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Creative Non-fiction and Photography

An Insightful Partnership

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ABSTRACT

A key issue in debates about creative writing as an academic discipline is the question whether practice-based research can contribute to knowledge. Creativity has traditionally been valued for its innate qualities that transcend reason and method. The practice of creative writing today has evolved from a craft that can be taught into a discipline with its own research frameworks. This paper outlines how a recent practice-based creative writing PhD took a multi-frame approach to research to write the creative non-fiction thesis: a cultural biography of a portrait of French actress, Sarah Bernhardt. It presents a selection of findings to suggest that poetics as an interpretive frame can offer new insights into the relationship between creative non-fiction and photographic history when drawing on phenomenology and material culture studies. As well as defining these terms and introducing the key thinkers who inform them, the paper proposes that these insights help to define creative non-fiction's place within the discipline of creative writing.

KEYWORDS

Creative writing, creative non-fiction, cultural biography, photographic history, phenomenology, material culture studies.

INTRODUCTION

A key issue in debates about creative writing as an academic discipline is the question whether practice-based research can contribute to knowledge. Creativity has traditionally been considered an innate skill that is “beyond methodological thought” (Cook 2013: 200). The practice of creative writing today has evolved from a craft that can be taught into a discipline with its own research frameworks which offer new insights (Webb et al. 2011: 192). I recently completed a practice-based creative writing PhD. In the creative non-fiction thesis, I wrote the cultural biography of a photographic portrait of Sarah Bernhardt that was taken at the London studio of Australian photographer, Walter Barnett, in 1910. Taking a multi-frame, or combined phenomenological and material approach to research, enabled me to gain insights into the relationship between the form of creative non-fiction and my subject areas of photographic history and material culture history. I explored these different ways of envisioning the past, or different forms of “memory,” through the figures of Bernhardt and Barnett, to get a fuller sense of their histories. My work forms part of an expanding definition of “knowledge” in the contemporary academy whereby one conceptualizes the practice of writing as a rich, interwoven process, that offers insights into one’s narrative form.

The combined methodology helped me to see, for instance, that there is a sympathy between my narrative form and my subject. Creative non-fiction and analogue photography are highly contingent forms of memory that create a sense of the real. Both have been perceived to occupy the space between art and information and are difficult to categorize. Through the process of making the thesis, however, I found this generic ambiguity to be a source of power. Secondly, taking a combined approach to research helped me to identify how, in creative non-fiction, one cedes control of the subject to dramatic effect. The form naturally adapted to reflect the unpredictable nature of a photographic archive that might otherwise have been off-putting to the researcher. My direct experience with the portrait also helped me to see that the change in its material form over its lifetime reflected a change in its status as an object of memory. The discovery shaped my narrative approach: I looked at each period in the portrait’s life through the lens of its material make-up. The approach offered me a new angle on the portrait’s history and gave me a new “way in” to

describe how I experienced it and to consider how it was experienced in the past. The insight therefore helped me to narrow the distance between my subject and the reader.

In the final chapter of the thesis, for instance, the analogue portrait is digitized. For scholars in the field of visual anthropology the process of digitization is a process of translation. In any translation there is an understanding that the two representations are not the same. The process of digitization made me aware that my narrative was also a form of translation. In much the same way as the digitization of the image has led to a new awareness of the material original, I was highly aware of the balance between the personal and cultural revelations, simply because the portrait was there.

Finally, my combined methodology drew attention to a key temporal feature of the analogue photograph and creative non-fiction’s origins: both depict experiences that existed at a particular moment in time and space that cannot be repeated. I now see that to gain insights into a photographic portrait one has to consider it at each of the stages in its “life”. Similarly, the form of creative non-fiction reflects how we need to situate ourselves in space and over time as readers and individuals.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND MATERIALITY: A COMBINED APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY AND CREATIVE WRITING RESEARCH

In the creative non-fiction thesis, I set out to show how genre, form, and subject, can work together to offer a mutually insightful partnership. To achieve this aim, I took a multi-frame approach to research. I propose that poetics—“a set of principles for the making of a text” (Greenberg 2018: 526)—as an interpretive frame, can offer new insights when drawing on phenomenology and material culture studies. I engaged with my subjects as a creative writer and took a phenomenological approach to narrative in the form of creative non-fiction. I also drew on both phenomenological and material approaches to photographic research.

