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Abstract

Das Grenfell Tower Fire, dem am 14. Juni 2017 in London 72 Menschen zum Opfer fielen, machte das soziale Ungleichgewicht in Großbritannien deutlich sichtbar. Die Ermittlungen führten zutage, dass Privatisierungsmaßnahmen im Bereich des sozialen Wohnbaus, Unverantwortlichkeit von Unternehmen und die Sparpolitik der britischen Regierung zu dem tragischen Zwischenfall führten. Die Opfer des Feuers wurden sowohl von der Politik, als auch den zuständigen Behörden, im Stich gelassen. Künstler aus der UK Grime Szene, eine britische Form der Rap-Kultur, nahmen dies zum Anlass, im Namen der Opfer Gerechtigkeit einzufordern und die politischen Zustände, die zu Grenfell führten, in ihren öffentlichen Auftritten und Musikvideos zu kritisieren. Als eine Musikrichtung, die Anfang des neuen Jahrtausends im Londoner East End entstanden ist, das besonders gezeichnet ist von Armut und sozialem Ungleichgewicht, war UK Grime immer schon politisch. Mittlerweile hat UK Grime den Weg vom musikalischen Underground in den Mainstream gefunden und ist somit als musikalisches Genre ein ernstzunehmender Bestandteil der britischen Kulturlandschaft geworden. Die klaren Stellungnahmen von Stormzy, Dave, Lowkey und Big Zuu im Zusammenhang mit Grenfell verleihen dem Genre jedoch eine besondere, politische Bedeutung. Die vorliegende Arbeit zeigt anhand einer multimodalen Diskursanalyse der künstlerischen Werke der vier Rapper aus London, wie die Musiker im Rahmen von öffentlichen Auftritten bei den BRIT Awards und in ihren Musikvideos den marginalisierten Opfern von Grenfell eine Stimme verleihen. Sie erschaffen dabei vielschichtige, anti-rassistische Diskurse, welche gesellschaftliche Veränderungen zum Ziel haben und die politischen Akteure zur Verantwortung rufen.

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1. Introduction

The Grenfell tower fire, which destroyed a 24 floors high tower block in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, one of the richest boroughs in West London, on 14th June 2017, was a disaster that shattered the UK to its core (Davies 2018). Even though, soon after the event, rumours were spread that the fire was caused by residents on purpose (McKenzie 2018), it soon became clear that the real and complex causes of the fire were to be found in political maladministration and faulty legislation executed in the building and social housing sector over decades. Tower blocks such as Grenfell became death traps for their inhabitants and living conditions in such buildings can, as current studies show, be labelled as completely unsafe (cf. Hodgkinson 2019). Neoliberal processes of market liberation, urban gentrification, austerity measures and privatisation in the building sector had led to the catastrophic fire that went out of control and made the tower entirely burn out within only 24 hours. 72 people lost their lives in the fire and many more lost all of their belongings and remained homeless after the fire. The government's response to the events of 14th June 2017 led to even more disbelief over authorities' negligence and irresponsibility prior to and after the disaster, which caused anger and frustration to spread within the population of the area. The protraction of the Grenfell inquiry over nearly five years that has not yet led to any criminal convictions at the time of writing elicited even more loss of faith in institutions. The inquiry closed with a report that left criminal convictions for the crimes of corporate manslaughter, gross negligence manslaughter, fraud, and health and safety offences to the Metropolitan Police. However, they might not issue any warrants of arrest before 2025, which is seven years after the event (Booth 2022). The disaster of the Grenfell fire, thus, can be considered the culmination of the nationwide building safety crisis that has yet to be solved.

What happened at Grenfell and in its aftermath did not go unnoticed by artists from the UK Grime scene, who used their public fame or local influence to raise awareness for the distress of the people from Grenfell. UK Grime itself, which emerged in less affluent urban areas of London in the early noughties of the new millennium, intersects with American Hip Hop and Jamaican Toasting, and their accompanying culture of underground resistance. Thus, it can be considered a musical genre of subversive and sometimes even political activism that opposes the power structures of capitalism and urban segregation (cf. Adams 2018). Grime artists often

transform their experiences of socio-economic imbalances, racism, and the effects of gentrification and urban colonialism (Atkinson & Bridge 2005) into music. Therefore, artists such as Stormzy, Dave, Lowkey and Big Zuu, whose work will be analysed in the course of this thesis, are probably able to identify with the living conditions of the Grenfell victims more than artists who had never experienced the living conditions of segregated urban areas themselves.

The music videos that will be analysed in the subsequent chapters contain different modes of representation, which create their own, quite unique political discourses with the aim to raise awareness towards what happened at Grenfell. Lowkey and Big Zuu are two artists from the area of West London, who lived near Grenfell Tower and actually lost friends in the fire. They created works of art that aim at making the realities of the local community visible and at voicing the local people's critique towards authorities. Their songs and music videos have a rather immediate focus, as they incorporate the life realities and emotions of people who live in the shadow of Grenfell tower and have to come to terms with the trauma they experienced. Trauma, as the analyses will show, is a theme in some of the multimodal discourses created by the artists discussed in this thesis, whether they use it metaphorically or in a more literal sense, to refer to the traumatic events of the fire. In contrast to Lowkey and Big Zuu, who remain more rooted in the local Grime scene of West London, Stormzy and Dave have made it into the musical mainstream. Both have recently been awarded BRIT Awards for their musical *œuvres*, and they have used their public performances at the awards ceremonies to address the issue of Grenfell. Stormzy performed a surprising freestyle rap between two tracks from his debut album *Gangs, Sings and Prayer* at the BRITs 2018, in which he attacked then Prime Minister Theresa May for failing the Grenfell victims. In 2020, Dave performed his single *Black* on stage, which drew attention to the problematic relationship that Britain still has to its colonial past, as well as to the inherent racism of contemporary British society. In this context he also dedicated an additional verse to the Grenfell victims and attacked Boris Johnson, who was Prime Minister at that time. Both performances sparked public debate and gained much recognition for their provocative elements.

There are the live performances on the one hand, that have been staged publicly, filmed and aired by international television broadcasters and the rather low budget music video productions on the other hand that were released on YouTube and thus able to gain a bigger audience. The modes of representation occurring in the multimodal discourses of these music

videos range from text and sound to video animation, stage design, colour coding, velocity, or dress code of the artist. Each of these video productions includes its rather unique political message and its quite distinctive *mis-en-scène* that contain relevant semiotic codes of political and cultural resistance. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to carve out these political messages and to decipher the meanings that are created within the semiotic codes of the videos' multimodal representations of the issues at hand. The methodology applied to the analyses of the music videos will comprise of a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), as well as a contextualisation of the artistic work of the musicians.

It is vital, therefore, to briefly outline the research questions that shall be answered in the course of this thesis. The first question to answer is: How are Britain's socio-economic inequalities and systemic racism inextricably linked with the fire of Grenfell? Why has Grenfell made these injustices and discrimination made particularly visible? Second, how do Grime artists express their political concerns over Grenfell embedded in the multimodal discourses of their videos and performances? What themes, codes, metaphors and messages are contained in these multimodal discourses that convey a specific political message? These questions will be answered in the course of the theoretical chapters as well as in the multimodal analyses of the musical performances.

The theoretical and historical framework of the analyses will consist of a chapter that aims at outlining why Grenfell fire can be considered a neocolonial disaster that was caused by a system of neoliberal austerity measures and urban gentrification, as well as by systemic racism and disregard of human lives. The following chapter will focus on the origins of UK Grime as a distinct British music genre and on Grime's resistance to the racial and socio-economic complexities of contemporary British society. Additionally, the methodology chapter will briefly explain the methods of multimodal discourse analysis that will be applied to the analyses and expound the necessity of contextualisation in connexion with the analyses of the videos. The analyses will then pay attention to the individual political discourses that can be found within the music videos of each artist and relate them to the context of Grenfell. The first analysis of Big Zuu's "Grenfell Tribute" will outline how the power of the Grenfell community is visualised in the charity video of the local rapper. The second analysis of Stormzy's "Freestyle Rap" will deal with Stormzy's reversal of the thug image that challenges prevailing discourses on black rappers, and his creation of a black hero on stage. The third

analysis of Lowkey's "Ghosts of Grenfell" and "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" will map out how Lowkey makes "invisible violence visible" (Thapar 2019) by portraying the trauma of the community of Grenfell and showing how people from the area act to fight for their cause. Finally, the fourth analysis of "Black" will dissect Dave's multilayered discourse on institutionalised racism, in which he delineates the experience of being black in modern Britain and demonstrates how the experience of racism is linked to the tragedy of Grenfell. At the end of this thesis, it should become evident why UK Grime's political momentum is relevant in the fight against the systemic racism of Britain's contemporary society, as well as in the fight for a fairer and safer housing system within the UK.

2. Historical and theoretical background

2.1 The Grenfell Tower Fire: Housing Crisis, Racial Capitalism and Social Murder

On 14th June 2017, Grenfell Tower, a tower block of council flats, 24 storeys high, situated in the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea, one of the richest boroughs in London, burned out completely due to major deficiencies in building structure and safety inspections. The onset of the blaze was a small kitchen fire, caused by electrical fault, on the 4th floor of the tower. Bahailu Kebede, the resident of flat 16 was woken up in the middle of the night as his fire alarm went off, and he immediately called the emergency number to report the fire. When the fire fighters arrived at the scene, the kitchen fire had already spread to the outside of the building through the kitchen window. Only fifteen minutes after the fire had broken out, it began to spread upwards via the combustible cladding of the tower and it needed only 20 minutes to reach the roof of the building (cf. Davies 2018). Within only three hours the whole tower became engulfed in flames, with the fire brigade unable to get the fire under control. Due to a 'stay put' policy ordered by the emergency forces, people became trapped inside their flats and could not be evacuated later as the heat and the smoke made evacuation

impossible. Officially, 72 people lost their lives in the fire, yet the true number of deaths is still being disputed as some of the residents were undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, and their deaths might not have been officially recorded (cf. Preston 33).

The tragedy of Grenfell can be viewed as a neocolonial disaster that reflects a substantial part of Britain's contemporary systemic racism and, therefore, needs to be delineated against the backdrop of anti-racist and postcolonial British cultural studies. Peter Apps writes in his article for the *Tribune Magazine* online, that "[t]he Grenfell Tower Fire was part of Britain's colonial past" and as the above cited quote implies, is a result of the "empire's long and continuing shadow" (Apps 2022). The aim of this chapter is to trace this shadow and explain how the neocolonial and capitalist principles of market deregulation and urban gentrification could lead to the preventable deaths of 72 people.

Postcolonial entanglements can already be found in the history that laid the foundations of the Grenfell Tower. It was built in 1974 and named after Field Marshall Francis Grenfell, who served in the British Army during the colonisation of North Africa and helped to invade and conquer Egypt in 1882 (cf. Apps 2022). However, not merely the tower's name transfigures Britain's colonial past, the colonial legacy reached into the tower's present, when it contemptuously became dubbed 'The Moroccan Tower' due to the high number of North-African immigrants who lived in it. Indeed, Grenfell's population somehow reflected Britain's colonial past, as most of the victims who died in the fire belonged to ethnic minorities. Therefore, the lawyers who represented some of the bereaved Grenfell families claimed that systemic racism and classism would lie at the "heart of the problem that caused the catastrophe" (cf. Townsend 2020). It is necessary to ask, therefore, how this systemic racism is linked to housing policies, privatisation waves, neoliberal market deregulation and processes of urban gentrification.

2.1.1 Grenfell Tower: A constructional death trap

In order to understand how a once modern and homely council housing project could become a hazardous death trap for its residents in the night of 14th June 2017, it is essential to comprehend the scope of deregulation in the construction sector as well as in the recent history of the British housing market. Initially, Grenfell Tower was built as a fire-resistant tower

that was believed to be safe and complying with construction safety standards of the time (cf. Hodkinson 2). Between 2015 and 2016 the tower was refurbished by KCTMO (Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation), which also managed the Grenfell tower, and received new aluminium cladding on the outside. This cladding, as it later became evident, was highly combustible and not fire-proof (cf. Hodkinson 7). Arconic's Reynobond PE and Celotex panels that were installed on the outside of the building, as well as the insulation foam used in the refurbishing process, contributed to the quick spread of the fire to the upper floors, as was found out during the Grenfell inquiry in the aftermath of the blaze (Booth 2020). The cladding and the insulation foam were not the only sources of danger at the tower. As the Grenfell inquiry also found out, the sprinkler system and the fire doors did not work and had not been properly maintained for years (Beale 2018). Moreover, the tower did not have an emergency staircase on the outside of the building and the only staircase available for evacuation was the one inside the building. As fire safety regulations had not been brought up to date since the 1970s, the 'stay put' policy was still classified as valid and implemented when the fire broke out. All of these circumstances led to the deaths of 72 people, who were not able to escape when the fire brigade lost control over the fire and evacuation became impossible.

Nevertheless, the unsafety of Grenfell Tower did not evade its residents, as even years before the tragic incident they had already raised their concerns with KCTMO. One of them, Edward Daffarn from the *Grenfell Action Group*, had filed several formal complaints about the condition of the fire safety system, as well as the 'stay put' policy in case of a fire, with the management organisation (Booth 2021). Additionally, the *Grenfell Action Group* together with the tower's residents voiced their concerns over the material used in the refurbishment process and tried to negotiate with the builder Rydon and KCTMO. However, the residents who raised their concerns were not just ignored by leaders of the KCTMO and Rydon, but even dismissed and labelled as 'troublemakers', which is why their concerns remained unheard (Booth 2020). In general, tenants complaining to their local TMOs or property owners about the undue conditions they live in, often do so in fear of being evicted. Section 21 of the 1988 Housing Act allows landlords to evict their residents without giving a reason in so-called "revenge evictions" (cf. Hodkinson 46). Thus, the residents of Grenfell Tower either had to face the dismissal of their justified complaints or even fear an eviction from their homes if they insisted on their complaints being taken seriously.

Housing conditions for social housing tenants have become increasingly problematic since the Thatcher Years, when the market for social housing became privatised to such an extent that the state is now hardly involved in it anymore (cf. Hodkinson 6). This process of demunicipalisation of public housing started in the 1980s by selling off properties to private investors and passing the task of council management into the hands of private contractors. Those private companies began to manage and maintain properties under capitalist and neoliberal market principles, which consequently resulted in the UK housing crisis of today. This crisis is marked by unaffordable housing prices and soaring rents, scarcer opportunities of social housing and properties being rent out in undue conditions (McMullan 2021). It peaked in 2010 under the austerity policies issued by another Conservative government under David Cameron, and led to tenants becoming disenfranchised and subjected to the whims of property owners, who profited from the deregulation of even basic building and safety standards with the aim of gaining profits. Stuart Hodkinson summarises the process of deregulation in *Safe as Houses* (2019) by pointing out that “[i]nstead of allowing local authorities to invest directly in repairing and modernising their remaining housing stock,” the government has made “such funding conditional on local authorities,” which agreed to “sell off or outsource” for instance “management, maintenance,” or “regeneration of public housing” to “commercial actors” (6). This, so Hodkinson, has weakened “the legal standards governing building and housing safety” (6).

According to Hodkinson, austerity measures even allowed private property owners to outsource fire safety engineers and replace especially trained firefighters with fire risk assessors, who ‘qualified’ by simply attending a three-day online course (cf. Hodkinson 46):

[..] the previous annual inspection and certification regime operated by the fire brigade has been replaced by third-party fire risk assessors employed by landlords or the building owners to conduct fire risk assessments (FRAs). However, there is no legal requirement on landlord or owners to employ qualified or professionally accredited fire risk assessors, and no legal timeframe for the assessment. (Hodkinson 45)

All of these aforementioned circumstances transformed the tower into a death trap for its residents. Therefore, it is necessary to have a closer look at what made such gross negligence even possible.

2.1.2 The Grenfell Fire: a neocolonial tragedy

Despite the fact that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is, according to the *Legatum Prosperity Index 2021*, one of the richest boroughs of London, the disparities and inequalities between the different communities within the borough are striking. Particularly North Kensington, where Grenfell Tower is located, is affected by poverty and deprivation and was, thus, subjected to gentrification measures such as the tower's renovation. Grenfell Tower, as Ida Danewid writes in "The Fire this Time" (2019) "was predominantly occupied by London's racialised poor – by Nigerian cleaners, Somali carers, Moroccan drivers and so on" (290). The population of North Kensington, as statistics show, consists of a high proportion of BAME people, or as Danewid puts it, the racialised poor. The *Kensington and Chelsea Foundation* has just recently pointed out that the inequalities that do exist in the more deprived areas of the borough, such as inequalities in education, employment, and healthcare, mainly affect BAME communities and lead to poverty and social exclusion within those communities (*K&C Foundation 2021*). It might be important to add here that there is also a significant inequality in terms of housing conditions, as those segments of Kensington and Chelsea's population that belong to the racialised poor do struggle with discrimination on the housing market as well. Therefore, Grenfell seems to be an example for discrimination based on race, but also an example for discrimination based on social class and income, as the cases of ethnically white residents of Grenfell show. Systemic racism and classism strongly interlink as the subsequent overview will demonstrate.

It can be said that what happened at Grenfell is a consequence of practices of urban segregation and gentrification. Gentrification is a term that was coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, when she needed an appropriate term to describe the transformation of working-class urban areas into elegant and expensive looking residences in Inner London (Atkinson & Bridge 249). As an urban phenomenon, thus, gentrification has its roots in London, and from the very beginning it had the aim to dislodge undesired segments of society from the centre of the city by transforming urban areas into unaffordable spaces for the working-class or the working poor. With the rise of minimum wage jobs and the erosion of the middle-class, the social segment of the working-class has become increasingly equivalent with the social segment of ethnic minorities, the disparities between the poor and wealthy segments of society have widened dramatically, and the phenomenon of urban segregation due to

gentrification measures has increased (Cooper 2018). Therefore, Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge emphasise in their book on *Gentrification in a Global Context* (2005) that “[c]ontemporary gentrification has elements of colonialism as a cultural force in its privileging of whiteness, as well as the more class-based identities and preferences in urban living.” (2) In addition, the two authors suggest that public sector privatisation and forms of (de)regulation do also conform with “colonial aspects of gentrification” (2) and that gentrification is “colonialism at the neighbourhood scale” (266). This colonialism at the neighbourhood scale, so Atkinson and Bridge, mirrors the neocolonialism that is taking place on a global scale as it is segregating the rich from the poor and builds on a system of exploitation and inequality that profits from processes of neoliberal market deregulation and global capitalism. The stark contrast within the population of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea serves as vivid example of urban colonialism.

Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins and Nadine El-Enany do also explain in *After Grenfell* (2019) that the disparities that are tangible in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea are based on ideas of white supremacy: “The hyper-segregation and differential quality of life of North Kensington residents mirrors practices of the colonial era when British authorities instituted spatial ordering on the basis of ideas and practices of racial hierarchy and white European supremacy.” (Bulley et al. 56) The spatial ordering that segregates BAME people or low-income workers from people of wealthier and ethnically whiter backgrounds and confines them to more deprived areas of the city, represents the racial hierarchies and class hierarchies that are still present within neocolonial structures of European cities today. Bulley and his co-authors further argue that “techniques of colonial domination” are still “applied to everyday life in the global city”, sometimes even “with deadly effects” (Bulley et al. 8). In the case of Grenfell, these “deadly effects” have become visible. Still, the question remains why these deadly effects had been disavowed prior to Grenfell and why the lives of the tower’s residents did not seem worth protecting.

