

Rundle and Return The Hybrid Tiger of SA Fashion

Erica de Greef

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the memory traces that are evident in the fashioned identity constructions of a post-apartheid South Africa. Fashion can be read as a locus for local-global debates, for past-present dialogues, and for self-other discourse. Some current South African fashion investigates notions of history, culture and memory in the construction of identity. In a society that has experienced radical transformation, fashion currently carries evidence of the past that is being renegotiated in the present. By exploring the work of South African fashion designers, I hope to investigate the layers in the palimpsest of this transformation.

Walter Benjamin's 'tigersprung' concept for change in fashion locates traces of the past in the present. There is evidence of historical associations in South African fashion brought about by various negotiations of the past. Issues that relate to the past such as tradition, memory, culture and heritage are currently explored as a means to construct new contemporary fashion narratives.

In this paper, I will use the concept of 'tigersprung' to investigate the historical traces in fashion, as the past resurfaces in an attempt to deal with the trauma of recent South African histories. Furthermore, I aim to position Pierre Nora's exploration of 'sites of memory' and history, and how these sites could act as catalysts for remembrance. I will look at the work of designer Clive Rundle in particular; whose approach to fashion highlights the notion of fashion as a tool for social commentary and a site for negotiating memory. My aim is to question whether notions of loss, mourning, and re-definition, can be expressed through or with fashion, and whether this can help locate a current understanding of identity in a post-apartheid South Africa as expressed through fashion.

Keywords: Memory, history, tigersprung, Benjamin, Nora, identity constructs, hybridity, palimpsest, politics, South African fashion, and Clive Rundle.

1. South African Fashioned Identities

South Africa has witnessed a kind of fashion revolution during the last 15 years seeing the rise of a number of individual signature designers; some have negotiated a shift between formally Eurocentric and Afrocentric leanings, others engage with a new cultural hybridity¹ and yet others work with the multiplicity of histories and traumas of the recent past. The apartheid era left behind scars of poverty, anger, inequality, and crime². Shortly after the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africans witnessed the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission³ (TRC), which were held in an attempt to uncover 'truth' in terms of apartheid-era human rights violations. In an attempt to heal the past, these hearings exposed events and experiences of pain and shame across a broad spectrum of the South African society⁴, reflecting upon a recent past that now no longer was; a past that some people desperately wanted forgotten, or hidden. It raised questions with regards to the construction of new national histories, and thereby new national identities.

These public re-presentations through the TRC exposed the complexity and diversity of both collective and personal memory⁵ within South Africa; many of which were deeply traumatic. The challenge for many South Africans was to renegotiate these concepts of the past, and in some instances, completely rewrite these histories. This quest for memory as the search for one's identity positions the need for individuals and the collective to investigate the origins, meanings and constructs of that history⁶. Nora (1989: 7) argued that through the "perception that anything and everything may disappear", an obsession with memory is created which takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects as *lieux de mémoire*⁷. This consciousness of a break with the past reflects what occurred in the past 15 years in South Africa, where environments of memory have been challenged, questioned, lost and re-negotiated, necessitating new sites of memory, in the construction of new collective expressions.

As South Africans dealt with the country's democratic transformation, the problematic of history and memory in terms of concepts of nationhood, identity and wounding became the focus of much visual and cultural production, including fashion⁸. Evidence of memory and its traces, as well as new historical imaginings, have impacted on the diversity of South African fashion in the years following 1994. It is through this renegotiation of the past that we find the representations of memory that evoke both the country's past and its attempted reconciliation⁹.

Benjamin called these traces of the past the ‘tiger’s leap’ or ‘tigersprung’¹⁰. These are the “tools that map the modern or present” which, rather than chart the past, are a means to manage the “changes in the structure of experience in modern life that is characterised by violent jolts, alienation and dislocation”¹¹. Evans (2003: 22) analyses Benjamin’s metaphor of fashion as a historical labyrinth which allows for the juxtaposition of historical images with contemporary ones in a form that doubles back on itself in an attempt to position that which is most modern as having a relationship with what is old (2003: 25). Evans argues that this layering of memory traces invoked in fashion often reflects historical fragments of a trauma, instability or transience from other eras, and that these traces often come back under the weight of a cultural trauma¹².

