SHOWstudio: Exploring Technological Determinism and Democratization in Digital Fashion Discourses

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ABSTRACT

The following developmental paper has emerged from my ongoing PhD research, which explores digital fashion brands, platforms, and metaverse events as key sites shaping and producing digital fashion discourses. This paper focuses on one case study, a fashion media platform SHOWstudio, founded in 2000, by famed fashion photographer Nick Knight. SHOWstudio is chosen as a case study to analyze their recent digital fashion experimentations, specifically their Ikon-1 NFT project, and how they reproduce technological deterministic ideas of the fashion industries future while promoting the democratizing power of such technology.

The research findings suggest that SHOWstudio is not a passive platform that simply reproduces fashion content, but plays a significant role in the promotion, visualization and acceptance of digital fashion technologies. They contribute to technological deterministic discourses and their democratic potential due to their use of communication technology is limited.

Keywords: SHOWstudio, Technological Determinism, Democratization, Digital Fashion, NFT

INTRODUCTION

The following paper is an outcome of my ongoing doctoral project, which examines digital fashion brands, platforms, and metaverse experiences as pivotal spaces influencing and generating digital fashion discourses. This paper will firstly introduce SHOWstudio as an active participant in the digital fashion movement, exploring their use of technology to produce fashion garments, images and narratives. It will analyze the philosophy of the studio that deeply coincides with founder Nick Knight's dedication to understanding new technologies for the production of fashion images, and to put these technologies in the hands of artists and designers. Furthermore, this paper seeks to explore if the technologies promoted by the platform have a democratizing power, or if they are reproducing technological deterministic discourses that perpetuate political ideas that claim that technological development is inevitable, and the ultimate driving force of social progress.

Raymond Williams' writings will be employed to define democratization, as well as to

critique technological determinism as a way of understanding changing technology in our media landscape. This study argues that firstly SHOWstudio's plays a significant role in the promotion, visualization and acceptance of digital fashion technologies, and their discourses surrounding the promotion of technology and digital fashion are technologically deterministic. Secondly, although SHOWstudio is a platform that is transparent about their processes, they are still bound to commercial pressures that limit democratic outcomes, and any understanding of the platform as democratic is immediately complex.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SHOWstudio is a fashion media platform, founded in 2000 by famed photographer Nick Knight. It is an online space where consumers and audience can view the in-studio creations, conversations, and the latest fashion collections, and also contribute via creative submissions or online discussions. SHOWstudio is known as an experimental fashion platform that pushes boundaries of fashion image creation, prioritizes a diverse range of voices, and champions the idea of radical transparency. In this vein, SHOWstudio was instrumental in the platforming of the fashion film, which is distinguished from fashion in film and fashion advertisement for television. SHOWstudio and their web-based projects intersect with the likes of fashion film, and demonstrate new ways to engage with and produce fashion media through modes such as their behind-the-scenes footage for image making, in depth interviews with fashion insiders and industry professionals, detailing their work, process and general opinions about the latest collections and industry news.

Nick Knight, in his own work, explores the boundaries of fashion photography by embracing digital cameras, photoshop, 3D scanning, and the internet. Jan Kedves describes, 'One might call it a clear, almost compulsive embrace of the future: Nick Knight has welcomed practically each new technological advance' (2013, p. 28). Knight's embracing of new technology was not a reaction or assertion of the redundancies of analogue photography, but rather, as Cotton notes, that the practice of photography exists both before and after the click of the shutter, and that there is much potential in accompanying image production techniques (2009, p. 11). Knight also has a moral stance regarding embracing innovation, encouraging artists to be involved in technological change, and not to leave it up to military or corporate interests (Conti, 2021). His personal position is aligned with the possibility that through the adoption of communication technologies the world could be a better and more democratic place.

To help situate ideas of democratization, as well as develop arguments against technological determinism, I draw on the work of Raymond Williams. Technological determinism is the belief that technology is the principle determinator of societal transformation (Williams, 1974, p. 5). Williams claims that technological innovation is

contingent on very specific social, economic and political contexts (Williams, 1974, p. 15). Furthermore, Williams' work challenges simplistic notions that technology alone has changed our world and rather highlights that social relations set limits to democratic possibilities of technologies (Freedman, 2002, p. 439).

