Julie Ripley

The Look of Austerity Conference

A hand-knit Esther Williams: Fashion and Glamour at the Beach, 1945-1956

My PhD research concerns the development of indigenous material culture of surfing in the South West of England. What follows is part of a chapter.

Immediately after the Second World War, materials and money were still hard to come by as Britain rebuilt itself. Ideological reconstruction was also taking place, notably around gender. The articulation of feminine identities through consumption had been disrupted by wartime shortages of goods and labour, and in the decade following, opposing conceptions of femininity fought for space in the arena of popular culture.

This paper will investigate how home-made beach wear can illuminate the relationship between the desire to embrace the sexualised femininity so keenly promoted by the patriarchal hegemony and the powerful, athletic femininity that women's war work had developed.

A big part of the material culture of surfing is the apparel worn by participants. Prior to the first surf lifesavers arriving from Australia in 1956, the clothing worn for wave riding was the same as that worn for swimming, hence my focus today on the period 1945-1956. In the UK in this period, the seaside holiday gained in popularity but suitable, let alone stylish swimwear and beachwear was difficult to acquire given post-war textile restrictions. How was it then, that countless holiday snaps attest to clothed activity in the surf in the late forties? What were the conditions that fostered the desire for stylish beachwear in the period, and the means by which it was attained?

As leisure time increased and transport improved in the early twentieth century, bank holiday characbanc trips and family outings by train to the coast became staples of British life. Edwards, Gilbert and Skinner, authors of *Some Like it Hot*, (2003), argue that the beach in this period is new social territory and is thus yet to settle into the accepted cultural norms of the city of the farm. In this liminal space, rules on acceptable behaviour and clothing are relaxed, and men and women in a state of semi-undress are able to interact with informality unthinkable elsewhere. By the 1930s, this playful, sexy environment is the setting for romance and adventure in films such as *Trade Winds* (1938) and of romantic fiction published by Mills and Boon.

Swimming, once an unusual pastime in the cold waters of northern Europe, had been promoted in events such as the 1908 London Olympics (fig 1) which took place in the chilly Serpentine pictured here; thirty years later Britain’s booming resorts were welcoming hoards of swimmers and riders on Europe’s first surfboards. These boards, known as bellyboards, were constructed of plywood and nicknamed coffin lids, and were sufficiently thrilling a prospect as to lure Agatha Christie and George Bernard Shaw, among others, into the waves (Fig 2).

The war provided other uses for coffin lids, and the beaches became potential sites of invasion. But once peace was declared, the lure of the coast and its thrills returned, and passengers were encouraged by poster and information campaigns like this one to take a trip on GWR’s ‘holiday line’ to the south west (Fig 3). As de-mobilised soldiers returned and women were relieved of war work, trips to the coast were a cheap means of escaping bomb damaged cities and enjoying fresh air. But what to wear?

US swimwear brand Jantzen sold the first ‘swimming suit’ as opposed to ‘bathing suit’ in 1921(Martin, Koda and Richard, 1990). BY the 1940s, specialist swimming attire was widely available to American consumers, promoted not as sports kit but as fashionable holiday clothing to enhance sales. The same could not be said in the UK, where in spite of Jantzen’s British wing having been established at Brentwood in 1931 and swimwear being produced by numerous British hosiers including Wolsey (fig. 4) , clothes rationing and shortages of materials resulted in few commercially made swimsuits being available.

Swimwear was of course only one of many hard-to-come-by items in the immediate postwar period, but demand for it was emblematic of demand for a more abstract commodity: glamour. Elizabeth Wilson unpicks the notion of glamour (2007), describing it as, “created in combination with dress, hair, scent and even *mise en scene*. Its end result is the sheen, the mask of perfection, the untouchability and numinous power of the *icon*.’ (2007:105).

Clothes rationing was at its most stringent in 1945, at only 40 coupons per person; soap too was restricted (Howell 2012) and perfume a pre-war memory. The ingredients for Wilson’s recipe for glamour, then, were entirely lacking in post-war Britain, and women’s war work, often physical to the point of visceral, exposed human imperfection and dislodged the mask of feminine allure all the more. No wonder then, that Hollywood stars, whose mise en scene could be meticulously created, became the icons of the glamour so precious in the period. The British film industry during the war had necessarily confined itself to propaganda films, escapist costume dramas and morale boosting comedies (Cook, 1996). Post war, British performers were deemed to have 'made it' only when their talents were showcased by the Hollywood studios.