Sanlam South Africa Fashion Week (SSAFW), established in 1997 as a platform to launch a local fashion culture, has witnessed the fashioning of new, local identities. Levin (2006: 18) notes how local designers challenge the boundaries of political correctness, reflecting on a heritage beyond the confines of clichés, and exploring the complexity of variable pasts. Similarly, Chang (2006:7) describes tensions that exist between vintage European ideals and Afro-futurist possibilities which allow designers to explore new iconographies that cross cultures, and in this way losing the polarisations of the past. The role of fashion in the development of post-apartheid identities can be seen through these re-presentations of a fashioned self¹³ which in turn indicate social negotiations and new processes of belonging.

I have chosen to position my research around a recent Clive Rundle collection. Rundle (b. 1962) consistently explores the potential of making social commentary through his work, using fashion as a means to communicate issues relevant to the politics of the present and the past, even at times shifting their meanings by making entirely new associations. Rundle who works with this notion of fashion as a metaphor of time, often uses fashion in such a way that it acts as a *palimpsest*¹⁴. The concept of the palimpsest has been used more recently to explain the layered constructs in architecture and studies of the urban environment, but applying the notion of the palimpsest to fashion is less common¹⁵, as fashion often embodies the new, with little value placed upon material pasts or patinas.

Through an analysis of Rundle’s work, I hope to identify how notions of loss, hope and history are presented by the particular use of details, textures and silhouettes, and display and design processes. The ambiguity and chaos in many of his collections suggest a parallel reflection of a contemporary South African environment. By investigating how Rundle’s work engages with notions of trauma, history and memory, I aim to contextualise this work within a

framework of South African visual culture and identity constructs that similarly explore these anxieties, and notions of alienation and dislocation in the context of contemporary social, economic, cultural and technological change.

2. Rundle and Return

I propose this reading as a positioning of Rundle's work; one of various approaches that could be used to analyse the creative approach, the product, and the complex displays of Rundle's fashion. Rundle presented a "private photographic, video, sketch and text journal of exactly 40 days that culminated in the Summer 2009 collection" to a small group of fashion insiders (09/07/2009). This afforded insights into the work, the process and the evolution of the collection from initial concept to final actualisation; a process which in Rundle's words continues to "find the chaos and embrace the impossible"¹⁶. I will be focussing on this Summer 2009 collection which showed at SSAFW, 04/04/2009, Turbine Hall, Johannesburg.

Like black and white photographs, this collection presented a blurring of the past with the present; modernity infused with the sepia tones of recollection. Rundle used specific items that recall associations with the past. Stockings (in black or white), suspender elastics (in nude) and slip dresses specifically reference turn of the century, historical styles. Lehmann (2000: 47) identifies these references to a feminine ideal in poetry, art and contemporary fashion; of the woman who "lifts her skirt to reveal her stockings and lace-up boots". These stockings and boots have become markers of time, in their positioning of a sartorial representation within a timeline. Lehmann argues that fashion is infinitely self-referential, with each detail quoting or referring back to the past (2000: 106). It is this 'tiger's leap' into the past that Benjamin (1939) used to describe fashion as having a "*sense of the modern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been*"¹⁷. Here Nora describes this identification of a past (in this case, a past object) in the present as a site of memory, where memory becomes the bond linking the individual memory to an eternal present (1989: 19).

