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Saha, Anamik. 2020. Funky Days are (Not) Back Again: Cool Britannia and the Rise and Fall of British South Asian Cultural Production. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 17(1), pp. 6-23. ISSN 1743-4521 [Article]

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## **Funky Days Are (Not) Back Again: The Rise and Fall of British South Asian Cultural Production<sup>1</sup>**

*Well, it seems like the funky days, they're back again*

*Funky, funky days, they're back again*

*And we're in vogue again*

*Before the Ghurkhas get called up again*

‘Funky Days Are Back Again’ – Cornershop (lyrics: Tjinder Singh, 1997)

### *Introduction*

The modern South Asian community in the UK, consisting of multiple national and regional identities and religions, has been firmly established for over 50 years. Yet despite this fact Asians are still marginalised in the cultural industries, and especially in television and film. This was not always the case. In the 1990s there emerged a new generation of British-born Asian artists and creatives who made a significant impact on British popular culture. This movement in various ways tackled the experience of being racialised as Other in the West, but in a way that both transcended victimhood and destabilised the assumptions of whiteness that underpin nationalist concepts of Britishness/Englishness. While films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *East is East* (1999), television comedy sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC, 1998-2001), the plays of writer Parv Bancel, the books of Hanif Kureshi,

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<sup>1</sup> This piece is dedicated to Parv Bancel (1967-2017)

and the music of Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney and Cornershop (who scored a number 1 single in 1996 with the remix of 'Brimful of Asha') together covered a wide variety of styles, genres and politics, what they all had in common was how they were articulating 'new ethnicities' (Hall 1996) or indeed, distinctly *British Asian* identities. Yet rather than establish British Asians in the cultural industries, dismantling the 'industry lore' (Havens 2013) that stories about Asian lives have limited appeal to a wider mainstream (i.e. white) audience, following this high in the 1990s we instead see a decline in *brown cultural production* that, despite some notable exceptions, continues to this day. In film British Asian directors remain invisible, while actors still struggle to get roles, many of whom have in fact turned to the US for more opportunities (British Asian actors Archie Punjabi, Parminder Nagra and Riz Ahmed have all found success across the Atlantic). In television, while we do see more diversity - for instance in competitive baking shows, occasional stand-up specials and lifestyle entertainment (which in fact rely on having a variety of social types (Malik 2014: 34)) - we still learn very little about the actual experience of Asian people in the UK. (In music Asian acts remain novel rather than the norm.)

The aim of this this paper is to explore the conditions that led to the rise and fall of British Asian cultural production. Yet this is not an exercise in nostalgia. I acknowledge that the development of British Asian cultural production across the cultural industries since the 1990s is more complex and uneven than such a narrative perhaps allows, though it broadly holds true. Nonetheless, the main purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how the practices of British Asian cultural producers have been shaped by the political-economic and social-cultural shifts that the UK has gone through since the New Labour government. In doing so I situate this work within the growing body of race and cultural production research (Malik

2008, Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, Nwonka 2015, Malik and Nwonka 2018, Saha 2018) that focuses on the *making* of representations of race, and how inequalities in the cultural industries shape the way that minorities are portrayed in the media. It also adds to the literature on creative industries policy in the UK, and the extent to which it is neoliberal in character (Oakley 2004, Newsinger 2012, Hesmondhalgh et al 2015). What this paper brings to this discussion is an explicit interest in ‘diversity’ and the politics of race in the creative industries. While this paper is not intended to be a historical case study, I apply historical analysis according to the cultural industries tradition of political economy (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013: 186), based upon an understanding that at different moments in time, different historical forces combine to produce particular social and institutional arrangements that shape cultural production. More specifically the purpose of the paper is to explore how the changing politics of multiculturalism and creative industries policy came together to produce a micro-conjuncture that initially enabled but then ultimately constrained British Asian cultural producers.

