, the aestheticization of commodities and the commodification of aesthetics blurs the relationship between economic and cultural activity, demonstrated by the commodification of multiculture and the Black Atlantic—and, indeed, by Changing Faces. Yet he states that aestheticized production is an increasing part of the economic fabric of the city and ‘a frame for corporate intervention in the metropolis’ (ibid.: 245).

The persuasiveness of Keith’s argument is in his avoidance of a discussion based on dialectics, where he conceptualizes instead how the ordering of the city facilitates an analytical slippage between the political, the economic and the aesthetic. Such slippages lead to two areas in particular that are especially pertinent to this paper. First, he draws our attention to ‘the ambivalence about the ethical nature of ethnic commodification commonly translated through a language of authenticity’ (ibid.: 255). For Keith, both authentic identity and hybridity are equally swallowed by commodity fetishism. Sometimes commodification is just a fact—after all everything is commodified—but one that can be used strategically by communities themselves, as in the case of the re-branding of the Brick Lane area as ‘Banglatown’. Second,
he describes a similar uncertainty in the relationship between commodifying practices (the economy) and the politics of recognition (ethics). He states that ethical practice does not just mean the celebration of diversity, and similarly warns of ‘the conceptual over-exploitation of the notion of the hybrid as simultaneously commodity, ethical stance and measurable aesthetic’ (Keith 2005: 258). Keith’s argument essentially highlights that the hybrid has no political guarantees; hybrid identities are neither wholly emancipatory nor wholly politically ineffectual. And it is precisely this ambivalence that, in my view, lies at the root of the Changing Faces exhibition.

**THE CULTURAL TURN**

Michael Keith essentially shows us that the issues of commodification (the ethical), difference (the epistemological) and aesthetics are inextricably linked. Most crucially, however, he stresses that this does not necessarily mean that the cultural potential of the hybrid identity is immediately foreclosed because it has been fed through the cultural industries and the hegemonic forces of capitalist ideology. This is an important point, for it conserves a space for cultural resistance, and suggests that despite any cynicism we have regarding O2’s sponsorship of Changing Faces, the actual content of the exhibition—or more specifically the philosophy behind the selection of images—follows in the tradition of the (anti) anti-essentialist project of the new cultural politics as outlined by Gilroy (1993). Certainly, while Hutnyk’s views on the corporate intervention in the production of knowledges make us seriously question O2’s involvement, looking at a selection of photos by Phil Maxwell depicting Bangladeshis on anti-racist marches in Whitechapel, one is reminded of Hutnyk’s (1996) concept of ‘radical hybridity’, which in its foregrounding of political agency and intent, he argues, is the only viable version of hybridity that can escape the Orientalist processes of exoticization.

This last point forces us to reconsider the relationship between corporations, the cultural industries and the new culturally diverse artistic practices. Hutnyk and Ash Sharma’s arguments are compelling enough to make us feel uneasy over the marketing of difference, but are the political outcomes of corporate involvement in the arts really that inevitable? It is clear that a dialectical approach to the culture industries can fall into the trap of a determinism and functionalism that can overemphasize the influence of institutional constraints and corporate structures. Indeed, within media studies, traditional political economy accounts of the culture industries have increasingly made way for more culturalist approaches to understanding the way the mass media operates (Hesmondhalgh 2002; Negus 2002). For instance, Angela McRobbie (2002: 97) highlights the convergence of notions of culture with those of work, ‘heralding a new and important relation’. This new phenomena has been met by a similar shift
in theory away from traditionalist bureaucratic models of work to the culture of organizations—what McRobbie marks as the ‘cultural turn’ in the sociology of organizational life. Central to this turn is that production itself is culturalized (Du Gay and Pryke 2002). Thus, contrary to classical debates on the political economy of the mass media, the cultural and the commercial are not mutually exclusive. This is a line of inquiry expanded by Keith Negus, who argues that apparently fundamentally economic and commercial decisions are actually ‘based on a series of historically specific cultural values, beliefs and prejudices’ (2002: 116). Negus highlights how the production of culture occurs through social relationships that are traditionally perceived to exist outside of corporate organizations. It follows that broader social divisions are inscribed onto business practices. Acknowledging excessively culturalist readings and noting the impact of regulation/corporate intervention on occupational practices, Negus nevertheless fundamentally wants to challenge the idea that corporate ownership leads to rigid forms of social control over workers.

