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Abstract

This paper explores how digital media can cause the representational value of rap artists to be transformed. Ubiquitous access to digital recording, production and distribution technologies grants rappers an unprecedented degree of representational autonomy, meaning they are able to integrate the street aesthetic into their lyrics and music videos, and thus create content that offers a more authentic representation of their (past) lives. Sidestepping the mainstream music industry, the digital enables these integrations and bolsters the hypercapitalist impulses of content creators. I illustrate these ideas through a case study of grime artist, Bugzy Malone, who uses his music to narrate his evolution from a life of criminality (selling drugs on the street; a 'roadman'), to one in which his representational value is recognised by commercial brands who want to partner with him because of his street credibility (collecting 'royalties'). Bugzy Malone's commercial success is not predicated on a departure from his criminal past, but the deliberate foregrounding of it as a marker of authenticity. The representational autonomy provided by digital media can therefore enable artists to maximise the affective cachet of the once-criminal self.

Keywords

Digital media, grime, hypercapitalism, inter-representational value, roadman

Introduction

Over the past two decades, as the digital has become threaded throughout the economic lives of individuals and industry, the nature of capitalism has been transformed. In particular, time-space compression has manifested in new, and often more microscopic, ways. This has foregrounded a reimagination of what value is, and where it is located. As Graham (2002: 227–228) puts it, 'changes in the reach and speed of our various media systems have profound impacts upon our notions about what is valuable because formerly disparate and distant social spheres are suddenly

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brought into contact with each other'. The notion of 'hypercapitalism' encapsulates these mani-festations and reimaginations. It helps to explain the emergence of new realms of value that rest not on goods and services but on 'the creation of a certain *imagery* which people identify with' (Salecl, 2003: 100, emphasis added). With this imagery, value becomes a more abstract construct that leads to the commoditisation of human activity and Graham's (2002: 230, original emphasis) related assertion that the 'totality of human *Being* has become a commodity form'. Arguably, these shifts are most clearly observed through the impact of digital production and consumption technologies on the cultural industries that rely on individual artists and the personas they culti-vate to create and deliver content to audiences. With specific regard to the music industry, the digital has brought about a democratisation of access to the tools needed create and distribute music. Indeed, whilst various studies have explored how the digital has 'ushered in a regime of distributed musical creativity' (Leyshon, 2009: 1309; see also Leyshon et al., 2005; Stuart, 2020; Woods, 2020, 2021), how it foregrounds new, and sometimes more morally ambiguous, forms of entrepreneurial activity and artistic value remain underexplored. This paper fills the lacuna by con-sidering the hypercapitalist impulses of grime.

My argument is that digital technologies enable the commodification of the self, which in turn enables the forging of new determinations of artistic value and new pathways to economic repro-duction. For those who are marginalised by socio-political and cultural structures of prejudice and oppression, and for whom traditional routes to upward socio-economic mobility might be obstructed, the creative and entrepreneurial opportunities provided by the digital can be trans-formative. Yet, as much as the digital empowers the individual, so too can it become a morally problematic catalyst for self-directed entrepreneurial activity. This is especially true when it is used to create and share content that escapes censure and glorifies criminality. I use grime – a genre of urban music that emerged in the early-2000s amongst disadvantaged youths living in inner-city London – to illustrate these ideas. For these youths, grime provided first a creative, and subse-quently a commercial, outlet for self-expression (White, 2017). Through grime, they are able to harness real-life experiences on the streets to provide authenticity and creative value to their music. Often, this involves narrating the life of a 'roadman' who makes an underground living selling drugs and engaging in other forms of entrepreneurial, and often criminal, activity. To the extent that 'grime music and the grime scene function as a vehicle for expressions of identity' (Adams, 2019: 438; see also Fatsis, 2019; Kubrin, 2005), so too does it rely on the generation of 'subcultural capital' that is specifically designed to attract 'youthful consumers who are seduced by its ostensibly transgressive character' (Ilan, 2012: 39). By enabling artists to independently develop their sound and aesthetic, the digital provides an epistemological counterpoint to the idea that grime artists in the UK 'mut[e] their links to street culture' (Ilan, 2012: 39) in order to succeed within the mainstream music industry.

By enabling artists to sidestep the expectations and normativities of the mainstream music industry, the digital encourages the hypercapitalist impulses of grime to manifest. In turn, these impulses have come to define the subversive potential of the genre. Some of the most successful grime artists today fold their past lives (as roadmen) into their present lives (collecting royalties), creating an authentic and integrated imagery of the commodified self (Salecl, 2003) that adds what I term 'inter-representational' value to the final musical product. Inter-representation ena-bles these integrations in ways that highlight the entrepreneurial prowess – whether through the illicit world of the roadman, or the co-opting of public interest through the accumulation of

royalties – that grime artists exhibit. This prowess – which often involves the 'continuous man-agement of risk associated with living and working beyond formal institutional norms' (Thieme, 2017: 537) – defines some of the alternative representational logics that have come to shape what artistic value *is*, or *could be*, in a digital age. The subversive potential of these logics is that they encourage the reimagination of socio-economic marginality as a leverageable position of value, not necessarily weakness. By exploring these new forms of inter-representational value, I expand Bramwell and Butterworth's (2019) understanding of the 'translocality' of grime to include its integrative trans*temporality* as well. Whilst hip hop is widely known to draw on the 'refined capitalist logic and the existence of distinct market regions' (Forman, 2000: 67) that grants artists a degree of 'proprietorship' over the representation of the self, the digital has caused these logics and specificities to evolve in meaning. They remain the basis of identity, yet the physical unbounding of their fanbases creates slippages that are filled by new forms of inter-representational value and authenticity afforded by exploiting the temporal 'proprietorship' of an artists' life course instead.