#### *The rise of new Asian ethnicities*

The 1990s was a fertile moment for Asian cultural production, albeit only momentarily. As mentioned in the introduction, this was the decade where filmmakers, musicians, playwrights, comedians, and authors of South Asian extraction finally made inroads into popular culture. Crucially though, this did not merely entail the odd Sunday newspaper magazine feature on the novelty of Asians in the mainstream, or even occasional commercial success, but actual cultural legitimization. For instance, in the year 1999 alone, popular BBC sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* - written and starring four Asian comedians/actors - received the best

‘Team Award’ from the Royal Television Society, *East is East* - based on the play by Ayub Khan-Din who also wrote the screenplay for the film - won a BAFTA Award for Outstanding British Film, while musician and DJ Talvin Singh won the prestigious Mercury Music Prize. This recognition from key UK cultural institutions was the culmination of the innovative, highly creative and politically urgent interventions that *2nd generation* South Asians had been making throughout the 1990s.

While there had been some significant British Asian work prior to the 1990s that achieved mainstream recognition (such as the writings of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi and the artworks of Anish Kapoor), the fact is that up until that point British Asian youth in particular were largely invisible in British popular culture. When they did appear in film and television, they were often portrayed as victims of racial violence and ‘paki-bashing’, unable to participate in British cultural life due to their fundamental cultural difference. These media representations were part of a popular discourse that saw Asian youth as passive, conformist, studious and uncool, who, unlike their black counterparts had nothing to contribute to contemporary British youth culture (Sharma 1996, Malik 2002, Huq 2003). But this changed in the 1990s when those Asian youth born in the 1970s started coming-of-age. Following in the wake of Afro-Caribbean cultural producers who were creating a distinctly British black cultural movement (away from the dominant hegemony of African American popular culture, or indeed Jamaican popular culture) (Gilroy 1993), British-born South Asian cultural producers, frustrated with the invisibility of brown folk and the stereotyping of brown culture, started creating their own unique expressive culture - in film, in television, in theatre, in music, in literature, in the visual arts, in fashion - that at once challenged reductive, exotic and racist understandings of Asian culture, while at the same time constructing new ideas

around national identity. Many scholars drew attention to the radical ‘hybridity’ of these cultural productions which, in their syncretic nature that fused South Asian with Western cultural influences, destabilised the ethnic absolutisms upon which national categories like ‘British’ and ‘English’ lay (Back 1995, Huq 1996). The new generation of cultural producers were not Asians, but *British* Asians. As Stuart Hall said at the time, ‘I was writing about identity, they were making it’ (quoted in Alexander 2009: 468).

Much has been written about the cultural politics of this new British Asian ‘scene’, mostly lamenting the manner in which its hybrid qualities were quickly commodified, subsuming its radical disruptive potential (see Sharma et al 1996). But the concern of the first half of this article is to consider what gave this particular generation of cultural producers cultural legitimation in the first place? I am working here with Karim Hammou’s notion (2016) of cultural legitimation: not just based on the recognition from (white) critics, art institutions and academics, but through the manner in which artists and cultural practitioners *self-commodify*, primarily through promotional practices. The emergence of a new generation of British Asian cultural producers can be simply read as a natural consequence of what Hall (1999: 188) calls ‘multicultural drift’, and ‘the increasing visible presence of black and Asian people in all aspects of British social life as a natural and inevitable part of the “scene”’ (ibid.); or in other words, by virtue of just *being around* for 50-odd years. But I argue that the new brown cultural producers were enabled specifically by two forces, one socio-cultural relating to a new politics of multiculturalism, the other political-economic relating to the emergence of ‘creative industries’ policy. Both forces constituted and were constituted by the rhetoric of ‘Cool Britannia’, bound up in the ‘New Labour’ project following the election of Britain’s youngest ever prime minister in 1997. I argue that ‘Cool Britannia’, for a moment,

led to the cultural legitimization of British Asian cultural production, before leading to its demise.

*‘Cool Britannia’: multiculturalism and creativity under New Labour*

‘Cool Britannia’ was originally coined by the American journalist Stryker McGuire in 1996 to capture the youthful dynamism of London at the time, reminiscent of the ‘swinging sixties’. As Tony Blair toppled the Tory government in a landslide victory, ‘Cool Britannia’ became the name of a New Labour campaign to rebrand Britain as young, modern and cosmopolitan, representing a break from both Tory conservatism and Old Labour statism. It was against this backdrop that the new 2nd generation British Asian cultural producers attained recognition.