The social phenomenon that has been the source for this shift in thinking is the growth in the independent cultural sector, and what Florida (2002) calls the ‘creative class’. Lash and Urry (1994) draw from Featherstone’s particular version of ‘cultural intermediaries’—those who work in advertising, marketing, design and other similar occupations—and describe ‘creative’ workers whose specific roles are to attribute cultural meanings to goods as a way of targeting specific consumers. Furthermore, McRobbie (2002) describes how large companies are reducing small-scale cultural producers to ‘dependent’ subcontracted independents who are employed (as part of cost cutting) for one-off projects and commissions. She highlights how this has led to a proliferation of independent companies, entrepreneurs and self-employed cultural workers who are characterized by a desire to be creative.

The theories mapping the ‘cultural turn’ McRobbie describes become more persuasive when we begin to consider them in relation to Shazia Nizam’s experiences as an independent creative and marketing consultant. From the outset, McRobbie’s account of how corporations are increasingly commissioning independent creative agencies to work on one-off projects describes the exact scenario where O2 asked Nizam to pitch ideas for an event from which to launch their ethnic communications strategy. It is when Nizam describes the nature of her work, however, that these theories become more illuminating. Echoing McRobbie and Florida and their accounts of how the new cultural occupations emerge from the intersection between business and creativity, Nizam stressed throughout the interview the importance of cultural expression, innovation and artistic practice to her work, as the following quote typifies:

For the brand it’s business, and for me it’s business but it’s also creative. All of my friends are creative, they’re artists, they’re musicians, they’re dancers, they’re painters, they’re photographers. I don’t do any of that stuff, but I have this real need to be creative. So it’s an extension
of me, but it’s also my work. In a wider sense, businesses want to make money so they’re always looking for markets and I just think niche marketing is something that has developed over the last few years anyway. And it makes so much more sense to target an audience directly, whether that audience is Asian, or gay, or old, or football lovers. Whatever the group may be, it’s so much easier in today’s world to target them in a very specific way.

This last point in particular dovetails with Featherstone’s and Lash and Urry’s notion of ‘cultural intermediaries’, whose roles—applying symbolic value to cultural goods, targeting specific communities in a ‘specific way’—act in accordance with the version of niche marketing Nizam describes.

It is Nizam’s experience of working with a corporation that is the most pertinent issue to my analysis. The arguments of Hutnyk and Sharma alert us to how corporations manage other identities through neo-Orientalist processes of exoticization. However, the writers of the ‘new cultural turn’ challenge the view that the nature of the production of cultural objects is determined by the rigid frameworks of big business, and argue instead that production is ultimately performed by human beings whose individual actions, choices and decisions are influenced by broader socio-cultural conditions. The experiences of Nizam certainly appear to correspond with this latter view. For instance, she describes working with O2’s PR company on the exhibition as a process of negotiation, empathy and mediation that overcame any initial difficulties: ‘There were initial conflicts, but they understood my ideas and I understood their job, so I knew what they had to contend with.’ Certainly, as the following exchange between Nizam and myself demonstrates, O2’s sponsorship of Changing Faces appeared to have very little influence on the creative element of the exhibition:

AS: What was the extent of O2’s involvement? How often did you have to liaise with them?
SN: In the early stages it was a lot because they had to agree on everything before I could really move ahead.
AS: What kind of issues?
SN: From simple things like where it was going to be, who we were going to target in the media, who the artists were? Not that they would say, ‘No you can’t have that artist,’ but they like to be informed. Another issue was what my visions were … obviously in terms of their brand guidelines—there’s a lot to do with brand guidelines with corporations in terms of colours and styles and things. The most important issue was the use of the text messaging service and how that was going to interactive.
AS: Did you feel that at any point that you had to compromise your vision?
SN: No—I didn’t even have to change the colour scheme! You just need to work within certain guidelines, though they are wide guidelines. I don’t think I had to at all; the only thing is, I would have liked to have made it bigger, I would have liked to tour it, I would like to have turned it into a book. But that has nothing to do with O2’s involvement. The project in itself I was really happy with.