Gundle and Castelli discuss the way in which glamour 'is transformed in the interwar years into a mainly American and cinematic phenomenon.' (2006:62) The industry tapped into narrative and visual codes of "excitement, luxury and sexuality at a time when women in America and elsewhere were dominated by scarcity and dowdiness' (2006:12)

Glamour was homogenised and commodified by Hollywood into easily decoded signifiers of wealth and sex: evening wear, furs, and porcelain skin offset by rich cosmetics. Dressing up and the use of cosmetics were part of a transformative process which changed the ordinary girl, with whom the audience could identify, into an extraordinary star, to whom they could aspire. Rita Hayworth, (fig 5) one of the biggest box office draws of the 1940s, was known at the time have undergone painful electrolysis to lift her hairline as part of a process which transformed a Latino showgirl into a red haired WASPish movie star. Thus Hollywood style glamour, in the 1940s, is associated with artifice, effort, and transformation: Cinderella can only go to the ball if she starts the story as Cinders.

But the ball itself was threatened by the war. Serving personnel were required until 1942 to appear at all times in uniform, and fellow attendees at social functions were loath to dine alongside them civilian formal wear. Hence Vogue breathlessly declared in 1943 that evening wear had been the first fashion ‘causality of war' (cited in Howell, 2012). Hollywood was forced to look elsewhere for glamorous clothing in which to dress its stars for publicity shots. The Motion Picture Production Code or Hays Code of 1934 had put an end to the saucy boudoir lingerie shots so beloved of Jean Harlow and her contemporaries. But as Ellen Wright (2015) explains, sportswear, specifically swimwear, could be as revealing as required and get past the censor. The tradition of the swimsuit pin-up was born. (Fig 6)

The association between swimsuit and glamour was not without precedent. Since the 1920s the opportunity to reveal rather more skin than was otherwise permissible had been enjoyed in the liminal informality of the beach. Bathing Belle contests, the forerunner of today's swimwear sections in beauty pageants, were popular events, and Billy Rose's Aquacade, a swimming and diving themed show launched in 1937 was seen by millions in purpose built pools all over America. The aquacade launched the careers of many Hollywood stars including Johnny Weissmuller and titular subject of this paper, Esther Williams. (Fig 7)

Competitive swimmer Esther Williams' Olympic ambitions were thwarted by the cancellation of the 1940 summer games. Her transition from serious athlete to screen goddess can be read as a studio backed transformative narrative like Rita Hayworth's. But her star persona and her on-screen success in 'Aquamusicals' also illustrates some of the tensions around feminine identity in the 1940s. Because although Hollywood addressed a female consumer, a passive dreamer and aspirant who hoped by miracle or marriage to possess the trappings of modernity, Williams embodied a different kind of femininity altogether. Like the newly enfranchised land army and factory girls, Esther Williams worked: she was known from the outset of her career as an astute businesswoman and relentless promoter of aquatic pursuits for girls and is credited with having invented synchronised swimming. Films such as T*his Time for Keeps* (1947) and *On An Island With You* (1948) are little more than vehicles to showcase Williams' extraordinary swimming talents. Romantic narratives notwithstanding, (Fig 8) The female players, including Williams and the synchronised swimmers making up the 'chorus' are not what Laura Mulvey described as 'passive bearers of the look' (1975). They are active, athletic AND glamorous, (Fig 9) much like the surf-bathing beauties pictured here in a poster from 1937 promoting Newquay as a holiday destination, where two confident women with belly boards flank a floundering male in a rubber ring.

It seems that complex ideas about gender, power, consumption and sexuality could be expressed at the beach in the mid-century, where we can view the contested ground between the muscular, hardworking femininity of the woman at work in wartime and the highly sexualised femininity exemplified by Dior's New Look.

