

## **THE BROWN CULTURE INDUSTRY: THEODOR ADORNO MEETS TALVIN SINGH**

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As theorised by Theodor Adorno, the “culture industry” is a pervasive structure that produces cultural commodities for the mass audience, while supporting dominant political and economic imperatives. What interests me here is not so much to focus on an apparent Adornian tendency to unify the culture industry, but to underscore the dynamic and conflictual make-up of the cultural industries. In an attempt to recoup Adorno’s arguments, critics have revisited them over the years and argued that the culture industry thesis is more counterbalanced and less pessimistic than it appears at first sight. Such double-edged nature of the Adornian critique might be relevant in understanding the workings of postcolonial cultural production. Hence, as an update to the concept of culture industry, and as a variation of Ellis Cashmore’s notion of a “black culture industry” (1997), I propose the idea of a “brown culture industry”. This conceptual category will allow for a fusion between one of the foundational theories in the study of popular culture, and a prevailing concern of postcolonial theories regarding the commodification of cultural difference investigated most prominently by John Hutnyk and Graham Huggan.

Thus, in the light of a renewed interest in Adorno’s theorisations on the political economy of the culture industry for those interested in postcolonial cultural production, the concept of a brown culture industry seems adequate to describe a predicament of British culture, in the same way as Cashmore’s model accounted in 1997 for the surfacing of a black culture industry in the North American context. Cashmore’s study explained how blackness had been transformed into a marketable commodity, rehabilitated as a profit-making marketing move in the interests of (white-owned) multinational entertainment corporations. Obviously, that pre-packaged black experience was seen as commercially viable as long as it echoed stereotypical representations. Thus,

Cashmore conveyed that attributing too much political impact to the increased visibility of black culture might prove to be far from emancipatory given that power relations remain, in the end, essentially unscathed.

In Britain, Hutnyk notes the similar process regarding what could be perceived as a brown culture industry: “[t]he visibility [and audibility] of some South Asian stars in the Culture Industry is, in itself, potentially useful but not guaranteed progressive — a favourite trick co-opts a few high profile names to foster the illusion that everyone else is ok” (2000, p. 8). Difference fuels and drives the market — so Adorno warned —, and in the UK difference rose to prominence in the 1990s, as a built-in of New Labour’s “cool Britannia” focused on projecting a multicultural national image. For this reason, the idea of a brown culture industry relies on an exoticisation of South Asian culture in recent years supported by its debatable “coolness”.

Specifically, in what follows, I will try to demonstrate the contribution of that concept to approach the work of the accomplished tabla player, producer and remixer Talvin Singh, a British Asian artist whose work can be tagged as a blend of western underground dance music and Indian percussionist sounds. Breaking into the pop mainstream in the late 1990s, Singh was engaged by assorted bands and artists, from Massive Attack to Madonna to Björk. Before the release of his debut solo album *OK* in 1998, he was best known for his participation in Anokha, a club-night established by himself at East London’s Blue Note club which, at the time, drew crowds of clubbers —and, as a result, caught the attention of both the media and the music industry — while providing a meeting point for a promising and pioneering British Asian music scene.

Even if postcolonial cultural products from areas as diverse as literature, theatre, film and visual arts are inescapably affected by some degree of commodification, music (in particular the surfacing of a market for so-called “World Music” in the late 1980s followed by the trend of “Asian Kool” in the early 1990s) plainly illustrates the tie between ethnic alterity and capitalist consumption when we consider its takeover by popular culture. Hence, it should come as no surprise that, within this tangled web of commodification, Singh was invited to perform at the Labour Party conference in 1998, when “cool Britannia” got underway (Huq 2003, p. 200). Singh’s feat was hailed as a step towards the establishment of a South Asian space within mainstream British culture. For

example, Ken Hunt, writing in the book *World Music: The Rough Guide* (2000), describes the late 1990s as a time of a “shift in power, as British-Indian artists became established in their own right and began forging new music that fused their Indian traditions with Western dance music”; “[a]t the beginning of this new zero-decade”, Hunt continues, Talvin Singh is “British-Asia’s star exponent” (2000, p. 111).

Nevertheless, his breakthrough to the mainstream can just as well be regarded as part and parcel of the brown culture industry rising to prominence around that time. As Hutnyk remarks, “[t]hat Talvin Singh’s success is founded upon a subsumption of the years of bhangra is only one aspect of the to and fro of complicity and occlusion that comes with vision” (2000, p. 9). Even though by that time the threshold of crossover reputation was reached by the Asian Underground, partly as the result of the visibility of the British bhangra scene in the 1980s (Huq 2006, p. 69), the “media portrayal of the musics of the Asian diaspora within Britain began to take the form of a rejection of bhangra, with the focus firmly upon the idea of the ‘new Asian cool’ and its implication that in the past Asians were both uncool and invisible” (Wood 2002, p. 242).