Here I set out the definitions for these terms and introduce the key thinkers who inform them. These critics include John Hartsock, in the field of narrative literary journalism; Elizabeth Edwards in visual anthropology; Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai in cultural biography; and Bruno Latour in social

anthropology. There is a sympathy of approach between these scholars: all share the desire to record the concrete details of lived experiences as they are or were directly perceived. They take an interest in the way that the material objects we make, and use, can offer insights into our cultural lives.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION (OR, NARRATIVE LITERARY JOURNALISM)

In the thesis I define creative non-fiction, or narrative literary journalism, following John Hartsock, as a “narra-descriptive” form of writing, in which personal and cultural revelations are intertwined (Hartsock 2016: 3). By personal revelation, I mean the way I experience things and respond to them. By cultural revelation, I refer to the things that I find. I took a phenomenological approach to subjectivity, which means that I adopted a reflexive, first-person narrative stance, and recorded my process of discovery and interpretation.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND MATERIALITY: A COMBINED APPROACH

My approach follows the definition of phenomenology offered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who held the view that phenomenology “offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may provide” (Merleau-Ponty 2005: preface). But I make a claim for a combined approach, drawing on elements of both phenomenology and materiality, because this enabled me to gain a thorough insight into my subjects.

By definition, materialism takes the ontological stance that “reality is ultimately independent of the subject who is engaged in the act of perception and mental phenomena caused by the operation of material or physical agencies” (OED 2001). In phenomenology, on the other hand, one finds the stance that “For something to count as real it must, in principle, be something we can encounter” (Zahavi 2019: ch. 2). In the creative part of the thesis, I combined these two approaches to photographic research by looking at how the portrait was produced, preserved and circulated. I also considered how it was creatively experienced as an object of memory throughout its “life”.

The description of a combined approach is taken

from the anthropologist Daniel Miller who describes the work of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, as combining an interest in material practice with a phenomenological exploration of how our interactions with the objects we encounter with can shape us as social beings (Miller 2005: 6). The work of Edmund Husserl is also relevant here. My investigation of the portrait drew on Husserl’s observation that “perceptual exploration ... is a bodily activity” (Zahavi 2019: ch. 1).

I drew specifically on the work of the visual anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards who has applied a combined material and phenomenological approach to the field of photographic research. My work in the creative thesis positions itself within the broader subject area of material culture history. I follow the definition of material culture given by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello as “objects that have meaning for the people who produce and own ... use and consume them” (Gerritsen et al. 2015: 2).

CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY

In the creative non-fiction thesis, I wrote the cultural biography of a photographic portrait of Sarah Bernhardt. I define cultural biography following Igor Kopytoff as a research process in which one looks at an object as “a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and re-classified into culturally constituted categories” (Appadurai 2013: ch. 2). Kopytoff’s definition relates to the work of Arjun Appadurai and his book *The Social Life of Things*. Appadurai identified that the “commodity situation” of an object is never fixed and changes throughout its lifetime.

The anthropological scholarship supported me in my inquiry. It gave me a firm base from which to explore my subject, and then to add my own creative layer to the work. I charted the life story of the portrait, from studio to present day, to show how its conceptualization as an object of memory shifted with each changing historical context. Appadurai and Kopytoff taught me that everything I found or could not find on the journey would offer me an insight into the nature of the object. I noticed, for instance, that the portrait was created as a commodity in 1910. It was then hidden away, perhaps lost, for over eighty years until it was discovered in 1997. The portrait was then framed and exhibited at an art gallery as ‘art’ in 2001, and more recently digitized as part of a permanent collection. It is now available online and is also the subject of academic inquiry. By

writing an object biography in the form of creative non-fiction, I showed that the form facilitates the anthropological desire to record the precise nature of the photographic record. The narrative story mode also offers a more personal voice and has helped to take my subject of a figure from the margins of photographic history to a wider audience.

I followed the portrait and recorded my findings. The approach also draws on the scholarship of Bruno Latour who encourages the researcher to “follow the actors themselves” (Latour 2007: 11) to find new and more accurate ways into the past. In his critique of the primacy of the human subject within social anthropology, Latour looks at the agency of the object itself which can operate in its own autonomous way irrespective of human interaction. Latour seeks to “entirely transcend the dualism of subjects and objects” (Miller 2005: 3). Kopytoff, Appadurai and Latour help us to see that “the things that people make, make people” (Miller 2005: 38).