In effect, Nizam’s experiences appear to directly correlate with Negus’ analysis of corporations and cultural industries, and the idea that unpredictable and uncertain human mediations are central to the production of culture. This is made more apparent in Nizam’s account of pitching creative ideas to O2:

SN: They give me a brief—as long as everything I do fits into their brief I can convince them. It’s a six-month process of pitching and re-pitching and re-pitching until you get to that point where they agree and then they just leave you to it. But it’s a tough process. Sometimes they have said no.

AS: What kind of things do they say no to? Like if it’s not deemed commercial?

SN: It’s things that they can’t understand, and I haven’t managed to explain it to them.

AS: Do you think it is just a case of having more time to develop your pitch before the corporations agree to your ideas?

SN: Maybe, but you’re always going to get people at the top of corporations who just don’t understand. You have to think about their politics as an organization, about their own background and their own understanding. You have to realize what might sound very simple to you, and really obvious to you, they might have no clue about. It’s just about working with different cultures of people really.

Again, this quote stresses the rich and varied cultures of corporate organizations that suggest that corporations will not always behave as predictably as classical political economy theorists would argue. However, while Negus is aware of the hazards of becoming excessively ‘culturalist’, does he concede too much autonomy to the cultural worker? I would like to introduce the third and final part of this article by suggesting that in some ways the new ‘cultural turn’ in social sciences does not necessarily represent the dialectical reverse of the arguments outlined by Hutnyk and Ash Sharma. Negus argues that broader social conditions determine the production of culture, but Hutnyk and Sharma would argue that these social conditions themselves are determined by capitalist ideology, thus ensuring that the outcomes remain the same.
NICHÉ MARKETING AND THE POST-COLONIAL CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY

The new ‘cultural turn’ in social sciences that McRobbie describes represents an important body of work in the way it deconstructs simplistic binary oppositions between the commercial and creative, the economic and the cultural. Certainly, my ambivalence over Changing Faces emerged precisely from the uncertainty that originates from such non-dialectical manoeuvring. While my initial assumptions that O2 must have intervened in the creative process of putting the exhibition together were untrue (Nizam clearly stated that she had full artistic control), I was still not convinced that the act of sponsoring Changing Faces was a completely neutral event, even if the executives of O2 and Nizam genuinely believed it to be. To unravel this further, we need to pull back and return to our original (postcolonial) vantage point and consider the location of the exhibition in relation to sites of resistance and the third space where identities are constructed. I want to argue that in order to discover the sources of ambivalence, we need to move our attention from the micro acts that constitute the production of the exhibition, and recover a broader perspective that considers the processes of the commodification of difference.

The first source of ambivalence lies in the nature of niche marketing. Nizam perceived her work in this respect as a completely natural fact of business and suggested that having been ignored by companies for so long, to be finally acknowledged as a viable market is an important form of recognition for Asian communities:

We’re a different age and we have different needs and wants, and that wasn’t being really looked into. Just like the gay market, [the Asian community] has been overlooked in the past but it is now a really viable way to go for many people. We’re a growing community, we’re quite well educated, we’re professionals by and large, and we have a lot of money to spend. Even those who aren’t professional have a lot of money to spend! You may not have any money in your pocket but you still drive a BMW!