These days ‘Cool Britannia’ is mostly discussed in disparaging terms dismissed as an empty, superficial promotional exercise that affected little actual material change. But nonetheless, it did signal - if only for a moment – a point when Britain appeared to recognise and accept its own multiculturalism. New Labour embraced multiculturalism. As Beynon and Kushnick (2003: 231) put it ‘multiculturalism added an important cosmopolitan flavour to Blair’s idea of “a young country”’. This had two elements. The first involved a rather superficial, exoticised consumption of difference. At best, this recognised the cultural contribution of racial and ethnic minorities - culminating in Robin Cook’s famous assertion in 2001 that Chicken Tikka Masala was a true British national dish. But secondly, it had a social justice element: the MacPherson enquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (a Labour party election pledge) that exposed the ‘institutional racism’ of the police force seemingly confirmed the government’s progressive stance. It is this shift in the way in which

British multiculturalism was understood and more crucially, *promoted back to itself*, that I argue benefited the British Asian cultural scene. While one could argue that the new brown cultural producers themselves contributed to this normalisation of multiculturalism with the symbolic goods they were producing that were articulating new multi-culturally inclusive (rather than exclusively White) *British* ethnicities, I would also argue that the recognition/legitimation of brown cultural production was helped by a more enlightened attitude towards the very fact of Britain's own multiculturalism

'Cool Britannia' not only evoked a cosmopolitan outlook (though this was quickly replaced by a whitewashed version of British cultural history as *Britpop* came to the fore) but also emphasised the centrality of creativity - and the creative industries - within this new, modern Britain. The renaming of the 'Department of National Heritage' as the 'Department of Culture, Media and Sport' (DCMS) as Labour came to power was about aligning the party with the knowledge economy, but again, also reflected New Labour attempts to create Britain as a more cosmopolitan, youthful nation (Nwonka and Malik 2018). Much has been written about creative industries policy as a response to industrial decline, reframing creativity in terms of economic growth and urban regeneration (Oakley, 2004 2006). But slightly less has been written about creative industries and diversity, which was an important aspect of creative industries policy, that I again argue briefly enabled the new generation of British Asian cultural producers.

Diversity, defined in terms of openness and tolerance, was key to Richard Florida's (2014) argument for creativity taking a more central role in the Western economies. Diversity in this regard has two values for the creative industries. Firstly, diversity has economic value (see Newsinger and Eikhof elsewhere in this issue for a fuller discussion of economic

justifications for diversity). Chris Smith, head of the DCMS, made sure to mention the contribution of Britain's young multicultural population in his report *Creative Britain* (2008) on the (economic) value of the new creative industries, when he states 'British bands such as Blur, Oasis, the Prodigy, Pulp and the Verve dominate much of the rest of the world. Singers such as Roni Size and Jazzie B. are putting black music on the map. And the British record and CD industry - as a result of the talent that lies behind it - is one of the great strengths of our modern economy' (quoted in Back et al 2005: 2.1). Thus, these 'multicultural' performers (neither Roni Size or Jazzie B are 'singers' incidentally) in the context of the creative industries contribute to the economic growth of the country. Secondly, diverse creative industries produce equality in society at large. New Labour's creative industries policy was based on the apparently easy convergence of economic with social/cultural rationales. For instance the UK film policy during the New Labour era was primarily about realising the industry's full commercial potential, but also included a remit to 'support and encourage cultural diversity and social inclusiveness' (UKFC quoted in Nwonka and Malik 2018: 10). In this way creative industries helped tackle inequality. As Oakley (2006: 262) states, 'The perception that the creative class was meritocratic, open to talent and unlikely to be bound by prejudices about race, gender or sexuality, led to the hope that these sectors opened up routes to participation among those from excluded groups'. In a similar vein O'Loughlin (2006), writing in the context of public service broadcasting, describes this new 'flowing' version of diversity (in contrast to the essentialist multicultural policy that characterised the BBC's approach up until then) as designed to enable the social capital of minorities, representing 'a means to ends such as democratic renewal, social cohesion, and economic productivity' (ibid.: 4).