By combining this scholarship and devising my multi-frame approach to research, where I considered my experience as researcher and the way the photograph was experienced in the past, I saw beyond the specific concerns of my narrative form, and the photographic media, to establish new interdisciplinary connections between them. These insights help to define creative non-fiction’s place within the discipline of creative writing and form the basis of discussion in this paper.

HOW DOES A PRACTICE-BASED CREATIVE WRITING PHD CONTRIBUTE TO KNOWLEDGE? AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL JOURNEY.

In the creative thesis I took a personal journey into the life of a portrait to see if this could offer insights into a photographer who remained in the margins of photographic history. For me, the narrative story mode of creative non-fiction offered a more intimate voice and acknowledged subjectivity which has arguably made my subject more accessible to a wider audience. Researching the historical development of my form helped me to see that creative non-fiction is engaging because, from its beginning, the form sought to reflect the personal details of an uncertain world. The contingent nature of the form has been an advantage, but it has also been a limitation. The form has held an ambiguous place in the academy because, much like the analogue photograph, it is not art or information in the conventional sense. Through the

process of making the thesis, however, I have found that the epistemic and creative value of both the narrative form and photographic media is evident in their material form. They are not art or information and can be both [1].

When creative writing programs began in the academy after World War 2, one of the first questions raised was, “Can creative writing be taught?” (Dawson 2015: 1). This question was not unprecedented. It was asked in England some thirty years earlier when, in the department of English Literature, scholars asked: “Can English be taught?” (Dawson 2015: 6). Literature was viewed as an instructional subject, and it was argued that “literature is a good thing if only we can bring it to operate on young minds” (Dawson 2015: 6). Literary scholar, Paul Dawson, explains that students were first taught philology, or historical and linguistic scholarship. With the rise of industrialization, however, the desire for literature to be fostered as an artform within the academy grew (Dawson 2015: 6, 37-39). The study of philology was replaced by New Criticism, or the study of “literature as literature,” and by the early to mid-20th century a divide between literature and literary criticism had formed. The critique of texts was duly recognized as a measurable output and English became a discipline in its own right (Dawson 2015: 6-7). For the discipline of creative writing, however, defining how one measures one’s output, or contribution to knowledge, has been harder to achieve. Creativity has been valued as an inherent and “unconscious process” (Cook 2013: 200). Indeed, the concept of creativity as an innate skill, which made it difficult for creative writing to find a home in the academy, is the very same concept of creativity that made it difficult for narrative literary journalism to be accepted as literature. Looking at its distinctly American heritage, literary scholar John Hartsock explains that this difficulty dates to the early 19th century, when literature was considered as an artform reflecting eternal and universal values. While literature was elevated to the realm of art, narrative literary journalism (and mainstream journalism more generally) was limited by its contingent nature and viewed as that which “soars but little higher in our intellectual flights than the column of the daily paper” (Hartsock 2000: 210). The form’s acceptance suffered with the rise of modern literary studies when the concept of literary genius was feted as “transcendental” (Hartsock 2000: 217). The very introduction of New Criticism into the academy,

where literature was viewed as an artform that “exists unto itself,” meant that a text acknowledging its origins of production could not be viewed as art. Literature, explains Hartsock, had taken on a level of importance that journalism never attempted to achieve (Hartsock 2000: 217-218).

Narrative literary journalism emerged in reaction to mainstream journalism in the 1890s and sought to provide a more subjective and honest account of events (Hartsock 2000: 23). The form rose in response to the need for an engaged and far more personal account of the news that made sense of change in an increasingly “indeterminate world” (Hartsock 2000: 70). Its evolution as a form reflected the technological changes of the 19th century and new theories of relativity, which had led to a sense of alienation and uncertainty about the fundamental nature of reality. Literary journalists understood that one could not fully capture the events of the phenomenal world. They sought to avoid what Hartsock refers to as the “closure” of text, or the depiction of an event with a fixed beginning, middle and end, because they felt that this did not represent the “inconclusive” nature of everyday experience (Hartsock 2000: 48). Here a subjective account came far closer to capturing the fluid nature of things which were inconsistent and incomplete; a reflexive and transparent approach to research highlighted the understanding that all information is shaped by the way we research it as individuals (Hartsock 2000: 52).