Certainly it is no surprise that since her agency is based on ‘bringing brands and communities together’ she has no problems—or, indeed, ambivalences—in helping corporations target ethnicized markets, as the following conversation illustrates:

AS : What are your thoughts on corporations who want to focus more on Asian markets?
SN : Well O2 did the black market as well and the gay market, so it was just part of the process of a new company starting off and putting themselves out there.
AS : And you are happy to be a part of that process?
SN: Yeah, it was wonderful! It was great. I still get calls from people asking, ‘What are you doing with O2 at the moment? Would you sponsor this event of mine?’ Or people are saying, ‘I am this type of artist or I am putting together this type of show—would O2 be interested?’ So the knowledge has spread incredibly. It has been very successful on different levels. But O2 has been incredibly successful. The take-up of young Asian people on O2 is huge. For me, it has been great because they’re a great name, a great client for me, the project was wonderful—it was nice to be given creative freedom!

Predictably, Nizam reflects on her experiences in terms of the end results for the client (expanding the consumer base) and herself (recognition, portfolio, creative fulfilment). Nizam would no doubt feel vindicated by an argument of Basu and Werbner (2001) who equally do not necessarily see any ethical conflict in corporations and ethnic entrepreneurs working together in this way. Using the production of hip-hop as their example, Basu and Werbner counter the argument that commerciality dilutes authenticity, and claim that ethical business practice is about ‘keeping it real’: ‘Authenticity is not so much lost in the move from pre-commodity to commodity but when the cultural product no longer adheres to the stylistic and musical tenets of hip-hop’ (ibid.: 256). This can be equally applied to Changing Faces, and there is certainly little to question in the ‘authenticity’ of the images chosen for the exhibition. So where do the problems emerge?

The most immediate concern is that the very the logic of niche marketing depends on difference and essential identities that can only lead to racial stereotyping (I certainly do not drive a BMW). Furthermore, corporate recognition is only reserved for a particular sub-community (those who can afford to drive BMWs). We can develop this further by returning to Keith’s exploration of the city and multiculturalism, and his effective description of how the city itself is curated, where the visual ordering of the city prioritises certain kinds of multicultural over others. When certain multicultural routes are celebrated for their diversity and commerciality such as Brick Lane, others remain invisible and are tucked out of the way, such as the poor housing stock endemic in the same borough, Tower Hamlets. While it is precisely the diversity of the photos on display in the exhibition that ensures that the privileging of certain Asian cultures over others does not occur, the pitfalls lie in O2’s ethnic communication strategy and their designs on the ‘Asian market’. As Spivak would argue, this supposed ‘recognition’ masks the continued marginalization of the subaltern or the urban sub-proletariat—not in terms of what images are included in the exhibition, but in terms of the much larger processes of globalization.

Of course, this is not to suggest an explicit conspiracy on the part of the corporation to discriminate against marginal groups, but it is part of a certain commercial logic that is inscribed
with a prevailing neo-colonialist discourse—it might not be as explicit as Hutnyk and Sharma would have us believe, but it exists nonetheless. This is made more evident in the response Nizam gave me when I asked if O2 were interested in touring the show: ‘No, they did very well out of it.’ This highlights again how the sole goal for O2 was in securing the brand association through generating press around the event, and as such once press coverage in key sections of the media was obtained (and the corporate logo was sufficiently on view in all the major publications), there was no further reason to continue the show. Whatever the success of Changing Faces in educating and informing the public of British Asian experiences and cultures, and according them with a recognition that had been previously absent, the exhibition’s two-week run in a venue located in a side street in central London appears increasingly circumstantial within the bigger picture of strategic identity politics.

If we return to the theme of how diaspora gets privileged at the expense of the subaltern in the post-colonial nation, a second more complex site of ambivalence emerges. This lies in the role of what I have called the ‘postcolonial cultural intermediary’—a slight variation on Spivak’s notion of the ‘postcolonial informant’—that stresses the role of the new cultural occupations. I have already highlighted how certain writers have conceptualised ‘cultural intermediaries’ in relation to the new creative class. Of course, the concept was originally conceived by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) who describes the emergence of the new petit bourgeois. According to Bourdieu, the role of the new cultural intermediaries is to legitimize new petit bourgeois culture, which is effectively references or imitations of ‘legitimate’ culture. Featherstone (1991) revises the occupation of the cultural intermediary against the backdrop of post-modernism, following on from Bourdieu, and argues that the role of cultural intermediaries is producing the relational set of taste choices for particular groups, creating ‘post-modern pedagogies’ (ibid.: 5). However, he places added emphasis on how the new cultural workers and entrepreneurs are the producers and generators of new consumer culture, who provide symbolic goods—and necessary interpretations of the goods—that contribute to the reclassification of the symbolic and cultural order.