Three sections follow. The first considers how artistic representation has evolved in a digital age. It explores the reimagination of the economic value of music, and the emergent role of inter-representational value for artists. The second explores the hypercapitalist impulses of grime as a uniquely 'digital' form of urban music. The third develops a case study of grime artist, Bugzy Malone, and explores how he establishes authority and acumen, how he inter-represents the street aesthetic through his music, and how inter-representation can provide insight into the affective aestheticism of hypercapitalism.

Artistic representation in a digital age

Capitalism has evolved in line with the embedding of the digital into more and more realms of economic life. Concomitant with this evolution are new understandings of what it means to be an 'artist'. As the distinction between the production and consumption of digital content is eroded, and as digital 'artistry' becomes a more accessible aspiration than ever before, so too have the ways in which artists represent themselves in and to the world caused the locus of value to evolve. Artistry is becoming less about the production of cultural products, and more about the representation of the self *as* producer (see Duffy, 2015; Marwick, 2013; Stuart, 2020). With it, the racial ordering of capitalism along the exclusionary lines of hierarchy and social division is being exposed anew (after Robinson, 1983). Hitherto marginalised groups are finding ways to reproduce value on their own terms, and, in doing so, to subvert mainstream models, normativities and tropes of economic reproduction. This shift echoes many parallel shifts in academic discourse: from the gradual acceptance of the fact that 'the economic' is constituted through social relations' (Hall, 2010: 236), to the more specific explorations of the 'relational geographies of music production' (Watson, 2012: 446). This has resulted in a situa-tion whereby the 'consumption of music is increasingly linked to other kinds of media, where the music is valued *less* for its own qualities than for its *association* with other phenomena' (Leyshon et al., 2005: 183, emphasis added). Whilst these 'associations' are multi-faceted, my concern here is how digital technologies enable artists to associate themselves with sources of value that transcend their music. Beyond the ability to forge closer relationships with their fans, they also enable the forging of closer, more integrated, representations of them*selves*.

This involves associating directly with their pre-artist lives, drawing on these experiences to create inter-representational value.

Reinterpreting the economic value of (the) music (industry)

For decades, the music industry has evolved in tandem with technological advancements. Whereas this relationship was once described as 'close and intimate' (Leyshon, 2001: 50) – with the development of vinyl, magnetic audiotapes and subsequently compact disks, for example, enabling music production (and, relatedly, profits for major record labels) to increase to the level of the mass market – its relationship with digital production and distribution technologies has caused it to become more antagonistic. The digital has since been described as a 'new technological assemblage [that] will fundamentally reorganise the music industry' (Leyshon, 2001: 49) and as such has become the 'scary monster' (Leyshon, 2003) that could undermine its business model completely. In particular, advances in digital software have led to a democratisation of access, which itself is 'tethered to a basic economic argument – affordability equals access' (Bell, 2015: 129). This economic logic began to manifest in tangible ways from the early 2000s, when 'cracked' – that is, illegally acquired – versions of audio production software (known as Digital Audio Workstations, DAWs) such as Cool Edit Pro and Fruity Loops became relatively easy to access online (Bell, 2015). Not only has digital software enabled the production of music, so too has it enabled its dissemination to audiences. As an outcome of these developments, 'gone are the days when artists needed massive advances on royalties from music companies in order to record their tracks professionally' (Boyajian, 2010: 589), calling into question the need for interlocutors in the exchange of value between artists and audiences. By 'dismantl[ing] the industry's established hierarchies and power relations' (Leyshon, 2001: 51), the digital has brought about a perceptible shift in the locus of economic value.

In many respects, this shift has caused the locus of value to evolve from the production technologies to the medium; or, from the artist-as-musician, to the artist-as-self. Boyajian's (2010: 590) observation that 'with costs of production, publishing, marketing, and distribution being vaporised, industry middlemen no longer add necessary value to an artist's career' can be seen to reflect this sentiment, as it encapsulates the expansion from the *medium* of music being the repository of value, to a more holistic sense of what the music represents, and who represents *it*. Ironically, this shift is driven by the fact that as the value of the medium has evolved and become more accessible, the medium as a form of value in itself has depreciated along with the emergence of a much 'freer marketplace' (Boyajian, 2010: 590) in which music is produced and consumed. This hyper-popularisation of music has caused it to become less distinct as a cultural repository of value, and more embedded within the realities of everyday life. Evoking Adorno's (1976) critique of popular music – that which is 'produced in line with capitalist means of production' and thus 'appeal[s] to the lowest common cultural denominator and distracted its audiences from the realities of their social subjugation' (Leyshon et al., 2005: 181) – we can begin to appreciate the extent to which the subjugated now have access to the channels and opportunities that can enable them to become the subjuga*tors* of an industry, even if subjugation remains the default outcome for all but the most talented artists. Whilst Adorno laments the fact that popular music 'uses repetition and predictability to stultify critical faculties, and to support impoverished social and economic institutions' (Leyshon et al., 2005: 182), this critique is based on the

observation (correct at the time) that it is the music industry that commoditises creativity, and thus subjugates its audiences in the pursuit of profit. By commoditising the means of production, the digital destabilises these assertions by forging new types of value.