The narrative form was redefined by Tom Wolfe in the 1970s under the banner of New Journalism. Wolfe and his contemporaries, such as Joan Didion and Truman Capote, expanded the scope of the genre by putting themselves at the centre of the story (Boynton 2005: xii). They channelled their character’s thoughts and introduced narrative techniques such as “scene by scene” construction and “varying points of view” to engage their readers in stories from real life (Boynton 2005: xvi). In the more recent wave of literary journalists, or the New New Journalists, such as Susan Orleans and Jon Krakauer, an interest in “the way one gets the story” has evolved (Boynton 2005: xiii). These writers not only probe the minds of their characters, but they also immerse themselves in their day-to-day lives. They show an interest in the “minutiae of the ordinary” (Boynton 2005: xvii). All three main phases in the history of narrative literary journalism share the desire to capture the details of phenomenal experience in a direct and natural way. They seek to narrow the gap between the subject and

narrator to engage the reader in topics they might otherwise overlook (Boynton 2005: xxvii).

The emergence of narrative literary journalism within the academy is harder to locate. The form’s history is marked by absence rather than presence (Hartsock 2000: 207). The appraisal of journalism at the turn of the 20th century is reminiscent of the critique of photography in the 1850s. Many of photography’s early critics shared the view that while painting is a thoughtful process, “photography only replaces artistic labour, not the work of imagination, conception or vision” (Costello 2019: 13). Similarly, a literary commentator wrote in 1906: “Journalism attempts to counterfeit the tones of the higher, but the result is counterfeit. So long as journalism attends to its own (material) business, it is not only harmless, but useful; but as soon as it would usurp what is organically above it, it becomes hurtful” (Hawthorne 1906: 166-67).

The historical development of creative non-fiction and analogue photography tells me that both have occupied an uneasy place between art and information, in the museum and academy respectively, which has led to a sense of uncertainty. The diversity of phrases used to describe the narrative form, such as creative non-fiction, narrative non-fiction, and narrative literary journalism, tells us that it has meant different things to people in different times and places. Only a few years back Hartsock claimed that he is “not confident that there can ever be a single designating terminology for the form” (Hartsock 2016: 3). Similarly, visual anthropologists say that the status of photographs has a degree of uncertainty to it. Their “lack of clear originality as historical objects, means that their status within the value systems that construct museum objects is at best confused if not contaminated” (Edwards 2014: 5). In the museum context, the evidence that “something has been” means that it can also be overlooked or misfiled (Edwards 2014: 4).

Through the course of my research I observed, however, that this placeless-ness, or ambiguity of form and media, can be a source of power. In *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, *A Hidden Inheritance*, for instance, ceramicist Edmund De Waal traces the story of his inherited collection of netsuke, small Japanese carvings, to tell his family history. This acclaimed work of creative non-fiction silently extends its reach beyond the single category of

biography, to the history, and art history, sections of the bookshop. Similarly, visual anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards asks of photographs, “Are they objects? Documents? Artistic statements: or mere bits of information? Of course,” she says, “they are all these things.” Edwards argues that it is this “indeterminate status” that makes the photograph a “highly flexible platform” for multiple interpretations. As a result, the photograph can ‘become [an] unquestioned and unnoticed part of the modern museum experience (Edwards 2014: 14). Relatedly, Sarah Bernhardt’s enduring name is due, in part, to her ability to invent and reinvent herself. Here, however, Bernhardt’s image was highly visible: her strength lay in the way she used photography to construct her idea of spectacle in which her on and off-stage personas were largely indistinguishable.

Each contribute to the knowledge of their fields by extending and redefining their media in silent but inventive ways. To be receptive to the idiosyncratic insights the photographic media can offer, however, is far more challenging than it might appear. While I share the ontological stance of my form and acknowledge “the existence of an external reality only perceived through the fallibilities of consciousness” (Hartsock 2000: 47), embracing the fallibilities and uncertainties I found in the photographic record entailed a marked shift in my way of thinking. I learned to regard setbacks such as missing or inconclusive dates as vital forms of information about the fragmentary nature of the photographic archive.

Similarly, I have observed that when one shifts one’s thinking to conceptualize the analogue photograph, or work of creative non-fiction, as a process, the divide between art and information does not limit their artistic or epistemic potential but rather emphasizes how neither are art or information in the conventional sense and can be both.