In previous collections, Rundle has explored recycling second-hand men's tailored jackets and his own garments/parts of garments by remodelling them into new designs¹⁸. In this Summer 2009 collection though, items were used that carried metaphoric histories and meanings, recycling symbolic narratives rather than the material. Rundle's approach reconfigures these inherent narratives by

breaking the weight of the past that is inscribed into or onto these items. By re-positioning the references of these items, in juxtaposition with the present, and in layers that blur the edges between their pasts, Rundle fuses time in layers. His use of layering in these outfits exposes a physical process of constructing surfaces that bear witness to the previous layers, which remain visible through the sheerness or through the openings of the outer layers. In this sense Rundle approaches the fashioned ensemble or outfit as a palimpsest, much like the concept used in describing urban environments, architecture and the dynamic aspects of the historical layers in cities¹⁹. Just as the marks of history, as evidence of time, leave traces on the surfaces of cities, the passage of time can be evidenced in fashion.

A number of contemporary designers have explored this witnessing of time; seen most notably in the work of fashion designers like Hussein Chalayan (Evans 2003: 240) and Maison Martin Margiela²⁰. Their work explores affects and effects of time through the use of materials, shapes or details that critique similar fragmentations and dislocations in contemporary environments. Ideas of re-using cloth, history, concept or image, are key to how memory is embedded in fashion. Similarly Rundle uses techniques that include ageing processes, tailoring techniques that reference past skills and crafts, and the use of patterns that contain structural memories, in the development of his collections that in many ways reflects the past in the present²¹. Evans (2003: 278) describes Benjamin's '*tigersprung*' as fleeting glimpses of the past as they flicker on the surface of what is presented as the modern. Rundle's use of transparency, cut-outs, and asymmetry, further allow for these glimpses of history in this complex layering of meaning. Buck-Morss (1991:250) argues how in the juxtaposition of images of the past and the present new meanings are often created by "tracing previously concealed connections"²². The palimpsest notion presented here positions several dialectics which Ranciere (2009: 11) describes as the "two potentialities of the image [garment, object, etc]: the image as raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history". In fashion, there is a constant tension between the present, its relationship to the future, and the evidence of its past.

Speaking at the SSAFW Annual Seminar (2-4/04/2009), Rundle presented a discussion that outlined his use of fashion as a metaphor for a *second skin*; one that can be worn, layered, and shed in a symbolically, metamorphic process. This notion of fashion as skin clearly highlights a past problematic of race and identity in South Africa. Apartheid's measure of hierarchy and opportunity focussed on the tones and textures of one's skin. The rhetoric of race remains in a post-apartheid dialogue in terms of acknowledging and addressing

past (mis)understandings of race and separatism. Rundle often selects models for his collections that highlight the multiplicity of race in South Africa, with models representing a cross-cultural diversity. The use of black stockings on fair-skinned models and pale stockings on darker models juxtaposes the politics of their skin. Using Benjamin's notion of the explosive that is fashion, Lehmann argues that fashion can reflect both a political and material concept of history (2000; 235). In Rundle's presentation of choice and change, these models engage in the political and personal interface of a nation in transformation.

The stark, neutral tones of this collection further positions Rundle's political intention of blackness and whiteness: a concept which is explored by numerous artists within contemporary South African creative practices²³. As evidenced in Rundle's previous displays of 'black and white', this colour dialectic continues to challenge notions of neutrality and segregation, and raises questions of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' that remain closely linked to the surface, to flesh, to skin, and to identity. It is the idea of blackness and whiteness now sharing the same bodies which blurs these notions of the self and other. Rundle's irreverent references to political slogans (completed in silver sequins) further deal with current political affairs²⁴.

The use of volume, wrapping and shapes that billow, protect, suspend and cling in Rundle's collection investigates and reflects the urban landscape surrounding his downtown studio where make-shift structures convey homelessness, poverty, vulnerability and survival²⁵. Even Rundle's use of 'found materials' reflects the politics of his urban context, as he assembles his collections as a *bricolage*²⁶ often making creative and resourceful use of materials that are at hand, including netting, tape, packaging and padding. In this sense we can start to investigate the complexity of Rundle's metaphors that span time and memory, place, purpose, politics and meaning.