I have already highlighted how Nizam’s occupation has strong links with that of the cultural intermediary, but it is the intermediary’s role in reclassifying the cultural order that I wish to consider here. When Featherstone considers such a reclassification, he is referring to the breakdown in the old distinctions and symbolic hierarchies that revolve around the axis of high and low cultures; but what are the issues that emerge if we read this in terms of reclassification of the postcolonial cultural order? To take the point further, what happens if we filter ‘cultural intermediary’ through post-colonial discourse, and translate it as someone who literally mediates between two cultures—or even *informs* on a culture? This notion of the employment of a character to ‘inform’ on their own culture is a particular theme in colonial history and, indeed, the ‘Native Informant’ is the main protagonist in Spivak’s *A Critique of*
Postcolonial Reason (1999). Spivak takes the term from early ethnography, describing a voiceless and non-specific element, which becomes a structural position from which to critique Western modernity. In A Critique… she follows the native informant through the post-Enlightenment history of the West, charting its foreclosure in Western philosophy, history, literature and culture.

Spivak argues that the native informant has agency, or rather its foreclosed perspective is the only narrative that can truly challenge operations of neo-colonialism. However with the onset of globalization, the native informant has been replaced by the ‘self-marginalizing or self-consolidatory’ (ibid.: 6) postcolonial subject masquerading as one. This has the effect of deflecting attention away from the subaltern, as she states: ‘The South is once again in shadow, the diasporic stands in for the native informant’ (ibid.: 169). For Spivak, the ‘postcolonial informant’ has little to say about the oppressed minorities in the decolonized nation and, as such, obscures the view of the true native informant—the poorest woman in the South. The new postcolonial informant undermines the struggle ‘by simulating an effect of a new fluid world, by piecing together great legitimizing narratives of cultural and ethnic specificity and continuity, and of national identity’ (ibid.: 360). In consequence, the role of the postcolonial informant can be politically suspect in that it masks the real marginalization and racial violence that occurs on the periphery of the third world. Spivak provides the essential task of situating cultural politics in terms of what she perceives as the global struggle. It follows that the occupation of the postcolonial cultural intermediary and the production of cultural projects such as Changing Faces form part of the ideological process of the West that prioritizes diaspora over the subaltern.

Spivak does not focus too much attention on the relationship between the postcolonial and the commercial, but her line on how the ‘telecommunications informatics taps the Native Informant’ (ibid.: xi) becomes increasingly resonant when we consider how a mobile communications company employed Nizam to put on Changing Faces as part of the deployment of an ethnic communications strategy designed specifically to exploit the affluence of the new Asian middle classes. Nizam was employed because of her skills and experience, and most crucially of all, because of her perceived ‘native’ understanding of the British Asian community. It may appear slightly heavy-handed to conjure the scene of the missionary using a native translator to spread Christianity to the indigenous tribe, but it is difficult not to draw parallels between this and the actions of O2 (this time spreading the religion of consumerism) in employing Nizam. Furthermore, the interactive element of the exhibition—where the viewer could text an O2 number in order to receive information about the particular aspect of Asian culture currently on view (at a cost of £0.25 for every text received)—becomes another irresistible metaphor for the ‘tapping’ of the native information network.