Hypercapitalism and the forging of inter-representational value

The shifting locus of value has been to the detriment of the music industry, but it also provides important insight into the evolving infrastructures of capitalism. As Leyshon et al. (2005: 182–183, emphasis added) put it, music is now an 'essential crutch to all manner of acts of consumption' which means that 'popular music is decreasingly valued for itself, but is, instead, increasingly valued more for the ways in which it is consumed *in relation to other things*'. This shift – from value being attributed to musical products or outputs, to value being attributed to the relational characteristics of music – reflects the emergence and unfolding of what has been termed 'hypercapitalism' throughout the world. This emergence is what Graham (2002: 232) describes as an 'historical point' in socio-economic development, as it foregrounds a situation in which 'specific identities, or ways of being, including ways of knowing and representing, become the most valuable commodity forms'. In turn, this has caused the once-privileging of industrial forms of production to give way to cultural forms of production, causing the idea of the 'commodity' to evolve and expand from being indexed to products and services alone, to being indexed to cultural representations and identities as well. Hypercapitalism, then, reproduces a system in which 'the most intimate and fundamental aspects of human social life – forms of thought and language – are formally subsumed under capital and become its most predominant commodities' (Armitage and Graham, 2001: 114; see also Salecl, 2003). Importantly for the purposes of this paper, these shifts go hand in hand with the digital reconstitutions of the economy. Through these reconstitutions, economic value becomes more abstract, more affective and more personal (Leyshon et al., 2005).

As a result, value is often (de)materialised at great speed, and thus always struggles to find stability and coherence through the time-spaces of digitalisation. Indeed, because value constantly needs to be realised throughout the 'processes of circulation and self-valorisation' (Armitage and Graham, 2001: 115) that give rise to hypercapitalism, that value becomes 'overtly situated in *valorised* discourses of expertise' (Graham, 2002: 228, emphasis added). The distinction between valoris*ation* and valoris*ed* is subtle, but is realised through the integration of different, diverse and often hitherto unrelated discourses into one coherent narrative. The coherence of this narrative is found in Salecl's (2003: 97) assertion that, whereas it was once observed that someone can be 'fully in charge of changing his or her identity as he or she pleases. . . today it looks as if we are living in times when people have woken up and acknowledged their limitations in such pursuits'. The 'limitations' of which Salecl speaks finds meaning in Thrift's (2008: 30) depiction of the reconfiguring of time-space in response to technological development, which lead to a new reality in which 'knowledge and life become inextricable'. The inextricability of what we know (knowledge) and who we are (life) foregrounds my notion of 'inter-representation', or the productive integration of different facets of being into one self-representation to the world. The *value* of inter-representation stems from the overcoming of 'betweenness' through integration. Overcoming is realised through the transtemporal mediation of the artists' life course, or the 'production, movement and transformation of meanings within and between social contexts, across space and time' (Graham, 2002: 233; see also Silverstone, 1999). Mediation thus creates

the possibilities for value to be stabilised and authenticated amidst the disruptions and dismantling forces of hypercapitalism.

These practices of forging inter-representational value through extensive mediation are often observed amongst musical artists, although not explicitly recognised as such. For example, writing about the inter-relations between rap and the music industry, Negus (1998: 361) suggests that musical production does 'not so much involve an understanding of "reality" as a construction and intervention into "reality"'. Subsequently, this suggestion is illustrated by the 'division of social life into constructed "markets", and then the routine deployment of knowledge about the characteristics and workings of these markets' (Negus, 2010: 492). The language used to describe these formulations of value – specifically 'construction', 'intervention' and 'deployment' – reflects the fact that Negus is commenting on the productive interplay between artist *and* industry, rather than the more integrated understanding of artist *as* industry. Contrariwise, in a world of digital artistry, these formulations may be less about engaging with something out there – the lives of others – and more about the realising the integrative value of the self through inter-representation. Recognising this value more explicitly is Dodd's (2014: 165) study of punk band, Rancid, whose artistic development is not a linear trajectory, but 'follow[s] more complicated paths – from periphery to centre, and back again; returning to roots, whilst trying to move forwards too; grounded in tradition but also radically focussed on dramatic change'. Here the value of integrating the 'periphery' and 'centre' of life – or the artist-as-persona and artist-as self – is highlighted, but underdeveloped. In this vein, and in seeking to develop these ideas further by building on the work of Negus (2010) and Dodd (2014), I now consider the hypercapitalist impulses of grime.