Creative non-fiction and analogue photography are ambiguous forms of memory because both are committed to an “open-ended present” (Hartsock 2000: 228). Both pay attention to the granular details of perception and remind us of the limits of individual vision. Neither media can be reduced to a singular definition because they reflect the nature of an indeterminate world (Hartsock 2000: 228). Creative non-fiction is a form of writing that is dedicated to “three-dimensional reporting” (Hartsock 2000: 241). For me, it offers the equivalent

in narrative depth to the conceptualization of the photograph as a three-dimensional object: in each media one sees beyond the two-dimensional image or record of an event to the intricate details of lived experience.

In creative non-fiction and analogue photography, the creative and epistemic value is evident in their material makeup. When one considers the photograph as a nuanced process—the thought for the shot, the preparation, choice of materials—one begins to see that the creativity of the photograph is intrinsic to its form. In the words of photographic historian Diarmuid Costello, it is not art “despite being a photograph”, but “because it is a photograph” (Costello 2019: 5). If one considers the Bernhardt portrait, this artistry is clear: the negative, photographic process, paper, and hand-crafted object contains the evidence of creative thought. The material form also contains knowledge about the historical intentions of the photographer. Similarly, if one considers a work of creative non-fiction, the evidence of the creative process is apparent. As literary scholars Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien have noted: “it is particularly in this form [of creative non-fiction] that the mechanisms, techniques and methodological imperatives of research become visible” (Webb et al. 2011: 196).

The creative and epistemic value of my creative thesis is evident in the way it was made and its material form. I followed the current National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) research benchmark for creative writing and propose that my work contributes to knowledge through the “process of artistic practice” (NAWE 2018). My work was not “primarily a vehicle for what may be termed ‘factual’ knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brought about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience” (Neal 2018). I drew on the observation that “writing ... begins at the point of practice; and practice begins with an idea, a context, a set of questions and body of knowledge” (Webb et al. 2011: 195).

For me, the very exercise of making the thesis led to a rich material process of discovery. Edmund De Waal’s approach to family history demonstrates my approach. De Waal extends the way he thinks about his pots to the way he thinks about words in a completely effortless way; he draws the reader’s attention to the process of writing as if he were

throwing a pot on to the wheel. For De Waal, words and pots both occupy a physical space beside him in the phenomenal world. In the final pages of his book, he writes: “It is not just things that carry stories with them. Stories are a kind of thing too” (De Waal 2011: 349). He is also open about how his process of making the book has led to a sense of personal discovery: “I stumble to a halt. I no longer know if this book is about my family, or memory, or myself” (De Waal 2011: 342).

In the creative thesis I adapted De Waal’s narrative technique to create my own unique blend of photographic history, material culture history and personal journey. I approached my topic as a creative writer and made an object of my own. Unlike a standard work of history or cultural studies, however, the way that I worked was evident in the text: I told the reader what I was doing and why at all times. With my methodological approach firmly in place from the start I had the “flexibility in practice” (Webb et al. 2011: 196) to gain fresh insights into the portrait and the professional histories of Walter Barnett and Sarah Bernhardt. As the journey proceeded, I drew on a range of approaches from art history, visual anthropology, photographic history, and my own personal experience as the researcher.

In other words, my technique was a form of discovery [2]. The very practice of making the thesis showed me where I needed to go next and why.

Throughout my research, I found that the generic ambiguities of creative non-fiction empowered me to reflect on the nature of the narrative form and analogue photography, which capture and reflect the phenomenal details of an uncertain world. I now see that the creative and epistemic value of creative non-fiction and analogue photography are intrinsic to their material form. By looking principally at the process of production and considering my work as a material object, my work contributes to knowledge by offering new insights into my subjects and the form of creative non-fiction. These insights into creative non-fiction help to define the form’s place within the discipline of creative writing.

