I don't love the word 'phygital', for two reasons. Worst things first: the word is inelegant. Secondly, it presumes a hybrid form of physicality and digitality: a synthesis between the world online and the world offline.

- Yes Charlie, I couldn't agree more! The P-word is hard to write and harder to say. It makes me think of fidget spinners. There are echoes of that other doomed phrase ‘metaverse’, though I suppose the greater etymological crime was committed in the latter case: being a portmanteau composed of both Latin and Greek constituents. For this reason and others, some thinkers have proposed a return to the ‘para-real’.
  - PARA-REAL!!! I love this.
- I'd also like us to think up alternative framings for this 'transcendental materialism' that purports to bridge digital and analogue worlds. I also see parallels to the phenomenon of proof-of-work: the process of ‘mining’ in Bitcoin and Ethereum, which connects the virtual inside to the material outside, through the consumption of large amounts of energy.

Implicit here is that there is the material world on one hand, and the immaterial world on the other – with new technologies such as the metaverse, NFTs and AR as liminal domains mediating the two. I can't speak to the notion's relevance elsewhere, but in fashion it is particularly out-moded, because all fashion simultaneously occupies both: a designer coat is both a physical object and an object that represents a communicative value that transcends its materiality. The form of this projection today is performed via digital, natürlich, but the deep technē is the same, in my opinion: fashion is the medium between communicative and material spheres, whether that sphere is 90s Vogue, a European royal court, or Instagram.

- In this sense, can we think of ‘fashion’ as a mode of art/craft – since we already said the N-word – I discussed possible histories and futures of immateriality in recent writings¹, where I trace a line from the past to the future that echoes the trajectory of conceptual art in its relationship to materiality. By way of a well-known example: in the early 70s, Sol LeWitt numbered and signed the instructions to execute his Wall Drawings works, rather than the outputs themselves. We can ask ourselves, where does the conceptual artist centre the value of their work?
  - What's perhaps interesting to mention here is the prehistory of this in the fashion context: the distribution of designer clothes via patterns in magazines. The early 20th century designer Paul Poiret, who among many other things invented the catwalk, would make both fabulously expensive creations for European royalty, and distribute patterns for his dresses for midwestern housewives in US magazines. I always loved this fact – that the most incredible designers would then sell their shapes to be made at home – it feels like such a radical form of DIY re-materialisation.

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- Perhaps we can regard fashion as a pattern language, in a conceptual lineage alongside the early algorithmic crafts of knitting, sewing and weaving. Can we see algorithms themselves – and other generative processes, in silico or otherwise – rather than their products as the fonthead of desire?
- Mitchell Chan has addressed the separation of the commodity form from the artistic form in recent writings and works². The notions of certification, authenticity, ownership and content are as muddy as ever in the digital realm.
  - YES! This rhymes with Virgil Abloh’s idea that the process is the creative object – the clothes are just the residue.

- So many other echoes of this through history: ‘the token is the artwork’ (Looney), ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan), ‘the Emperor’s new (digital) clothes’ (Andersen)...

- To what extent is fashion conceptual, and to what extent is it experiential, material or corporeal? Can these two factors of libidinal production really be characterised as distinct, delineated and independently analysed through a critical lens?
  - I am deeply sceptical of any attempt to bridge materialities to their ‘digital twins’. This is another rightly maligned piece of techno-jargon which implies that there is a possibility of a perfect copy, facsimile or reproduction inside the shitty, lossy, latency-saddled world of the metaverse. Despite lip service

1. Spike Magazine #70: The Revolution Will Not Be Tokenised
I could do with a crisp definition of what we think fashion is, was, and could be. It does indeed seem to be deeply connected to desire in its myriad forms, material (I want cool stuff) and immaterial (validate my physical charm). Weightings of the two validation forms are different in material and immaterial forms of media, as to be expected. Can the immaterial form ever carry the gravitas of its libidinal semiotics beyond the digital enclosure? Can IRL brands create the similar breeds of ‘FOMO Economics’ with coding 1’s and 0’s, or even worse... blockchains?