The hypercapitalist impulses of grime

Like many other genres of rap-based music, grime was forged out of the restricted socio-economic mobility, the distinct subcultural codes and characteristics, and the (often unrealised) aspirations of inner-city life. Also, like other rap-based genres of music, the popularity of grime is that it leverages these defining features in ways that enable their limitations to be transcended (Forman, 2000; Ilan, 2012; Kubrin, 2005). Where it differs from other rap-based genres, however, is the role of digital technologies in fomenting its sound and popularity. Emerging in the early 2000s in inner city London, grime coincides with both the embedding of digital technologies within everyday life, but also a climate of economic constraint and political marginalisation. Notwithstanding, the urban music economy provided up-and-coming rappers with both the motivation, and the channels, needed to forge an entrepreneurial career as an artist. Grime artists have long taken a 'pragmatic approach to the acquisition of technological skills' (White, 2017: 38) with music being made 'in bedrooms on inner-city housing estates' using computers 'nominally purchased for the purposes of schoolwork' (Adams, 2019: 439) and free or cracked software. These autonomous, digitally enabled and distinctly 'home-grown' origins play an integral role in defining grime's representational qualities. Whilst lyrics and backing tracks may be developed in bedrooms, accompanying music videos would be recorded on phones and handheld video cameras in the street, thus 'portray[ing] the gritty, 'grim(e)y' reality of life in London's council estates in an almost ethnographic fashion' (Fatsis, 2019: 449). This gives grime's audio-visual outputs a rawness and authenticity that foregrounds its 'illicit appeal', especially amongst a 'youth demographic living in the

sanitised environments of suburbia and mass consumption' (Ilan, 2012: 42). In other words, it offers voyeuristic insight into how marginalised groups respond to the realities of structural inequality.

Digital reproduction enables a largely unfiltered representation of the 'street aesthetic' for which grime has since become known. It is this aesthetic, coupled with the self-directed forms of promotion that social media enable, that connects grime's music to its origins, even for its most successful artists, enabling them to 'reclaim the power of representation from more mainstream forms of cultural reproduction' and to 'achieve mainstream success, albeit *on their own terms*' (Woods, 2020: 298, 303, emphasis added). Indeed, as a departure from the neighbourhood (or 'hood') aesthetic that defines many other genres of rap music, the road is rooted in the economic logics of capital accumulation through the demarcation and defending of territory that facilitates the dealing of drugs (or 'shotting'). Whilst the road discursively overlaps with the 'hood to a large extent, the 'hood differs in that it is 'regularly constructed within the discursive frame of the "home"' and the authenticity that comes from being 'closer to friends and family, closer to the posse' (Forman, 2000: 73, 72). Accordingly, the road is 'characterised by "spectacular" aggressive/hyper masculine modes of behaviour, incorporating violent and petty crime, fraud/personal identity theft and low-level drug dealing' (Gunter, 2008: 352; see also Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson, 2016; Watts, 1997), all of which provide marginalised youths 'illegitimate avenues for success' (Kubrin, 2005: 362). Many grime artists – including some of the genre's most high-profile names – have histories of earning money from the streets, as a 'roadman'. In itself, this reveals the subversive potential of grime; by drawing on the inclusive codes of street culture, and the criminalisation that such inclusion foregrounds, artists find opportunities to rewrite the script by engaging with capitalism *on their own terms* (after Ilan, 2015). Moreover, whilst roadmen are intimately embroiled in the economic reproduction of the street aesthetic, so too are they embroiled in its stylisation through its sartorial codes. According to American pop culture magazine, *Complex* (2020),

> roadmen, named cause they're always in the streets, need to dress accordingly. Estate soldiers don't mix labels: The aim is to be consistent. Tech-wear and utility fits are the uniform. Watch any Grime video, Risky Roadz freestyle or Lord of the Mics clash; you'll spot twenty hangers-on wearing full Nike tracksuits and sturdy TNF [The North Face] storm-beaters.

It is by identifying the economic and stylistic inscriptions of the street aesthetic, and connecting these to grime artists, that the genres' hypercapitalist impulses start to manifest. Indeed, Ilan's (2015) interpretation of the street as a cultural *spectrum* (rather than a monolithic construct) points to these impulses, and hints at how they provide the connective tissue between roadmen and royalties. Whilst street culture centres on the 'values, dispositions, practices and styles associated with particular sections of disadvantaged populations' (Ilan, 2015: 8), it ranges from the harder end of roadmen – defined by (organised) criminality and street 'codes' – to the softer end of aesthetics and associations – defined by 'coolness' and socio-spatial practices of 'hanging out'. Grime artists bridge these extremes, revealing how the logics, styles and expansive *values* of the street translate into various forms of (hyper)capitalist activity that are leveraged as part of their entrepreneurial journeys (White, 2017). This includes, most notably, artists establishing their own labels under which they publish and promote their music – prominent grime brothers Skepta and

JME, for example, operate under their label Boy Better Know, whilst Stormzy does the same under #MERKY – but the freedom to forge collaborations with other artists and brands as well. Ilan (2012: 40) tracks these integrations, observing how:

> The music industry is now the preferable space in which to demonstrate one's entrepreneurial acumen, as opposed to the violent and criminal world of the street or 'road'. . . In some ways the new form of urban cultural expression. . . continues to draw on the street aesthetic but in a manner that is based on 'code combining' rather than 'code switching'. This entails maintaining a patina of street aesthetics, while crafting lyrics that reference other, arguably less criminogenic, topics.