STRUCTURE AND STORY-TELLING CHOICES: KEY INSIGHTS

In the process of making the creative thesis, I made several discoveries. These include how I could shape but never control the events of the story. The observation helped me to see the dramatic potential

of the form. I also discovered how my observation of the changing material form of the portrait helped me to narrow the gap between my subject and the reader. Additionally, I discovered that while the form of creative non-fiction and the photograph capture something “that has been,” they are also both a “complex temporal response” (Edwards 2012: 21) to an event.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION: THE DRAMATIC PROCLIVITY OF THE FORM

John Hartsock argues that in creative non-fiction the use of personal and cultural revelation “works on a spectrum or continuum, that, if taken to extremes, results in either an increasingly alienated objectified world on the one hand, or, on the other, a solipsistic subjectivity in the most personal of memoirs.” The personal insights, he says, offer “a different dimension of the cultural” and the form aims to narrow the gap between the narrator, characters and reader” (Hartsock 2016: 3–4). In my work, which tells the life story of a portrait held in a public photographic archive, I concede that I needed to “modulate” the balance between the personal and cultural revelation to aim for “that perfect space of distance,” as Philip Gerard puts it, between myself as narrator, the reader, and the text (Gerard 1999: 18–19, 68). I also say, however, that the very struggle to achieve this balance only emphasized the little power I had over my subject as narrator, for it was always slightly beyond my control. The powerlessness I felt, and expressed, was directly related to the capacity of my narrative form to reflect the nature of an indeterminate world. My experience as researcher and writer helped me to see the dramatic proclivity of the narrative form.

Two examples from the creative practice illustrate this experience. Firstly, at a lunch time seminar during my doctoral studies, I presented the Bernhardt portrait. A scholar in early modern history and theatre saw a connection between my portrait and a painting of Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse by Joshua Reynolds. In the creative thesis, where I relayed this event, I asked: is there anything to the professor’s observation? I brought the reader into the process of discovery by relating how I proposed to answer the question. The further I went, however, the more I realized that I was out of my depth. The Reynolds portrait tapped into the vast area of 18th

century painting about which I knew very little. My narrative stance enabled me to metaphorically put my hand up in the text and share my predicament with the reader. The experience of writing in this way was honest. I did this to establish a contract of trust with the reader and make them a “participant in the performance” (Hartsock 2016: 17).

Secondly, by combining a phenomenological approach to writing with a phenomenological approach to photographic research, I experienced the photographic experience of Sarah Bernhardt’s portrait in a more intimate, probing, and wide-ranging way. When I found that I could not date the portrait, for instance, I experienced a sense of panic. I felt out of control. No matter how hard I tried to describe my findings, there was nothing I could do for I was unable to invent nor change the course of events. It reflected my awareness that in a work of creative non-fiction I am “bound by the data [I] have gathered” (Webb et al. 2011: 197) and I have a duty of care towards my reader to get the information right. By sharing the process of discovery with the reader I acknowledged the limits of the photographic record. When I could not date the portrait, I did not revise my story to fit, but rather made the discovery a feature of the text. I wrote: “I feel like I have been swept up into the crowd, into the spectacle of Bernhardt, and can no longer distinguish between illusion and reality” (Bertram 2000: 160).

The use of personal and cultural revelation enabled me to step in and out of the text to give the reader the bigger picture. I could not control the events of the portrait’s story but only relay them as they unfolded. My experience directly reflected the unpredictable nature of the photographic archive. The narrative form enabled me to respond and record my subject in a direct and dramatic way.

GLASS, PAPER, DIGITAL: NARROWING THE EMPATHETIC DISTANCE

In the creative thesis I used the “life” of Sarah Bernhardt’s portrait as a story-telling device. The portrait formed the plot, and I traced its journey from studio to present day. The material form of the photograph changed over its lifetime from glass to paper to digital, and each has its own individual history. These multiple originals move in multiple directions that are unpredictable. Through a process of observation, writing and re-writing, I made several discoveries that shaped the way I wrote. I found, for

instance, that this change in material form reflected a change in the status of the photograph as an object of memory. The discovery shaped my narrative approach and offered me a new way into the past. I also found that this helped me to narrow the distance between my subject and reader to gain insights into an incomplete photographic archive that might otherwise be off-putting to the researcher.

I considered, for instance, how a transparency of the portrait was given to me as a gift by the curator at the National Portrait Gallery, London. It now sits in my desk drawer as a detached object of historical memory for me. The portrait was first made of glass. For the photographer, Walter Barnett, the glass plate negative once represented an individual memory of a portrait sitting; it was an object that he sold to Sarah Bernhardt as part of his business. The photograph’s changing material form—through the decades and as it changes hands—drew attention to a shift in the status of the photograph as an object of memory. Barnett’s glass plate negative represented his experience of the moment. It also represented Bernhardt’s appearance at that time. The paper print then produced and circulated more widely, became Bernhardt’s analogue version of the memory, and the wider collective memory when digitized as a part of museum collections. The shifting material form demonstrated the anthropological insight that the perception of its role changes from one moment to the next, from owner to owner, from one social and cultural context to another.