Interactivity between producer, consumer or audience is one of the most dynamic attributes of SHOWstudio and this two-way line of communication can be described as democratic. In 2009, Alison Bancroft reviewed an exhibition named *Fashion Revolution* and praises the studio for its democratic values:

> *It uses film as a means of opening up the fashion process, and shows filmed interviews and examples of designers, stylists, and photographers at work, demonstrating and demystifying the creative process in action. Far from being a top-down, proscriptive fashion arbiter, it actively encourages its (mainly young, mainly urban) users to participate in the fashion process (2010, p. 129-130).*

The exhibition performs an amalgamation of digital interactivity: one can listen to recorded messages from supermodels through a telephone, watch live fashion shoots, and see garments created from patterns available for download on the site (Bancroft, 2010, p.130). In Bancroft's review, it is highlighted that SHOWstudio, while having a commitment to democratized fashion image making, also exist as a commercial entity that relies on an abundance of 'industry' players to promote and legitimize their studio as an essential entity of Britain's (or more specifically London's) fashion ecology. Furthermore, Bancroft suggests that the interactive aspect that SHOWstudio was and is well known for took a back seat to the variety of famous names and faces.

For Williams, democratic communications depend on the "right to transmit and the right to receive", "independent of the market and state"" (Williams 1967, Qtd in Freedman, 2002, p. 434). In an interview by Alice Beard, with Penny Martin, the first SHOWstudio editor and chief, Beard asked the question "Is the site democratic in that it manages to address different audiences and allow them opportunities for participation and access?" (2008, p. 186). Martin answers accordingly: "Well democracy's a difficult concept when it comes to an edited product" (Beard, 2008, p. 186). As such, the studio presents their outcomes, and communicates in a seemingly democratic way, but this does not mean that all people have equal access. Martin points to the way that they do not show all they produce because they do filter projects, which suggest that certain kinds of clients do not want to open to the public, and furthermore, that there is a right time to publish behind the scenes of certain projects. Obviously, access is still restricted by certain amounts of economic incentive and industry power that need a certain level of exclusivity to remain mysterious to their consumer. This echoes a sentiment developed by Williams, who acknowledges that there are little alternatives or ways of challenging corporate incentives via what are

considered alternative models of media. In the same way that technologies are not determinable, neither are they undetermined, particularly by the powers of capital (Freedman, 2002, p. 434).

SHOWstudio is a significant platform for the promotion and adoption of commination and digital technologies for fashion. Nick Knight and the platform are known for not only adopting and using but encouraging and promoting digital technologies. A previous exhibition review and interviews explore the ways previous SHOWstudio projects can be considered democratic and how they contradict the concept of democracy. But even more so, explores how it is not necessarily the communication technologies that create a democratic or non-democratic space but more the platforms complex relationship and attachment to flows of capital.

METHODOLOGY

In my wider doctoral research, I engage with the online platform SHOWstudio as an element of visual culture and object of material culture guided by a case study methodology incorporating an autoethnographic walkthrough method and critical discourse analysis. This method allows for a researcher to collect data and execute a critical analysis of a software application (app) or platform (Light et al, 2018, p. 881).

SHOWstudio's recent Ikon-1 project is an NFT (Non-Fungible Token) collaboration with the model and musician Jazzelle, known on Instagram as Ugly World Wide. Ikon-1 is a series of photorealistic digital renders of Jazzelle as a series of NFTs. The artworks have been created through a collaborative process of 30 different "innovators and mavericks at the forefront of fashion's digital future", as well as hairdressers, nail art specialists, and other 'analogue' stylists and image makers (SHOWstudio, n.d, ikon-1). There are 2000 unique NFTs available to mint on the Ethereum blockchain, and more importantly, one NFT is a ticket to SHOWstudio's future fashion metaverse and will enable access to fashion's digital future, insinuating the likelihood of future web3 projects.