John Preston argues in *Grenfell Tower* (2019) that the political negligence, on which the poor decisions that led to the disaster are based, does not only stem from systemic racism and classism but also from sheer capitalist greed. He writes that “[c]apitalism [...] eliminates the concrete necessity for humanity” and that “class and racial cleansing of our cities is part of this process as the ‘unnecessary’ are eliminated in the name of profit.” (Preston 63) This happens,

so Preston, by assigning 'zero worth' to the lives of humans who are deemed irrelevant for gaining financial profits, as the following quote illustrates: "This speaks to Grenfell, to Aberfan and Hillsborough, where human life was treated as having no worth. This zero worth is not simply a moralistic concern that can be rectified through social justice but an inevitable part of capitalist growth." (Preston 63)

Considering the history of the Grenfell disaster and the findings of the Grenfell inquiry in its aftermath, an explanation like this seems plausible. In this respect, urban colonialism mirrors the disregard of human lives that is an essential constituent of global capitalism as well. The exploitation of labour force has moved from the periphery of global economic nodes of power, such as sweatshops and unsafe workspaces in countries of the Global South, to the centre of such global economic nodes of power, where migrants are sheltered "in diverse communities where they can be contained and neglected, separated from the super-wealthy by invisible barriers" (Bulley et al. 8). The political neglect of the concerns of the residents of Grenfell therefore stems from the systemic inequality and racism inherent in the neoliberal machinery of global capitalism.

2.1.3 The Grenfell Tower Fire and the question of social murder

For five years, the Grenfell Tower Inquiry that was installed by then Prime Minister Theresa May immediately after the tragedy, has aimed at identifying persons in charge who should take responsibility for what happened at Grenfell in the night of 14th June 2017. Five years, during which victims and bereaved families of the Grenfell Tower fire have neither seen justice nor appropriate restitutions for what they lost. It seemed intricate to find a proper definition of the crime that had been committed. Stuart Hodgkinson suggests in *Safe as Houses* (2019) that Friedrich Engel's term 'social murder' might be an appropriate term. The act of murder implies deliberate intent, therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at Engel's definition of what he calls social murder:

But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands

of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual [...] I have now to prove that society in England daily and hourly commits what the working-men's organs, with perfect correctness, characterise as social murder. (Engels 95)

Engel's definition of social murder seems to apply quite well to what happened to the victims of the Grenfell fire, as the permitted conditions eventually have caused the inevitable consequence of the death of 72 people. The Grenfell Tower Inquiry's counsel Richard Millet KC concluded on 10th November 2022, which was the last day of the inquiry, that these deaths had been avoidable (Booth 2022). It will take another year for the full report of the inquiry to be released and perhaps two more years or even longer until criminal charges will finally be brought in. Meanwhile the burnt-out shell of the Grenfell Tower stands as a symbol for the deadly consequences of racial capitalism, and as such it stands as a warning sign for those in power to remind them that systemic change is needed if such tragedies are to be prevented in the future. As during the years of the protraction of the inquiry it seemed that those in power might have conveniently forgotten about their responsibilities, UK Grime artists have made it their task to remind them. They have taken to the stage and produced music videos that focused on the Grenfell tragedy and that conveyed very clear political messages that could remain unheard. The subsequent chapter, therefore, will deal with UK Grime as a political music genre and examine its role in raising awareness for the incident of the Grenfell Fire.

2.2 UK Grime: From London's underground to working-class movement

UK Grime is a musical genre that emerged in Bow, East London, at the beginning of the new millennium as an underground genre. It was invented by young residents of council estates who transformed their experiences based on class and ethnicity into music, and who created their own urban subculture with the help of pirate radio stations, underground music events and small record stores (cf. Collins & Rose 2016). Twenty years after its conception, UK Grime has not just conquered the musical mainstream, it has also gained international recognition as a distinct British music genre and Grime artists have been awarded prestigious music awards (BRIT Awards, MOBO, Mercury Award) or headlined important music festivals (Glastonbury,

Coachella). Still, Grime artists insist on remaining true to their roots, the deprived urban areas of London they come from, claiming a form of authenticity that resembles those of US Hip Hop artists, who have long tied their authenticity as rappers to urban “space, place, race and cultural differences” (Forman 3). Despite the many parallels between Hip Hop and Grime, it is important to identify what constitutes Grime as a distinct British genre and why it has become the sound of subversiveness and rebellion for a generation of young Britons since the beginning of the new millennium. It is also necessary to take a closer look at the political relevance of the genre, as numerous Grime artists have begun to use their fame for political concerns and to raise awareness for political issues in public. This chapter aims at answering the question on what characterises UK Grime as a British music genre, as well as at outlining the political relevance of Grime particularly in the context of the Grenfell disaster.

2.2.1 UK Grime: authentically urban, multi-ethnic and British

Grime music, like US Hip Hop, is an eclectic British music genre, that is rooted in various musical styles and consists of electronic beats and rhythms over which an MC (or emcee, Master of Ceremony) raps his or her lyrics. Even though it is sometimes considered a subgenre of American Hip Hop, or as a form of UK Hip Hop (Bassett 2018), UK Grime is a distinct British music genre that is strongly related to Hip Hop, but shows features that delineate it as an independent music genre. The differences between Hip Hop and Grime are not evident at a first glance and it must be acknowledged that the line between those two genres is rather blurry. What clearly differentiates UK Grime from US Hip Hop, though, is the tempo, as the beats used in UK Grime tracks are as fast as, or even faster than, 140 beats per minute/bpm (*MasterClass* 2021). Hip Hop MCs usually rap over beats ranging from 60 to 100 bpm (*Ableton* online), which is “notably faster than hip-hop” and “reminiscent of Jamaican toasting” (Dedman 518). The speedy tempo is also what usually makes Grime sound more aggressive than Hip Hop. UK Garage, an electronic music genre that was particularly popular during the 1990s is one of the many influences of Grime music, as well as beats and rhythms that originated in Caribbean and Jamaican music (Dedman 518).

The language and content of the lyrics is another feature that delineates Grime as an independent genre. Grime artists rap in an English accent, sometimes even in Cockney, and their lyrics contain narratives of the urban realms of London or, as by now Grime has spread beyond the borders of the capital, other big cities in the UK (Swain 2018). These narratives contain the urban realities of contemporary metropolises of Britain, and they reflect on the idiosyncrasies of British society, which is still shaped by its colonial past and legacy. Thus, the third feature that needs to be identified in order to outline the differences between UK Grime and US Hip Hop is Great Britain's colonial past, which is also reflected in Grime's musical influences. These influences can be traced back to former British colonies as for example the Jamaican sound systems that were already popular in London's black music underground scene of the 1980s. The Jamaican sound systems that dominated London's underground scene back then already contained some of the typical features that later contributed to shaping Grime as an independent British genre: "British sound systems emerged to provide a platform for producers and vocalists who created their own distinctive variants, including the 'fast chat' vocal style, with lyrics addressing the UK experience." (Adams 4)

Using minority languages to oppose the standard language of the former empire is a subversive feature that has remained until now, with Grime artists using Cockney in order to signify their class affiliation and to oppose the ruling classes of a capitalistic system. The underground origin of the genre, as well as the artists' identification with the racially marginalised underdogs of society, is something that UK Grime has very much in common with US Hip Hop. Both, US Hip Hop and UK Grime are rooted in Black music cultures and the lyrics of Hip Hop and Grime rappers alike thematise the urban realities of ethnic minorities. Hip Hop artists though focus their lyrics on the history and realities of Black Americans and other US American ethnic minorities, such as Hispanics, which differentiates their music from that of Grime artists in very culture specific ways. Additionally, UK Grime artists would refuse to be labelled as Hip Hop artists even though they sometimes collaborate, e.g. Skepta and A\$AP Rocky (ASAPROCKYUPTOWN 2018).

Another characteristic that US Rap and Hip Hop culture and the UK Grime scene have in common is that soon after their conception they became associated with street crime and gang violence. As music genres that emerged from deprived urban areas, such as the New York

Bronx and London's East End, they became either criminalised or seen as an escape route from crime. Serouj Aprahamian notes in "Hip-Hop, Gangs, and the Criminalization of African American Culture" (2019) that: "In the early 1980s, at around the same time that the media encountered what would become known as 'hip-hop', the borough where it began was becoming the poster child for American urban decay. [...] Much of this narrative was accompanied by images of arson, drug use, and violence, but rarely did audiences hear the voices of its actual residents." (301) One of the aims of Hip Hop as well as Grime, as shall be argued in this thesis, is to make the voices of the actual residents of these areas of "urban decay" heard and to reverse the negative image that is ascribed to the music culture created in those areas. For some Grime artists, as Hattie Collins and Tricia Rose demonstrate in *This is Grime* (2016), creating music instead of selling drugs was indeed an escape route to crime. In an interview with the authors, *Lethal Bizzle*, a Grime artist from Walthamstow, said for example:

One thing about grime, the majority of the MCs spoke about their surroundings, their areas. Our heroes were the shooters – they had the clothes, the cars, the girls, the money. They was hood stars. We wanted to be them without having to sell drugs. A lot of my friends in school were involved in certain things, I was involved in certain things and so music was a release. (Collins & Rose 24)

Also *Wiley*, the founding father of UK Grime, is quoted saying: "See, when you get stabbed, you can't even feel it until it is healing in the hospital, which is when you are in pain. Getting stabbed is not funny and too many kids stab people. So many kids are on the stabbing thing these days." (Hattie & Rose 26) Drug crimes and violence can be found in many personal histories of now famous UK Grime artists. For most of them, creating music and being successful with it really became a way out of the gang violence present in many deprived areas of London. The artist *Wretch 32* might best sum it up by saying that: "We're writing to escape. If you listen deep into the lyrics, there's probably a lot of cries for help in there." (Hattie & Rose 24) Perhaps the criminal history of some Grime artists is the reason why UK Grime has been criminalised in the way it has been, it seems important to ask though whether this criminalisation seems justified.

The criminalisation of Grime in the UK led to the launch of the *Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696* by the Metropolitan Police in 2005. *Form 696* allowed the Metropolitan

Police to ban or shut down events, where Grime music was played. The form had to be completed by promoters and licensees of music events that hosted DJs and MCs prior to those events. If the form was not completed 14 days prior to the event, the license was either not issued or the police arrived at venues to shut down events (cf. Brett 2021). *Form 696* was met with opposition though as it included sections that were “asking for the stage and real names, addresses and phone numbers of all performers, questions about the ethnicity of the audience” (Brett 2021), as well as questions that notably precondemned Black music genres, such as R&B or Grime. In 2017, *Form 696* was discarded by London’s mayor Sadiq Khan, as “[i]t drew heavy criticism for its racist tone, and was seen as discriminating against grime, rap and other underground black genres” (Bernard 2018). As a form of institutionalised racism, *Form 696* led to increased monitoring of the Grime scene and the closure of many live events. Despite its repeal, the Grime scene is still faced with racial prejudice and criminalisation, as is Hip Hop culture in the USA, which has led to “consistently associating the culture with gangsterism” and, thus, perpetuating “destructive attitudes and behavior in the very communities the culture was created to serve” (Aprahamian 311).

What Grime artists do thus, is to create their own narratives that defy the criminalisation of black urban music: “Here, where the mainstream speak about British urban street violence in dramatized terms [...] grime artistes offer an alternative narrative, supporting their audience to make choices which will ultimately decrease their exclusion.” (Ilan 48) These alternative narratives do not just help to cope with the feeling of being excluded from the mainstream of a predominantly white society, they offer sources of identification and authenticity for those who identify with the multi-ethnic Britishness and cultural tropes of UK Grime. Justin Williams argues in *Brithop* (2021) that rappers from the UK “both adhere to and rebel against constructed notions of Britishness” (2). By addressing the issue of institutionalised racism in their lyrics for example, Grime artists negotiate such constructed notions of Britishness in the context of a multi-ethnic nation. Some of their lyrics aim at creating a version of Britishness that includes all kinds of ethnicities and is defined by, as Ruth Adam describes it, a “process of cultural blending” that “does not preclude an ‘authentic’ white (or other ethnic) identification” but “creates new modes of identity and expression” (Adams 2). These new modes of identity and expression reflect on “new patterns of inequality and exclusion, alongside novel hybrid cultural manifestations” (Adams 2).

In addition to the theme of Britishness, Grime artists discuss class and urban segregation in conjunction with marginalisation and socio-economic background in their lyrics. As Grime artists speak about the everyday realities of people living in deprived areas of London and other big cities in the UK, they have created a voice for those, who otherwise would remain unheard or as Spencer Swain writes “the genre continues to provide a prominent voice of hope to those who feel that the political classes have forgotten about them” (Swain 2018). Swain does also emphasise that grime artists do so against the backdrop of “highly charged media debates about inequality and racism” (Swain 2018).

Additionally, the DIY character of the genre, as well as the democratic opportunities of participation provided by digital media, helped to increase the popularity of the genre and finally even to pave its way towards the British musical mainstream. When it entered the mainstream, UK Grime even offered a political vision in the form of hope for a much wider audience, which added to its popularity.

2.2.2 UK Grime: From British underground music scene to global mainstream

As an underground genre, featuring artists with few financial possibilities, Grime depended on local pirate radio stations to air locally produced music during the years of its invention. Due to the intense localism that was created thereby, Grime quickly became rather popular as a means of identification for young rappers from London. The music that was created in the council estates of East London provided a platform for creative output. Richard Bramwell does also note in “The Aesthetics and Ethics of London Based Rap” (2011) that besides being a means of identification, Grime music became so accessible for particularly young Londoners due to the opportunities that digital media provided: “The use of technology in the process of self-development also leads to a broadening awareness of the social world. The communicative technologies that enable participation in this cultural practice [...] facilitate a process of social development.” (Bramwell 123-124) In the early 00s, Grime artists began to make music in their own homes, often public housing estates or their abandoned basements, and used all the affordable equipment they were able to lay their hands on. They created “hip hop-inspired rhythms or beats that were initially made using basic music software (e.g.

FruityLoops) or game consoles (e.g. Music 2000 on the Playstation, Mario Paint on the Super NES)" (Fatsis 2-3), they tried to distinguish their music "from its stylistic predecessor, UK garage, which glamorized 'champagne and cars,'" and "set out to portray the gritty, 'grimey' reality of life in London's council estates in an almost ethnographic fashion" (Fatsis 2-3). Additionally, they created CD mixtapes or digital mixtapes, which they distributed on underground raves, in local record shops, or aired on aforementioned pirate radio stations such as RINSE FM, Mystic FM or Heat FM (cf. Collins & Rose 156-157). The early Grime scene consisted of MCs and DJs who knew each other, either from the estates they lived on or the schools they went to, and when the scene began to grow they connected via the music (cf. Collins & Rose 2016).

The intense localism of specific urban areas created means of participation that also offered new ways of democratic and political participation for members of the Grime scene. The emergence of Grime, thus, can be considered a social movement, or process of social development as Bramwell suggests. It is a social movement that defies the driving forces of hyper-capitalism that usually exclude people from the more deprived areas of London from the participation in cultural creation and political activism. It is also a social development that, as Ruth Adams notes, stands in opposition to the capitalist forces "of 'gentrification and austerity'" (2), which have impacted the local communities in which it has emerged. Adams further explains that the cultural output of Grime is produced "by those segments of society most excluded from and neglected by establishment power structures" (2). Therefore, it became possible for these young artists to create layers of contemporary British culture outside said establishment. The British musical mainstream mostly provides a culture that pushes artists from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority communities to the margins of cultural production. However, creating their own genre, a genre that was outside the framework of this mainstream, was perhaps what helped Grime artists to shape their later success. Since its conception, thus, UK Grime has evolved and the music of Grime artists has now risen to international and institutional acclaim. The numerous music awards and millions of records sold worldwide have lifted UK Grime from an underground genre to a globally acknowledged music genre. Today, many Grime rappers are not just famous but also wealthy and as stars of the British music scene, they have entered the exact musical mainstream that they once had defied.

2.2.3 Grenfell Grime: The genre's political dimensions

Living on an estate gives you the teachings of life. Being on the estate every day, seeing people's struggles, people borrowing off each other. I used to go to the shop with an IOU note for milk and bread on it. Seeing that, when I MC, I MC from that mindset. (Skept4 in Collins & Rose 202-203)

We know where we're from. We're from a place where no one is coming to help us. The government isn't coming to help us. No one is coming to help us. We know as young black people from the ends that we are at a disadvantage. We've known that for a long time. And if you know that, and you come from it, don't continue it. Break the cycle. (Stormzy in Yawson 26-27)

Grime artists, as the above stated quotes by Skepta and Stormzy demonstrate, have forced the capitalist establishment to listen to those it has neglected and excluded for decades. The public discourses Grime has opened up for debate, thus, should be considered as a process of democratisation of urban spaces and art forms. Democratisation in this context does also entail that Grime artists develop and communicate an awareness about their place in society, and an awareness about the ways in which the urban areas they grew up in have shaped their identities. This awareness allows artists to create authentic art forms that are representative of the social stratum and ethnic backdrops they come from such as "the city they inhabit", "the relations with others through which their life experiences are structured", "modes of urban living", or "the exploration of the relations that are constitutive of this verbal art form" (Bramwell 98). Grime explores urban spaces and relationships within those spaces and the Grime scene produces art that creates a "voice for the voiceless" (Adams 2). The democratic opportunities of social and cultural participation, first offered by digital media and online platforms and later offered by the public channels of the musical mainstream, helped Grime artists to make these voices heard. The style of music and subculture created thereby can, therefore, not just be seen as creation of art or creative output, it also gains a political dimension that is critical for social development.

When the incident of the Grenfell Fire shattered the British nation, many public figures, musicians, and artists voiced their criticism over the tragedy and how it was handled politically. There is for example the project *Artists for Grenfell* joined by Ella Eyre, James Blunt, Rita Ora, and Robbie Williams, who performed a remake of Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water", which also features Grime artist Stormzy. Singer Adele visited the site of the tragedy

and memorial events and became an advocate for the *Grenfell United* campaign (Moore 2022). Hence, quite a number of artists made use of their fame and influence to make the pain of the Grenfell victims seen and heard. However, some of the most powerful performances and musical statements came from Grime artists who took sides with the victims of Grenfell. Their creative responses to the incident were so impressive, as it is the generic purpose of Grime to express anger and frustration over society's prevailing inequalities and systemic racism and to do it provocatively and unapologetically. UK Grime, in this context, gained a political dimension that could no longer be ignored by those in charge.