As I wrote and re-wrote the text, I constantly assessed these shifting perspectives and questioned their significance in the desire to understand what the portrait represented, which added to my process of discovery. The process built. I read widely on my topic and attempted several drafts. I asked myself: how could I use this observation in the text? By the third draft of the first chapter, I decided to make the material form an ongoing principle of the thesis. I viewed the portrait and the contexts in which it existed through the prism of its material form. I studied books on the history of glass, for instance, to gain insights into its significance to the story. This formed part of my research process for each subsequent chapter. In other words, the process of writing was where I ‘tested’ (Cook 2013: 205) my ideas.

I found that this consideration of the changing material form offered me a concrete “way in” to

consider how individuals historically experienced street life when the shot was taken. Glass as a material, for instance, was not only crucial to the photographic trade, but it also fostered a new culture of looking, observing and examining. In the thesis I included a photograph of the photographer, Walter Barnett, standing in his studio and wrote: “This [new culture of looking] makes us wonder, when Barnett looked outside did someone walking through the park look back? Did he catch his own reflection in the glass that day as he walked to the window to have his picture taken?” (Bertram 2020: 19). The material form helped me to narrow the distance between past and present, but also between reader and subject, for an “exchange of subjectivities” (Hartsock 2000: 67) because the reader can relate to the experience and therefore becomes an active participant in the text. Glass as a material also gave me something tangible. It added to the multi-sensory nature of the work and drew my attention to the fragility of the photographic archive. I wrote: “I start to feel as if I am looking at this moment in 1910 not only through the prism of a photograph but, more specifically, through 19th century glass ... I have to tread with care” (Bertram 2020: 20). The process was a mutually shaping one: my technique of using the life of the photographic portrait as a story-telling device led to the discovery of the changing material form which, in turn, shaped my narrative approach and helped me to find my voice as a writer [3].

An analysis of the changing material form can also lead to a process of personal discovery for the researcher. In the final chapter of the thesis, for instance, the portrait is digitized. The very act of digitally encoding an object teaches you to look at it in a completely new way. In examining a photograph, for instance, you become aware that it is a three-dimensional object with a front and a back. For me, probing the nature of the digital translation also had the slightly unnerving effect of narrowing the distance between myself and my subject. I could not extricate myself from the moment to view my subject clearly. At first, I had thought that the chapter would be reasonably straightforward to write: it was going to be about cultural memory in the digital age and the importance of scholarly preservation. Through readings on cybernetic history, however, I became aware that the translation from analogue to digital not only affected the portrait, but it also affected me. I wrote: ‘I visualize myself within the database ... unable to gain the perspective I had in the past. For I have been digitized too’ (Bertram 2020: 194) [4].

The observation of the digital form made me re-evaluate my evolving relationship with the portrait I followed. I began to see how attached I had become. In keeping with an object-led approach, I chose not to hide my response to a journey that I did not want to end, and a memory that I did not want to lose, but, rather, to build it into the closing pages of the thesis to offer an open, reflexive account, of the ambiguous relationship between people and things.

I discovered that the temporal and spatial disorientation reflected my desire to hold onto the original moment the portrait was taken. I cannot do this. One might therefore say that when we describe the photographic object digitally, and when we take account of its experience over its lifetime, we reveal the shaping subjectivity of the people it has interacted with and its rhetoric of value in much the same way that the form of creative non-fiction reveals the shaping subjectivity of the narrator and their aesthetics of experience.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION: A COMPLEX TEMPORAL RESPONSE

The creative non-fiction thesis is structured around the day Sarah Bernhardt had her picture taken. While I trace the trajectory of the portrait on its journey across the world, I always return to this single day in 1910.