Christian Dior's Carolle line, launched in 1947 and known as The New Look (fig 10) was said by Colin MacDowell et al (McDowell, 1997) to have heralded a return to femininity in fashion. Elizabeth Wilson (1996) describes the New Look as 'weirdly modern', but it is more usually viewed as backward looking, with its corseted waist and crinoline reminiscent of the Belle Époque. This return to corsets and long, cumbersome skirts was viewed by many women as a step back from emancipation, and the excess of fabric required unpatriotic in a time of continued shortages. Dior and his collection were attacked in the British press for their decadence and the Paris fashion houses as a whole for collaboration during the war. Whilst the New Look was undoubtedly glamorous, even if women were to turn a blind eye to its ethics, it was impossible even to imitate until clothing and textile rationing and shortages ended.

Not so the swimsuit. In the immediate postwar period, rubber shortages meant a lack of Lastex, an important component of commercially produced swimsuits. But British women, after years of making do and mending were able to put their sewing, knitting and crochet skills to use. Swimwear is most commonly made from knitted fabric since it allows stretch, and throughout the 1920s and 30s hand-knit swimwear had been a common sight on British beaches, providing ordinary men and women access to the aquatic pursuits enjoyed by the better off consumers of exclusive garments by Jean Patou et al. In the postwar period, hand knitted swimsuits had the added advantage of requiring very little yarn, and could even be made from the unravelled remnants of a garment no longer required. The hand knit one piece in figure 11 from the archives of the Worthing museum dated circa 1935, is made in a style that could easily be constructed from such 'oddments'.

Smallish pieces of new or pre-used woven fabrics could also be put to use in the construction of fashionable swimwear, such as in the home-made one piece from 1946 in figure 12, also found in the archives of the Worthing museum. With its carefully placed straps and flexible ruching, this stylish but functional garment can truly be considered a swimming suit, fit for purpose for an active, athletic woman.

Whilst materials were still scarce in the 1940s, there was no shortage of information about fashion. Women’s magazines from *Vogue* to *Woman’s Weekly* had remained in print, with paper limitations, for the purposes of morale boosting throughout the war. Inspiration could be had, as I’ve established, from films and promotional pictures. These appeared in film magazines and the mainstream press alongside editorial on the lifestyles of the rich and famous, much of which focused on leisure pursuits including pool parties and exotic holidays overseas.

American dressmakers were being positively encouraged to consume, and to emulate the stars with the inclusion of 'Hollywood Patterns' in *American Girl* magazine from 1946 (see fig 13). Although motivated by Austerity and thrift in the UK, a staple of women's magazines on this side of the Atlantic was also the free craft pattern.

Fiona Hackney provides an insight into this phenomenon (in Burman, 1999), suggesting that 'an economic or useful pattern could justify "buying a little treat to enjoy the fiction"' (op cit:77) in the magazine.

Even 'fashion forward' brands that were not issued free, such as Vogue patterns, could be purchased cheaply. This edition of the *Vogue Knitting Book* from 1946 (fig 14), costing just two and six, features a sheath-slim bathing suit made from 6oz three ply with optional elastic.

In the same year the bikini two piece suit by Louis Reard was launched with much fanfare at Piscine Molitor in Paris. Modelled by nude dancer Micheline Bernadini, since, legend has it, no self-respecting mannequin would wear it, the bikini nevertheless entered into mainstream fashion; as soon as July 1949, the *Daily Mail* was offering a free pattern to readers hoping to replicate this highly sexualised feminine look. (fig 15)

The 1950s saw the chill of Austerity begin to thaw, and as Sherry Schofield Thomson argues, the motivation for home-making dwindle (in Burman, 1999). By the middle of the decade, consumer culture was in full swing and Britons were able to buy a wide range of swimwear, much of it designed and or manufactured in the US. (Fig 16) Commercially produced for a mass market, women’s fashionable swimwear in the period becomes increasingly unsuitable for athletic activity and instead positions the feminine wearer as passive, decorative and sexualised. In an image like this 1950 advert for Mabs of Hollywood, the struggle for an active, athletic feminine identity in beachwear appears to be all but lost. But the arrival in the UK in 1956 of Australian surf lifesavers and with them a new kind of surf-riding, was to motivate a new wave of domestically produced equipment, and with it a new struggle over gender identity, which is to be the subject of a later chapter.

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