Whilst I agree with Ilan's point about 'code combining' – which essentially captures the inter-representational value created by grime artists that I explore below – the point that lyrics tend to speak to 'other, arguably less criminogenic, topics' is contingent upon the artist. Whilst true for some, it is not true for those who leverage the value of code combining to its maximum extent, thus reproducing the hypercapitalism of grime. Indeed, this downplaying of criminality – or of artists' past lives – is a theme widely reflected in the literature on rap music, and leads to the widespread acceptance that with mainstream success comes a conscious sense of separation between an artists' former and present life. For example, Hess (2005: 298), drawing on Gilroy's (1993) notion of 'doubleness', suggests that rap artists 'work to produce marketable music for mainstream listeners yet at the same time to maintain a necessary level of authenticity to a place of cultural origin' with the ghetto providing 'both a crucial signifier of authenticity and a marketable aspect of the self'. What Hess describe here is a seemingly inviolable tension between making 'marketable music for mainstream listeners' and maintaining a level of 'authenticity' to the ghetto. This tension is made explicit in his assertion that rap music tends to 'draw strict lines between performance and commercialism' (Hess, 2005: 299). Whilst I do not discount this separation, I maintain that it is based on the relationships that artists *once had to* maintain with the mainstream music industry in order to leverage opportunities for commercial success. This is, however, no longer the case in a digital age, where apparently full representational autonomy is granted to artists. In this sense, then, grime is a paradigmatic example of artists inter-representing their journeys from roadmen to royalties.

Inter-representing Bugzy Malone's journey from roadman to royalties

In the subsections that follow, I develop a case study of Manchester-based grime artist – Bugzy Malone (or 'Bugz' as he is known) – that showcases his development from being a roadman to receiving royalties from his music and various other collaborations with international brands. Importantly, I explore the ways in which the starting point for his career is intimately entwined with his current success, and thus highlight the inter-representational value found therein. To do this, I draw on a lyrical and visual analysis of some of Bugz's most popular songs (and associated videos), which I then combined with interview material obtained from various media outlets. Bugz is one of the few non-London-based grime artists to have achieved mainstream commercial success, which has since earned him the self-imposed nickname, the 'King of the North'. Born into a

family with strong gang connections, and spending a period of time in jail in his teenage years, Bugz has since leveraged these experiences to produce four albums – *Walk with Me* (2015), *Facing Time* (2016), *King of the North* (2017) and *B. Inspired* (2018) – all of which reached top ten positions in the UK albums charts, a fashion line with label Supply & Demand that is sold in popular high street retailer, JD Sports, and a role in Guy Ritchie's recent film, *The Gentlemen* (2019). All of these successes draw intimately on his experiences as a roadman, creating inter-representational value, rather than distance. The three subsections that follow explore the origins and effects of such value creation by considering how Bugz establishes authenticity and acumen, how he inter-represents his journey from roadman to royalties, and how these practices can in turn reveal hypercapitalism's aesthetic affects.

Establishing authenticity and acumen

Much of Bugz's authenticity as a grime artist stems from his experiences growing up amongst friends and relatives that were heavily involved in crime and gang-related activities. It is these experiences, which he gradually became more and more involved with, which establish his credentials as a roadman; he is a product of his environment. Growing up in the 1990s – at a time when Manchester was referred to as 'Gunchester' and 'the infamous Cheetham Hill and Gooch gangs parcelled up the streets with drugs' (*Evening Standard*, 2017) – he reportedly started participating in criminal activity at the age of eleven, which culminated in a stint in HMP Stoke Heath at the age of sixteen. In an interview with *Big Issue North* (2018), Bugz claims that his time in jail provided some respite from the posturing and danger that comes with being a roadman, and thus enabled him to reassess the direction in which his life was heading. In his words:

> [Prison] just felt like a big youth centre. . . I was only a kid and in that respect I enjoyed the break from the streets because they were getting scary at that point. People were getting shot or killed and I was in the firing line, Prison gave me a place to go away and get back to who I actually was before all the bravado. . . When I was out on the streets I wasn't getting used up to my full potential. It's not very creative out there. So when this grime thing [blew up] that wasn't looked down on by people from the streets and was an opportunity to be creative, I was all for it.