These points would make the ideological consequences of the corporate sponsorship of Changing Faces more clear-cut, but I would concede that this second ambivalence is much
more opaque. For instance, we can question Presstop Creatives’ symbiotic relationship with corporations, which seek to make profit from what we read as the commodification of difference. However, it cannot be ignored that O2 gave Nizam full creative control as well as significant financial resources, which she was able to use to her advantage in recovering and exhibiting images that represent the authentic experiences of British Asian youth. The uncertainty we may have regarding the ethical dimensions of the production of Changing Faces arises from how the motives behind a critical interrogation, propelled by a distrust of corporate strategies, is at odds with what I consider the visually spectacular achievement of the exhibition. This paradox is effectively the source of the ambivalence at the root of Changing Faces. It emerges precisely from the moment we consider the exhibition as ‘subversive’ (through its ability to disturb the production of racialized knowledges about Asians in the West), yet are simultaneously reminded of O2’s involvement and how the production of the exhibition was part of a commercial strategy that depends on—and reinforces—notions of racial difference.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with the question at the root of this article: how can British Asian cultural producers make effective texts that de-essentialize national and racial identities, avoiding imperialist co-option, which through market processes can transform such texts into Orientalist sites of exotica? This article argued that it would be myopic to formulate this question in terms of the simplistic dichotomies that equate commercial motivations as ‘selling-out’, and independent cultural expression as ‘keeping it real’. Throughout this investigation, I wanted to stress how over-determining the influence of the culture industry, or over-determining the autonomy of the cultural worker, fails to recognize the true complexities of the global processes at work in the (commercial) production of knowledges about race and difference. In this case, the O2 Changing Faces exhibition became the perfect illustration of the disordered, or elaborate, meanings that can emerge from a corporation’s involvement in the new cultural diverse artistic practices.

The goal of this article was to unpick the thematic issues that arise from corporate intervention in the multicultural arts, rather than formally appraising the ethics of a creative consultant who accepts investment from a large corporation. However, avoiding adopting a political position is somewhat inevitable, and I will postulate that entering such a corporate relationship could lead to problematic epistemological outcomes. In my view, Changing Faces was compromised from the start, by being launched as part of a corporation’s ethnic communications
strategy based on the logic of niche and, therefore, differentiated marketing. However, does this mean that as British Asian cultural producers we should totally avoid working with big business? It is a hard fact to bear that the cost of putting on a photography exhibition is immense (sourcing material, licensing photos, hiring a venue, producing promotional material, etc.), and sometimes corporate investment is the only way of guaranteeing the capital (both financial and cultural) that will ensure an adequate level of coverage as well as quality. Indeed, future research should consider alternative financial networks to aid the production of black and Asian texts that can help resolve the tensions between the ethical and the commercial. Ultimately, the main objective of this research project was to emphasize how explorations of the new culturally diverse artistic practices will always be hindered unless the cultural texts in question are situated within the contexts and processes of the cultural industries and the wider structures of global capitalism. Certainly, if the commercial, the aesthetic and the epistemological are as tightly intertwined as Michael Keith tells us, disentangling this relationship and scrutinizing each strand in isolation in order to grasp the whole would give us no coherent answers.

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NOTES

1. The growth of brand marketing has seen corporations increasingly sponsor events such as art exhibitions. An obvious example of arts sponsorship is the increasingly influential Beck's Futures exhibitions.
2. 2nd Generation was the name of the magazine edited by Imran Khan, and was the first publication truly dedicated to covering the new ‘post-bhangra’ British Asian scene.
3. I certainly find the term preferable to the patronising ‘New Asian Kool’, which was a media created label used to apply to the emergence of non-bhangra Asian bands.
4. While I am not keen on the term ‘post-bhangra’ (as it connotes an elitist development over bhangra and also suggests that bhangra as a moment is over), Huq (1996) and Sanjay Sharma (1996) use it simply to mark the distinction between bhangra and the new Asian dance ‘musics’ that appeared mid-1990s. It should certainly not be read as a unitary style; hence, my use of the plural ‘musics’.
6. Which was originally conceptualized by Bourdieu (1984).
7. Negus (1999) also uses Bourdieu's concept of ‘cultural intermediaries’, to describe workers who occupy a position between the producers and consumers. He uses this concept to stress the human behind seemingly faceless corporate decisions.
8. Despite this, in our interview Nizam appeared uncomfortable with being labelled a specialist in solely Asian markets and stressed how she considers herself a specialist in youth markets.
REFERENCES