So how did the 2nd Generation Asian cultural producers benefit from this new emphasis on creativity (and how did they in turn, shape it)? As Hall acknowledges, this new generation of black and Asian cultural producers emerged as a

small but highly-visible proportion especially of young members of the communities who have benefited from the greater fluidity of market opportunities in the leisure, the consumer and the entertainment industries and in sport, opened up by the 'hustling' entrepreneurial spirit which is the legacy of Thatcherism as well as by public-sector equal-opportunities policies inaugurated in the 1970s. (1999: 191)

Hall here alludes to how the motivations of these young creatives aligned with both New Labour's social democratic ideals as well as its neoliberal tendencies. The new British Asian cultural producers more specifically were facilitated by two elements of creative industries policy.

First was the stress on independence. The British Asian cultural producers of the 1990s were effectively members of what Oakley and Leadbetter (1999) called the 'new Independents' that referred to the emergence of informal networks of creative practitioners who value independence and creativity over financial ambition. Indeed, the 'creative individual or independent' was at the heart of New Labour's creative industries policy. According to Newsinger (2012: 117), small independent producers were considered the most appropriate unit of the government's new creative industries policy, where 'subsidy is most effectively directed in order to drive a host of policy objectives such as economic development and efficiency, urban regeneration, cultural pluralism and diversity'.<sup>1</sup> Second, the new brown independents were facilitated by the emerging cultural quarters in inner city areas - areas where there were already strong Asian communities. As Keith (2004) suggests ethnic creatives were willing participants in the gentrification of these areas, which in fact lent their work or 'brand's a certain amount of (sub)cultural capital. As an example, 'Asian

Underground' club nights such as Anokha and Swaraj worked out of the famous Blue Note club in Hoxton Square in Shoreditch, Asian beats record label Outcaste Records established a regular night at the Notting Hill Arts Club, and Asian style magazine *2nd Generation* that covered the scene was run as a start-up off Coldharbour Lane in Brixton. While this on the surface seems to relate little to television and cinema, many of the participants on this scene went onto forge careers in film/broadcasting. For instance the actor Sanjeev Bhaskar started his career in comedy as part of an act with Nitin Sawhney, a Mercury Music Prize-nominated musician who had strong ties to Outcaste. Similarly actors Nina Wadia and Meera Syal also cut their teeth in the burgeoning British Asian theatre scene. Imran Khan who founded *2nd Generation* became a well-respected broadcast journalist for Al Jazeera. Independence was key to British Asian cultural producers in the 1990s as it gave them the autonomy to self-represent and self-define and contest the way that Asian communities were being portrayed in the media. (Though on the other hand, they had no choice but be independent since they were receiving little to no support from established cultural industries and institutions.) Moreover as creative industries policy was being implemented, British Asian cultural producers, who had been working in DIY, underground contexts found their work finally being recognised - at least symbolically rather than economically. My argument is that the new brown independents, with their entrepreneurial spirit but commitment to social justice issues encapsulated New Labour's approach to both creative industries and multiculturalism. While creative industry policy didn't necessarily provide the material infrastructure for the new brown independents, it at least recognised (and legitimated) the contribution of the new independents to not just British cultural life but the economy itself, whereas before then, the contributions of brown cultural producers had largely been ignored.

*The fall of 'British Asian' cultural production*

The end of the 1990s then marked a watershed moment for British Asians in the cultural industries where they were receiving cultural recognition/legitimation across a number of sectors including television, film, music, theatre and literature. But rather than see the further establishment of British Asians in the media, the first decade of the 2000s finds only sporadic instances of British Asians cultural production crossing over into the mainstream of British television and film. Following the cancellation of *Goodness Gracious Me* in 2001, Sanjeev Bhaskar and Meera Syal found further success with *The Kumars at No. 42* (BBC 2001-6) but there was little else in television that centered Asianness in the same way. (Later on *Citizen Khan* (2012-16) became one of the BBC1's primetime sitcoms albeit controversially since it is criticised for reinforcing Muslim/Pakistani stereotypes.) *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), directed by Gurinder Chadha (who also directed the critically acclaimed *Bhaji on the Beach*), was a huge international hit, but she remains the only notable Asian film director (and one of the few established female directors) in British film. While one might have assumed that the formal recognition and legitimation of the new British Asian artistic and cultural practices by the late 1990s would have led to more opportunities for British Asian cultural producers in the 2000s, the UK cultural industries seem to be operating a *one-in-one-out* policy when it comes to the representation of brown folk in the media.