3. Healing in Transition

Preoccupations with new identities have occupied the work of many South African artists as they renegotiate the past, exploring South Africa's material history like an archive of memories, re-presenting familiar terms in new ways in an attempt to reconstruct history. South Africa's transition from apartheid witnessed these confessional and contentious voices in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and many artists continue to surface these memories²⁷. The TRC exposed multiple traumatic experiences and inequalities,

and elicited numerous forms of rupture with history and identity. The diversity of responses that surrounded the TRC often heightened, rather than resolved, the nation's differences²⁸. Because the past meant vastly different things to different people, its terms were often difficult to process collectively. There are a number of visual artists in South Africa working with notions of trauma, memory and shame, for example; William Kentridge (erasure, power and identity) and Penny Siopis (trauma and history), Siemon Allen (memory and archive), Senzeni Marasela (Memory and identity), Berni Searle (gender and history), and Steven Cohen (trauma and sexuality)²⁹. Questions are raised whether this exploration of memory initiates a discourse on South Africa's recent history, or whether it constitutes nostalgia for the country's first phase of transition³⁰.

Nora (1989: 11) argues that the quest for memory is the search for one's history. With the acceleration of history, the responsibility of memory has become individualised, multiplied, fragile and diversified³¹. South Africans experiencing a sudden rupture with history have attached memory to 'sites' in an attempt to either restore a historical continuity or to renegotiate their pasts. Debates about history and memory in an era that has, in a sense, freed itself of any past has created this preoccupation with trauma. According to Nora (1989: 15-16) the need for sites of memory that are self-referential, personal and experiential constitutes the major difference between memory and history, where history remains external and impersonal, as a representation of the past and a reconstruction which is always problematic and incomplete. Is it the need to go in search of a new histories and identities that has created an obsession with memory or is it the notion of oppressed historical trauma that is resurfacing in an attempt to heal the wounds of the past? Evans (2003: 296) draws on works of Foucault, Freud, and Buck-Morss to investigate the traces of the past that as they surface in the present which carry elements of the 'stressed' or 'repressed'. Evans (2003: 199) argues that fashion designers often locate memory traces in the context of historical rather than personal trauma and shock, hereby relating to larger questions of history. This positions the role of fashion as a metaphor for healing and transformation in South Africa, with its ability to act out or portray this instability and transience³².

Objects, images and even items can remain haunted by previous meanings and associations. Could the semiotics of fashion as a means of communicating transformation begin to negotiate a consensus on historical discourse within South Africa, despite its citizens' diverse experience of the past? The danger posed by this is that images or objects circulating in a contemporary South African landscape may not be able to question the meanings or memories

without at times, also spectacularising them. Rundle's use of tribal accessories in this collection, particularly reference this dialectic, of notions of tribal and modern, of an African and Eurocentric interface, and of negotiating authenticity and fashionability.

This fusion of associations echoes Nuttal's "entangled histories" that enable codes and meanings to be re-appropriated and transformed when used in the work of fashion designers as they are brought to life anew, remixed in a cross-pollinated present (2009: 108)³³. These forms of hybridity or hybrid identities reference Bhabha's argument of colonial hybridity, which, as a cultural form produces ambivalence³⁴. The post-apartheid South African identity presents a similar identity construct to the postcolonial, which Bhabha (1994) argued as the site for creating mindsets that embody hybridity, often in association with negotiations around authority and power. The postcolonial subject negotiates the present as a palimpsest surface, often questioning the patterns of past writings and erasures on land and bodies. The politics of the traces of the past can be read in the layers of the present. Fashion that acts as a palimpsest can imply either a resistance to, or a remembrance of these variable pasts. Lehmann (2000: 210) states that fashion is an "indispensible catalyst for remembrance", and can equally, act out new political concepts of history.

In conclusion, Rundle's work has often been compared to that of Rei Kawakubo of Commes de Garçons, Maison Martin Margiela, and Hussein Chalayan. Understanding the technical skills that underpin the composition and complexity of these designers and their work is critical to the analysis of their work. Much has been written about the use of the term '*deconstruction*' in relation to their approach to fashion³⁵. Using the concept of deconstruction as a demonstration of constructedness, this is evident in Rundle's work, as it can be seen in terms of the tailoring techniques, the details, the shapes, and the questions around craft and function. This notion could also apply to Rundle's investigations into the constructions of self through fashion: be it personally, publically or politically. Much of Rundle's work acts as a political metaphor, and in his way, a deconstruction of the ideologies and identities within a post-apartheid context.