Alongside the exclusive drop is a video of Nick Knight's digital fashion manifesto, with it a tag line stating, "Nick Knight introduces, SHOWstudios roadmap to a virtual future and his vision for how fashion can create a better society" (SHOWstudio, n.d. ikon-1). The video is in black and white, with Knight sitting on a stool, in which he delivers his vision for fashion's future. Knight encapsulates three main points that I argue require further interrogation for its technological deterministic sympathies. First, the statement necessitates an investigation of how fashion as an industry has troubling ethical practices, and that expanding into the digital realm is the natural next step to address these issues - "Fashion needs to change, and the digital world is fashions future, in my opinion" (SHOWstudio, n.d. ikon-1). Second, that SHOWstudio is different from other fashion media as they are known for transparency, and therefore possess and

champion democratizing values - "Transparency has always been central to SHOWstudio, hence the name, we've never accepted advertising because we never wanted anyone to be able to tell us what we can and can't do, we want to be independent so we can create projects just like this." (SHOWstudio, n.d. ikon-1). And third, the overall technological deterministic discourses that render the development, adoption and adaptation of technology as natural and generally progressive - "we are standing on the edge of a new frontier" (SHOWstudio, n.d. ikon-1).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The quoted statements made in above section make clear that while SHOWstudio is far from representing the technological prophets of Silicon Valley, like Zukerberg's memed announcement of the metaverse, technological determinism can perpetuate throughout culture in more subtle ways. The ways in which Knight claims that the digital world is the 'future of fashion', and the language he uses to describe it as a new and exciting frontier to 'discover' is one example. It is exactly when technological determinism is seen as common sense, that this type of discourse can be insidious and have political consequences. As outlined by Freedmans, technological innovation or progress, when seen as inevitable, is favored by dominant groups to encourage the acceptance and adoption of their products.

> *Precisely because competing models are technically possible, corporations are forced to attempt to convince investors, regulators and the public that the opposite is true: that there are no alternative paths and that resistance is futile because technological development is pre-determined...According to this logic, governments are left with 'no option' but to liberalize and deregulate if they are to maintain any control over the deployment of new technologies (Freedman, 2002, p. 432).*

Economic access is also a concern for this project. Access to one of the 2000 NFTs on the Opensea market costs (at the time of writing) 0.07ETH, or $234.76 USD, a significant barrier to access the claimed future of digital fashion, and the future of fashion more generally.

Further to this, SHOWstudio's choice to collaborate with the internet personality Jazzell is pointed and highlights the need to also prioritize collaborations with specific celebrities, that may be seen to 'legitimize' their studio. In previous projects SHOWstudio and Knight specifically have worked with various celebrities, supermodels, musicians and artists. The collaboration with Jazzelle echoes previous projects with Lady Gaga or Björk, who bring a specific theatrical aesthetic that aligns with ideas of creative freedom – while also being hugely financially successful. In other words, these celebrities still fit within the experimental studio's brand, while providing them with viewership from their fanbases. This demonstrates that SHOWstudio, a

platform that heralds the democratizing power of communication technologies, is simultaneously also a platform limited to the constraints of capital and the overall mechanisms of the industry.

It should be highlighted that while the likes of new communication technologies such as the internet are neither determined or determining technology, its democratic futures rely on the social struggles that debate the corporate control of our personal and social lives (Freedman, 2002, p. 439). It is not about being cynical about the possibilities of democratic communication technologies, but rather it is about attempting to see how they might work under different social and economic conditions. A critique of technological determinism is needed at a time where there are many voices that herald digital technologies as the embodiment of liberal democracy (Freedman, 2002, p. 439).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that that, as a platform, SHOWstudio is a significant player in the promotion – and therefore acceptance – of digital fashion and communication technologies more generally. Their discourses are found to be technologically deterministic, and while being transparent, their use of communication technology does not necessarily make their platform more democratic. For Raymond Williams, how a technology will be adopted and used is unpredictable, but rather it is determined by the priorities of the economic elite and ongoing social struggles that are present in all societies (Freedman, 2002, p. 440). To both challenge profit driven decisions and aspire for truly alternative and democratic vision of communications and the arts, we must acknowledge the material conditions, conflicts and contradictions found within technological development.

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