How to read this decline that followed the optimism of the 1990s? Again, according to a particular cultural studies approach we might read this in terms of the commodification of Asianness; what once began as radical hybridity is transformed by commodification into reified, exoticised, *absolute* ethnic difference. According to this narrative, Asianness was co-

opted by the culture industry and reduced to a fad that eventually and inevitably went out of fashion – as alluded to in the Cornershop lyrics that opened this article. While this is a compelling argument it is too simplistic, and as I will show, the contextual approach that I adopt here, reveals a more complex picture. As much as British Asian cultural production was briefly enabled by new discourses around multiculturalism and creativity, I argue that that these same sociocultural and political-economic forces eventually came together to constrain the practices of British Asians, in the process *de-legitimizing* their art which once again was treated with suspicion, relegating them back to the margins of British popular culture.

*The northern riots and the crisis of multiculturalism*

In terms of socio-cultural effects, 9/11 had a transformative impact upon Britain. But that is not to say that Britain was a peaceful, settled multiracial society before this rupture. The fact is that even during the peak of ‘Cool Britannia’, structural racism still characterised the experience of people of colour in the UK. According to the key social indicators of racial marginalisation - stop and search, disproportionate sentencing, deaths in police custody, continued racial discrimination in the workplace) – not much had in fact changed for people of colour during the New Labour government (Hall 1999, Beynon and Kushnick 2003, Kapoor 2013), despite Blair’s claim in 2000 that the party’s ‘record on race relations is exemplary and one we are extremely proud of’ (Blair quoted in Beynon and Kushnick 2003: 233). In other words, underneath the valorisation of British multiculturalism and Macpherson’s damning indictment of institutional racism in the police force remained the constant mid-level hum of racism, both at the level of structure and in the everyday.

But in 2001 we see a flare-up in British race relations, specifically tensions between the state and Britain's Muslim community (which destabilises the term 'Asian' as British Asian Muslims start defining themselves by their religious identity). In the summer of 2001 riots break out between mostly Pakistani Muslim youth and the police in the northern towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, provoked by the far right against a backdrop of severe deindustrialization and poverty. The civil unrest in 2001 followed by 9/11 marked a shift in New Labour's celebratory tone around multiculturalism. The new Home Secretary, David Blunkett starts speaking out against immigrants' lack of English and inability (or refusal) to integrate, alluding to the backwardness of immigrant cultural practices. Indeed, Back et al (2002) identify a return to the assimilationist language of the 1960s. For Modood (2005), the riots in the north resulted in a 'governmental reversal' (ibid.: 62) in its approach to racial and ethnic minorities and the return to a suspicion of multiculturalism especially Muslims 'who seemed to identify more with jihadism than the Union Flag' (ibid.). New Labour's superficial embrace of multiculturalism is eventually subsumed into rhetoric around a supposed 'crisis of multiculturalism' that becomes the dominant discourse throughout Europe (Lentin and Titley 2009). The feeling now is that there is *too* much difference, and moreover, a type of difference that is fundamentally incompatible with European, liberal values and the Western way of life. Suddenly, the celebrated 2nd generation British Asian cultural scene of the 1990s appears exclusive, elitist and London-centric. As Hall (1999: 188) says of multicultural drift:

Though visibly registering the new play of difference across British society, this creeping multiculturalism is, of course, highly uneven. Large tracts of the country, most significant centres of power and many so-called 'ethnic minority' people are largely untouched by it. Many white British people may accept it as a fact of life, but do not necessarily welcome it. Outside of its radius, the practices of racialized exclusion, racially-compounded disadvantage, household poverty, unemployment and educational under-achievement persist - indeed, multiply.