The important point here is that, with a background like his, grime both reconnected him to the road, but in a way that enabled him to realise his 'full potential'. Grime thus enabled Bugz to retain his credibility amongst his peers on the road, but also to leverage this credibility in order to elevate himself artistically, professionally and financially (Adams, 2019; Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson, 2016; Kubrin, 2005). Indeed, it is this sense of authenticity, which draws on experiences that translate into uniquely autobiographical lyrics, that 'mark him out as someone different from the majority of his grime peers for whom boasts of inner city violence and aggression are the norm' (*Big Issue North*, 2018). More than just representing the life of a roadman in his lyrics, however, Bugz goes further and demonstrates his entrepreneurial *acumen* as a roadman. He represents himself as not just a roadman, but a successful one at that. In his song M.E.N, released in 2015, just before he attained significant commercial success as a grime artist, Bugz narrates how:

I got a brand new three-bedroom crib
Spotlights in the ceiling
It's sick
Got a beanbag in the computer room
All I need now is Grand Theft Auto Six
Got an office and everything cocaine white
In the morning it can get too bright
But it doesn't affect me these days
'Cause I've been staying up way too deep in the night. . .
Sat counting about twenty-five bags
I'm running out of elastic bands
'Cause it turns out
When you make money on the road
There's nothing you can do with the cash

The accompanying video for M.E.N involves Bugz walking through his new home, showing us the tangible manifestations of his acumen as a roadman. Whilst these demonstrations are mostly visual – showing, for example, a black holdall stuffed with money – they also include the metaphorical referencing of drug dealing as the source of his wealth. These references run through his aesthetic preferences, his pervasive sense of criminality and his difficulties in keeping up with demand. For Bugz, his criminality is commoditised through the trapping of a roadman's lifestyle, causing criminality *itself* to become a commodity that straddles the nexus of self-making and money making (after Stuart, 2020). At the end of this excerpt, however, he also flags his frustrations with the life of a roadman, asserting that the underground nature of the road is dissatisfying, as 'there's nothing you can do with the cash', thus emphasising the pervasive sense of exclusion that *defines* street culture (Ilan, 2015). It is at the point that Bugz airs his 'grievances about life in the dark side of the "urban"' (Fatsis, 2019: 453) that he changes direction in M.E.N, describing his transition from a roadman to an up-and-coming grime artist. He tells listeners how he used to be

A villain, takin' Securicor boxes
And I don't care if it's hot
They don't mean Russell Crowe when they mention the gladiator
In the gang war book
Before going on to make clear his aspirations as a grime artist:
Now it's my turn to try and put Manny on the map. . .
Hope I can get one million views
Hope that I never get caught with food[1]

His aim to 'get one million views' reflects his desire to be recognised beyond his immediate circle of associates, and to reach a broader market of influence and appeal. In reaching this market, however, he recognises in the last line the potential dangers of being a roadman. These dangers are not a questioning of his legitimacy as a roadman, but more the danger of being 'caught with food' and thus imprisoned again, which would limit his ability to develop his career as a grime artist. Checks like this underscore the authenticity of Bugz's autobiographical narrations, which have been recognised as a source of appeal amongst fans. They do, however, also provide a point of distinction from some other grime artists, who seek to downplay their experiences on the road and emphasise their other achievements instead. In this vein, Ilan (2012: 47) argues that 'an emphasis on education is linked to the acumen grime artistes feel is necessary for them to achieve financial and commercial success within an industry that has grown organically and independently out of their own ingenuity'. The point made by Ilan reflects a certain discursive framing of 'success' that is *within* the music industry, and thus reflects a degree of acquiescence to the mores of the mainstream. Bugz, however, is different. As his music career started to take off from 2016 until the present day, he can be seen to leverage more and more his experiences as a roadman, highlighting the seamless connectivity of his past and present, and the value of representational integration therein.

Inter-representing the roadman and royalties

Bugz's growing confidence as an artist, reflected noticeably in his live performances on BBC Radio 1Xtra's *Fire in the Booth* in 2015 and 2016, demonstrates the representational value he managed to create by integrating his past and present lives. Representing his experiences as a roadman adds authenticity and appeal to his emerging status as a grime artist. The representations of himself align, creating more value for his persona as an artist than he could have achieved by obfuscating his past. The empowering potential of digital production gives artists exact control over these representations, enabling them to express their 'aspirations and identities through new mediums and vernaculars' (Thieme, 2017: 532–533). Indeed, it was just a couple of months after his second *Fire in the Booth* performance that his clothing line with Supply & Demand was released in JD Sports, which he references in his song *Mad*:

I used to make change in the snow
I would make fifty pots in one grow
Now I get paid in shorts and a t-shirt
'Cause I've got shows all over the globe

Notable here is how he tracks the change in his economic value, from dealing drugs to getting 'paid in shorts and a t-shirt' because of his popularity as a grime artist. The interrelationships between these factors reveals the commercial acumen he developed on the road as the bedrock of his success; his years as a roadman contributed to his popularity as a grime artist, and his popularity as a grime artist contributed to his collaborations and resultant abilities to get paid from royalties. The value of such an integrative approach to creating a distinct sense of representational value, as reflected in an interview he conducted with the *Evening Standard* (2017) newspaper:

I'm exactly the same as then, but the only thing different is: I won't commit crime. I don't have to commit crime, I don't have to do anything like that to try and make money. I'm not in circles where I have to try and survive all the time. So the only thing different is my actual job description. But at the same time, I'm still bringing the same kind of bravado as if I was still out there, do you get what I'm saying?

