Brighton paper- Denouement: narrative, objects and images of surfing in Cornwall.

Any child can tell you that a good story has three parts: beginning, middle and end. We learn, later, that the end of a story is called the denouement. It's the moment of narrative closure, when all the loose ends are tied up and nothing is left dangling. But the translation of "denouement" actually means the exact opposite to tying up loose ends. It means, un-knotting. I've always puzzled over what this could mean about the endings of novels written by Francophone authors, which definition they apply when structuring their final chapters. It seems to me that the writer of fiction can choose to tie up, or loosen the narrative threads as she sees fit, spin her own yarn as it were, providing a neat ending which satisfies the reader. The stories of the artefacts, images and accounts in my own research offer no such tidy resolutions. This paper explores some of the problems I'm encountering in my ongoing attempt to piece together an untidy patchwork of memories into a document with a beginning, a middle and an end.

My PhD research at Falmouth University traces the development of the distinctive visual and material culture around surfing in the South West of England, and examines the negotiation between the global phenomenon of style and local identity in a small community in North Cornwall.

According to surf historians (Warshaw et al), surfing was practiced, mainly in Polynesia, for many centuries but it was the growing use of leisure time spent at the beach and the uptake of swimming in the early 20th.century that provided a context for its growth in the UK. So my research looks at surfing but also beach culture and swimming, and the kit, clothing and ephemera that were consumed as surfing became a feature on the SW coast. I am looking at physical objects and photographs in archives and private collections, and recording oral histories from those who produced and consumed them.

 My main interest is dress, worn in and out of the water, and how dress has enabled wearers in the region to articulate, define and redefine issues around local identity, gender and sexuality, consumption and modernity.

I have been given access to a collection of over two hundred garments and accessories dating from around 1880 to 1990, amassed by Di Downs, head of Textiles at Falmouth University. Many of the garments are accompanied by personal narratives and occasionally photographs of their having been worn by family members; some have been handed down, altered and made over; some have been acquired by Ms Downs to fill gaps in the timeline, and these carry the story of their acquisition and sometimes their subsequent use. Both as part of the process of archiving *these* artefacts and their associated narratives, and as part of my PhD research, I've been examining the beach, surf and swim related pieces and their stories, accumulating oral histories and attempting to match them up with artefacts and images. For the sake of brevity, I'm drawing examples today from one interview about one garment, and the frayed and tangled narratives that come with it.

Following Elizabeth Wilson, Buckley and Fawcett assert that “from the end of the nineteenth century, fashion was an important cultural site for the manifestation of ‘the modern’: it was urban and it constituted the kind of visual spectacle that characterised the city (Buckley and Fawcett, 2002:5). While much subsequent scholarship has viewed the city as the central locus of fashion, and from which fashionable styles disseminate and dilute (Breward 2006 et al), Fred Davis identifies two fashion systems existing simultaneously: the globalized world of mass commodified international fashion and the "veritable cacophony of local, sometimes exceedingly transient, dress tendencies and styles attached, however loosely, to its own particularity, be it a subculture, an age grade, a political persuasion, an ethnic identity or whatever" (Davis1992:191).

I would like to go a step further, and propose that fashionable spaces are not, by definition metropolitan, and nor does a local dress tendency have to be part of this cacophony. It can be in harmony with mainstream fashion, but site-specific, and with no viable expression in the city.

From the Biarritz of Jean Patou in the 1930s to the clubs of Ibiza today, beaches and resorts have functioned as fashionable spaces, characterised by the “rapid and continual changing of styles” (Wilson,1987:3) of particular kinds of dress: swimwear, beachwear and lately, surf wear. Indeed as Christine Schmidt asserts, ”the swimsuit and the spaces it occupies mark out a modern landscape where fashion, beauty, sport and leisure industries have worked together” (Schmidt 2013:4). My overall project, then, is at least in part an attempt to tell a story of fashion and modernity that takes place in just such an alternative fashionable space.

Although I’m concerned here with fashionable dress and fashionable spaces, it is conceptually removed from the production of high fashion that Roland Barthes discusses in The Fashion System (edition 2010). However his division of the system into three distinct themes does provide me with a useful organising principle for what is to follow here, which is a discussion of the methodological issues I am encountering as I attempt to tie together narrative threads of swim, beach and surf fashion, firstly as real clothes, then in imagery and finally in writing or speaking.

Real Clothes (Vetements vraies (CHECK)

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's notion of 'archivisation' (1996), Carole Hunt argues that physical textiles provide a "vivid connection with past" (2014:208) She explains that for Derrida, "the structure of any archive determines what can be archived. Thus history and memory are formed by the technical methods which are the basis of the archive's construction...'archivisation' can only happen through the methods that are available to make preservation possible..." The process requires what she describes as "a receptive substrate, something which is able to receive and hold information" (2014:216) and argues that the "strains, stresses, stains and smells we impress upon it, make cloth into an archive of our most intimate life" (2014:215). More than that, even:

"well used fabric has a capacity- if not unique then unusually powerful- to embody both a communal, historical moment and a local individual, specific story: this is what a late nineteenth century sofa looked like; this is what my mother wore in the 1930s (Carole Hunt, 2014:226).