In London the brown kids were dancing, while in the northern mill towns they were rioting.

In the moment of 'Cool Britannia', British Asian cultural production represented a momentary challenge to the dominant nationalist discourse that, relying on the binary opposition between a (white) Self and the (racialised Other), excluded racial and ethnic minorities from 'the national conversation' (O'Loughlin 2003). But the buzzing conviviality of London's cultural quarters eventually loses out to the nation's postcolonial melancholia; as Back et al (2002: 26) state, 'British political life is caught like a grieving child unable to move beyond, or let go of, the death of an imperial parent'. Into present times and what Hall (1999: 192) initially identifies as an English cultural nationalism (which he goes as far as describing as 'an English "fundamentalism"') remains in ascendancy. Within this context the hybrid translations of British Asians no longer have currency, and indeed are seen as a threat to a British national identity that needs cohesiveness, not more difference, in these anxious times.

However, this by itself cannot totally explain the decline of British Asian cultural production in the 2000s. After all, as Back et al (2002) stress, in the context of the New Labour government there is in fact a tension between the party's postcolonial melancholia and the its remaining commitment to social democratic principles (see also Hesmondhalgh et al 2015 and Newsinger 2012). This tension is felt particularly acutely in creative industries policy. Challenging the idea that cultural policy under New Labour is solely neoliberal in character, Newsinger (2012) argues that it is better understood as ambivalent; as much as it was about upwardly distribution of income through marketisation, it also emphasises inclusion and diversity, even during times of austerity. But the way in which diversity is

conceptualised in policy I argue has governing effects upon racial and ethnic minorities, and is paradoxically what has impeded British Asian cultural production.

*The ascendancy of neoliberal 'diversity' discourse*

In the first half of this article I argued that the cultural legitimisation of British Asian cultural production was enabled by New Labour's vision for a new, young, cosmopolitan and creative Britain. The impact made by black and Asian cultural producers in the mainstream during the 1990s in fact contributed to a shift in diversity policy - which I argue paradoxically resulted in their marginalisation. In the 1980s broadcasting and cultural policy was characterised by a multicultural approach; 'strategies used to manage difference' (Malik 2013: 230) that entailed special provisions for specific ethnic and racial groups. While this guaranteed minorities a space in the media it was ghettoising, and limited the ability for minorities to gain mainstream recognition. In the 1990s the seeds are sewn for a shift to a broader and supposedly more inclusive notion of 'cultural diversity', that eventually flower in the 2000s, fed by the idea that we no longer need multicultural policies because, as Channel 4's Chief Executive Michael Jackson famously put it, minorities "have been assimilated into the mainstream of society" (quoted in Malik 2014: 32)<sup>2</sup>. So in the case of broadcasting and arts policy we see multicultural provision replaced by the apparently progressive *mainstreaming* of diversity, that in the case of broadcasting was about incorporating minorities into mainstream programming rather than making programmes for specific groups. Under 'cultural diversity' policy, the emphasis was now on enabling *individuals* from diverse backgrounds. This entailed a language of access, excellence, education, and in turn entrepreneurialism and individualism (see also Oakley 2004). While minorities welcomed the

‘mainstreaming of diversity’ (as a challenge to cultural ghettoisation), within the cultural industries there was now less concern (if there was any in the first place) with tackling racial exclusion and discrimination. Advocacy around inclusion appeared to involve (as it still does) making a business case for diversity. That is, diversity is conceptualised in terms of how it can contribute to originality, innovation and driving competition.