The political dimension of Grime had been there long before Grenfell, although it rose to a new task when some renowned Grime artists such as *JME* and *Stormzy* actively began to support Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party after the Grenfell incident. *#Grime4Corbyn* became a social media movement that aimed at motivating young people to vote for Labour. According to Justin Williams, rappers from London have always voiced a critique of "the UK's more conservative narratives" and created a "counter narrative" (Williams 1) instead. The political dimension, as William outlines, is "an extension of, or often a counter to, political discourses happening in other realms of British society" and rappers, who "are essentially 'talking back' [...] to mainstream Britain's political discourses" do so "as 'an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless' (hooks 1989, 8)." (Williams 1) In addition to that, Grime as a social and political movement, managed to encourage young people to go to the polls and make a deliberate statement against Conservative politics. This anti-Conservative political intervention did not develop randomly, as Monique Charles points out in "Grime Labour" (2017):

Grime is a working-class scene. It originates amongst the people and places hardest hit by government austerity measures over the last fifteen years: the bedroom tax, schools being placed on special measures, the underfunding of schools, the abolition of the education Maintenance Allowance, tuition fee rises, zero-hour contracts, dwindling prospects of becoming a homeowner, high rents, increased job insecurity ... Those young people able to vote in 2017 voted in response to their lived experience, the government's disregard of their future, and the disconnection they felt with a Conservative Party that hardly recognised them, couldn't relate to their lives and knew little about the localities they called home. (Charles 43)

Therefore, the Grenfell Tower Fire should have become a wake-up call to those, who kept the system of inherent inequalities and racism that Charles describes in the above cited quote, running. Instead, the burned-out tower became a symbol for the indifference and negligence of a system that does not pay much attention to the prospects and future of an entire generation of marginalised UK citizens. Grime artists, whose work of art is based on provocative and furious critique of this system, could not have remained silent about Grenfell. The tower itself has become a symbol of the grimy and gritty conditions of London's urban fringes that Grime represents. The critical voices of Grime artists in the shadow of the burned-out tower are perhaps the most authentic voices within the musical mainstream, as they are the voices of a social movement that entails much more than just the production and dissemination of music. As the subsequent multimodal analyses of *Lowkey's* and *Big Zuu's* music videos as well as of the performances of *Stormzy* and *Dave* will demonstrate, the cultural codes and signs, which Grime artists create in their musical protest, are expressions of a social movement that has emerged to strive for political reform with the means of an underground rebellion.

2.2.4 Grime and Gender: the women in Grime

One aspect of UK Grime though that cannot be ignored when discussing the political influence of the genre, is the underrepresentation of women in Grime. Sadly, one of the features that UK Grime does also have in common with US Hip Hop is that it is mainly dominated by male artists. When looking at the ascent of Grime into the musical mainstream, it is striking that mainly male artists like Stormzy, Skepta, Dave or Wiley have made it into the international headlines. Therefore, it seems legitimate to ask: Where are the women in Grime?

There are in fact a number of female Grime artists, who have been there from the very beginning of the scene. Unfortunately, however, they have not gained as much public recognition as male artists. Female MCs such as Lady Leschurr, Shystie, or Lady Sovereign are considered veterans within the boy's club of UK Grime. Some of these female artists even won music awards, as for example Lady Leshurr who won a MOBO award for Best female Act in 2016. Lady Leshurr's "Queen's Speech 4" and "Queen's Speech 5" landed in the UK charts and Lady Sovereign even landed a number 1 hit in the UK dance charts with "Love Me Or Hate Me"

in 2006 (cf. Okoth-Obbo 2016). However, the Grime women seem to have always remained under the surface and never reached the public spotlight to the same extent as their male counterparts. Only recently, in 2022, Grime artist Little Simz from North London has been awarded one of the prestigious BRIT Awards in the category of Best New Artist. Ironically, the album with the title “Sometimes I Might Be Introvert” that she has won the prize for was in fact her fourth studio album, which shows “how hard women in rap have had to work to gain this overdue respect” (Thomas 2022). Still, Grime women do also seem underrepresented in the media that covers their performances or musical releases.

In two articles for *The Guardian* Yomi Adegoke tries to unveil why female Grime artists often remain in the shadows. First, she notices that if there are any women in the spotlight of the music industry, they are most presumably white or of lighter complexion, and she attests the Grime scene a problem with *misogynoir*, a condition she explains as “misogyny directed at black women” (Adegoke 2018 and Adegoke 2019). Misogynoir, as Adegoke notices, manifests as a racial imbalance within the US Rap and Hip Hop scene as well as the UK Grime scene, which both particularly disadvantages black women (Adegoke 2019). The renowned women of the Grime scene she mentions in her articles are mostly women working in the background, such as DJs, radio hosts or producers (Adegoke 2018). They truly might make valuable contributions to the development of the genre. Nevertheless, this does not counterbalance the fact that female Grime MCs performing on stage remain a minority. There are women within the scene who are trying to change this. *GIRLSofGRIME* is a collective of female artists founded by Shakira Walters in 2017 that is trying to change the status quo by supporting female artists and offering them opportunities for creative output (Thomas 2022).

Unfortunately, however, there has not been a response to the disaster of Grenfell made by female Grime artists, and therefore, all of the artists mentioned in this thesis are men. I would have been very much interested in a female stance on the issue, or in integrating a female perspective into the analysis of multimodal discourses on Grenfell. However, perhaps it needs the male Grime artists to finally take a fierce and public stand for their female contemporaries to make the women in Grime finally become heard and seen.

3. Methodology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Contextualisation

In order to analyse the music videos of Stormzy, Dave, Lowkey and Big Zuu I am going to apply the methodological tools of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), as the discourse within the five music videos that will be discussed in the subsequent section consists of several modes that work together to create partly rather direct, and partly symbolical, political messages. A mode, according to semiotician Gunther Kress, “is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning” (Kress 79). Mode, therefore, could be anything, from written text, via image, colour and design, to spoken utterances and gestures, or even sound, which creates meaning and is used to communicate knowledge and meaning. The meaning thereby is not fixed but results from the choice and combinations of different semiotic signs (cf. Machin ix-x). In his seminal work *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (2010), Kress writes that: “Knowledge is made and given shape in representation, according to the potentials of modal affordances; the process of representation is identical to the shaping of knowledge. Makers of representations are shapers of knowledge.” (27) The affordance of a mode entails the social norms and conventions that determine its use (Mavers online), whereas representation requires knowledge about, and engagement with, the world in which meanings are produced. All of these, however, would not work without the principles of communication, whose purpose it is to make representations as well as knowledge available to others and to share meaning (cf. Kress 49). Multimodal discourse as a form of communication, thus, makes use of a complex semiotic system of various modes, in which signs have meaning potential as opposed to fixed meaning and this meaning potential results from the particular combination of signs and modes within the discourse (cf. Machin 3). David Machin calls this complex semiotic system in *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis* (2020), borrowing a term defined by Michael Halliday (1985), “visual grammar” and describes it as a “system of choices and possibilities for combinations” (Machin 3-4). For the subsequent analyses, therefore, it will be vital to look at the choices of representation the artists make regarding various modes and signs, and how they combine these modes and signs within their respective multimodal discourse.

The question at hand, thus, is what meanings are created by these choices and combinations of modes and signs within the music videos and how these meanings help to communicate

the aforementioned Grime artists' political messages in the context of the Grenfell fire. In addition, it is vital to look at how the political dimension of these multimodal discourses aims at making the political implications of Grenfell accessible or visible. Both, the creation of meaning as well as the choice of modes, as I would like to argue, are deliberate in these cases: "When we want to make meaning we make choices in the semiotic resources that we use. But none of these choices is neutral. All are motivated by interest." (Machin xii) The meanings that are thus made arise from the arrangement of, and the interplay between, different modes of representation in the respective music videos. They combine visual, musical and textual discourse as forms of communication that work on various levels of meaning-making, whereby none of the individual modes would work without the connection to the others. What the analyses will therefore contain, is a delineation of how the intersemiotic relations between the various modes used within the videos work to create unique political messages that each aim at raising awareness towards what happened at Grenfell, what the incident imparts with regard to political and societal problems within the contemporary society of Britain, and in some cases, what it communicates about the trauma Grenfell caused.

Nevertheless, even though several modes are entailed, the visual mode of perception dominates the discourse in these music videos, when it comes to the creation of new meanings. For instance, colour coding, the use of lights, dress codes, or the visualisation of people that would otherwise remain unseen, are modes of representation that make the visual discourse rather salient within the videos. It seems valid, thus, to pay particular attention to the visual elements in the videos with regard to their communicative purpose. Gunther Kress argues that "[c]ommunication is semiotic work. Work changes things: the tools, the worker and that which is worked on. Semiotic work is no exception: it is work in the domain of the social; changes produced by social-semiotic work are meaningful. Meaning is made in communication, whatever its form." (32) The social-semiotic aspect of the communication performed in these videos, thus, is of high relevance, as it aims at the production of social change. It is embedded within the socio-political context of a post-Grenfell urban environment; a context that has brought relevant socio-economic and political issues to the fore. David Machin does also approach multimodal semiotics from a social perspective, writing that "all semiotic systems are social semiotic systems. All semiotic systems allow us to negotiate social and power relationships" (Machin xii). The negotiation of power relationships is the most prominent feature of the videos that will be analysed, as those who are in power

have failed the people on whose behalf the artists are issuing their political messages. Therefore, the videos are what Gunther Kress would refer to as “temporary recordings of the social and the semiotic state of affairs” that constitute a “semiotically and socially productive force of communication”, in which what is socially problematic becomes projected into a public space (cf. Kress 35). The problems which become projected into public space in this context, are those of the political failures prior to and in the aftermath of Grenfell, as well as the anger and the frustration of the Grenfell community. As the problem itself arose from various and complex sources, the modes of representation that address the problem are equally varied and complex.

The contextualisation of the artists’ work becomes necessary as well, in order to localise where their motivations and sources of inspiration have come from. While Stormzy’s and Dave’s videos are recordings of their performances on the stage of one of Britain’s major music award ceremonies, namely the BRIT Awards, Lowkey’s and Bug Zuu’s video productions are rather basic and conceptualised for a YouTube audience. Therefore, the context of the videos’ creation and dissemination matters in terms of a multimodal analysis. In addition, the artists’ personal involvement with the community of Grenfell, as well as their political orientations or personal life histories seem also relevant for the analyses. Furthermore, the analyses will, apart from a delineation of the semiotic aspects of the multimodal discourses, also comprise contextualisation with regard to the artists’ biographies and their political activism. Contextualisation as a category of linguistic discourse analysis has already been mentioned by Bronislaw Malinowski, who classified context into context of situation and context of culture (Yang & Hu 219), which then became further expanded by Michael Halliday (1985), who defined more precisely that “context of situation denoted only the immediate environment for a textual event” and that context of culture would refer to “the broader institutional and cultural environment within which the context of situation is embedded” (Locke 19).

Even though this thesis is not dealing with textual events but multimodal events, the immediate environment of the music videos filmed during Stormzy’s and Dave’s live performances needs to be taken into account when analysing the stage design and what the artists are doing on stage. The respective audiences at the O2 arena, as well as in front of their screens watching the event, play a role in the context of the performance, as they are the recipients of the respective political message. In addition, the institutional and cultural

environments in which all of the music videos were created are relevant, as these environments are entailed in and at the root of the political messages that are communicated in the multimodal discourses of the videos. Therefore, I would like to argue that the context and the content of the videos are interdependent, which is an approach that Yang Yang and Rong Hu suggest: "The meaning of discourse depends on the context: discourse and context are interdependent and mutually reinforce each other. Without context, the form of language in use does not make sense. The same form of language can express different meanings on different occasions." (221) I would like to apply these implications to a theory of multimodal discourse analysis as well, as also discourse that consists of various modes often does not make sense without context. As previously mentioned, the choice and combination of modes and signs and their potential for creating meaning do only work within a social context. This social context is embedded within a particular culture, in which the meaning that is created makes sense. Thus, "cultural context has the functions of explaining cultural connotations" (Yang & Hu 225) and without understanding these cultural connotations, the political messages of these music videos could not be decoded.

Regarding these videos as forms of communication, it seems vital to look more closely at what Gunther Kress writes about environments of communication. He explains that the social frames that have been constructed around language and communication are embedded within the system of institutions of the nation state, globalisation, as well as of market (de)regulation, in other words, in "advanced capitalist conditions" (Kress 20). In these conditions, he argues, "the market actively fosters social fragmentation as a means of maximizing the potentials of niche markets. Hence the market has an interest in the development and support of distinct lifestyles, with former (at least partly) ethical concerns swept aside." (Kress 20) He continues that "[c]onsiderations around professional practices, work, moral/ethical issues are increasingly left to individual effort, action and, significantly for communication, to forms of regulation not sponsored (let alone imposed) by the state: that is, in situations where choices around regulation are possible, given limitations or not of economic, cultural and social capital." (Kress 20) Here, linguistic theory overlaps with socio-cultural theory in that sense, as it acknowledges the influence that capitalism has on the choices made when creating multimodal discourse. In addition, it positions itself critically towards a state that reduces individuals to the role of consumers, who act within the limitations of their economic, cultural or social capital. Interestingly, UK Grime as a genre

addresses the problems of social fragmentation, socio-economic deprivation, and ethical issues such as racism, not just by use of language but by the means of the creation of an entire musical genre. In addition, it also acts within the given limitations of a capitalist system and exerts itself to subvert or even oppose the power relations within this system. At least, this is still true for those Grime artists who have not yet made it into the mainstream. Additionally, it is a generic feature of UK Grime to create a distinct multimodal discourse that also conveys the image of a certain lifestyle. Apart from the fact that this lifestyle has now also been commercialised and become part of the capitalist system it once aimed to subvert, the genre as multimodal discourse keeps a sound critique of the dynamics of social fragmentation at its core, and this is important.

The methodology applied to the analyses of the five music videos, therefore, will treat the multimodal discourses that are created in these videos as a form of multimodal, primarily visual, communication with a specific purpose, namely to convey a political statement on the issue of Grenfell. The multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) will serve to decode how the particular choices in terms of representation made by the artists create new meanings with political concerns, which impart the genre of UK Grime with decisive political relevance. Therefore, the artists, as I would like to argue, take on a level of political responsibility that is quite preeminent, as no other music genre in the UK has set itself the task to speak on behalf of the victims of Grenfell as uproariously as UK Grime did. In this regard, also context plays a role, particularly cultural context. It is the context of the history of UK Grime as a genre as well as the individual personal histories of the four artists discussed in the analyses, which impact the choices of modes and signs within the multimodal discourses. Besides, it is the context that shapes the creation of the political messages as well. What the subsequent chapters will do, therefore, is to decode visual, textual and musical elements that are relevant for an overall decoding of the political messages contained in the music videos, and to provide insights into the contexts in which the videos were filmed.

The order of the analyses follows the chronological order of the dates on which the respective pieces of music were released. It begins with Big Zuu's "Grenfell Tower Tribute" that was released only two days after the incident, on 16th June 2017, as a charity rap to collect money for the victims. Second come Lowkey's "Ghosts of Grenfell", which was released on YouTube on 8th August 2017, and "Ghosts of Grenfell 2", which was released on 14th June 2018, one year

after the Grenfell fire. The analyses of these two videos interlink regarding mode of representation and themes, and they form a conceptual whole, which is why the chronological order becomes slightly disrupted here. The third analysis deals with Stormzy's performance at the BRIT awards that was aired live on television on 21st February 2018, and the fourth analysis focuses on Dave's performance at the BRIT Awards 2020, which were aired on 18th February 2020.

4. Analysis and Contextualisation

4.1 Big Zuu's "Grenfell Tower Tribute" – Community the people power!

Big Zuu was the first Grime artist to release a "Grenfell Tower Tribute" video in the immediate aftermath of the fire. He did so, as he lived in West London very close to Grenfell tower at the night of the fire, and he even lost one of his friends, Yasin El Wahabi, who is also mentioned in the lyrics of Lowkey's "Ghosts of Grenfell", in the fire. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Big Zuu says that many people who were helplessly standing in front of the tower and filming it because it was the only thing they could do at that moment, only realised afterwards that they had been filming people dying (Hancox 2018). He adds that nearly everyone from the area lost someone they knew in the fire. The shock about what happened on June 14th was deeply felt by those who had witnessed the fire. The "Grenfell Tribute" was made as a fundraising song in order to collect donations for the victims. The description of the video released on YouTube via *GRM Daily* reads "[t]he video is a collation of footage around the site and is a touching documentation of the amount of love our community has for one another. Nothing can bring back what was lost but we can honour them in our memories and our art." (*GRM Daily* 2017) The video itself was released on 16th June 2017, only two days after the fire. Thus, Bug Zuu has really quickly put together the lyrics for the rap, as well as the video for the Grenfell charity.

The shock over the terrible blaze might explain why the motivation to help and donate in the aftermath of the disaster was so high among the population of North Kensington: "The next day everybody got up, and brought all their clothes, money, all their food, and took it to the mosque, or to the church. People gave so much. But why did it fall to the community? The

response from the people was way better than the government's." (Big Zuu in Hancox 2018) Big Zuu expresses in this interview what he is trying to show in the visual discourse of his music video: that the people of Grenfell apparently provided more effective aid to the victims of the fire than the government did. Therefore, Big Zuu made the choice of using original footage from the area, filmed during the first hours after the fire, to compile the video to "Grenfell Tower Tribute". The people filmed in this footage, performing acts of compassion, are real people from the area, not actors performing a rehearsed scene, and incorporating the documentation of their charity work into the visual mode of the video is one of the means of constructing the central message of Big Zuu's rap: "Community the people power!" (00:40-00:42) It is in the interest of the victims, who are in need of help, to show these acts of compassion; however, it is also in the interest of Big Zuu, whose aim is to raise money for the victims and to motivate others to help. The artist himself appears in some scenes of the video, where he is seen walking down the streets of the borough, talking on his phone or shaking hands with Akala, another Grime artist from London, whose voice can be heard at the end of the video. Nevertheless, Big Zuu is not taking up a central role in the visual discourse of the video, instead he makes the first responders and people from the area become the protagonists.

In addition, Big Zuu drew on a very common stylistic feature within rap and Hip Hop regarding the musical mode, namely sampling instrumentals from another song. As background sound to "Grenfell Tower Tribute", he used the instrumentals of American soul singer Mary J Blige's "No More Drama". The choice of this song might also be deliberate, as the drama that unfolded in the night of 14th June 2017 needed to be eased. Additionally, the piano chords that are being played in the background are solemn and mournful, and they create an atmosphere of grief for the victims of Grenfell.

4.1.1 Social cohesion: community the people power!

The most salient theme in Big Zuu's music video is that of the community. The footage he uses shows how people join forces in order to help the victims. They carry food, toiletries, water bottles, as well as boxes and bags filled with clothing donations to the help centres. In the background of some images, huge piles of plastic bags and heaps of boxes can be seen that

contain donations from the people. The video features, as the lyrics do imply, people of “every religion, every race, every gender, every age, working hand in hand ‘coz it is the only way” (02:12-02:15). There is a group of Muslim women in white hijabs bringing food and clothes (00:31-00:36), a white couple with a trolley full of water bottles and a punnet of watermelons (01:28-01:32), a black man coordinating the incoming donations (02:14-02:20), and many other people of diverse ethnic backgrounds working hand in hand to bring, collect, or sort donated items. All of these scenes come to signify the cohesion within the community despite its ethnic diversity.