*I’m coming to think, via this dialogue we’re having, that fashion is kind of the medium by which the two are defined and imbued: it’s kind of the glittery mist between the sexy ideas and the sexy clothes, you know?*

- How about fashion as: tension, boundary, liminal horizon, a border between imaginary libidinal territories... which is there to be trespassed or transgressed. Are the arbiters and tastemakers of fashion the FRONTEX of this ‘no menswear’s land’?
- *There’s an old essay in the London Review of Books*³, reviewing two books on ‘cool’, using, of all things, Lady Chatterley’s Lover as its main source, and I always think about it whenever these questions come up. In the article, which is a lot better than it sounds, the writer David Trotter argues that cool is always and actually the mediation between two opposites – it’s neither serious nor frivolous, it’s the space between them, and the knowledge of how to walk these lines – rather than existing anywhere itself. It is the exploitation of ‘give’ or ‘slack’ in any system. It is, as he puts it: “the information designed to resist information.” Fashion is, I would say, the industrialisation of this.

- For the interest of this piece, a solid understanding of ‘fashion’ is very hard to model: both capital and computers require things to be defined, and if fashion is always neither one nor the other, always a bit too cool to be pinned down, because it’s exactly the process of not being able to be pinned down. That’s what makes it so enticing: capital always needs something it can’t have. You can’t tell why a pair of shoes is sick, they just are.

- I’m thinking about Sianne Ngai’s work on cuteness as an aesthetic category, trying to make onto-epistemic inroads into crystallising the ineffable. It’s a tough job, but someone’s gotta do it.

- This also reminds of Slavoj Žižek’s review of the latest Matrix movie in The Spectator, which by all accounts, he did not even watch. There was a rather anti-accelerationist conception of capital, not as an object or an unstoppable force, but rather as a virtual Other of society – its animus, its shadow, an egrege, Et tu, fashion?

- But am I being too basic in this thinking on ‘computers’, Wassim? Are there ways for the 1’s and 0’s you describe, to work around indeterminacy? How does modelling tie into this?

- Hehe, I would rather spend my days with the other kind of models :) System-models are in essence toy representations of the real. The thing with contingency and indeterminacy is that they are hard – maybe impossible – to faithfully represent with lossy computational methods. Simulations necessarily leave behind much of the richness of the world that they try to recreate in silico, in other words we must once again ‘mind the epistemic gap’ between the real and the virtual in all cases... but particularly when considering the squishy, utmost human domains of desire, art, and subjectivity that fashion appears to inhabit.

- The notion of equilibrium in fashion is always and invariably bendy, I think, in terms of matter vs information – as I ramble on about the above, it’s an industry of the Interzone. But perhaps more interesting to think about is how power relations change the construction of the image and its desirability. The tension between participation and exclusion, most particularly, and who gets to decide, and how.

Here, I’m thinking less of ‘Das Digital’ as computers and screens, and more as the world of communication and liquidity; and fashion less as ‘cool clothes’, and more of a complex of relations, images and seductions. I’m super curious about what and where this beautiful glamorous sprawl will go, and how it will change and rebuild the experience and material underpinning of the technological nexus.

- Ah, the trusty ‘network of relations’! Of course, everything is a network if you stare at it long enough :) Liquidity is a nice lens to approach these concepts through – I wonder if we can think about aesthetic liquidity, as Hamza Walker⁴ does? Is fashion a process of immaterial alchemy, lubricating, and assetising – or assetising – immaterial forms, vibes, looks? Or is it simply another mode of application of capital?

- Might fashion be the virtual other of desire?

- On communication and liquidity, I’ve been digging through Baudrillard’s Symbolic Exchange & Death again recently, and there are some absolute banger insights on the interplay between different value forms:

  - *We now live in a world dominated by the free play of the ‘monetary sign’ that is beyond reference to any ‘real’ of production or even a monetary referent in the form of a gold standard. In this world, the idea of a ‘real’ value (of equities, of commodities, of houses, of anything) is meaningless as what matters instead is not value per se, but “infinite speculation.”⁵*

  - If we are indeed to think of fashion as a network and a set of relations, is it also an adversarial environment for zero-sum Voguing? Are tight-fitting weird clothes and fresh-faced youths with eating disorders a dark forest of abstract and mutating forms of desire?