So how did this impact upon racial ethnic and racial minorities in the creative sector? In terms of workforce, while creative industries are seen as promoting social inclusion they are more likely to produce polarisation. Research shows starkly that despite the celebration of black and (occasionally) Asian contributions to British creativity, the creative industries remain overwhelmingly white with minorities disproportionately underrepresented across the sector (Oakley 2006; O’Brien et al 2016). But while this might be read as a failure of creative industries policy, in other instances creative industries have, I argue, directly impeded the type of independent production that flourished to an extent, in the 1990s. Firstly, creative industries provision was unevenly distributed disadvantaging minorities outside London; as Oakley (2006) argues, creative industries policy favoured certain regions, exasperating differences between London and the north in particular. (This again serves to highlight the London-centricity of the 1990s moment.) Secondly creative industry policy did little to improve the social conditions of independent cultural producers, who continue to experience precarity, self-exploitation, insecurity, with racial/ethnic minorities and working classes hit particularly hard by this. Thirdly, minorities were more likely to be constrained by the new infrastructures put in place in the name of creative industries policy. While the British Asian cultural scene in the 1990s was impactful because of its independent, DIY, bottom-up nature, top down creative industries policy has imposed a ‘new managerialism’ style, that shifted for

instance, artistic/editorial roles in the sector towards more managerial, business oriented ones. For Oakley (2004), rather than supporting bottom-up creative initiatives to facilitate long term growth, creative industry policy was short-termist and based on implementing measures on things (to ascertain 'impact') that are not in fact measurable.

With particular ramifications for black and brown cultural production, I argue that creative industries policy, with its emphasis on 'diversity' additionally affected the way that minorities appear in the media. Mainstreaming diversity has in fact led to a 'hyper visibility' in television and film of minorities, but often in a superficial way. While we see more black and brown faces on screen - whether its on lifestyle shows, supermarket adverts, or American sitcoms - we do not necessarily learn anything particular about black and brown experiences; as Kohnen (2015: 89) puts it diversity becomes a 'veneer' to look at rather than something to explore. 'Colour-blind' casting - where actors are cast regardless of their racial or ethnic profile - appears progressive but in fact fulfils what Jo Littler (2017) calls a 'post-racial neoliberal meritocracy' - the myth that society is a level-playing field where minorities have equal opportunities to whites thus disavowing the structural racism that still blights people of colour. As Malik (2013: 228) puts it, in this post-race conjuncture, 'race and racism have been driven underground'. But on the other side of the coin, the emphasis on diversity puts pressure on minorities to perform their ethnic and racial identity that confirms to white expectations. Exploring diversity in UK film policy, Nwonka and Malik (2018), focuses on the case of the film *Bullet Boy* which they argue received funding from the UK Film Council out of obligation to fund something diverse; as an anonymous respondent told one of the authors, there was an urgent need 'to get something black made' (ibid.: 11). Moreover, they argue that the funding of *Bullet Boy* occurred because of the way it reaffirmed certain racial

tropes that were acquiescent with white gatekeeper views of what 'authentic' British black culture is. Thus, an emphasis on 'diversity' leads to the overdetermining of race, in order to fulfil a particular racial/ethnic 'tick-box'; under creative industries policy the ability to measure diversity is more important than actually dealing with structural forms of inclusion. Summing up the contradictions at the core of the diversity agenda Clive Nwonka (2015: 10) astutely observes that 'diversity policy is both political and depolitical; political in the sense that it is influenced by discourses of social inclusion and multiculturalism, but depolitical in the sense that it manoeuvres away from credible interrogations of discrimination into concepts of underrepresentation'.

My argument is that British Asian cultural producers in the 1990s achieved cultural legitimisation and recognition, no doubt because of the quality of their cultural works, but also because of the way they helped realise a new, seemingly radical, vision of Britain, fed by the state but reinforced by the media, that foregrounded multiculturalism and independent creativity. However, following the summer unrest's of 2001, and then 9/11, attitudes to Britain's own multiculturalism were radically altered, less about celebrating difference and more about integration and cohesion. Creative industries policy, at the heart of which remains a tension between neoliberal goals of upward income distribution and social democratic principles of inclusion and access, conceptualises a new vision of 'diversity' which purports to facilitate inclusion, but in a way that disavows any reference to racism. Moreover, they act as a form of governance - or indeed a technique of power as Herman Gray (2013: 784) puts it - that reproduces the very whiteness of the cultural industries (Saha 2018), and in addition expects minorities to perform their Otherness that conforms to the Eurocentric worldviews of white, middle class gatekeepers. Thus while the British Asian independents found

legitimation in the 1990s through its seeming alignment with New Labour's creative industries policy, the same policy I argue ultimately constrained the new culturally diverse artistic and cultural practices. Newsinger (2012) states that under creative industries policy, culture has been instrumentalised for the sake of capital, and we can say the same about race, reconceptualised as 'diversity'. This shift in policy, coupled with a new suspicion of multicultural difference I argue has led to the decline of British Asian cultural production in the 2000s, even though the end of the 1990s suggested something more optimistic.