In addition, the video also features the emergency forces at the scene, such as police officers (01:16-01:24) and rescue teams (01:33-01:34), and the lyrics pay tribute to the fire fighters, who fought the flames the entire night: “We’ve got the firemen they’re opposite of cowards.” (00:36-00:38) The emergency forces are shown working closely together with the people who have come from all over London to North Kensington to help. Everybody seems to become part of the community and its joint efforts to alleviate the effects of the fire. This mode of representation underscores the message of “Community the people power” (00:40-00:42) as well, and it aims at counteracting the dominant discourse on urban areas with a high ethnic diversity as areas of disproportionate social unrest (Schaeffer 2014). In the face of tragedy, but also in the face of great social injustice, the cohesion in diverse and deprived urban areas seems to grow beyond the apparent disparities of ethnic or religious affiliation. More importantly, the social cohesion also seems to go beyond the disparities of social class. One of the tower’s former residents, named Mahad, is quoted in a *Guardian* article criticising the Kensington and Chelsea council: “We are rich, rich in dignity. You are dishonouring all of us, traumatising a whole community ... You have been put in a position of trust and you have let the people down.” (Sherwood & Booth 2017). The visual discourse of the video seems to support what Mahad is saying: the people of North Kensington are rich in dignity. This dignity derives from collectively taking a stand against that which is dividing Britain’s society the most: social class. There seems to be a social consciousness within the population of London that thwarts the dominant political discourses which justify measures of gentrification based on class and ethnicity. Using footage that shows social cohesion as a salient feature in the video, Big Zuu demonstrates that there is some form of resistance against these dominant political discourses.

4.1.2 The politics of social cohesion: Burn the government, the city's ours!

There is also a quite provocative line in Big Zuu's lyrics, when he raps: "Burn the government, the city's ours!" (00:42-00:44) Of course he does not literally suggest to burn down the government, instead he uses the word "burn" metaphorically in order to underpin another important message, which is that the people are better off without the interference of an inapt government. In the lyrics of "Grenfell Tower Tribute", Big Zuu criticises the government for not investing in the sprinkler systems of the tower: "No wonder why there is people there displaying rage. People complained fam, it's on the page. But they don't wanna pay a couple 100k, just to put a sprinkler system! Why d'you think there is no faith in the system?" (01:31-01:42). Therefore, the lyrics reflect a sentiment that was already there before the Grenfell tower went up in flames, but culminated shortly after the fire. Big Zuu's call to "burn the government" is echoed in Stormzy's performance (which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters) when he tells government authorities "we should burn your house down an see if you can manage this." (Stormzy 02:38-02:40) The textual metaphor of burning down institutions stands for the burning rage of the people who feel let down by them. "The city is ours" (02:41) reverses the governmental claim of ownership of city spaces, handing it back to the people who reclaim the domain of the city spaces they inhabit. The words are mirrored in the images used in the video, in which Big Zuu bestows agency on the people he is portraying, instead of rendering them as helpless victims. In the scenes chosen for the compilation of the video, the people take ownership of the places they inhabit by fulfilling supportive functions that become political acts. The outcomes of these social and political actions are what is uncovered in the artistic work of Big Zuu, who makes the impacts of these actions seen and heard.

Big Zuu himself stated in the interview with the *Guardian*, that the 'burning' rage he addresses in his song, is the rage about the widening gap between rich and poor that is particularly felt in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea: "I know we're not in a third world country, but you'll be in the blocks, where people are crammed into tiny flats, knowing that round the corner there are huge mansions worth millions. The juxtaposition is mad." (Hancox 2018) Big Zuu is articulately highlighting the problems that arise from urban gentrification and urban colonialism here. Socio-economically segregated urban areas create spaces of deprivation within nodes of wealth, or in Big Zuu's words juxtapositions of madness that stir discontent. It

is not the ethnic diversity per se that creates social upheaval in ethnically diverse urban areas, as racist discourse implies, it is the socio-economic inequality that leads to turmoil. Merlin Schaeffer confirms this assumption, when he concedes that: “In contrast to the general expectations, there are even tendencies for increased levels of civic engagement in more diverse areas.” (Schaeffer 138) Thus, Big Zuu’s visual discourse reverses the general expectations that Schaeffer addresses here.

Therefore, another salient feature of the verbal as well as the visual discourse is empathy, as Big Zuu emphasises this in his lyrics: “What I feel is more than empathy. My soul hurts that’s where it gets to me.” (01:09-01:13) This empathy is visualised by aforementioned acts of compassion. Big Zuu demonstrates that the power of the people lies in their compassion for each other, which in turn creates cohesion. The empathy that made Big Zuu craft the lyrics to “Grenfell Tower Tribute” and put together a visually powerful music video within only two days, does also have a spiritual component, as the following section will demonstrate.

4.1.3 Spirituality and religion in the face of tragedy

In the “Grenfell Tower Tribute” video, the Muslims from the area become particularly visible as signifiers of religious diversity. The footage used to assemble the tribute video also aims at accentuating the presence of Muslims in the community, and to highlight their role in providing aid and shelter for the victims. There is the previously mentioned scene from minute 00:32 to 00:35 that shows a group of Muslim women wearing white hijabs and blue abayas, which are clear signifiers of religious affiliation and represent a segment of British society that is often subjected to prejudice and Islamophobia. Additionally, there is a scene from inside a local mosque from minute 01:01 to 01:03, which shows an old man praying and wiping tears from his eyes. The local *Al-Manaar Mosque and Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre*, which is situated just a few blocks away from Grenfell, became an important site of assistance as it did not just provide food and emergency refuge to the victims but also counselling, art therapy for children, massages and acupuncture (Dawson 2018). It is a deliberate choice to show the inside of the mosque in the video, as thereby the mosque as a place of social support becomes seen. Another shot from the video that aims at making the presence and contributions of Muslims as first responders visible is the scene from minute 01:16 to 01:18, where two Muslim men

wearing kufi and jubba are seen in the background. Grenfell is often referred to as a moment in contemporary British history that “changes everything” (Cornish 2020). Whether this might be true is debatable. What Grenfell changed, at least for a short moment in time, was the way even the conservative press talked about British Muslims in the aftermath of Grenfell. By making visible Muslims a salient feature in the video, Big Zuu counteracts the prevailing Islamophobia that has pervaded British society particularly since the terror attacks of 9/11.

As already mentioned, Grenfell Tower was derogatorily dubbed “Moroccan tower” due to its high proportion of Muslim residents. It seems like a great historical irony thus, that the burning down of the “Moroccan tower” led to joint forces between the Muslim and the non-Muslim population of North Kensington. Jonathan Gornall draws attention to this irony in his comment for *The National News*: “[...] as the family names of the victims of the Grenfell tragedy emerged over the days following the disaster, it quickly became apparent that, through a cruel twist of historical fate, many whose origins lay in Islamic countries [...] were among the dead.” (Gornall online) Gornall argues in his text that the usually anti-Islamic sentiments, which were particularly fed by right-leaning, conservative newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* suddenly became reversed when the news of the Grenfell tragedy spread. He observes that journalists, formerly known for taking a rather anti-Muslim stance in their writings, surprisingly sided with the Muslim victims of the fire and heavily criticised Theresa May for her political failings. He interprets these media reactions towards the Grenfell tragedy as follows:

The blackened remains of Grenfell Tower stand like a gigantic, ghastly memorial, casting a heavy shadow over the bureaucrats who failed its occupants. But, in time, the devastated edifice named for a forgotten enforcer of the greatest empire the world has ever known might also come to be seen as something else – the marker of a moment when attitudes towards immigrants in general, and Muslims in particular, began to change. (Gornall online)

Perhaps his interpretation of events seems too optimistic, and Rosie Dawson refers to the issue more accurately, when writing: “Though they haven’t escaped all stigma lingering from Islamic terror attacks on British soil, Muslims’ response to the Grenfell Tower fire has highlighted their social and charitable engagement.” (Dawson 2018) The conservative media’s empathy for immigrants, particularly Muslims, has unfortunately not been of a lasting nature and Islamophobia still prevails. Grenfell was just a short moment of shock that brought the nation

closer together. However, it is the creative output of artists from the area, such as Big Zuu and Lowkey, that retained this moment for posterity in the multimodal discourse of their music videos. It seems in the interest of British Muslims to just do that and it creates a powerful political message in terms of counteracting Islamophobia.

Therefore, Big Zuu does not just visually emphasise the presence of Muslims in his video, his lyrics have a spiritual component as well. Again, he combines the visual with the textual mode to create meaning in his work. He frequently addresses God in the lyrics, but it is not particularly specified, which God is meant: “Life’s short you could be next to grieve. That’s why you got to thank God for every breath you breathe. That’s why you got to thank God for every step you take” (01:14-01:20), or “even at the worst of times you gotta have faith, and thank God that your family’s safe. For everyone in Grenfell I pray, and if you’re still alive we think you will be ok?” (02:18-02:26). Using the word God instead of Allah might have a neutralising and inclusive function that should communicate that everyone believing in God is invited to find comfort in these lines. That is why also a Christian priest is making a short appearance in the video (01:37). In the face of disasters such as Grenfell, many people might turn to religion, in order to seek comfort in a situation that seems so horrendous that only the belief in a higher power could render the events explicable. What kind of religion, in that case, neither seems of importance, nor does it make a great difference. Referring to God, the act of praying, and visually representing different religions in the video adds to the discourse of social cohesion that is created thereby. Additionally, surviving the inferno might seem like a miracle, so Big Zuu begins the chorus with the lines: “Count your blessings if you wasn’t in that tower. Fire for over 24 hours.” (00:29-00:31)

What he implies here is that many people in the UK live in conditions similar to Grenfell and that some of them might be well aware that it could also have been them trapped inside a burning tower block. The shock that was felt over Grenfell thus, did not just contain the sheer dimension of destruction of the fire, it also contained the awareness and knowledge of the fact that it could have happened anywhere in the UK, where the minimum of safety standards for tower blocks had been neglected for decades. The people shown in the footage, who came to help, might as well have been driven by the thought that it could have been them. The sentiment that anyone living in unsafe conditions could become a “Grenfell victim”, as long as safety regulations in buildings are not met, is what created the immense social cohesion that

occurred in the immediate aftermath of the fire. People felt, consciously or not, that they had been let down by the government as well as building companies. As Big Zuu suggests, if there is “no faith in the system”, perhaps the only faith that remains is the faith in God, be it Allah or any other religious deity that might be able to preserve lives if the government does not.

4.1.4. Velocity – A slowed down reality after disaster

The footage showing the people supporting the voluntary workers at the emergency accommodation and the Islamic centre is slowed down in pace. The people in the video are walking and moving slower than people would usually do at such busy spaces. Thus, velocity becomes a salient mode in the videos as well. The decelerated pace of the video has some rather important semiotic functions, which shall be briefly outlined in this section. First, the slower pace aims at putting emphasis on the individual actions of charity, aid and compassion. It enables the viewer to follow the individuals and their actions and to notice details that would not be as easily perceptible in normal pace. Such details could be the items people are carrying, their clothing, their social interactions or the expressions in their faces. Second, the slower pace represents the altered perception of time in the face of trauma and shock. It is a stylistic feature used in many films to slow down pace, or even use slow motion, when something tragic happens. In fact, it is a stylistic feature that is derived from reality as Wöllner, Hammerschmidt and Albrecht argue in their article “Slow motion in films and video clips” (2018): “Time perception varies impressively, and it is a long-established observation in philosophy and psychological research that the outer circumstances as well as the inner state of a person may lead to experiences of time that seems to stand still or to fly” (2). Particularly life-threatening and traumatising events, so the authors, have the effect of appearing to be “slowed down to extreme extends”, and individuals in such situations experience “distortions of time”, “a higher alertness and speed in cognitive functioning”, and are able to “perceive numerous details that they would not have perceived otherwise” (Wöllner et al. 2). Individuals, so Wöllner et al., would therefore „overestimate durations in these situations” (2).

Presenting the events that happened in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell fire in slowed down motion thus, seems accurate. An unbelievable event that happened much too fast required people to come to terms with what had happened. Altered perceptions of time

enable the experiencers, such as the viewers, to dissect the unfathomable into smaller, more digestible pieces. Within these smaller, more detailed pieces of slowed-down time, the individual stories of real people come to the fore. This is what the video does as well, it shows individual stories of first helpers and volunteers at the scene. It shows the people who came out, dedicated their time, their energy and their financial or material donations, so the video aims at honouring them in the same way it does honour the victims.

In addition, the slowing down of paces serves like the visual metaphor of a deep breath. A deep breath that is taken in shock, a deep breath that is taken in grief, in order to calm down and sooth the aroused nervous system. The video shows the community of Grenfell, as it is slowly beginning to breathe again after being confronted with an unfathomable event. The slowed down pace thus, could also serve the purpose of reflecting the emotional state of people involved in the scenes. The pace of the video might even contribute to its spiritual dimension, as altered pace is also a component of particular cultural or religious practice: “The meaning potential of velocity derives from our physical knowledge of what slows us down and what speeds us up (age or fatigue, for instance) and our cultural knowledge of occasions which require slow movement – solemn processions, for instance, or funerals.” (van Leeuwen 107) The spiritual impetus of Big Zuu’s rap becomes a prayer for the victims: “For everyone in Grenfell I pray.” (02:23-02:25) The time of prayer is a time of stillness and calm, in which the pace of normal life decelerates and the mind becomes focused. Such as the tempo of the visual discourse of the video is slowed down, its focus becomes more clear: Big Zuu’s prayer is a prayer for the community, for those who died, for those who survived and for those who performed acts of compassion.

Big Zuu uses images of the first responders from Grenfell, people from the neighbourhood, firefighters or rescue workers alike, in order to create a visual discourse of unity in the face of a tragedy. The acts of compassion shown in the video serve as signifiers for the power of the people and the community that the artist extols in his lyrics. These images create political meaning as they visually contradict racist and classist discourses on ethnically diverse and socio-economically deprived urban areas. In addition, the visual salience of Muslims in the video counteracts the rhetorics of Islamophobia and sheds them into a more positive light. Visible Muslims become a sign of social cohesion beyond the boundaries of ethnic and religious difference. This draws attention to the fact that many Muslims were among the

victims. In accordance with the lyrics the message becomes clear that everyone living under such dire housing conditions could have become a Grenfell victim. The slowed down pace of the video signifies the collective experience of shock over what happened, but also the dawning awareness of the dangers people are exposed to, as well as the collective power that lies within the process of becoming politically active. Therefore, the "Grenfell Tribute" video sheds a positive and optimistic light on the community of Grenfell. Big Zuu does not just honour the victims of Grenfell, he honours the people of the community, who solidary stick together to create hope in a time of despair. The video shows humanity and compassion beyond race, age, gender and class. Thus, what it contributes to the political discourse that is created by Grime artists around Grenfell, is the defiance of racist myths that surround urban areas like North Kensington, as in the few minutes of the video it becomes a place of hope.

4.2 Ghosts of Grenfell (Lowkey ft. Mai Khalil) – Thematising the traumatising effects of Grenfell

Lowkey is a British-Iraqi rapper from London, who has been engaged in political activism from the very beginning of his career in the mid-2000s. He began his musical career with UK Hip Hop groups from London, such as the *Poisonous Poets*, but also produced UK Grime on his solo albums. In addition, Lowkey has collaborated with members of the bands *Arctic Monkeys* and the *Babyshambles* for the rap/crossover project *Mongrel* (Sandford 2022), and his style of music can thus not be shelved into a single category. Lowkey's real name is Kareem Dennis and he is an academic, who has an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the SOAS University of London, and who is a qualified English teacher (Thapar 2019). Dennis participated in a debate at the Oxford Union on the topic of "The Arab world has failed the Palestinian people" (Oxford Union 2019), in which he contested the title of the debate, arguing that the Arab world has not failed the Palestinians. Due to his academic interests Dennis became politically active, as a supporter of the *Palestine Solidarity Campaign*, or endorsing Jeremy Corbyn's campaign on social media, stating that he wanted Corbyn as a Prime Minister (Novara Media 2017). He also created the rap clip "Vote Corbyn" for YouTube (*Link Up TV* 2019). Vice versa, also Corbyn praised the artistic work of Lowkey on Twitter, which was met with criticism though, as Lowkey's support for Palestinians is perceived as antisemitism by the Jewish

community (Evans 2022). In general, Lowkey frequently merges his academic interests with his art. On his third studio album *Soundtrack to the Struggle 2* he features Noam Chomsky and filmmaker Ken Loach, and in an interview with VICE magazine, he stated that: “My music and my shows are partly about political education, but also partly about politically organising as well. Songs and poems have always accompanied dissent.” (Thapar 2019) Kareem Dennis alias Lowkey is an artist who quite consciously uses music as a form of political engagement and activism.

Dennis lived in a tower block near Grenfell Tower on 14th June 2017 and was woken up in the night of the fire by the screams of people outside his window (Smith 2017). He attended the fire and helped during and after the fire, and thereby witnessed and experienced the tragedy first-hand. In an interview with Oli Dugmore, who hosts a political YouTube channel called *PoliticsJOE*, in which Lowkey talks about the Grenfell incident, he says that “you know I'm someone who had the cladding in my hair, I had the cladding on my body, there was no one who would have been at the scene on the night that didn't have some of that material on them” (0:00-0:10), referring to the highly combustible and poisonous material the tower was covered with. In the aftermath of the event, Dennis became active in the *Kids on The Green* charity (KOTG online), which is an organisation that helped children in coping with the traumatising effects of the fire. KOTG was founded shortly after the fire by Zoe Levak, who “saw kids with pictures of their missing friends sellotaped to their T-shirts” walking down Latimer Road and thus felt that it needed an immediate “emergency response to what was unprecedented, abject chaos and horror”, which “left the community in **North Kensington** traumatised and shellshocked” (KOTG online). Since then, KOTG is helping children and teenagers to transform the trauma they experienced into creative pieces of music, rap, drama or dance.

Therefore, from the Grime artists whose work is analysed in this thesis, Lowkey was closest to the tragedy and like Big Zuu personally affected by it. Additionally, he was also actively involved with the community of North Kensington and helped with rehabilitation in the area. His artistic work has a very personal focus of reflecting on the event and tells the story of Grenfell from the perspective of the community of North Kensington. The videos to “Ghosts of Grenfell” and “Ghosts of Grenfell 2” do feature people, who live in the area and whose lives were affected by the tragedy as well. The two music videos make the effect that Grenfell had

on the people from the area around the tower most tangible, and offer these people an opportunity to act out the trauma of witnessing the fire or even losing someone they knew inside it. Even though Big Zuu's Lowkey's videos do not have the same public and media outreach that Stormzy and Dave had with their performances at the BRITs, they still gained wider public recognition due to the powerful words and images used in their work. Big Zuu's work received public recognition due to its nature as a fundraising video, while Lowkey's music made it into national public broadcasters. *BBC Radio 4*, for instance, featured his song in *World at One*, and helped to spread the political message of the artist. Thus, Kensington's MP Emma Dent Coad (she was the borough's MP from 2017-2019) lauded his artistic work on Grenfell in the Houses of Parliament and called him a "poet laureate for Grenfell Tower" (Smith 2017). Therefore, the following analyses of the two music videos shall illustrate the valuable work Karim Dennis aka. Lowkey has done for the people from the area in the aftermath of Grenfell. The videos to "Ghosts of Grenfell" and "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" were released on YouTube by *Voice Over*.