- Here’s one for you Charlie: why are opinions on fashion, trends etc so polarising? Where is the canonical ‘voice of fashion’, an objectivity of idealised aesthetics, to be found? Or is it another virtual-other, an epistemic red herring?

  - I recently had dinner with a designer that I’ve been a fan of since I was a teenager. He told me a story about when he met a stylist in the 80s, who informed him that a certain look was good, but not ‘fashion’. *What is, or was fashion?* I asked. *It’s as simple as this,* he said. *It’s the difference between a red dress and une robe rouge.*

  - I hope that doesn’t answer your question :)

- What of the relation of fashion to glamour? Is fashion a specific and/or formalisation; an objectification (if not materialisation) of the aesthetics? Does glamour enjoy ‘epistemic category’ status, as cuteness does according to the aforementioned Sianne Ngai? Are primary epistemic categories such as cuteness and glamour – should we afford them such a status – the raw materials from which fashion is made, as with sugar beets and crystalline sucrose?

- *Fashion is to glamour as sugar to deliciousness, not beets.*

  - So – I wouldn’t say that glamour stands as one of Ngai’s epistemic categories, any more than desire is an emotion. It’s somehow more of a sensation, any urgency, a position: more effect than affect.

    - Second Order ‘(p)enoména’ – glamour as the emergent, ineffable ‘product’ of fashion crystallising desire?

    - This is why it is so hard to bottle, and why countless coins, fiat and otherwise, will be spent trying to replicate it online. It’s something else.

    - Just as “money can’t buy you love”, it also can’t buy you cool, hot, vibe or cuteness. I suppose capital can feed into, mediate, foster, create baselines or jumping off points, but never simply buy you the ineffable.

- Here’s an interesting thought: direct monetisation of hotness seems to be becoming...
OnlyFans. Mixing the need to belong – and its virtual other, the fear of missing out – when I see high fashion on the catwalk, through the eyes of others, what would a

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can think of the ways that industry and logistics also contain their own allure. (Balenciaga's recent couture show is a great homage to this). So here we

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It's the paradigmatic exclusive event,* right? Which is interesting, because

its exclusivity comes in large part because it's essentially a trade show: only buyers and press would traditionally be invited, and if you are a buyer, stylist or editor, you get an invite. It's not a launch party (it's the dinners that

are the real exclusives, after all), it's a presentation of wares. An incredibly

chic one, of course, but it's an aspect of an industry, not a public concern (Balenciaga's recent couture show is a great homage to this). So here we

can think of the ways that industry and logistics also contain their own allure. I'm thinking here of 'utopian conspiracy worker collective' Trust's day-trip to an Amazon fulfilment centre. We all want to see behind the curtain. Helmut

Lang's deployment of Juergen Teller springs to mind here. There is the

event, and the projection outward of the event, and then the glamour of the space around the event.

- 'Insider trading show', ;) the VIP ticket, the 'real opening' (not the one you were 'invited' to), the backstage pass; humans want to be wanted, and since we are talking about fashion as encoded desire, it makes total sense that the fashion show itself is the must-have experience, embodied by its exclusivity.

- On the glamour of the space around the event: recently, I've become interested in the notion of 'metaphysical arbitrage'. Two recent examples: when a Banksy piece was bought and destroyed whilst being tokenised, and Damien Hirst's *The Currency*, which requires owners to destroy either the physical or digital component of the work. What remains after the physical has evaporated? An aura of aestheticisation, a crypticographic vibe…

- But then of course, the show has always had its other side: the one projected out beyond the runway. Even before photography could catch clothes in motion, illustrators were documenting looks at the first fashion shows and salons. There was a projection, carried through media, of these moments, right up to watching shows on IG stories, as an iteration of these first pictures.