### *Conclusion*

The focus of the article has the 1990s-2000s. So where are we now with regard to the representation of British South Asians in television and film? The fact is that Asians remain on the periphery except for a few notable exceptions. Comedians such as Nish Kumar and Romesh Ranganathan feature regularly in stand-up specials and panel shows, while Guz Khan and his BBC3 comedy series *Man Like Mobeen* (2017-present) has achieved acclaim (if not viewing figures) for its portrayal of ordinary working-class Pakistani Muslim lives. Yet there is still a lack of (British) brown faces on in film and television (beyond lifestyle programming) and a stark absence of brown women and LGBTQ people in particular. However, this strangely feels less pronounced now that our cultural diets have become more global in character. I am specifically referring to the seeming preponderance of brown folk who appear on US-based streaming services in particular— including Mindy Kaling (*The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013)), *The Mindy Project* (Fox/Hulu, 2012-2017)), Aziz Ansari (*Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-2015), *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015-present)), Hasan Minhaj (*Patriot Act* (Netflix, 2018-present)) and Kumail Nanjani (*The Big Sick* (Amazon, 2017)).

Much like British Asians in the 1990s these individuals share an urge to transform perceptions of South Asians on North American screens that up until recently was still shaped by the stereotypical character of Apu in *The Simpsons*<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, we must not underestimate either the impact of DIY cultural productions on social media, whether YouTube, Tumblr or Instagram, where brown youth in particular are making *new* new ethnicities as they create their own content that articulate new sexual, raced and (trans)gendered identities.

Yet returning to the UK, within the corporate or state-funded cultural institutions that still dominate film and television production, a neoliberal discourse of diversity remains in ascendency. Rather than tackle head on the very real forms of structural disadvantages that minorities face, 'diversity' serves an ideological function, managing difference in a way that maintains racial hierarchies within the cultural industries (Saha 2018). This paper argues that the seeds of this approach to diversity were first sewn during the emergence of New Labour's creative industries policy. While it initially led to the recognition of British Asian cultural producers who had until that point remained invisible, the same producers were eventually de-railed by the de-racialised version of diversity that characterises current cultural policy.

The aim of this paper was to challenge the idea that as migrant groups become more embedded in British society their representation in the media will naturally 'improve'. Multicultural drift is a profoundly transformative force but can only achieve so much, especially when up against the archaic forms of nationalism that are activated during crises in hegemony. As I argued, particular political-economic and socio-cultural forces came together in the late 1990s to create a micro-conjuncture that at once enabled but then constrained the cultural practices of British South Asians. Thus secondary aim of the paper is to show the

value of a historical approach in the study of race, representation and the media. The field of media and race research remains dominated by textual analyses of individual texts, yet I argue that it is not enough to just look at representation as though they are created in a vacuum. As this paper has shown the need to look at the production of representation, the *contextual* as well as the *textual* in order to better understand the cultural politics of particular representations of race and how they can be transformed.

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<sup>1</sup> Making the argument that New Labour's creative industries policy was a continuation rather than a break from Tory cultural policy, Newsinger points out that the emphasis on creating and maintaining internal markets (via high levels of public subsidy), and in turn the adoption of casualised employment practices which characterise the new independents, were first developed in the broadcast sector following the Broadcasting Act of 1990.(Newsinger 2012: 117).

<sup>2</sup> While this could be read as progressive, in many ways Jackson's assertion was somewhat disingenuous, as following the Broadcasting Act Channel 4 existed in a much more competitive environment where, quite simply, the channel could not afford to cater for niche audiences anymore (Malik, 201x).

<sup>3</sup> A separate paper would look at the social cultural and political economic circumstances that are enabling a certain section of US-born South Asians - I suspect class plays a significant role here