4.2.1 Death, trauma and the burned-out tower

The most salient theme of Lowkey's "Ghosts of Grenfell" is that of death and trauma, visually symbolised by the burned-out black shell of the tower and continually present in the lyrics, particularly in the chorus. The tower thereby functions as a symbol with several layers of connotation, which are referred to textually and visually. The first scene of the video already introduces the image of the tower as a salient theme. It begins with a close-up establishing shot of two eyes and the line "the night our eyes changed" (00:00-00:02). The camera then shows the eyes of a man, who is sitting on his bed, staring numbly at something in front of him. The view of the camera moves through the room, showing flowers and a self-made "Justice for Grenfell" sign in the window. (00:00-00:10) After a quick cut, another room is shown, a close-up from the top of a drawer with family photos and the photo of a child on it, the face of another man staring numbly at something in front of him. (00:10-00:17) The next cut moves the viewers to a third room, in which a third man with the same sad expression on his face is staring at something the audience, at first, does not see. (00:18) The visual narrative of these first few shots focuses on the eyes of the three people and the emotions the expression of their faces convey. (00:00-00:20) Finally, the camera is panning out of the

window to show what the three men, blankly staring into nowhere, have been haunted by: the burned-out Tower of Grenfell, a black silhouette hanging above the lower buildings in the street, still threatening and terrifying (00:23-00:25). The looks on the faces of the three men, staring directly at the black shell of the tower, make the terror that the memory of the fire awakens, tangible: their eyes have changed and with them, the way they perceive and experience their home. (00:26-00:30) Additionally, the words that accompany these first images of the video, impart a form of reality and everydayness to the victims of the fire that make it impossible to rationalise and detach from the pain felt by those who are left behind:

Rooms, where love was made and un-made in a flash of the night
Rooms, where memories drowned in fumes of poison
Rooms, where futures were planned and the imagination of children built castles in the sky
Rooms, where both the extraordinary and the mundane were lived
Become forever tortured graves of ash
(0:00-0:33)

The words “castles in the sky” (00:23-00:24) are spoken simultaneously to when the burned-out tower appears for the first time on screen. The visual mode in connection with the textual mode has a strong emotional effect, when the ruin of the tower shows what has become of children’s castles in the sky during the night of the fire: a “tortured grave of ash” (00:33).

The chorus of “Ghosts of Grenfell” is sung by Mai Khalil, who also features in the video. She is singing the lines of the chorus “Did they die, or us? Did they die, or us? Did they die, for us?” (00:41-01:04), while Lowkey is rapping the lines “Ghosts of Grenfell still calling for justice. Now hear 'em, now hear 'em scream” (00:48-00:52) and “[t]his corporate manslaughter will haunt you. Now hear 'em scream” (01:01-01:04) in the background. “Did they die or us?” is a rhetorical question that serves as the central verbal theme of the entire rap. It implies that people who witnessed the fire and were forced to watch people dying without any chance to intervene or help, died together with the victims in the fire. Obviously ‘death’ is not meant literally here, but a part of the people’s soul seems to have died through the trauma they experienced. This becomes visible in the expression on people’s faces throughout the video. Lowkey makes the terror of witnessing the Grenfell fire also palpable in his lyrics: “People reaching, from their windows. Screaming for their lives. Pleading, with the cries. Tryna reason with the skies.” (01:16-01:22) Having to watch this scenario keeps haunting those who experienced it first-hand because of the knowledge that it could have been them dying in the

fire too. Indeed, a report published by the RBKC in 2018 shows that among the Grenfell victims who survived the fire, the percentage of people suffering PTSD symptoms outnumbered the usual figures of PTSD patients after a deadly incident. The NHS screening carried out prior to the report found that 67% of the fire's victims showed PTSD symptoms, which is a rather high percentage compared to the usually expected one in three people showing PTSD symptoms after a traumatic event (Osborne & Hopkins 2018). In addition, the report highlights a significant risk of secondary trauma for people from the area, who were indirectly affected by the fire (Wróbel 2020). Marianna Wróbel suggests that what the Grenfell community experienced could also be described as a chronic disaster syndrome (CDS), a term defined by Vincanne Adams et al. in 2009 to describe the individual, social and political impact the traumatic experience of the two hurricanes Katrina and Rita had on certain communities of New Orleans. The traumatising effect of these events; therefore, lies within a "cluster of interrelated conditions" that "manifests in the individual bodies as chronic distress and at the same time as the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that produce suffering" (Wróbel 2020). Grenfell has produced a collective and complex trauma that keeps festering due to the political and socioeconomic conditions the survivors of the fire, be they directly or indirectly affected by it, are still exposed to. The rhetorical question "Did they die or us?" becomes representative of the sentiment that accompanies the trauma of surviving Grenfell.

4.2.2 The community of Grenfell as a mouthpiece of protest

The lyrics of Lowkey's rap are mouthed by residents of North Kensington who feature in the entire video. Even though the actions in Lowkey's video are staged and not, as in Big Zuu's video, random documentations of people's behaviour, it is significant that the actors in his video are not professional actors, but actual residents from the area. Showing the faces of people who have actually been affected by the fire, has a much stronger emotional effect in terms of conveying the video's political message. The people pass on the lines of the song from one person to the next, as if they are telling the story of what happened during the night of the fire collectively. Thus, the visual narrative emphasises the experience of collectivity but also of social cohesion. It is one visual element that the productions of Lowkey and Big Zuu have in common. In addition, the video shows people's everyday lives in contrast to the

exceptionality of the fire and the trauma it induced. During the first verse people are filmed in rather mundane situations, such as walking down the street, greeting each other, walking in and out of a café, sitting at the tables or buying take-away coffee (01:04-01:53). While they are mouthing the lyrics, they keep looking into the camera, as if talking to the audience in front of their screens. They are not portrayed as passive victims of their situation but as active narrators of the story of the Grenfell community, who finally intend to make themselves heard. The lyrics accompanying these images portray what many of them might have experienced on June 14th 2017:

Words cannot express
Please allow me to begin though
1: 30 am heard the shouting from my window
People crying in the street
Watchin' the burning of their kinfolk
Grenfell Tower, now historically a symbol
(1:04-1:16)

The tower that has been visually established as a symbol of a death and trauma is now also verbally mentioned as such. The quoted lines capture the collective trauma of the community and an attempt to put the unutterable into words. Grenfell as a historical symbol, as already discussed, has not just become a symbol for the injustice that happened at the community of North Kensington, it has become a symbol for much wider racial and class-based problems within British society, and beyond that even a symbol for the failings of a global capitalist system that values corporate power over human lives. Thus, on the one hand Lowkey's video shows the community of North Kensington as a united force against this injustice, but on the other hand the people in the video do also stand for everyone who is affected by these racial and class-based problems. Being portrayed in such mundane situations, the residents of Grenfell become the everyman and everywoman from the streets, representative of all of the people who live in undue housing conditions. Additionally, the people from the video become mouthpieces of protest and political action, not just for the victims of Grenfell, but on behalf of all of those who experience injustice based on ethnicity and class. In an interview with VICE magazine, Lowkey states that because of Grenfell: "Invisible violence became visible. And I saw so many complexities that are inherent in British society at play." (Thapar 2019) Thus, what Lowkey does in his music video, is making these complexities visible and to transform invisible violence into a visual narrative that makes the effects of Grenfell, but also other complexities of injustice visible. The above quoted verse from the song, that starts with admitting that

“words cannot express” indicates the necessity of words working in conjunction with images to convey the horrors of 14th June 2017. The visual and the verbal mode become equally important in the dissemination of Lowkey’s political messages.

Another theme in this sequence is the confrontation with the dangers people who were close to the fire were also subjected to: “So don't judge our tired eyes. In these trying times. 'Cause we be breathing in cyanide the entire night.” (01:29-01:35) People witnessing the fire and trying to help were breathing in the poisonous fumes that emerged from the combustible material of the tower’s cladding. As Lowkey stated in the previously quoted interview, he even had the cladding on his body. What is meanwhile also known is that a significant number of firefighters who attended the scene have been diagnosed with terminal cancer (Kingsley 2023). Some of them had to wear their contaminated suits for more than 10 hours and they might have inhaled a dangerous amount of the poisonous fumes at the scene. A quite recent article in *The Independent* written by Thomas Kingsley says that: “Analysis carried out on the debris found there were heightened concentrations of chemicals that cause cancer and proven carcinogens within 200 metres of the tower, [...]” (Kingsley 2023) The fire contaminated the area around the tower and the consequences of this contamination have not yet been sufficiently investigated. In 2019, *The Guardian* already reported on the toxins that were found in the soil in the immediate surroundings of the tower and that the inhalation of these toxins might pose a potential risk for children playing on the ground (Hopkins 2019). The young men mouthing the above quoted lines of the rap, are young men whose health might have been put at risk by being too close to the fire and by living near the tower (01:29-01:35). Thus, it is not just the mental load of witnessing people dying, it is besides the knowledge of a health hazard that might endanger the lives of people who still live in the area that puts a strain on the community. Again, the question “Did they die or us?” gains another substantial layer, when considering the imminent health damage and threat to life the people from the community have to live with.

4.2.3 Urban protest and people taking to the streets

Lowkey uses images of urban protest, reminiscent of the monthly silent marches that were held on the 14th of every month in the aftermath of the fire, in his music videos, in order to

show that the community has become politically active since the disaster. Again, the residents of Grenfell are portrayed as active individuals, who are not passively subjected to the invisible violence of corporate power, but who decided to take things into their own hands. In the monthly silent marches that have been organised since the fire, local residents march through the borough towards the Grenfell tower in tribute of the victims and to protest for justice (Butcher 2018). Lowkey attended these protest marches himself and by including them visually into the narrative of the music video, he emphasises the impact that people who join forces in the face of injustice can have. Nevertheless, the people in the video do not march silently, they join the chorus of voices who sing “We’re calling!”, voicing out loud their demands towards politicians and authorities. The marches are accompanied by a figure that serves as a metaphorical healer for the trauma of the community. The last line of the first verse “Oh you political class, so servile to corporate power” (00:35-00:40) is mouthed by Asheber, a musician from the area, shaking a finger accusingly at the camera. Asheber, who is wearing a hat made of straw, a long necklace made of beads and is walking with a wooden cane, calls himself the musical medicine man. He usually produces reggae with a group called “Asheber and the Afrikan Revolution” (*Facebook*) but in “Ghosts of Grenfell” he supports the cause of the Grenfell community. Asheber walks the streets of North Kensington with the expression of a healer, who intends to heal the community from the trauma it experienced, but who is also ready to fight for the cause of the Grenfell community when it comes to justice for the bereaved.

The protest march in the video is built up slowly, by first only showing small groups of people walking down the streets and mouthing the lyrics, and then joining each other to form a big protest march that finally comes to a halt in front of a Grenfell memorial wall underneath the London Westway. While walking, people keep singing the words “We’re calling!”, raising their hands into the air (02:43-02:44). The lyrics then reveal what the community of Grenfell is calling for: “Calling for survivors rehoused in the best place, not to be left sleeping in the West Way for 10 days” (02:50-02:55), “calling for arrests made, and debts paid in true numbers known for the families who kept faith” (02:56-03:01), or “calling for safety in homes of love” (03:02-03:03). Asheber who joins the march, accompanying it as the urban medicine man, supporting the protests and calls for action, symbolises the remedy that lies within these lines. The cure for the survivors of Grenfell would be an appropriate rehousing scheme, a home that is safe, and holding those responsible for the disaster accountable. Without these remedies,

the community of Grenfell will remain unable to heal from the inflicted trauma, and the “Ghosts of Grenfell” will keep haunting them. Choosing images of protest is a conscious decision made by the artist, as these images represent the power that lies within the organisation of public demonstrations. Lowkey aids in making the monthly protests of Grenfell visible and to disseminate their political message to a wider audience by incorporating them into his music video. He thereby serves the interests of the community to make their voices heard.

4.2.4 The hour of the fire, the hour of sahoor

The last verse of “Ghosts for Grenfell” is sung by Mai Khalil in Arabic, which is another element of the song that is significant. Arabic is a language that was spoken by quite a substantial number of the Grenfell victims, as also the list of the victims’ names at the end of the song reveals. The *Grenfell Muslim Response Unit* estimates that 80% of the fire’s victims were Muslims (Hearst 2022). The Arabic lyrics are translated in the subtitles on YouTube, so that all listeners can understand what Khalil sings: “Tell me where I can go, people are burning at the hour of sahoor. I feel as if I’m in another world.” (03:32-03:39) Lowkey is referring to the “hour of sahoor”, which is the last hour before sunrise during Ramadan, as many of the first people to arrive at the scene and help the victims were Muslims. They had already been awake to celebrate Ramadan and eat their last meal before sunrise in the night of 14th June 2017 (Griffin & Osborne 2017), and Lowkey himself had been among them. Thus, Muslims as first responders were trying to wake up their neighbours, were warning them about the fire, and perhaps even prevented further deaths. Language becomes a mode of representation here, as Arabic represents the Muslim community of Grenfell.

What Lowkey aims at challenging, is the anti-Muslim prejudice, Islamophobia and racism that lie at the heart of how the residents of Grenfell tower were treated prior to the event as well as in its aftermath. Maya Goodfellow writes in an article for *Aljazeera Online*, “housing inequality isn’t just about class; it’s about race and migration status, too.” (Goodfellow 2017) She additionally points out that a majority of the former Grenfell residents were classed as “other” and, therefore, lived in conditions “deemed officially unfit for human habitation, compared with white households.” (Goodfellow 2017) The “other” in this case, is a Muslim

“other”; an “other”, as mentioned above, that has been deemed a threat to British society for decades, with anti-Muslim sentiments on the rise since 9/11 and 7/7 (cf. Levin 2022). Therefore, the verse is an attempt to fight off the anti-Muslim sentiment that surrounded the Grenfell incident, which falsely rendered Muslims as the “enemy within” or “other” that had either caused or benefitted from the fire. Additionally, it gives Muslims from the area an opportunity to be represented and seen.

4.2.5 Making invisible violence visible: naming the 72 victims

The last part of the song is the most touching and haunting part of “Ghosts of Grenfell”. It begins with the line “To whom it may concern at the Queen’s Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where is Yasin El Wahabi?” (03:58-04:06) mouthed by Asheber but spoken by Lowkey. The video shows the people from the protest march, standing in front of a Grenfell memorial wall underneath a Westway road bridge, holding up missing signs with the names and photos of the deceased. The song continues with the real voices of the people, alternately asking where the 72 victims of the fire are. This sequence lasts for about two minutes, as it takes that long to name all the victims. In the last shot of the video a girl is mouthing the lines “The blood is on your hands. There will be ashes on your graves. Like a Phoenix we will rise,” (06:15-06:26) lifting her arms into the air like the wings of a bird. Naming the victims and showing their faces is a very powerful method of making them visible and humane. As mentioned above, likewise as the lyrics do, these last images make it harder to rationalise or emotionally detach from the realities of the Grenfell atrocity. The very last shot of the video shows the burned-out black tower again from the air, probably filmed by a drone, rising above North Kensington, and carrying all the symbolic connotations that were mentioned above (06:27-06:37).

Thus, the last part of the video, apart from the rest of the touching lyrics of “Ghost of Grenfell”, strongly confirms what Lowkey has pointed out in an interview with *Vice*:

Through making music, if you can move someone to tears, then you can move them to action. If you can combine that deeply touching aspect of music with a political message that is trying to make a listener aware of a situation they may be entangled in, but don’t otherwise have awareness of, that’s powerful. My music is about visibilising those entanglements. (Thapar 2019)

The emotional impact of a work of art, be it music, a film, or a painting, apart from raising

awareness, can inspire people to become politically active. Lowkey's intention is tangible throughout the video. He does not only unite people from the area in offering them the opportunity to participate in a video that speaks for their cause, he does also convey an emotional message that is felt by an audience beyond the community of Grenfell. The message is that everyone of us could become a victim of political negligence and that we all have to stand up against it and become mouthpieces of protest. It is perhaps necessary to mention here that Lowkey himself does not make an appearance in any of the videos. As artist, he steps into the background to leave the stage to those, on whose behalf he has composed the songs. The second song, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" that was made only one year after "Ghosts of Grenfell" comprises of a very similar medial staging as the first video. It contains a stronger focus on the Grenfell inquiry and holding those accountable who have not taken any responsibility yet. Additionally, the second video features more children from the area, which creates quite another layer of visual discourse that shall be analysed briefly within the next section.

4.2.6 Ghosts of Grenfell 2 – Calling out the culprits of Grenfell

While "Ghosts of Grenfell" is a tribute to the victims of the fire and honours those who heroically helped the survivors during the night of the fire, "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" aims at condemning the protraction of the Grenfell inquiry. The second song also features a female artist named Kaia, who supports Lowkey in singing the background vocals and the chorus, and the lyrics of "Ghosts of Grenfell 2" are again mouthed by local residents from the area of North Kensington, some of which have already featured in the first video. Asheber, the musical medicine man occurs again as well and fulfils a similar symbolic function as in the first video. What is striking though is that the second video features more children and teenagers than the first one. Perhaps this is due to Lowkey's involvement with the charity *Kids on the Green*, and his intention was to represent the children he worked with in the video. It might also indicate that any political decisions made as a consequence of the tragedy of Grenfell will affect these children's future. However, children do often not get a voice in the political arena, and this is what Lowkey is trying to thwart by making them become the protagonists of the visual discourse of his music video.

The video begins with a man standing behind a piano on the street, playing the initial chords to the song (00:00-00:10). The piano itself stands on a pavement underneath the same road bridge under which the last shots of “Ghosts of Grenfell” were filmed, so the second video starts where the first one ended. This choice of setting has a symbolic character. While the first video came out in 2017, “Ghosts of Grenfell 2” was released in 2018, resuming the observation of what had happened in the community since. It visually links the past with the respective present to continue the narrative without interruption and smoothing out the time leap. In addition, also the lyrics aim at creating a connection between the past and the present, when beginning with recapturing what happened on June 14th: “Black snow on a summer's night. Cold shoulders on a summer's day. Invisible violence becomes visible in such a sudden way.” (00:11-00:22) Lowkey uses the words he also used in the VICE interview to portray what happened at Grenfell, namely the invisible violence of corporate manslaughter. While he is rapping the introductory lines, children are shown, with stern faces, standing around the piano, wearing hoodies and shirts with *Justice4Grenfell* logos and green hearts on them (00:14-00:44). *Justice4Grenfell* is a community-led organisation that was launched on 19th June 2017 with the aim to help those members of the community who were affected by the fire (*Justice4Grenfell* online). The organisation’s logo is a green heart that shows the lettering of the word “Grenfell” in its middle, a sign that is also held up later in the video by some of the people protesting on the road (03:36-03:40 and 03:58-03:59). Showing this logo in the visual discourse of the video as a sign of protest is a means to represent the politicisation of the Grenfell community. The green heart stands for the power of the community when it comes to portraying the perseverance of their political protest.