Notes

¹ I use the term hybridity here with reference to Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1985: 156) whereby individuation within cultures reverses the effects of colonialism, in such a way that other “denied” knowledges and identities enter upon the dominant discourse.

² The apartheid government represented a minority rule of discriminatory prejudices and rights accorded by race.

³ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a court-like body at which anybody who felt they had been a victim of violence could come forward. Furthermore perpetrators of violence could request amnesty upon giving testimony. Annie E. Coombes explores the impact and complexity of this event in *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2003: pp 243-278. Coombes includes Desmond Tutu’s opening address 15 April 1996, where the commission’s brief was to “unearth the truth about our dark past, to lay the ghosts of the past so that they will not return to haunt us and that we will thereby contribute to the healing of a traumatised and wounded people, for all of us in South Africa are wounded people, and in this manner to promote national unity and reconciliation”.

⁴ (ibid.)

⁵ A. E. Coombes (2003: 8) accounts for the individual subjective experience and shared social processes that influence the representation of remembrances and of the past. In addition, research on witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war, or systematic political repression (such as in South Africa) has pointed to the impact of trauma on memory.

⁶ Pierre Nora, ‘Between History and Memory’. *Representations*, Spring 1989, pp 7-24. Nora describes dialectics of history and memory in a modern world where these terms have become fundamentally opposite.

⁷ (ibid.) *Lieux de memoire* are described as sites of memory that are simultaneously material, symbolic and functional.

⁸ Sarah Nuttall in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009:117) explores the re-appropriation and transformation of cultural codes of the past, in terms of the notion of self-styling with reference to fashion and identity construction in a post-apartheid generation.

⁹ Andrés Mario Zervigón. ‘The Weave of Memory: *Screen* in post-apartheid South Africa’. *Art Journal*, Spring 2002 offers an analysis that investigates the role of memory in the construction of contemporary South African art and re-definitions of the past and present.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, trans. Zohn H (1973 [1939]), *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, London: Fontana/Collins.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In this sense the contemporary preoccupation with trauma can be understood as an important contemporary articulation of the past. *Trauma theory* insists that events which pose crises for testimony, witnessing and representation continue to reverberate in the present and to shape the future.

¹³ Sarah Nuttal, *Entanglement* (2009: 119) describes how ‘representations of self as an expressive subject have... been seen by scholars to signal a subject that is fractured, multiple, shifting and produced through a set of social performances.’ In this context ‘fashion’ is read as a social performance.

¹⁴ *Palimpsest* is a term that denotes a manuscript written over a partly erased older manuscript in such a way that the old words can be read beneath the new. The concept of the palimpsest is also used to understand the developing complexity of cultures, as previous ‘inscriptions’ are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness, especially in the post-colonial experience (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffen, *Key Concepts*: 176).

¹⁵ Palimpsest differs from *Historicism* which also features in contemporary fashion, and which generally refers to a fashion cycle or form of nostalgia that specifically highlights or references styles of the past with attention given to the aesthetic, nostalgic qualities of the historical period being referenced.

¹⁶ Notes taken at a discussion presentation held 09 June 2009, Johannesburg.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin’s work has been addressed in depth by a number of fashion academics recently, including Ulrich Lehmann, Carolyn Evans, Christopher Breward, etc.

¹⁸ Clive Rundle’s Autumn/Winter 2008 invitation described the collection as more than 50% recycled.

¹⁹ Extract from the editorial to ‘memory, amnesia and urbanism’ *mudot*, issue # 1, 2008.