The non-difference articulated here by Bugz the extent to which he draws strength by reconciling two stages of life that are distinct in time, but not necessarily attitude. This is the true sense of empowerment that inter-representation offers to people who have had to overcome adversity. It goes beyond authenticity and the related fact that 'some grime artists have opted to stay as geographically, socially, and culturally connected to their "ends[2]" as much as possible, even after commercial success' (Adams, 2019: 450) – even though this is part of it – and speaks instead to a deeper sense that the circumstances might change, but the self is a relatively more enduring construct. Taking this idea as the bedrock of inter-representational value, it obviates the very possibility of *dis*connecting from the 'ends', and highlights instead the value of embracing them. This embrace is explicitly recognised by Bugz in his song M.E.N II; the sequel to M.E.N that was released in 2019. The videos for both songs are choreographed in a similar way, alternately depicting Bugz driving around the ends in pensive mood, and him showing viewers his house, with these visual similarities being emphasised by the replication of lyrics to demonstrate both continuity and change. Consider, for example, the declaration that

Now I'm in a seven bedroom crib

With spotlights in the ceiling, it's sick

No bean bag

I've got a Lamborghini on the ramp and I don't use it

I've got a grand piano in front of the Mona

And everything cocaine white

But I don't get to see it much these days

'Cause I'm always out taking a flight

The impression Bugz gives here is that whilst his aesthetic and attitude have changed little over time, his material wealth has. But the sense of continuity that Bugz evokes goes beyond his style and includes his hustler mentality as well. Whilst he can change his circumstances and realise his self-worth, he struggles to escape the sense of 'protracted liminality' that stems from the fact that his inter-representational value serves to 'muddle the cultural constructions of life stages' (Thieme, 2017: 531; see also Thieme, 2013), creating a sense a continuity where progression may be more befitting his evolution. Bugz is aware of this paradox, lamenting the fact that *my heart still beats when I see a police van*, meaning that, for good or bad, he cannot escape the roadman mentality and the structural inequalities within which he is embroiled. It is these inequalities that makes Bugz's appeal even more pronounced; they provide a benchmark and set of normative expectations that Bugz has overcome, but which he also constantly evokes in order to elevate both the aesthetic, and affective, resonance of his content.

The affective aestheticism of hypercapitalism

The transcendence of the most successful grime artists relates not just to their ability to overcome the limiting socio-economic contexts in which they are raised and that they come to represent, but, more conceptually, the ability to realise their representational power. This power involves representing the self in a way that is temporally integrated and thus undeniable in its authenticity. As much as artists like Bugz represent themselves in a larger-than-life way – through their boasts, their metaphors, and even their avatars – so too do these representations reflect an expansion, not deviation, of the commodified self. The digital enables these expansions by implicating the self in the logics of hypercapitalism and the associated desire for the 'control of space and time, and the production and consumption of *people*' (Armitage and Graham, 2001: 116, original emphasis). It is people – or the image of people, their self-representations – that is playing an increasingly prominent role in (re)locating and (re)producing value. This value is temporally cumulative, with the inter-representing of distinctive time-spaces of an artist's life serving to reproduce a unique sense of appeal that blends aesthetics in order to maximise its affective resonance. As Ahmed (2004: 120) explains:

> Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to 'contain' affect.

Ahmed's notion of 'circulation' speaks to the accumulative transtemporality of Bugz's audio-visual cues, which can be seen to reinforce and thus strengthen the authenticity of the artist. This sense of authenticity – which is rooted in the artist-as-self, but which reaches back to its criminal origins – is a defining feature of grime's hypercapitalist impulses, and the affectiveness of its reproductions. In Bugz's song *The North's Face* – released in 2019 – he adds in a sense of transtemporality to these reproductions, thus elevating its affective resonance further. The name of the song puns on both his status as the 'face' of the north (Manchester), but which also evokes a corporate competitor (The North Face) that claims both the symbolic (of the 'north') and material (of streetwear) terrains as its own. The video depicts Bugz 'perched on the roof of a white Mercedes AMG truck. . . assert[ing] his dominance as he rides through London's high-fashion streets' (Sawyer, 2019). His lyrics reflect the visual aesthetic, combining rapid delivery with violent imagery, expressing a sense of defiance towards The North Face, and a sense of solidarity with the streets. In itself, the video represents a form of 'choreographic practice in which aptitudes for navigating various rhythms and states of emergency become critical to the skills associated with the uncertainties of living on the edge' (Thieme, 2017: 531–532). Hanging out the sunroof of a Mercedes truck as it drives down Regent Street, Bugz raps:

I don't make clothing for the mountains
I make my clothes for the estate. . .
And watch when the trainer's drop
Fuck's sake, somebody better say grace

I made them triple black for the brothers that are ready to become self-made
I wasn't rich when I was on the road, but I swear down I was well paid. . .
I used to weight .9 of a gram on the scales. . .
And now I'm competing with North Face

We can see here a sense of continuity and change. In terms of continuity, he references his status as a roadman, being 'not rich' but 'well paid', and the fact that he is now 'self-made'. However, his allegiance to JD Sports – and his competitive anger at The North Face – causes him to become even sharper in his observations and threats. His direct references to drug dealing emphasise his street credentials, and are used to highlight the ontological difference between him/JD and The North Face – whilst the latter 'make[s] clothing for the mountains', the former makes it 'for the estate'. The outputs may be similar, but the motivations are different. What we see here are the 'innovation, creativity and acumen' of an artist seeking to 'transcend the boundaries of exclusion placed on them' (Ilan, 2012: 40). This transcendence goes beyond escaping the life of a roadman – his listeners know by now that he has already achieved that – it involves competing not just with his grime peers for attention, but with global brands as well. Indeed, it is in this transcendence that hypercapitalism's affects become clear. Bugz goes on to recognise the competitive threat to corporate brands that he poses, asserting that *You're annoyed that I'm running this town*, before narrating his ability to outmanoeuvre these brands and thus to beat them at their own game:

I hear that they're looking for me
Well tell them they're looking the wrong way

Bugz here evokes the dismissiveness with which brands like The North Face sees him as a competitor, with his assertion that it is 'looking the wrong way' providing an encapsulating metaphor that enfolds multiple registers of inter-representational meaning into one lyric. First is the evocation of competing (London-based) grime artists, with Bugz stating the fact that he is a northern grime artist recording a grime video in the epicentre of grime – London – but also the heart of London's retail district. Second is his evocation of his former life as a roadman, the criminality of which would always mean that the police would be 'looking' for him, despite having escaped the criminality of the road. Notwithstanding, in the video he depicts himself as participating in a more aesthetically evocative form of criminality; that of filming a music video whilst hanging out the sunroof of a moving car. Third is his assertion that he is now competing with The North Face for popularity, and that his credentials as roadman hold more value than the 'mountains' for which The North Face is known. Combined, the transgressions leave an impression of where he has come from, and where he is now. It is these 'rhetorical strategies of self-promotion in gangsta rap artistry' that can be seen to 'alter and are altered by the sophisticated interdependencies amongst private, public, and economic spheres' (Watts, 1997: 42). Digital production technologies enable these spheres to coalesce audibly and visually, creating inter-representational value where there otherwise was none. In the closing scene, he builds on the third evocation above and becomes more direct in his intentions. At the video cuts to his car parked outside a North Face store, Bugz talks directly to the camera, exhorting:

Bugzy Malone, see what!

Man are sick of these big corporations

On some culture vulture shit

Finna can come in this fucking culture and use man

Try and pay man pennies and all that

Start payin' man right

Like it's not man that makes this thing in the first place

Trust me, it's a fuckin' B Malone thing

In JD, hang tight JD

Trust me, trust me

Man!

As he makes these remarks, a group of youths start to gather around him, filming him on their mobile phones. They recognise Bugz, and want to both memorialise, and also be part of, the music video. When Bugz finishes, he turns to them, embracing them as his 'brothers'. There is a complex negotiation and assertion of representational value at play here. Whilst he laments the fact that brands like The North Face leverage street culture and exploit its representatives, he asserts that it is people like him that 'makes' the culture in the first place, by embodying and translating the street aesthetic into something that has since generated wide-ranging, and mainstream, appeal. The visual juxtaposition of The North Face store, surrounded by Bugz, his crew (and cars) and his fans, further highlights the distinct contrast between the materialisations of capitalism, and the splintering effects of hypercapitalism therein (after Robinson, 1983). The North Face reproduces value through its products, whereas Bugz does so through him*self*. The integrated and commodified self becomes 'securitised' through the mechanics of hypercapitalism, which privileges the 'tracing [of] value to its source. . . since what we can see now is an impulse to identify almost anything that might provide a stable source of income, on which more speculation can be built' (Leyshon and Thrift, 2007: 98). Increasingly, these two systems of value – and of representation – are being brought into conversation with each other, creating contrast, tension and new opportunities for the affective exploitation of difference.

Conclusions

Grime disrupts notions of progress. The success it can bring otherwise disadvantaged individuals does not necessarily offer, or even foreground, a break from the past; it draws representational value from it instead. This offers a radical counterpoint to normative understandings of the interplay – and indeed tensions – between independent artists and the mainstream music industry, and the associated fear that 'the origins and foundations of this culture would undergo a corporate-influence change in order to make it palatable to [the] mainstream' (Ford, 2004: 127). The digital circumvents these fears, replacing them with brash assertions of artistic sovereignty instead. It also reveals the extent to which digital technologies can have a galvanising force on the socio-spatialities of deprivation, providing new channels and endless possibilities for alternative forms of

entrepreneurship to flourish. Grime is a case-in-point, revealing how policy frameworks like NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) can obscure the realities and potential of the digitally mediated cultural economy, and place discursive limitations on those activities that might go *beyond* such categorisations (White, 2017). The digital empowers grime artists to pursue success on their own terms, and to represent themselves in ways that integrate, rather than isolate, the different temporalities and stages of their lives. Criminality can, in this sense, provide the cachet needed to authenticate the artist, whilst simultaneously ensuring their transition from roadman to a commercially valuable product in their own right. There is a multiplicity to these representations, which in reflects the 'diverse forms of making do, distribution and accumulation that turn devalued or invisible practices into meaningful through perhaps unorthodox social and economic experiments' (Thieme, 2017: 530). Exploring what these 'experiments' mean for the future of social and economic life provides a fertile channel through which future research can unfold.

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Notes

1. In British street slang, 'food' refers to drugs.
2. The 'ends' is British street slang that refers to the streets where a person is known, and from which they make money ('a means to an end').

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