Real clothes, then, worn on local beaches are invaluable in my research. Beach related artefacts are rare in the archive I mentioned earlier, and indeed in dress collections as a whole. When a garment is available for scrutiny it seldom remains as it was when first worn. Sun and salt water bleach out colour, fading once vibrant prints and even clothing designed for the water will sag and stretch, as this photograph shows (.....image). Sand and sharp rocks will snag and tear the most robust textile. The short useful life of these garments often make them unsuitable as hand-me-downs, consigning them to rags. And even when not discarded, swim and beachwear is often lost or left behind- smaller than other garments, it is removed in unfamiliar environments like changing rooms or hotel bedrooms and can be too sandy or wet to pack into a suitcase with ease. Discussing a navy blue swimsuit from the archive, Di comments, “there is a story attached to this one. Well, not to this one exactly. I bought this blue one from a charity shop because it reminded me of another one, a red one, that I’d had when I was little. God knows what happened to that one” (interview, 2015).

The *original* garment here is long gone- in fact the story is about a that swimsuit acquired irreparable and embarrassing damage on a public beach, and the interviewee’s father’s mortifying attempts to effect an impromptu repair. The replacement, purchased almost as an aide memoire, provides the highly sensory “receptive substrate” that Hunt describes, but at one remove: Di tells me, “mine was just like that. The feel of the scratchy nylon and all those horrible little pockets that got full of sand.” But, without the real, worn garment, the genuine artefact, the narrative itself begins to unravel: “I think mine had a kind of bib on the front and straps at the back. I’m sure it did. Perhaps it didn’t, and it was the same as this one… But then it couldn’t have come undone like that, and my father couldn’t have tried to tie it on the other way.”

Fashion as image

A photograph at an exhibition is identified as the same kind of swimsuit, shown here. It too, has tubular bodice rather than straps. The model appears in front of a paper backdrop, possibly in a seafront studio. According to Graham King, " the seaside was a breeding ground for what can only be called the commercial snapshot. The need for some photographic evidence of one's presence there was so powerful that small armies of photographers made fortunes each summer supplying snapshots to cameraless visitors" both in conveniently located studios and al fresco. The image appears staged; the smiling sitter appears unaffected by the scatchy nylon. The photograph could even be a publicity shot for R &WH Symington, the company that developed the telescopic ruching that created the tiny pockets that Di remembers with such distaste, and which were designed to allow one size suit to fit any child. The photograph could in fact be of ‘any child’- it is certainly not the specific child in the narrative. My interviewee unearths some holiday snaps, [SLIDE DI ON BEACH] which, according to Coe and Gates, are likely to be “taken on impulse, perhaps almost at random, with no attempt to manipulate the subject or wait for ideal conditions” and which, they judge “may come closer to supplying the historian’s needs" (Coe and Gates, 1977:11)

John Berger tells us, "photographs are relics of the past, traces of what happened" (Berger edition 2013:57) And Roland Barthes comments in Camera Lucida, the photograph "immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge." (1981: 29) But Barthes is referring here to professional documentary photography, not family snaps: Graham King asks, “can an anonymous snapshot, which visually records information about a person, a place, a family or a group, be considered as a "documentary" photograph? Logic suggests that it cannot....a documentary photograph must be viewed in the context of its subject, the time, the circumstances and the reasons for its existence. Take this context away and the photograph can become meaningless, even false." (1986:114). Snapshots can come accompanied with information, for example pictures processed and printed commercially from film canisters were regularly dated by the developer. But these too yellow and fade over time, and rarely tell more than a partial story: they usually only picture those who consent to be photographed, and depict occasions, before the ubiquity of inbuilt cameras in phones, deemed worthy of a shot. So locals wearing swim, beach and surfwear for much of their leisure time take few photographs of their day to day life by the sea. Tourists take more, but their attention is on the location or the subject, rather than on what they chose to wear by the that day. [SLIDE, HOLIDAY SNAP WITH DONKEY, 1950s]

Barthes describes photography as "a science of desirable and detestable bodies" (p18) referring to the ability of two photographs of the same subject to arouse entirely different emotions. The affective power of fashion photographs is discussed by Eugenie Shinkle in her analysis of what she terms, “the apotheosis of fashion photography’s fascination with the abject”. Her subject matter is a visual essay by Juergen Teller “shot against the white painted wall of a raw industrial space” (2012:15) echoing the traditional narrative of fashion as an urban phenomenon. Shinkle critiques the so-called ‘naïve’ or ‘dirty’ realism of these images, which trade on “the unstudied credibility of personal photography” (217) as, possibly, “just another marketing ploy”, but she also comments that “the meaning of [any] image consists of far more than just what we read into it or what we are able to *say* about it. Looking also comprises a visceral dimension…the act of perceiving an image involves *affective* responses on the part of the viewer, most of them involuntary...we do not simply *see* images, we are *touched* by them” (2012:215).