In the first verses, the lyrics turn from the past to the present and become highly political by denouncing political actors for their inaction: “Twelve months, no arrests made, the image in our heads stayed” (00:35-00:38), and “Minister, what was your relationship with Mark Allen? Been waiting twelve months for answers, still we can't have them.” (0:48-0:54) Mark Allen was the technical director of the company Saint-Gobain UK that manufactured the Celotex panel of the Grenfell Tower’s cladding (*The Independent* 2018). Allen was believed to have advised the UK government on building regulations in his function as a member of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC). However, newspaper articles that claimed he had influenced the government in buying the Celotex panels from Saint-Gobain had to be revoked and an apology had to be issued (*The Independent* 2018). Still, the *Daily Mail* has kept the

article highlighting Allen's involvement with the BRAC online and that is why his role as an advisor of the government remains unclear (Taylor 2017). Later in the lyrics, Lowkey also addresses Sajid Javid, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government at the time when Grenfell happened, who was criticised for rejecting requests for additional funding for sprinklers in tower blocks (Buchan 2017). Naming these political agents directly in the lyrics has the effect of making them known. During the Grenfell inquiry it seemed that those responsible for the disaster kept hiding and making excuses for why they could not take on any responsibility. In 2021, Kenan Malik reports from the inquiry for *The Guardian*, and concludes that the apologies voiced at the inquiry were "a fauxpology, an exercise in deflecting blame rather than in accepting responsibility" (Malik 2021). Lowkey's intention is to focus on those responsible for the tragedy and force them to take on accountability by moving them into the public spotlight.

4.2.7 Tragedy that brings about change

The appearance of Asheber in the second video stresses again his symbolic function as the area's medicine man. However, this time he contributes to a visual statement on the Caribbean influences within the multi-ethnic population of North Kensington. From minute 01:01 to 01:13 he is seen carrying a *barillette*, a kite that is typical for the Día de Muertos celebrations in Central and South America or the Caribbean. The *barillette* shows the face and name of Kelso Cochrane, a young black immigrant from the Caribbean, who was stabbed to death by racists in Notting Hill on 17th May 1959. His murderers were never arrested. This led to more than 1.000 people attending Cochrane's funeral, in order to take a stand against racism (Kingsley 2022). The incident sparked anti-racist protests and activism that eventually resulted in the conception of the Notting Hill Carnival. Notting Hill is very close to the area of Grenfell Tower. Thus, what the representation of Cochrane in the video signifies is that even tragedy could lead to positive social developments that are brought about by social cohesion and political activism, and that the people from the streets have the power to initiate change. Lowkey even implies that in the lyrics: "Carnival on the soul of Kelso Cochrane. What do you think will develop, on the strength of those names?" (01:01-01:07) If positive social and political transformation arises from commemorating the victims' names, their useless deaths might not remain entirely futile. Lowkey establishes a glimpse of hope in his lyrics, hope that the Grenfell

inquiry would lead to substantial changes in housing regulations and in the protection of social housing tenants. At the time when the video was made, nobody could have anticipated that the inquiry would last for another four years.

While the first video acknowledged the courageous commitment of the Muslim population during the night of the fire by including a verse in Arabic, the second video honours the cultural legacy of the borough's Caribbean population. Lowkey offers an alternative discourse, which emphasises the positive developments that come with embracing diversity. His visual and lyrical discourse represent a counter-narrative to that of urban gentrification, which justifies the spatial segregation of ethnically diverse communities. He creates a narrative that exemplifies and endorses the positive aspects of ethnic diversity, such as neighbourhood aid, social cohesion, political activism and the creation of collective art. Therefore, Lokey also makes a reference to Stormzy's performance at the BRIT awards, which happened between filming the first and the second video, when he raps: "Hardened battered hearts, haven't laughed in a good while. But Stormzy at the Brit Awards made the neighbourhood smile." (01:59-02:05) Looking into the faces of the people mouthing the lyrics seems proof enough that Grenfell has taken its toll on the people of the community. Stormzy's daring performance at the BRITs 2017 though, has given the community hope that their concerns might finally be heard. Lowkey shows that political activism and cohesion go beyond the area of North Kensington and that influential advocates are needed to encourage people to keep fighting for their cause. In addition, not only Lowkey but also Stormzy was awarded the title "Poet Laureate for Grenfell" by (back then) MP Emma Dent Coad (Wearmouth 2017)

4.2.8 Invisible violence/invisible tower

While the charred tower became a central theme in the first video, the second video does not show the tower despite in the very last shot. Still, the tower is present, not just in the lyrics but also in the visual narrative of the video. From minute 02:28 to minute 02:43 people are standing in a row on the street, looking upwards into the sky, staring into the same direction. The lyrics meanwhile address the ongoing trauma, as they did in the first song, re-emphasising that the community of Grenfell still needs healing from the terrors of that night:

Goosebumps cross your skin when you feel the breath of death against you.
Bet you never went through that cursed night of haunted sounds.
That wretched cladding falling down, since then death is all around.
They say that every storm there is a dawn.
Knocking on Heaven's door, we mourn forever more.
(2:28-2:43)

Without visually referencing it, the audience knows what the people in the street are staring at. The trauma of the fire remains a central theme here too, as the collective memory of that night is evoked through the lyrics sung by Kaia in the chorus: "Calling, still hear them calling. Black snow was falling. From the corners of my mind, I hear you. Calling, still hear them calling. Black snow was falling. From the corners of my mind, I hear the..." (01:26-01:52) Black snow becomes a metaphor for the ashes of the dead who could not be buried appropriately after the fire. The voices of the victims remain, they are still being heard by their bereaved families and friends. Meanwhile, the voices of the bereaved themselves still seem to go unheard. Nevertheless, Lowkey refuses to regard the people from the community of Grenfell as "voiceless" victims. In the previously mentioned interview with VICE he explains that:

Arundhati Roy has an amazing quote where she says: 'there is no such thing as the voiceless, only the conveniently unheard'. So actually, I think that attributing voicelessness to people can take away their agency. There are those whose voices are censored or discounted, and whose narratives are marginalised." (Thapar 2019)

In the case of Grenfell, Roy's wording of people being "inconveniently unheard" seems much more appropriate than using the term "voiceless". As discussed above, the people of Grenfell have voiced their concerns quite frequently and they did not only remain unheard, they were deliberately silenced by deeming them "troublemakers" (Kirk 2021). Lowkey aims at reversing the status of paralysis that has been enforced on the community of Grenfell. By making the people from the community mouth his lyrics, Lowkey bestows them with agency, at least metaphorically. The lyrics he lays into the mouths of the protagonists of his music videos belong to those narratives of Grenfell that remain marginalised by those in power, they contain the words that remain "conveniently unheard". This way, the everyman and everywoman in the video stand for everyone who experiences the same acts of silencing by those in power. Lowkey's aim; therefore, is to amplify the voices of "people who pay the biggest price of the economic status quo" (Thapar 2019). This amplification makes the violence that is invisible visible, not just in Grenfell, but in other places like Grenfell too.

This is most powerfully visualised when the same girl that mouthed the lines “The blood is on your hands, there'll be ashes on your grave. Like a phoenix, we will rise. The blood is on your hands, there'll be ashes on your grave. Like a phoenix, we will rise,” (04:27-04:50) in the first video, does so at the end of the second video as well. The girl has visibly grown during the year that lies between filming the first and the second video. However, the lyrics and the images of the videos remind the audience that not much has changed in between. While Kaia is singing “[w]e will never give up. We will never give in. We will never give out. We will rise. We will rise,” (04:50-05:17) people are shown holding up the names of the companies and authorities they are holding accountable for the fire on self-made signs. The people are standing under the same Westway road bridge, under which the ending of the first video was shot, holding up their *Justice4Grenfell* protest signs from the silent marches and large posters that say that they need answers from: “Celotex”, “Arconic”, “Rydon”, “BRE”, “KCTMO”, and “RB KC” (04:50-05:34). This retake of the setting has the effect that it emphasises the continuity of the problem. As long as the demands of the people from Grenfell are not met, the effects of the fire keep spinning a loop that always reverts back to the same unanswered questions, the same painful memories, the same anger and frustration over what happened. These questions, memories and anger are what takes those people back to the memorial site underneath the road bridge, what makes them walk the streets of North Kensington in silent grief, and is what lets them continue the loop until those who are responsible for the disaster, will finally take it. The phoenix from the lyrics becomes a powerful verbal sign in this context, as it becomes a metaphor for the community of Grenfell that will keep rising from the ashes of the tower to fight for justice.

When the music stops the camera zooms out again to film the scene from above. The Westway is shown and behind it Grenfell tower. However, this time the tower is disguised by a white cover that shows a green heart on top of it (05:35-05:44). The shocking image of the black, charred tower has been replaced by the image of the white tower that symbolises hope with the green heart on its top. The covering of the tower has an effect that is not to be underestimated. For those who had to witness the fire and see people dying in it, as well as for those who live near the tower, the view of the burned-out ruin of Grenfell might have triggered the memories of that night every time they had to look at it. For people suffering from PTSD, a sound, a smell, or an image, can set off a trigger for emotional flashbacks or intrusive thoughts or memories (cf. Egan 2010). Even for people not suffering from severe PTSD

symptoms, the daily view of the tower must have been terrifying. The administration of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea had to become active, even though the tower could not be teared down as long as the inquiry was running. Covering the tower was a humane decision. However, what Lowkey also makes clear in the video to “Ghosts of Grenfell 2” is that even if the tower is covered, it does not completely erase the memories or eliminate the trauma. People still hear the victims’ calls for help, they still see the black snow falling down on their heads, and the memories of June 14th 2017 persist. The covering of Grenfell tower should not become analogous to the cover-up of what really happened during that night. Thus, the second song and the second video by Lowkey should remind those in power that the community of Grenfell is still looking behind the veil and is searching for answers.

The videos of Big Zuu and Lowkey are created from within the community of Grenfell. Unlike the performances of Stormzy and Dave, which will be analysed subsequently, they do not have the stage of an international music award show to disseminate their political message. Still, the emotionality that lies within the lyrics as well as the visual discourse of the three videos, has the power to transform. Lowkey manages to visualise the effects of Grenfell in a very touching and haunting way, while Big Zuu offers a glimpse of hope in the aftermath of Grenfell. In addition, Lowkey and Big Zuu bestow the people from the community with agency and render them as powerful and politically aware people, who intend to bring about change from street level. By representing the community of Grenfell in such a way, and by emotionally touching the audience, Lowkey intends to invite them to become politically aware and active too.

4.3 Stormzy at the BRIT Awards 2018: “Yo Theresa May, where is that money for Grenfell?”

In 2018 Grime artist Stormzy won two BRIT Awards, one for album of the year, for his debut album *Gang, Signs and Prayer*, and one for best British male artist. He was the first grime artist who finally gained the laurels for his artistic work at the BRITs. During the award ceremony, Stormzy used his live performance at London’s *O2 Arena* to put a freestyle rap on stage that heavily criticised the UK government for its failings in the Grenfell disaster and attacked then

prime minister Theresa May and the *Daily Mail*. According to his producer Fraser T. Smith, nobody knew what the freestyle rap, which was aired live on public television that night, would contain:

It was the most surreal experience seeing Stormzy performing, just after he'd won and no one had heard the content of his rap except Manon and me before that night. Not even anyone in rehearsals. So to hear the lines about Grenfell and politics booming out to such a huge audience blew me away. It was truly iconic and testament to Stormzy that he used his platform that night to try and do some good in the world. (Yawson 184)

Stormzy's decision to make a political statement like this, live on stage during one of Britain's most important music award shows, was not just brave, it became even iconic through the visual discourse of the stage design and Stormzy's physical expression and presence on stage. Its purpose was to raise awareness of the irresponsible political handling of Grenfell and by doing so it drew attention to the political dimensions of the genre of grime. Additionally, Stormzy's political subtext of reversing the "thug image" (Jeffries 2011) reframed the prejudice attached to Grime, and it aims at unveiling the systemic racism inherent in Britain's society. The political message of Stormzy's iconic performance came as a surprise and, thus, stirred various kinds of reactions from his fans and critics, the media, and even the prime minister herself. Conservative media condemned his freestyle rap while other media lauded the insistence of his political statement. Amanda Plattell from the *Daily Mail*, for example, criticised Stormzy for making "incendiary statements" and using "vulgar language" (Plattell 2018), while Laura Snapes from *The Guardian* labelled Stormzy "not just a groundbreaking musician, but an agitator and inspirational figure (Snapes 2018).

The BRIT Awards ceremony were not the only occasion on which Stormzy spoke out for the victims of the Grenfell fire in public. He also did so, for instance, as one of the headliners at the Glastonbury festival 2017, where he wore a Grenfell tribute T-Shirt and called out to the authorities to tell the truth and take responsibility (Collier 2017). In addition, he repeated his statements and actions in other performances as well; however, the performance at the BRIT Awards is the one that made the most lasting impression in Britain's public awareness. In the following multimodal analysis of the video of the live performance at the BRITs, I would like to dissect what elements it consists of and what it communicates, as well as elaborate on the

most salient theme, which is Stormzy's reversal of, what I would like to refer to as, the *thug image*.

4.3.1 Stormzy's Reversal of the Thug Image

The term *thug image* as I am going to use it in the subsequent analysis, shall be defined as the image of the black gangster, as it is often used in American Hip Hop and Gangsta Rap and that has been transferred to the rap culture of UK Grime along with many other elements that have been borrowed or copied from US Hip Hop. Michael Jeffries explains in his book *Thug Life* (2011), that "the word thug has come to stand in for nigger as an epithet for criminally inclined black men" and that "commercially successful rap acts since the mid-1990s have embraced the word thug as an unapologetic affirmation of their experiences as black men, marginalized and insulted by mainstream America and socialized in violent and economically depressed American ghettos" (Jeffries 78). Thug is a term that has been playfully used, contested and challenged by many rappers since Tupac Shakur has adopted the term "thug life" as an acronym for "This Hate U Gave Lil' Infants Fuck Everybody" (Jeffries 89). According to Tupac's definition, the thug is the target of hatred, which shows that black rappers have always been contesting the image ascribed to them by an outside, supremacist white gaze. In a similar manner, Stormzy is playing with the criminal associations made with UK Grime and Grime artists like himself during the BRIT Awards show, which becomes evident in the lyrics and the visual discourse of his performance. The video clip I am referring to in this multimodal analysis is a live recording of Stormzy's performance at the BRIT Awards 2018 that can be found on Stormzy's official YouTube channel (*Stormzy* 22.02.2018) and captures his entire performance. It is a snippet from the live broadcast of the BRITs that was aired by several British broadcasters.

4.3.2 Colour Code Black: Thugs on Stage

A rather salient visual element in Stormzy's performance is the colour code of the stage design that is dominated by the colour black. When Stormzy is walking on the darkened, entirely black stage that has only one spot that lights the microphone stand in the middle of it, water is

raining down from an invisible ceiling (00:08-00:18). The grime artist entering the stage is also dressed in black: black hoodie, black tracksuit trousers, and black trainers. In the background an organ is playing the intro to “Blinded by your Grace pt.2”, a track from *Gang, Signs and Prayer*, Stormzy’s debut album. It is obvious that the stage design is inspired by the album cover art, which is also dominated by the colour black and shows Stormzy amidst a group of disciples wearing black balaclavas. The chorus on stage is also dressed in black, wearing these black balaclavas.

The colour black carries several meanings in this performance, as it is partly referencing the ethnic background of the artist, but also referencing the blackness and harshness of street life, particularly at night. Thus, black hints at the criminal associations often made with the genre. A person in a dark street, wearing a black hoody, stepping into the spotlight of a streetlamp might instantly become associated with the image of the thug, who is involved in criminal activities, and Stormzy is playing with these connotations when he is entering the stage. Black, in this context, carries a number of negative and stereotypical connotations attached to the thug image, such as drug crime, gang violence, or mugging. These negative connotations, however, become reversed when Stormzy begins performing the first song on stage, “Blinded by Your Grace pt.2”, which belongs to the subgenre of Gospel Rap, a genre that combines two styles of black music, namely Rap and Gospel. “Blinded by Your Grace pt. 2” is a song that contains deeply religious lyrics that can be read as a form of repentance and benediction to God. Thus, the visual message of the stage design partly contradicts the musical and lyrical message of the first part of the performance. There are two modes, the visual and the musical, which communicate contradicting messages. Stormzy, in the role of the reformed sinner, or better reformed thug, is contesting the racially stereotyped image attached to Grime, showing the audience the religious aspects of his artistic oeuvre. In relation to the religiously laden lyrics that Stormzy performs in the first part of the show, the black colour of his clothes evokes associations with the colour of a priest’s robe, a priest who sermonises from the stage.

4.3.3 Symbolic Apparel: The Hoodie and the Thug

Another salient feature of the performance is the choice of clothing of the artist. The attire Stormzy is wearing, the hoodie and the tracksuit pants, reference the origins of the genre with all their implications of class and ethnicity. Tracksuits are the symbolic garment of the British

working-class and people wearing them are often dubbed “chav”, which is short for “council-housed and violent” (Elliott 2018). A chav, therefore might be a British variation of the American thug as tracksuits are worn by both. Joanne Turney writes in *Fashion Crimes* (2019): “The tracksuit, when worn on the street, will be considered in these terms: as the garb of the socially resting competitor; the temporary outsider for whom normative codes of behaviour and performance are viewed suspiciously from the side-lines.” (Turney 170) Thus, the tracksuit is associated with rebellion and social deviance. Additionally, in the 1980s, the tracksuit became adopted into US Hip Hop culture, providing the garment with a hint of rebellion, ownership and power (cf. Turney 172). This is also true for the tracksuit as the signature garment of UK Grime. According to Joanne Turney the tracksuit serves as a “sign of antisocial activity and has become a symbol of the ‘happily’ dispossessed” (Turney 175). Therefore, it “is no longer the sign of the lone revolutionary; it is now a sign of an army that threatens the status quo.” (Turney 175) Despite their negative symbolic meanings, though, tracksuits have also become popular fashion items under the category of “street-wear” and famous rappers are frequently seen proudly wearing luxury versions of the tracksuit designed by Luis Vitton or other famous designers. Some rappers have even established their own fashion lines and keep selling tracksuits under the premise of selling luxury fashion items (Blay 2022). The tracksuit Stormzy is wearing is carrying all the aforementioned negative connotations of street crime, gang life, and violence, while simultaneously paying tribute to the British working class.

The hoodie that Stormzy is wearing at the beginning of his performance, is another symbolically laden piece of garment. Over the past decades it has become a “symbol of social disobedience”, “a sign of criminality and criminal intent” and its wearers have been even “merged into the contemporary folk devil, the hoodie” (cf. Turney 23). The hoodie is a piece of clothing that invokes images of “racial conflict, injustice, and tragedy” (Leslie 2019) with Trayvon Martin as one of the most well-known contemporary examples. Martin’s case has become a sad example of how the criminalisation of the hoodie could lead to deadly consequences. Associating Martin’s case with the hoodie conflates images of vulnerability and innocence with those of the apparent thug. Thus, the garment itself becomes paradoxical and in the paradox it embodies, it challenges the stereotype of the thug image. Moreover, the paradox is staged by Stormzy, who is wearing the thug uniform while singing the Gospel of a reformed criminal. Mixing the cultural sign of the hoodie and what it signifies with contradicting connotations helps Stormzy’s aim of reversing the thug image.