Throughout the course of my research, I discovered that the choice of a single portrait on a single day draws attention to a key temporal feature of the analogue photograph and creative non-fiction’s origins: both depict experiences “located at the intersection of a unique, distinctive and one-of-a-kind time and space that cannot be replicated” (Hartsock 2016: 28)

On the one hand, this accords with the belief that all our experiences are grounded in the phenomenal world, and that this world prompts our perception of it [5]. On the other, I now see that the single shot on a single day emphasizes the unique temporal nature of both forms of memory. While making the creative non-fiction thesis, I drew on Elizabeth Edwards’s book, *The Camera as Historian*, which offers a study of the photographic survey movement which took place in England from 1885–1915. The survey sought to provide a permanent, visual record of England’s past (Edwards 2012: 2) and one of Edwards’s central findings is that these photographs were far more “complex temporal responses” than

has been historically recognized. The photographers, she argues, were involved in “self-conscious acts of memorialisation.” The way they made their photographs indicates that the survey was “not merely about a loss of the past, but about a loss of a future that might have embraced and been moulded by its past” (Edwards 2012: 21). Her observation helped me to see that the Bernhardt portrait I followed was also a complex temporal response to a sitting. By drawing on Edwards’s scholarship from within visual anthropology, and tracing the portrait’s life story, I found that the portrait looks back to the eighteenth-century influences of Joshua Reynolds, but also anticipates a 21st century interest in the staging of celebrity, ageing and un-idealized beauty. I concluded that Barnett was highly perceptive of the professional female performer and that his work remains relevant today.

The complex temporality of the Bernhardt portrait also drew attention to the temporality of creative non-fiction itself. The narrative form emphasizes a chronology or “the passage of time” and reflects the way we engage with the world and ourselves as individuals. Narrative helps to “make sense of our complex and ambiguous world” (Hartsock 2016: 9-10). My experience with the portrait reminded me of a comment by the philosopher Charles Taylor with respect to our development as individuals. Taylor’s perspective is particularly relevant for a study on the nature of portraiture. He says narrative helps us to situate ourselves in the continuum of space—past, present, and future: “What I am, has to be understood as what I have become ... we have to move back and forward to make a real assessment”

(Taylor 1989: 47). Similarly, to understand the Bernhardt portrait I had to consider it at each of the stages of its “life”.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how in a recent practice-based creative writing PhD, I wove genre, form, and subject together to show how they can offer a mutually insightful partnership. It has presented a selection of findings to suggest that poetics as an interpretive frame can offer new insights into the relationship between creative non-fiction and photographic history, when drawing on phenomenology and material culture history. The paper has demonstrated how combining these approaches and establishing fresh connections between scholars in the fields of narrative literary journalism and visual and social anthropology, who share an interest in recording the concrete details of lived experience as they are or were directly perceived, can lead to a rich process of discovery for the creative writing researcher. It has suggested that the insights gained into the narrative form help to define creative non-fiction’s place within the discipline of creative writing and have, in some cases, provided the scope for future research.

I have noticed, for instance, that there are parallels between the form of creative non-fiction and the ancient Greek chorus. One might explore this by looking at parallels between the chorus in drama and the use of narrator in written art forms and analysing where this appears in works of non-fiction. This has not, to my knowledge, been explored in depth and offers a springboard for further inquiry into the form of creative non-fiction.

ENDNOTES

[1] In *On Photography, A Philosophical Inquiry*, Diarmuid Costello also argues that when we conceptualize photography as a ‘distinctive process,’ the photograph has artistic and epistemic value (Costello 2019: 5-8).

[2] The American critic, Mark Schorer, wrote: ‘technique is the means by which the writer’s experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and, finally, of evaluating it’ (Schorer 1948: 67).

[3] ‘To conceive of writing as discovery and technique implies the necessity of re-writing and it calls for a practice of writing informed by extensive reading. If these conditions are met, then I think it is appropriate to call writing a research method ... The discoveries initiated by technique can be summarized in a metaphor of “finding a voice” (Cook 2013: 204-5).

[4] In *How We Became Posthuman, Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Katherine Hayles claims that we are all part of a “cybernetic circuit that splices [our] will, desire and perception into a distributed cognitive system in which represented bodies are joined with enacted bodies through mutating and flexible machine interfaces” (Hayles 1999: xiv).

[5] One could argue that it is also a subtle response to the claim that all text is fiction, and a nod to Daniel Miller's observation that even in our desire to 'transcend the apparently obvious' we still express ourselves 'in material form' (Miller 2015: 1).

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