The recurrent issue of the burden of representation led to incidental grieving over lack of “cultural relevance” and “inauthenticity” of the new Asian dance music, as well as to insinuations that Singh had supposedly been co-opted by the agents of late global capitalism. Even if the performer garnered up appraisal from the mainstream media, in 1998 an anti-Talvin Singh counterattack was ongoing in the Asian press (Huq 2006, p. 70). Academic scrutiny was also fast on track. For instance, Hutnyk criticised the “imitations across the planet (New York, Frankfurt, Tokyo)” that “Talvin Singh’s Anokha night-club in London has spawned”, citing them as examples of “transnational flavours” which “do not burn the tender tongues of middle-class liberalism”, being as they are “[s]horn of political roots, toned down and sweetly packaged as exotic magical mystery tourist fare” (2000, p. 116). On the same subject, Koushik Banerjea remarked likewise: “Attending Anokha might not change the world but it certainly convinces enough punters that they are better people for it: organic intellectuals getting urbanely high on the flavours of multicultural clubbing” (2000, p. 66).

If we consider Singh's alleged selling out to the by now worn-out rhetoric of "cool Britannia", it might seem there is no escape from the process whereby alterity is remade by western market forces, against the backdrop of an escalation in hate crimes and restrictive immigration policies. In this context, one still concurs with Hutnyk's words published in 2000: "[d]espite the effervescent cultural industries, the 'hybrid' visibility of Asian cultural forms has not yet translated into any significant socioeconomic redress of multi-racial exclusions within Fortress Europe" (2000, p. 4). Due to the restive production of diverse commodities by the cultural industries, difference is more visible in popular culture than in the past; nevertheless, it still remains to be seen if, for instance, the increased profile of a British Asian cultural presence is an indisputable political achievement.

Interestingly, such logic parallels the focus on the production of cultural hybridity discernible in the field of cultural studies during the last two decades. Indeed, there has been a rising awareness in this area to how the production and marketing of alterity has become a core tactic of post-Fordist cultural industries. At the same time, the critical prominence of concepts such as "difference", "hybridity" and "ethnicity" in the area of postcolonial and cultural studies and their sometimes uncritical glorification have summoned negative reactions (Schlote 2004, p. 138). It seems that these fashionable concepts have become marketable academic commodities.

Even if it is viable to demonstrate the subversive and oppositional use of certain cultural commodities, critics have argued that hybridity-talk is altogether contained by the commodity system and might not act as a disturbance of that structure. Hence, Graham Huggan posited in *The Postcolonial Exotic* that his academic output in the field of postcolonial studies was inextricably "bound up in a late-capitalist mode of production (...) in which such terms as 'marginality', 'authenticity' and 'resistance' circulate as commodities available for commercial exploitation" (2001, p. xvi).

Acknowledging and critiquing this "hybridity turn" of cultural studies as somewhat empty of the professed political impact, the study *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, edited by Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk and Ashwani Sharma, reacted as soon as 1996 to a rising commodification of "Asian coolness" by applying the notion of "selling difference" to popular music production in Britain.

On the first page of the introduction to the collection, the editors stated: “Ethnicity is in. Cultural difference is in. Marginality is in. Consumption of the Other is all the rage for late capitalism. Finally, it appears that the ‘coolie’ has become cool. (...) an increasing heterophilia found in Cultural Studies feeds this expanding discipline’s voracious appetite for all that is labelled ‘hybrid’” (1996, p. 1).

In dialogical spirit, this paper aims to enquire if we should follow Adorno in dismissing Talvin Singh’s work as a commodity “through an through” (Adorno 1991, p. 10), being as it is seemingly part of a brown culture industry, or consider his music as in some way ‘contrapuntal’, following Edward Said. In musical terminology, “counterpoint” refers to the connection between two or more voices concurrently autonomous in rhythm and interrelated in harmony. Said resolutely refused to privilege either side of the encounter that comprises contrapuntal reading. As in music, in contrapuntal reading, so the critic writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “various themes play off one another, with only provisional privilege being given to any particular one” at any given time; contrapuntal reading, he adds, opens all texts up for the ways in which their premises, themes and even styles “brush up unstintingly against” the counter-texts to which they are opposed (Said 1993, p. 51).

Here, a disclaimer is overdue: I do not wish to argue that Singh’s syncretic musical production is contrapuntal, as if fusion music equals being contrapuntal. As the editors of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* caution their readers in the introduction to the collection, my purpose is “not to celebrate the hyper-syncretic quality of the new Asian dance music”, exemplified here by Singh’s work, “naively as a ready-made vehicle for realizing a necessarily progressive kind of politics of difference” (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996, p. 9). For Adorno the *question* that the culture industry raises ensues from the potential for social transformation that it contains (Bernstein 1991, p. 2). Thus, having construed culture, along with Max Horkheimer, as a “paradoxical commodity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2001, p. 161), his critique of cultural products was, above all, dialectical, being as it was interested in their critical possibilities for *both* liberation and control. By the same token, as much as I do not intend to engage Singh’s music in a celebratory tone, as if being hybrid amounts to being progressive and politically emancipatory, I do not wish to condemn it as a mere

commodity, the end product of skilful and successful marketing strategies of transnational entertainment corporations. What interests me is rather to draw attention to the *extent* to which his music, understood as a merger of what might be conceived as independent and individual traditions by origin, embodies and enacts in an interdependent fashion both complicity with (neo-colonial) cultural industries and resistance to it.