4.3.4 Stage Design: A Choir of Thugs

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the symbolic meaning of the clothes Stormzy is wearing in connection with the highly symbolically charged stage design. The arrangement of the choir resembles, as mentioned above, the album cover art of Stormzy's debut album *Gang, Signs and Prayer* (2017), which in itself conveys a particular symbolic message. Similar to the album cover, in three rows, one superimposed on the other, the choir is sitting behind black tables, dressed in black with black balaclavas covering their faces. Plates, glasses, and jugs are positioned on the tables in front of them and some singers are folding their hands like in prayer (00:31-00:36). The iconic album cover of *Gang, Signs and Prayer* shows a similar scene, which is an allusion to Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the biblical last supper, with Stormzy standing in the middle and around the table, and his friends pose as his disciples in black balaclavas (Ross 2017).



Figure 1 - Ross 2017

The idea for the photo shown on the album cover came spontaneously during one of the photo-shoots for the album art, according to art director Mark Farrow (Milton 2017). The image resonates with the title of the album, as what we see is a gang of eight disciples in balaclavas, gathering around a table, their postures alluding to those of the apostles in Da Vinci's painting. In the middle of the table, Stormzy is taking up the position of Jesus amidst his disciples even though his body language differs strongly from the da Vinci painting. He

assumes a rather threatening body posture with his fists propped up on the table, torso leaning forward, and looking directly into the camera. His facial expression communicates defensiveness and confidence and he becomes the gang leader of his eight disciples in balaclavas. The colour black also dominates the album art.

Again, Stormzy is playing with the thug image, on the album cover as well as live on stage, where he performs in front of his choir dressed up as thugs. The visual and the musical mode create another contradicting message, as the choir of dressed up muggers behind Stormzy is singing a Gospel. Stormzy is playing with the expectations of the audience, as what they are witnessing on stage is not a thuggish Grime tune that is celebrating the harsh realities of street life with the typical braggadocio of a rapper, instead it is a musical reverence to God. The outfit of the choir, thus, could be read as an ironic critique of the criminalisation of UK Grime and of the criminalisation of black men in general. Stormzy, when entering the darkened stage, wearing a hoodie, having his 'gang' in the background, is immediately dismantling the thug image when he begins to sing the words to "Blinded by your Grace pt.2".

4.3.5 Body Language: from sermoniser to thug

Another very important aspect of the performance is the mode of body language, including Stormzy's posture, his gestures, and his facial expressions. He undergoes, as already mentioned, a suspenseful transformation during his show, in which the personality he is performing on stage changes. Stormzy's body language while approaching the microphone stand at the beginning of the performance appears boyish, swinging his arms and nervously pulling down his sweater (00:11-00:17). While performing the Gospel Rap, his body posture remains meek while simultaneously he keeps imitating the gestures and postures of a preacher (00:55-01:58). For instance, when he sings the lines "I said a prayer this morning, I prayed I would find a way" (00:55-00:60) he is lifting an index finger, pointing upwards to the sky, followed by a posture in which he lowers his arms and turns his palms upwards, arms stretched out, a posture that is also used in prayer (01:01). The line "you came and saved me" (01:08-01:10) makes him point towards the sky once more and then lift his forearms sideways holding his hands to the left and right side of his head (01:12-01:15). Stormzy keeps looking upwards as well, as if he is talking to an invisible entity above him. Stormzy's words and body postures

construct meaning, as well as the stage design does in contrast to the physical and verbal performance. This opposition of constructed meanings becomes part of the political aim to reverse or deconstruct the thug image. The salient discourse of challenging the racially stereotyped thug image consists of a juxtaposition of conflicting signs on stage, whose discrepancy finally dismantles the racist prejudice.

However, the rather humble physical performance of Stormzy changes, when the musical intro to the freestyle rap begins and he is turning his back on the audience to pull off his hoodie and throw it on the ground (01:59-02:06). When he turns to face the audience again he takes on the posture of a black street fighter to recite his unflinching critique of the British government and the *Daily Mail*. In addition, his movements become more energetic and fiercer, and his body is radiating self-confidence and aggressiveness (from 02:14), while also his facial expressions are changing. Stormzy is now looking directly, angrily, and confrontationally (02:26-02:34) at the audience. His fingers are now also pointing directly towards the audience (02:15). These gestures indicate that he has changed the entity he is addressing with his words. Whereas the gospel seemed to have been addressed towards God, the freestyle rap now seems to be addressing the people watching him, the people at the O2 Arena and in front of their TVs or screens, as well as the politicians and journalists who are being criticised in his lyrics (02:14-02:17 and 02:22).

In addition to his gestures, Stormzy's naked well-toned torso is radiating readiness for battle, as well as black masculinity and sexuality. He has now turned into a thug version of Stormzy that seems to confirm the stereotypes, and that portray a version of black masculinity that is shaped by the harsh realities of life on the streets. The stereotypes of thug life are confirmed in the lyrics too, when he is rapping "MPs sniff coke, we just smoke a bit of cannabis" (02:41-02:43) and is first putting a finger under his nose, followed by a hand gesture that indicates a spliff being held between his fingers. Stormzy accentuates the content of his lyrics by using provocative gestures. In this part of the performance he uses his body language in order to create the persona of a powerful black combatant. Still standing in the artificial rain, the stage lights that keep flashing and blinking reflect from Stormzy's wet skin, making him appear to steam (02:24-02:26 and 02:28-02:44); steaming off his anger about politics, Grenfell, the *Daily Mail* and racism in Britain. Stormzy's nakedness is as menacing as it is seductive and thereby reinforcing the well-established Hip Hop stereotype of hypermasculinity, or as bell hooks

would describe it in her book *We Real Cool* (2003), Stormzy is embodying a version of “Black male selfhood” that is “constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” as “the image of the brute, untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling” (hooks xii). Stormzy seems to be playing with these notions of black masculinity and even reinforcing them, while simultaneously challenging the exact stereotypes he is representing on stage. In connection with Stormzy’s body language it is important now to have a closer look at the lyrics of the freestyle rap that Stormzy has particularly written for the occasion of the live BRIT Awards Show, and how these lyrics work in connection to the visual discourse on stage to construct meaning and a political message.

4.3.6 Freestyle Rap: Reversing the image of the thug

Along with the change of Stormzy’s attire and body language, as described above, comes a change of music in the background. The mode of music and the mode of body language are changing. Fanfares and beats introduce the beginning of a grime tune. Stormzy, who has turned from pious worshipper to gang street fighter self-consciously grabs the microphone. The lyrics of the freestyle rap begin as follows: “Ain’t here to talk Illuminati and chem trails Here to close the show and make sure that it ends well.” (02:15-02:18) Stormzy emphasises that what he is saying is not the product of a wild fantasy, such as a conspiracy theory, but is in accordance with well-known facts. He also announces the means by which he is planning to voice his truth: “Well, all these stories that the tip of my pen tell. Yo, here I’m a let the tip of my pen shout.” The words of his rap contradict the visual codes of the stage design, when he emphasises that the weapon of choice for his thug persona would only be the words of his raps, crafted by his pen. These words then, are used like weapons, attacking Theresa May, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom:

Like, Yo, Theresa May, where's that money for Grenfell?
What, you thought we just forgot about Grenfell?
You're criminals and you got the cheek to call us savages.
You should do some jail time, you should pay some damages.
We should burn your house down and see if you can manage this.
MPs sniff coke, we just smoke a bit of cannabis.
(02:28-02:43)

Provocatively, Stormzy calls those who were in office when Grenfell happened “criminals” and suggests they should be put in jail. He even goes as far as issuing a threat towards those in power, when saying “[w]e should burn your house down and see if you can manage this.” (02:39-02:40) What Stormzy does here, is challenging the definition of crime by indicating that the crimes committed by powerful people, so-called white collar crimes, might be worse than crimes committed by poor people, who often become criminals due to circumstance. He uses the comparison of cocaine and cannabis as a metaphor here, to challenge the thug image attributed to rappers like himself. Andre Cummings notes in “Thug Life”, that this is a discourse within rap cultures that can already be found in American Hip Hop lyrics: “Hip-hop teaches that the U.S. system of crime and punishment is inequitable, and does so primarily by exposing, in stark lyric and behavior, that the poor are punished more harshly than the rich, and that drug offenders are punished more harshly than white collar criminals.” (544) Thus, Stormzy straightforwardly asks, who the true criminals were with regard to Grenfell. His critique is not just a critique of May’s government, it is a more general critique of a society that continuously renders young black men from poor socio-economic backgrounds as criminals. As the subsequent analysis of Dave’s “Black” will demonstrate, the number of black people incarcerated for rather minor offences is disproportionate in comparison to convictions of other crimes. It is also condemned by Stormzy, who raps: “You’re criminals and you got the cheek to call us savages.” (02:33-02:35) This is a reference to the criminalisation of the Grime scene, which might of course seem not entirely unjustified considering the biographies of some Grime artists, even that of Stormzy himself. However, what he is trying to defy though is the racist myth of rendering black people or people of other ethnicities than white as “savages.” This rather provocative part of the freestyle rap has made the most lasting effect, as it even prompted a speaker of the prime minister to issue a public statement in response. May’s speaker communicated via the press that “[t]he PM has been clear that what happened at Grenfell was an unimaginable tragedy, which should never be allowed to happen again,” and that “[s]he is determined the public inquiry will discover not just what went wrong but why the voices of the people of Grenfell had been ignored for so many years.” (Elgot 2018) What Stormzy’s performance elicited, thus, was finally a reaction by the government. If they wanted or not, Grenfell was in the media and in public consciousness again and politicians were forced to position themselves publicly. Therefore, Stormzy achieved what he had planned to achieve, at least in terms of bringing Grenfell back into public discourse. In addition, the

question “Yo Theresa May, where is the money for Grenfell?” served as an emphatical reminder that the fire’s victims had not yet received an appropriate form of compensation at the time of the performance. This knowledge was also being brought back to public consciousness by means of Stormzy’s performance and it was meant to force political representatives into action.

Thus, which metaphors, symbols, and signs does Stormzy use in his multimodal discourse on stage to defy the thug myth, to construct new meanings, and to convey his political message? First, there is the stage design, dominated by the colour black, with the thug choir in black balaclavas, and Stormzy himself wearing a hoodie on a darkened stage. These contradict the body language of humility and the religious signs and connotations in the beginning of the performance. Stormzy is breaking with the expectations of the audience regarding the image of the black thug/black gangster rapper. The contradiction of the signs within the various modes of representation he uses, is the most salient theme of his performance. Second, when he changes his role on stage and becomes the black street fighter on behalf of the Grenfell victims, he still keeps challenging the thug image. Stormzy questions the definition of crime and the definition of the word ‘thug’ itself. His gangster rapper persona becomes the fighter of a noble cause. He fights on behalf of those who do not have a voice, or who remain unheard in public discourse. He even dares to challenge the political ruling class and forces them to act by bringing the issue of Grenfell back into media and public discourse. The political message of his performance thus, indicates that Stormzy perceives himself as an artist with political responsibility. He admits in an interview with *NME* after the BRIT Awards Show that:

As a young black man coming from the community that I come from, I recognise that I have responsibilities. If I’m going to be on stage for five minutes at the Brit Awards, I have a responsibility. Bearing in mind that not one of us has been on that stage for a very long time, if it’s ever happened. If I have five minutes, I’ve got to use that time wisely. (Reilly 2018)

It is the nature of rap, or rap battles, to provoke the opponent and to do so with hyperbole and braggadocio, so that is what Stormzy did when finally a Grime album won one of the prestigious BRIT Awards. His metaphorical opponents in this rap battle were Theresa May, the UK government, and the *Daily Mail*. Even if his performance did not have a great effect on the scandalous handling of the Grenfell disaster and on the yearslong protraction of the Grenfell inquiry, it sent out a very important message to the victims of Grenfell, those people on whose

behalf Stormzy was acting. It at least provided a small glimpse of hope for them, as Stormzy's live performance on national TV, which was broadcasted live to an audience of millions, gave them the feeling that their concerns were still being heard and seen, and that someone with a public and powerful outreach was daring enough to perform on their behalf. In that sense, the defiance of the thug myth and the reversal of the thug image was successful, as the metaphorical thug Stormzy embodied turned into a figure of political relevance and power.

4.4 Dave's "Black" at the BRITs 2020: Racism and Grenfell

In 2020 another Grime artist, who goes by the stage name of Dave, was awarded a prize at the BRIT Awards for British Album of the Year, for his debut album *Psychodrama*. In his live performance at the O2 arena, Dave presented the single "Black" from his album and added some verses he had composed for the occasion at the end of his performance, in which he also criticised the political handling of Grenfell. Like Stormzy's performance in 2018, Dave's sparked controversy over attacking prime minister Boris Johnson and calling him straightforward a "racist" (Okundaye 2020). Even though Dave's reference to Grenfell in "Black" is rather short, it is significant as the political issues he raises in his lyrics criticise the political and social conditions which underlie the Grenfell disaster.

Dave's "Black" is a song about the artist's personal experience of being black and what has shaped his identity as a black man in Britain. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he says about "Black" that he based the song on his experience as a black Nigerian growing up in London (cf. Sawyer 2019). However, he also adds that he does not "think that it's universal for the whole black experience", as he feels that "there's too many different races and dynamics within the race of black" (Sawyer 2019). Dave states that he does not want his autobiographical lyrics to be interpreted as a universal account of what it means to be black in world dominated by racism. However, for the purpose of the subsequent analysis though, I will treat Dave's depiction of blackness as one that is personal as well as political and has, therefore, a wider socio-political relevance, particularly in the context of Grenfell. The lyrics of "Black" shall be viewed as a voice that is speaking for many of those who, as Dave puts it, suffer in silence

(02:55-02:56). I am doing so because what Dave describes in his song traces the wider historical and systemic causes that partly induced the Grenfell disaster. In addition, as Ruhi Parmar Amin writes for the *Indie-Mag*, “Black” was released at a time “when racial prejudice and stigmatisation are starting to slowly creep their way back into our judgement and society” as well as “institutionalised racism” and “police brutality, blame and unjust discrimination” (Amin 2019). Calling out this institutionalised racism in such undaunted clarity became the most salient theme within the multimodal discourse of Dave’s performance.

Apart from the controversially discussed lyrics (cf. Okundaye 2020), what is unusual and stunning about the performance that Dave plays the piano live on stage while he is rapping. Rapping while playing an instrument is rarely seen in any live performance, be it US Hip Hop or UK Grime. Dave is a self-educated pianist, who began playing the piano as a teenager instead of strolling the streets like his peers (cf. Sawyer 2019). At the O2, he is playing a double-ended piano together with his producer Fraser T. Smith, who joins him on stage in the second half of the performance. The piano itself comes to play an important role in the performance as the visuals that create an alternative but complementary discourse to Dave’s lyrics are projected on top of it. In the subsequent chapter, the key moments of Dave’s performance of “Black”, which are featured in the video of the BRIT Awards 2020 on the artist’s YouTube channel *Santan Dave*, shall be analysed.

4.4.1 Colour Code: Black & White

The performance begins with Dave sitting at the piano on a black stage, on which only the shapes of four white rectangles that are mirrored on the shiny black floor are seen (0:08). During the entire performance, the stage design is held in black and white, as is the attire of the artists on stage. Black and white in this instance represent the dichotomy of racial classification which forms the basis of racist ideologies that have shaped human history for centuries. In his lyrics, Dave is dismantling these racist ideologies, exposing them not just by words, but also the visual discourse of his performance.

The words Dave starts his performance with thus, are just one example of how he is challenging racial prejudice verbally: “Look, black is beautiful, black is excellent. Black is pain, black is joy, black is evident. Workin' twice as hard as the people you know you're better than. 'Cause you need to do double what they do so you can level them.” (00:26-00:37) Black, so

Dave, means never being treated equally and having to put much more effort into everything you do than a white person. Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic* that black and white “remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic-black and white” (1-2). The symbiosis of this antagonistic relationship is represented by the stage design, as the white lines on stage would not be seen without the black background, and without the white, the black would be invisible as well. The 2D and 3D animations that are projected on top of the double-ended piano would also not work without the interplay of black and white elements, as they are interdependent.

The Manichean black-and-white dynamic Gilroy is referring to, is also present in the attire of the artist. Dave is wearing a white suit that contrasts him from the blackness of the stage. Fraser T. Smith, the producer of Dave’s debut album *Psychodrama*, who joins the double piano on stage at minute 01:30, is wearing a black suit with white stripes, emphasising the black and white dichotomy that is created by the visual discourse. Like a Chinese Ying-Yang sign they visually seem to complement each other. They also musically complement each other’s play at the piano. Additionally, it is of high symbolic value that the white piano player supports the performance of the Black artist and not the other way round. This setting releases the Black man from his historically laden role of servitude.

The visuals projected onto the top of the piano are also held in black and white and tell the history and contemporary reality of black people in the form of a visual narrative that accentuates Dave’s lyrics. “Black”, so the visual discourse on stage, has been determined as the opposition in a binary of races, in which “white” has always aspired to self-attribute racial and moral supremacy, while “black” has been and still is attributed with poverty, criminality, violence, and primitivism. This racist narrative of binary oppositions, though, is exposed in the performance by making it visible.

“Black” is as much a song about the experience of blackness as it is about the relationship between black and white. The animations that can be seen on top of the piano start with the word “Black.”, written in black letters on white background. “Black.” thus, is not just the title of the song, the full stop at the end of the word indicates that “Black.” is a full sentence and thus “Black.” becomes a statement. The statement is further contextualised by Dave’s lyrics that follow and by the images that accompany them. These images create a parallel visual

narrative that needs closer consideration. Thus, the following sections shall be dedicated to the most salient visual elements of the video installation and how they construct meaning.

4.4.2 Dismantling Britain's colonial past and contemporary racism

A central theme of the visual narrative of Dave's performance is linking the imperial and racist history of Britain with contemporary forms of racism. The contemporary realities of black people in Britain cannot be understood without linking them to a past that created some form of transgenerational trauma induced by the experience of racism. The title of the song "Black.", which is projected onto the white top of the piano, becomes underlaid with a black blood stain (00:31) that comes to represent the experience of racism, when Dave simultaneously raps the line "black is pain" (00:31). At about minute 00:39 the visuals change into the lettering of the words African American above the background of a Union Jack and the American Stars and Stripes banner, which show on the shape of the continent Africa. This image represents the USA's and Britain's interrelationship and cooperation in the transatlantic slave trade, a commercial undertaking that helped the British empire to its prosperity and power (Scanlan 2021) but also caused immense suffering and pain. While the image appears on top of the piano, Dave raps the words: "Black is so much deeper than just African American. Our heritage been severed, you never got to experiment with family trees" (00:38-00:43). What Dave addresses here, is the pain of not knowing your cultural roots, a fate that many African Americans or Caribbeans from the West Indies shared, who had been transported from Africa to the new world as slaves. The trauma of slavery, or as Joy DeGruy defines it, *The Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005), still affects African Americans today. In her book she writes: "As a result of centuries of slavery and oppression, most white Americans in their thoughts as well as actions believe themselves superior to blacks. Of greater import, too many African Americans unconsciously share this belief" (DeGruy 100). This might also be what Dave expresses in "Black", when he raps "It's workin' twice as hard as the people you know you're better than, 'cause you need to do double what they do so you can level them" (00:32-00:37). Black Britons have also made the experience of being treated inferior to whites, no matter how hard they try to be acknowledged. In addition, they might have to prove to themselves that they are worth the same as their white counterparts. Experiences of racism and

dehumanisation are what Black Britons have in common with African Americans. Therefore, the image of the US flag that is united with the Union Jack above the shape of the continent of Africa, represents the parallels in history when it comes to racism towards black people. The visual link to transatlantic slave trade is then again made, when a tree with roots occurs in the visual narrative, which becomes symbolic for the family trees of former slaves that were uprooted. What Dave implies here is that a feeling of uprootedness has accompanied the Black experience since the slave trade; however, what he also implies is that uprootedness is a feeling that many Black migrants might also be familiar with today. The flags and the tree become signs for the painful history of Blacks.