This affective response is visible in interviews when respondents examine snapshots and documentary images with which they have no direct relationship aside from having lived in the period depicted. Prior to any verbal response deriving from cognition, these pictures elicit the pattern of biological effects that psychologist Silvan Tomkins observed. Eyes lowered, head down, my interviewee responds for barely an instant with the typical shame/humiliation expression to the photograph of the anonymous child in the one size-fits-all ruched swimsuit, which may or may not have resembled her own, before smiling and saying, “there’s a special name for those swimsuits. Peter Pan, yes that’s it.” Working from photographs, emotion and memory tangle together in what Tomkins calls a "complex matrix of nested and interacting ideo-affective formations” (1991)

Ecriture- written or spoken fashion

At times in my research, there is corroboration between image and word in the form of a family album. Langford tells us that “the photographic album can… be understood by recognising its original function as a mnemonic device for story-telling and situating it in the realm of orality” and that “Speaking the album is not merely the supplement of photographic and textual reading, but the discovery of the album's ordering principle" (2006:224). Here she echoes Berger, who writes that "the photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph" (2013:66). When respondent and album, or even single photograph, are both available, the narrative might be expected to tie up neatly and provide the English meaning of denouement. But photographs, as I pointed out do not always record the researcher’s interests, and although often treasured they are easily lost and damaged. Often oral history must stand alone as testimony. Even with the sharpest of respondents, memory seldom serves. “Memories”, according to Lou Taylor, “ have to be set within a viable interpretive framework of critical evaluation...The bedrock is that the words of the respondents have to be set firmly into his/ her personal locality and period." (Taylor 2002:62)

The vagueness of the language of place and time in my exemplar interview is not untypical. “We were on holiday somewhere, Devon or Cornwall, it must have been. Or Dorset?... No. Somewhere in Devon…I must have been about…well…I was very little…a child, certainly.**”** The vocabulary firms up when describing the materiality of the garment in question: “straps about an inch wide, crossing over at the back and fastening with a button here, just above the hip.”

Like the dress recollected by Doris, in Alison Slater’s study of working dress in WWII, the swimsuit “no longer exists in its primary physical guise, but secondary traces remain: in her memories and in my recordings and interpretations of her memories. The absence of the physical garment seemed to strengthen her need to remember its materiality (Slater 2002:127). Slater observes that… “there seems to be something about memories of dress, and other material things that persist when other memories are lost. (2002:127).

Shenaz Suterwalla asserts that “Oral history in fashion and design scholarship helps us to deconstruct metanarratives and to make space for full and inclusive histories that show experiences as embodied, performative articulations that reflect fluid identities, not discrete, fixed positions” (2013:167) Spoken testimony around swim and beach wear does appears to offer something of a challenge to the dominant narrative of fashionable space, monopolised by the metropolis. My respondent talks about the swimsuit her mother wore; “it was boned and embroidered with tiny flowers. You couldn’t possibly swim in it. It was just for the beach.” But as Sutterwalla points out, the researcher must beware the challenges of “unreliability, subjective narrative conjecture and the essential fallibility of individual personal memory” (2013:168).

Memories, like the physical objects and the photographs of them, fade with time, degrade and eventually disappear.

Carole Hunt suggests that “Supplementing traditional academic analysis with literary writings and personal memoirs may assist in the formulation of a richer analysis that includes our 'real' experiences of textiles in various forms" (Hunt 2014:228). But as I hope I've shown, this multi layered approach can present the researcher with methodological tangles and loose ends. The problem of locating garments of personal significance and usable quality is by no means specific to my own area of interest, but the scourges of sea sand and sunlight can complicate the process of object based research. Personal snapshots offer different insights into fashionable dress to those more formal depictions found in fashion spreads or documentary photographs; again, it is not only swim and surf style that might be helpfully examined in such a way, nor are they the only aspects of dress which appear tantalisingly almost in shot, out of focus or lacking in magenta hue. And pictures taken at the beach often dominate family albums. But clothing is not what we seek to capture in amateur beach photography: with luck, we create a picture combining specifics of place and time with affective power which envelops the viewer in a complex mesh of emotion and memory. Finally, Testimony can only ever be subjective, and the dress historian must always be aware of the context. Researching the beach, the pool and the esplanade, I find that my respondents' memories are pictures taken in the dappled light of long gone leisure time, of places never revisited and clothes seldom worn.

I began my project hoping to piece together the stories connecting the garments, the images and the memories in search of a rich analysis, tying up loose ends as I went. Instead, the denouement in sight is more like the literal translation, as I follow the unravelling threads of the narratives, unpicking as I go.