Undoubtedly, it is possible to identify connexions between Singh's music and the idea of an Adorno-influenced brown culture industry. According to Adorno, consumers are provided by the culture industry with pre-packaged products that have already been conceptually managed and classified for effortless and immediate processing. Singh's work has been variously categorised as "Asian Underground" (*Melody Maker*, 28 June 1997) or "New Asian Dance Music" (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996). As Adorno put it in "On Popular Music", "[t]he composition hears for the listener. This is how popular music divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes. Not only does it not require his effort to follow its concrete stream; it actually gives him models under which anything concrete still remaining may be subsumed. The schematic build-up dictates the way he must listen while, at the same time, it makes any effort in listening unnecessary. Popular music is 'digested' in a way strongly resembling the fad of 'digests' in printed material" (1941, p. 22). In this way, it is not necessary to impose labels on films, television programs and popular music, trying to fit them into open conceptual frameworks. Following this reasoning, the ethnically oriented labels "Asian Underground" and "New Asian Dance Music", umbrella terms firmly stamped on Singh's musical practice at the point of production, act as the predigestion Adorno identifies in the culture industry. In this context, it seems that there is nothing left for listeners/consumers to organise.

Unlike other performers (such as, for instance, Asian Dub Foundation and Fun<sup>da</sup>mental), it seems that Singh chose to come across as not blatantly political in his lyrics and music, while nevertheless he acknowledged that it was necessarily a political act for a British Asian artist to land his feet on unfamiliar turf. As he confided in 1997, "This has been happening for 15 years. But there's a different agenda for us now than saying, 'Let's cash in on the Asian sound for

the Western scene.’ It’s about bringing music to people’s attention which they’ve probably never heard before”<sup>1</sup>.

As Rupa Huq observes, Singh sees himself essentially as musician and not a vehicle for “postcolonial political vengeance”, and she supports this by quoting the artist’s words in an interview conducted by herself in 1998: “I don’t really want to be political all the time. I don’t fit into that and I don’t want to. I wanna enjoy things which I like whether they have an Asian value or not (...) These cultural crises really stay in your blood but instead on being sour about it, I bring that into some beautiful energy rather than going ‘you fucked us up. I’m gonna fuck you up.’ Fuck *who* up? Are these people any part of that? Let’s move our shit on” (Huq 2006, p. 75-76).

Accordingly, the title for his album *OK*, winner of the mainstream Mercury Music Prize for Popular Music and South Bank Prize for Popular music in 1999, was selected due to the perceived universal character of that term, as if discarding the idea that South Asians are marginal to mainstream British culture (Wood 2002, p. 281). He chose this name because, as he put it, “anywhere you go in the world, people know what OK is. Music shouldn’t have boundaries. That’s the most valuable thing in music today. We are living in a time when things have got to unite” (Singh quoted in Zuberi 2001, p. 182).

Postcolonial resistance is time and again regarded in terms of ambivalence or hybridity disrupting the binary oppositions on which the operations of power lie. What this paper contends is that in-betweenness should not be construed as a basis for understanding Singh’s work, as a critical grounding on in-betweenness will predictably involve a reproduction of the traditional postcolonial binaries of oppressor/oppressed and coloniser/colonised the performer seems to dismiss altogether. Singh is, to be sure, not overtly involved in what might be described as a transgressive affirmation of political alterity. What he seems to be suggesting is a way out, a way beyond the confines of hybridity-talk as the cipher for understanding British Asian cultural expressions while defending a cultural space.

Ultimately, I argue that Talvin Singh, both the artist and the entrepreneur, locates himself, whether he is conscious of this or not, outside the rhetoric of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thumped.com/bbs/archive/index.php?t-12793.html>

alterity and hybridity that fuels ethnic commodities, in particular, the so-called World Music, sometimes used as a catch-all term for a diverse range of musics. What is essential is to untangle Singh's approach to cultural production from hybridity-talk. In fact, I have some trouble with dismissing his music offhand as saccharine entertainment, as Hutnyk does, maybe because I believe that if a white European individual enjoys his albums, there is not necessarily something neo-colonial about that. Believing that he/she is a dupe of marketing and advertising is falling in the "Adorno-thought-consumers-were-all-just-automatons" routine trap Hutnyk himself condemns in his blog "Trinketization"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://hutnyk.blogspot.com/2007/05/beyond-exoticism.html>



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