4.4.3 The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice

From minute 01:00 onwards Dave dedicates some of his verses to the matter of criminalisation of Black people by the media. He introduces the topic by rapping the line “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice”, which is an intertextual reference to several multimodal sources. First, it refers to Wallace Thurman’s novel with the title *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), which tells the story of a black woman struggling with racial discrimination from within the black community during the Harlem Renaissance. Second, the line is a reference to the film *Foxy Brown* from 1974, which is categorised as a blaxploitation film that displays racial stereotypes, particularly about black women, in which Pam Grier acting as Foxy says: “The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice, honey.” Additionally, the two US rappers Tupac Shakur and Kendrick Lamar use the line in their lyrics. In “Keep Ya Head Up”, released in 1993, 2Pac raps the lines: “Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice, I say the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots” (*The Loverboy* 00:15-00:17). 2Pac’s song is first and foremost dedicated to black women and until today “Keep Ya Head Up” is considered one of the most important odes to black women within US hip hop, as it “not only spoke to black women, it defended them from within a genre that was and still very much is a man’s game” (Tinsley 2018). Dave also honours black women later in his performance, when the visuals show a figurine of the female African goddess Mami Wata and the faces of famous Black British women, who contributed to contemporary British history in the fields of sports, culture and science (02:12-02:24). In 2015, Kendrick Lamar gave one of his songs the title “The Blacker the Berry”, which is in its content another negotiation of black identity and critically deals with

violence within the black community. Therefore, what all of these references have in common, is that they refer to black-on-black violence, and so does Dave in the lines of “Black” that follow: “Kid dies, the blacker the killer, the sweeter the news. And if he's white, you give him a chance, he's ill and confused. If he's black he's probably armed, you see him and shoot, look” (01:01-01:09).

The visuals that accompany these lines show two newspaper headlines reading “Senseless Death” and “Bloodbath Britain”, as well as excerpts from newspaper articles referring to “stabblings”, “black youth”, “gang violence”, “gang knife crimes,” and “black men stabbing each other” (01:02). These headlines stand representative of how the media in Great Britain deals with crimes committed by black people. In fact, there is a discussion going on whether this form of representation of black violence in the media is justified. UK government statistics from research carried out by Professor Clifford Scott et al. in 2021 show that the number of knife crimes among people from the BAME communities is much higher than those among other ethnic groups. These figures include knife crime offenders as well as victims of knife crimes. Statistics seem to prove that “stabblings” are a matter of black-on-black violence. However, in a debate on such crimes in in “Letters” *The Guardian* Nick Moss states that: “Black-on-black violence is a myth created by a section of the law-and-order lobby to facilitate an acceptance by the black community of intrusive policing techniques. The causes of black-on-black knife crime are the same as those of white-on-white knife crime – but we do not speak of white-on-white violence.” (Moss 2019)

Moss’s words might best reflect what Dave tries to criticise in his lyrics: institutionalised racism and the media’s tendency to support it. This is made evident by the visuals that turn into what looks like the badge and checks of London’s metropolitan police (01:07-01:08). Simultaneously, Dave is making an intertextual reference in his lyrics, taking up the controversy that surrounded the release of Kendrick Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry,” and the statements the artist made after the shootings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. In Lamar’s song, the narrator calls himself a hypocrite over criticising police violence against black people, as he himself had been involved in gang violence and killed blacks. After the killing of Brown, Lamar said in an interview with Billboard that: “But when we don’t have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us?” (Lynch 2015) While Dave is paying tribute to Lamar’s song, he is also objecting his fellow’s public statements. In order to stress Dave’s point, the visual

discourse infers that the effects of police violence and racial profiling are too easily excused, particularly by tabloids or conservative media. Black artists with an influence and outreach like Kendrick Lamar implying that such violence against blacks would primarily correlate with a lack of self-respect seems to be yet another layer of black-on-black violence carried out on a verbal level. Therefore, what Dave does instead of repeating Lamar's unthinking remarks, is putting a spotlight on the media's complicity in creating and perpetuating the myth of the black criminal and in contributing to the system of institutionalised racism that subjects Black people to enhanced police surveillance.

4.2.4 The "go home" campaign as an example of institutionalised racism

From minute 01:37-01:40 the words "go home" are written in black letters above the white background of the piano. It is only a few seconds after Fraser T. Smith joins Dave on the piano that these letters appear. "Go home" was used in 2013 as the slogan of a Home Office campaign that aimed to promote the voluntary return of refugees and illegal immigrants to their countries of origin. The campaign featured posters and printed vans that displayed the slogan in the streets of six London boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Brent, Ealing, Hounslow, and Redbridge (Mason 2013). Additionally, the posters and vans showed texts asking: "In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest", "Is life here hard? Going home is simple", or "The plane can take you home. We can book tickets" (Sparrow 2013). The campaign was part of the *Home Office hostile environment policy* that had been issued by the British government in 2012, under the then Home Secretary Theresa May, and it was heavily criticised for its openly racist and hostile tone. The campaign had to be suspended after legal complaints and online petitions (Sparrow 2013). A study carried out by Hannah Jones et al. titled "Go home? The politics of immigration controversies" (2017) showed that the Go Home campaign led to yet another stigmatisation of black people by using a racist slur as the slogan of a governmental advertisement.

The fact that politics borrowed a slogan from openly racist far-right groups paved the way for further racism: "The moment of the Go Home van seemed to us to be a turning point in the climate of immigration debates – a ratcheting up of anti-migrant feeling to the point where it was possible for a government-sponsored advertisement to use the same hate speech and

rhetoric as far-right racists.” (Jones et al. 30) Displaying the words “go home” on top of the piano serves as a visual link to the sign of the uprooted tree that could be seen earlier in the performance. “Go home” created and reproduced a sense of un-belonging that was aimed at illegal immigrants. The term “home” thereby becomes a challenging notion, as it elicits the question: Where *is* home? The campaign though was only a harbinger for what was about to come in 2015, with anti-migrant politics becoming even more popular during the refugee crisis and causing the success of right and far-right political movements throughout Europe, also Great Britain, which was a development that eventually led to Brexit. Additionally, the anti-immigrant sentiment then culminated in the Windrush scandal in 2018, for which the “go home” campaign had also slowly paved the way. The feeling and experience of un-belonging that the “go home” campaign and the Windrush scandal induced is what Dave refers to in his lyrics, while the “go home” slogan appears on the piano-top: “Black is growin' up around your family and makin' it. Being forced to leave the place you love because there's hate in it. People say you're faking it, never stay for change in it. But black is bein' jealous, you'd be dead if you had stayed in it.” (01:31-01:41) The struggle of (social) dislocation is at the centre of these lines. When looking further into the issue, it becomes obvious that the theme of dislocation and homelessness is somehow also connected to the context of Grenfell. People who lost their homes due to government failure were not given suitable replacement accommodation. As if undeserving of being given new homes on British soil, some of them were still waiting for receiving appropriate accommodation from the RBKC when Dave performed on stage of the O2 (Bulman 2020).

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Fraser T. Smith joins Dave on stage just before the visualisation of the “go home” campaign. From minute 01:32 the two artists keep playing together, when at minute 01:51 Dave stops playing and only Smith continues to play. Their interplay on stage and the presence of a white musician who supports the performance of a black musician constructs meaning that is political in connection to the overall message of the performance. It reverts the habitual hierarchy of the white man in a superior role and the black man in a subordinate role. Dissolving this hierarchy is a powerful element of the multimodal discourse on stage. It challenges the familiar perception of social and racial hierarchies on a performative level, and questions them. In addition, it seems to substantiate the message that the colour coding of the stage communicates: black becomes invisible without the presence of white and vice versa. Within the realms of visual representation, black and white are equals.

Dave's performance does not require the audience to become colour blind, also not in terms of racism, but it requires the audience to call habitual ways of perceiving and expecting hierarchies into question.

4.4.5. Black life in jail

During the second part of the performance the visuals on top of the piano turn from two-dimensional projections into three-dimensional animations that appear to come out of a tunnel inside the piano. One of the most salient of these 3D representations is an animation that shows the inside of the tunnel as prison walls with telly marks on each side, while Dave thematises the unproportionate number of blacks serving a prison sentence:

I mean, bloody hell, what about our brothers that are stuck in jail?
That couldn't bust a bail, they held a bird and gotta live with it.
Black is bein' guilty until proven that you're innocent.
Black is sayin', 'Free all my people stuck inside them prison cells.'
Think it's funny, we ain't got nothin' to say to them
Unconditional love is strange to them, it's amazin' 'em.
(03:08-03:24)

The line "black is being guilty until proven that you're innocent" points towards the racially biased judicial system of the UK and again challenges the stereotypical image of Blacks as criminals. While Dave is rapping these lines, the tunnel is being closed with bricks and a window with prison bars, which black hands are grabbing from the inside of the tunnel, is appearing in the middle of the wall (03:05-03:30). This image stands for the experience of captivity that entails the black experience in modern day jails. The hands grabbing the prison bars from inside to reach outside the prison walls into freedom, show the futility and loneliness of imprisonment. Being left excluded from society "unconditional love is strange to them", as love seems only reserved for those who accomplish and fit in.

In this part of the performance, Dave turns attention to another experience of institutionalised racism that entails the undue criminalisation of black people in the UK. A report from 2017 carried out by MP David Lammy shows that black people in the UK are more likely to be arrested than in the USA. The Lammy Review also shows that the disproportionality particularly concerns young black men and calls for more support of young people who are

coerced into joining gangs, as well as for a “race blind prosecution” of criminal offenders (cf. Lammy Review 17). David Lammy himself said: “These disproportionate numbers represent wasted lives, a source of anger and mistrust and a significant cost to the taxpayer.” (Kentish 2017) Dave expresses more explicitly in his performance, what Stormzy only implies in his visual discourse and provocative statements by straightforwardly addressing the injustices of the legal system in the UK and questioning the stereotypical image of the black criminal. In his lyrics Dave offers an insight into the struggles of Black people in the UK: “Poverty made me a beast, I battled the law in the streets. We all struggled, but your struggle ain't a struggle like me. Well how could it be when your people gave us the odds that we beat?” (03:00-03:07) In a society that precondemns people based on their skin colour, the opportunities in life are not distributed equally and the legal system can do no justice either. It is, as Dave suggests, a combination of racism and poverty that causes the struggles of many Black people in Britain. The image of the hands grabbing the prison bars from inside the prison cell become a visual sign for the exclusion of Blacks by a racist society. As they cannot become equals in a society that privileges white, they should either “go home” or become segregated, if not by urban practices of segregation, then by locking them up. Therefore, the last verse of Dave’s performance, which he has written for the particular event of the BRIT Award’s ceremony, is an indictment to the racist society of Great Britain.

4..4.6 The racism of Grenfell

When Dave finally gets up from his piano stool to walk around the piano and deliver the last verses of his song, in which he also refers to Grenfell, the walls of a tower block can be seen inside the tunnel (2:53-4:12). However, regarding this last but most important part of the performance, the visual discourse moves into the background while the words Dave is rhyming make a strong and lasting impact. The last verse of “Black” starts as follows: “It is racist, whether or not it feels racist. The truth is, our Prime Minister is a real racist. They say, ‘You should be grateful we're the least racist.’ I say the least racist is still racist. And if somebody hasn't said it: Equality is a right, it doesn't deserve credit.” (03:31-03:45) These lines are perhaps the most provocative lines of Dave’s performance, as he straightforwardly calls Boris Johnson, who was Prime Minister of the UK in 2020, a racist. While he is doing so the audience

is cheering loudly, supporting and affirming what he is saying (03:36-03:37). Additionally, these words, like Stormzy's, became aired live on TV (and most probably were also streamed live on the internet), and thus reached an audience of millions who became witnesses of this iconic moment. Criticising Johnson in such a bold move is a very strong and clear political message and it gives Dave's performance not just a cultural but also a political impetus. Similar to Stormzy he positions himself against the political establishment by attacking its supreme leader. Moreover, he exposes the whole system as what it apparently is: racist. In connection with what he has said in the lyrics before, this last verse is, what gives Dave's performance a subversive political momentum. This momentum was immediately picked up by Jeremy Corbyn, who retweeted the lyrics of Dave's last verse on Twitter after the performance (Bakare 2020). Dave's attack on conservative politics was received as encouragement by the political left. Whether Dave had intended this or not, the message that remained the most salient one after this performance was that of criticising institutionalised racism and racist politics.

As impressively as the verse starts, it also ends, when Dave raps his last words and then literally drops the microphone on top of the piano to walk off the stage:

All he would want is unity, funding for communities
Equal opportunities, people under scrutiny
No more immunity, way less hatred
More conservation, less deforestation
We want rehabilitation, now that would be amazing
But Grenfell victims still need accommodation
And we still need support for the Windrush generation
Reparations for the time our people spent on plantations
I'm done
(4:13-4:35)

Even though it is only a very short moment in the entire performance that Dave dedicates to the Grenfell victims, it is of great significance as his reference to Grenfell is embedded within the wider political discourse of his performance. Dave's performance underscores the central message that the victims of Grenfell have been victims of institutionalised racism. This institutionalised racism, as the visual and textual discourse of the performance suggests, consists of a denial of historical responsibilities in the aftermath of slave trade and colonialism, of a political system that endorses discrimination and racism, of a media landscape that supports the political system in doing so, and a legal system that is complicit with both of them.

The visual setup of the colour coding on stage, however, opposes the racist narrative of racial hierarchies by making black and white complete each other on equal terms.

Two years after Stormzy's performance at the BRITs, in which he held Theresa May accountable for letting down the victims of Grenfell, another Grime artists needs to remind those in power that "Grenfell victims still need accommodation". Both artists, so Jason Okundaye from *NME*, refuse to stand "meek and mild in the face of racism", defy the notion of gratefulness to Britain and decline to become "exceptional darlings of the nation" (Okundaye 2020). Despite receiving one of the most honourable British music awards and being acknowledged for their artistic *œuvres*, they refuse to remain silent about the injustices they observe. It seems irrelevant that the name of the Prime Minister has changed in the meantime, what still bears relevance though, is pointing out the systemic failure that has allowed the protraction of the Grenfell inquiry and the long-promised rehabilitation scheme. It is no coincidence that Dave mentions Grenfell in connection with his visual and textual assemblage of what constitutes racism. Grenfell is an event that was still as unfathomable and shocking on 18th February 2020, as it was on 14th June 2017. The trauma of Grenfell is caused by the experience of systemic discrimination and negligence that leaves its victims helpless in the face of injustice. Dave's performance is a beautiful and painful aesthetic representation of the complexly traumatic experience of systemic racism and it is a reminder of the need for change.

5. Conclusion

The implicit obscenity of the Grenfell fire has been made to look normal, to appear routine. We have been habituated to that blankness and encouraged to imagine that there can be no alternatives to this particular way of organising human life and calculating its minimal, transient value. Thus the true horror of these killings is that they present in capsule form a deeply disturbing illustration of the morbidity of institutions in contemporary Britain.
(Gilroy 2023)

The burned-out shell of the Grenfell Tower has become the UK's national symbol of the consequences of racial capitalism, urban gentrification and institutionalised racism. What happened at Grenfell was a form of, in Engel's definition, social murder that was caused by the failures of a system that is based on exploitation and greed. The survivors and victims of the

fire are, at the time of writing, still waiting for justice. This experience keeps captivating a community that has to come to terms with living under the menacing shadow of the Grenfell tower. UK Grime artists from London, who are familiar with the conditions of urban gentrification and institutionalised racism have recognised their responsibilities as representatives of a music genre with strong political endeavours. They decided to use their creative impetus in voicing their individual political messages that cannot remain unheard. UK Grime has been political since its very beginnings, when airing self-produced mixtapes via pirate radio stations was an act of subversiveness and rebellion against the establishment. Even though Grime has entered the musical mainstream now, it has not lost any of its rebelliousness and subversiveness from this initial period. This is why Grime artists, such as Big Zuu, Lowkey, Stormzy and Dave stepped into the spotlight in order to speak on behalf of those who remain conveniently unheard.

The various modes of representations they choose to craft their political messages, create counter-narratives or alternative discourses, in which they challenge the well-established notions of a dominant, racist discourse and subvert these by imparting them with new meanings. Grime's approach of musical eclecticism has always done so: it takes elements and features of already existing musical styles, remixes them and transforms them, in order to create something new. It is similar with the political messages conveyed by the Grime artists discussed in this thesis. They take from pre-existing stereotypes and racial prejudices, deconstruct and re-assemble them, and produce new connotations and meanings to defy racist discourses. When reconsidering the previously analysed examples from the multimodal discourses of Stormzy, Dave, Lowkey and Big Zuu, it becomes obvious that what they have done is retelling cultural myths in a new guise, and by doing so, create new cultural signs and meanings. Their reinterpretations of dominant discourse encompass the potential for social and political change.

UK Grime artists have demonstrated that their genre has to be taken seriously, not just as it finally entered the musical mainstream industry, but as it has proven that its political endeavours are credible. This became particularly evident in the context of Grenfell. People from a genre that was conceived by societal underdogs of urban London, have made it their task to speak on behalf of those at the margins of society. It is in the DNA of UK Grime to rebel against and to subvert the establishment. Joseph Patterson, the founder of the British music

magazine *Trench* said in an interview with *The Guardian*: “Artists like Dave and Stormzy don’t care what anyone thinks of their truths [...] These young artists are fearless, they’re doing things their way and without puppet strings. That can only be a good thing.” (Bakare 2020) It is indeed a political act to remove the puppet strings of dominant discourse and to not conform to racially biased expectations of what musicians from a certain musical genre should or should not do in their performances or creative work of art. The political momentum of UK Grime in the context of Grenfell lies within the will to break with expectations and conventions, and to create a confrontational and provocative counter discourse to the systemically racist cultural myths of a neoliberal and hyper-capitalist society . The counter-discourses as crafted in the works of Stormzy, Dave, Lowkey and Big Zuu might become small contributions in creating a novel narrative of racial equality, in which the voices of those who otherwise remain conveniently unheard, could join the chorus of the culturally dominant discourse. Their creation of signs with new meanings and their creative and partly unusual assemblage of signs and modes within the multimodal discourses of performance and music videos might contribute to the creation of new cultural artefacts of an anti-racist, multi-ethnic society.

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