²⁰ Kaat Debo ed. *Maison Martin Margiela, ‘20’ The Exhibition*. The Fashion Museum of the Province of Antwerp, MoMu, 2008. Margiela ‘couture’ records the number of hours invested in the production of the garment (measures of time), uses materials that carry along the traces of a garment’s previous life (passages of time), and experiments with momentary materials or decaying characteristics in materials (power of time).

²¹ From notes taken at a discussion presentation 09 June 2009, Johannesburg, where Rundle described his use of certain processes and techniques that were integral to the development of the individual textiles used in the collection.

²² See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, 1991.

²³ Sarah Nuttal, Antjie Krog, Nandipha Mntambo, Lolo Veleko, Nicholas Hlobo, Pieter Dirk Uys, Craig Native, Stoned Cherrie, are a few literary, visual and fashion practitioners who position and question these false identity constructs around race and identity.

²⁴ The Dalia Lama was refused an entry visa to South Africa to participate in a peace conference in Cape Town, days before the SSAFW shows, with the then finance minister (Trevor Manuel) questioning the public outcry.

²⁵ In this sense Rundle’s work reflects recent investigations into the built environment and the dressed body. See *Fashion and Modernity*, eds. C. Breward & C. Evans, Berg, Oxford, 2005 and Lucy Orta’s *Refuge Wear & Body Architecture* projects.

²⁶ *Bricolage*, is a term used in several disciplines, among them visual arts and literature to refer to the construction or creation of a work from a diverse

range of things which happen to be available, or a work created by such a process. In a paper "Dividuality in Fashion Design: An Ethnography of the Dress" to be presented at the 4th International Conference on Design Principles and Practices in Chicago, February 2010, Caroline Taylor of Wits Anthropology Dept, Johannesburg expands upon how "through the imagination of the designer as bricoleur, the partible nature of the design team - artist, pattern cutter, machinist, model, photographer and client is distilled and illuminated. The anthropological lens refracts positionality, centrifugal and centripetal forces, and energies, voice(s), mood(s) and the logistics of a constructivist design field."

²⁷ Annie E. Coombes explores the impact of this event in a number of group exhibitions and artists' work in *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2003: pp 243-278

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Trade Routes: History+Geography, Johannesburg Biennale 1998, and Africa Remix, Johannesburg 2008 were two large scale exhibitions that highlighted some of the issues explored by South African artists.

³⁰ Andrés Mario Zervigón. 'The Weave of Memory: *Screen* in post-apartheid South Africa'. *Art Journal*, Spring 2002

³¹ Pierre Nora, 'Between History and Memory'. *Representations*, Spring 1989, pp 7-24. Nora describes this break with the past as crucial to the value of memory in a modern society.

³² Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity & Deathliness*. Yale University Press, New Haven and New York, 2003. Evans describes these traces of the past that surface in the present like the return of the repressed. Fashion designers call up these ghosts of modernity and offer a paradigm that is different from the historian's paradigm, remixing fragments of the past into something new. Because traumatic memories are experienced with a sense of great vividness and immediacy they seem to retain an indelible imprint of the past and thereby an incontestable link with history in an era of simulation. Traumatic experience disengages the subject from the historical agency at the same time as it registers historical change.

³³ Sarah Nuttal, *Entanglement*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2009. Chapter 5 (pp. 108- 131) looks at how a contemporary 'pick-and-mix' culture is developing in this first post-apartheid generation.

³⁴ Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) analyses the liminality of hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety.

³⁵ Barbara Vinken in *Maison Martin Margiela, '20' The Exhibition*. The Fashion Museum of the Province of Antwerp, MoMu, 2008: 118, describes deconstruction in fashion as "philosophically speaking deconstruction entails the demonstration of constructedness". Further writings on the notion of deconstruction in fashion can be found in *Deconstruction Fashion: The making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes*, Fashion Theory 2 no 1 (1998: 25-50).

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Erica de Greef is Head of Research at LISOF, Johannesburg and is currently completing a Masters Degree in Fine Arts at Wits University, Johannesburg. Her areas of research include fashion curation, fashion theory and the history of South African fashion.