- Why is this so important? I think because fashion has always had these two sides: the technologically mediated projection, and the material moment. The industry has grown up with industrial image-making, and is a piece of it.

- What's so interesting is that it depends upon these events to generate its allure – it's the very physical impossibility of replicating the experience of attending that drives the attention.

- As a Lacanian might say: desire is driven by lack, a void, a need to be made whole. We look for things (objects, experiences, people) that we hope can fill that gap. Projecting our needs and wants onto unsuspecting animals, vegetables, minerals, metaphysical objects and so on.

- This is all very obvious to say, but what I'm getting at is that there is something integral to the growth of fashion as a driver of culture and commerce over the last decade – that it has been digitised for over a century whilst being impossible to download.

- Fashion as paradox, as reified contradiction. A barometer for libidinal tension.

- To put my simple point even more simply: the digital requires fashion.

6. There was a recent interview with a long-standing NYFW security guard in Vestal that was incredible on the ways that exclusivity is maintained and sensi-

tivity is granted.

which requires digital, which requires fashion, which requires a space beyond the digital, which also requires a space beyond the digital.

- A binary star system? Or a black hole sucking matter into its horizon? A 'Turning-incomplete' hotnet?

- What is also interesting to pick up is this notion of romance, which is, for the record, a more 'fashion' way of saying glamour. The death of the romantic age of fashion has been touted for decades, eternally recursing back to some bygone era of true glamour. For me, naïve as it may sound, the fashion show is still the ultimate industrialised performance of romance. Or, to put it in a more nuanced way: the successful fashion show is a time period in which elements of the world are decided worthy of romanticisation.

- And just as capital will always seek new markets, fashion will always seek new areas to romanticise – which is what I think we mean when we talk about the sort of aesthetic brimanship of, say, putting a model in an extreme cut-off skirt, or in ultra-square toe loafers.

- Romance, capital, time. Digitisation has collapsed the temporal gap between the crystallisation of desire and its fulfilment, even if it is being sated by a cheap facsimile such as an Instagram reel.

- Of course, romanticisation is the point, and why fashion is the ultimate late capitalist art form; it allows viewers, as much as consumers, a way to become an Other: a fantasy and a way of becoming part of it. Shopping is a way into a world: anyone can belong, for money. The Roman agora — the centre of society — was also the market place.

- So... fashion is available to purveyors of capital and can be bought wholesale, but glamour is the je ne sais quoi which everyone wants, but not all can access?

As a final note, I'm very keen for us to avoid sharp prognoses about digital and fashion. I think it's v/a/f for us to keep a mind of possibilities and potential avenues, rather than making a simple big prediction, because that's how you get nonsense like a million arti-

cles about digital trainers.

- Agree! Let's keep our horizons as open as possible. There's no way of knowing what follows from trends surfacing and market logics that emerge from the swamp of capitalist possibility, in fashion or anywhere else. I am constantly reminded of the need for the various kinds of reflexive humility (epistemic, ontological and all the rest) with one pertinent example being the current mania surrounding cryptographic tokens in the context of digital art. Very very few of the 'old guard' in the crypto space expected or anticipated anything on the scale we are experiencing to happen, ever. Indeed, few of the creators of early token-art projects held onto much of the supply of their works, nor encoded royalty logics into secondary market sales. Just as NIFs were simultaneously the dumbest and greatest immaterial investment craze of the past few years, what is not to say that metaversal fashion — be it phygital, or pure digital — might be next regardless of whether anyone *we know,* wants it, needs it, can afford it or is technically/economically competent enough to use it?

- Perhaps we could speculate on what forms 'phygital fashionhood' could take? We already skewered 'sneakers on the blockchain', so what more can there be?

- As a concluding thought, perhaps the most important one: someone I know who worked in fashion once called ASICS the ultimate 'hot-guy' shoes. That feels somehow like a conclusion.

- You make me sick, I wear ASICS. ;}

42. 43.