There came a time when I could no longer tell a story about myself and my life. My identity had slipped away from me. I could not get it back until I was able to invent a new story that fit the present situation.

Stories are a strong builder of identity. The loss of one’s stories can be connected to the loss of one’s idealized images or roles. Clothing and fashion are both used to create these images and roles. In extreme situations, like war, the altering or stripping of clothes are severe and horrific ways of stealing a person’s identity.

I am focusing on three characteristics in the shaping of identity: decoration, rules and process. They are used in the creation of the narratives, images, and roles used for the establishing of identity. My interest lies in distinguishing the characteristics in the connection between narrative, identity, fashion and clothing.

In his book Fashion Classics, Michael Carter references the Victorian text Sartor Resartus, by the nineteen century author, Thomas Carlyle. In this text, he writes about clothing and how it can not be only considered as functional, because it would result in “mere externalities”. Carlyle sees clothing as ornament, decoration, and as being “the first spiritual want of a barbarous man”. This is one of the first references to clothing as an anthropological matter.
In this case, Clothing refers to the spirituality of man. Later in history, the idea of fashion becomes closely connected to time. Borrowing the idea from Carlyle, of ornament and decoration being a spiritual act, spiritual here being something that is a need outside the utilitarian and of a purpose that is not directly life-sustaining. In the act of ornamentation and decoration a certain contextual meaning can be added through the use of narrative. An example today is the different meaning of the colour and lacing of Dr. Martens boots. The connection between the narrative and the decoration is closed to someone not sharing the knowledge of the narratives. It can be seen as a sharing and hiding game and a group and identity building through the combination of the decoration and narratives.

If fashion is connected to time, it is also related to process. Rules, on the other hand, are the tools which we use to try to control anything that is in process. Rules can be seen as a starting point in experiments, plays, and games.

Another characteristics I have been elaborating with is collage, it has a close relation to image, the possibility of cracking of the image, and the possibility of inventing new stories from the old. I need to investigate more in collage and assemblages techniques as part of the shaping of identity and in the relation to narrative, fashion and clothing.

As I have stated earlier, fashion and clothing are areas of non-verbal communication. Clothing has its greatest power prior to conversations taking place. Story-telling has a great power as an identity marker, and can overshadow any clothing. However, there are certain moments when the individual’s stories about themselves, and their lives, are not at play. Clothing gains its strength as non-verbal communication found in groups, and in the flow of people.

It's interesting when the impact of image/role, fashion/clothing, becomes translated into words. This is usually experienced in the passing comment. Different kinds of these comments exist; the kind that are used to put you down and to question; those that are related to curiosity, and seek understanding; and those that wish convey positive feedback. Positive feedback is something we use in our social interaction with friends, when we give positive response to what our friends and family are wearing. This kind of feedback can also be directed at strangers in certain situations, and is usually understood as being friendly.

The comments I refer to are those that are provoked by what you wear, and are given by strangers in the street. It's fascinating how something worn, can so strongly provoke a feeling that a verbal statement has to be made.

The most common reactions are not even verbal, but are gestures like the opinionated “thumbs up”, or “thumbs down”. The comments and gestures that I prefer mainly state the obvious.

Once, in Berlin, I was wearing a skirt I had made, a red skirt with two holes cut out at the bottom. A man in the street saw me, pointed with his finger to the holes and then cried out, happily, “Löcher!” Some time later, in Sweden, my three year old niece, acted similarly, pointed at the holes, actually put her finger through one, and exclaimed “Hål!” (hole!).

I enjoy these reactions, not only in that they are non-opinionated, but as an interaction with me wearing something. The passing comment can be seen as confirmation and acknowledgement, like a verbal mirror. I regard these interactions as mutual, and I use my own smile and gaze to confirm that I have received what was said.

I regard the passing comments as witnesses of my existence. Furthermore, they are connected to storytelling, but relate more to the potential of a story to emerge.
As part of my doctoral work in 2006, I have been wearing a mirror brooch. While wearing the brooch, I have received many passing comments. Here are a few of them:

A 13 or 14 year old girl on the tram, with a purple and black Mohawk, states: A mirror! (where upon she immediately looks at herself in the mirror.)

Walking along Vasagatan in Göteborg, a man points at my brooch, smiles and says. The sun!

The mirror broche has provoked many reactions, not only positive ones. Some people react negatively when they see themselves in the mirror. Some make a short, intense analysis of why I am wearing it.

The brooch has also provoked many questions. For example:

Is it an instrument?
Is it for protection?

A man working in the cashier of a grocery store says to me, while paying for my groceries, “Aha, it will show different people in the brooch, well, then one can not say it is handsome, nice.” (meaning, that he could not flatter himself, because at that point he was reflected in the mirror.)

I have noticed that the Mirror is mostly commented on by men, some even think it is a device for me to meet single men. I have also noticed that it is easier to make verbal contact with strangers, when I am wearing the brooch.

One of my favourite comments comes when I meet two men at Gamla Masthugget, and one of them states:

Here comes a mirror girl!

This comment is appealing because it provokes ideas of stories that could be tied to the Mirror girl. The Mirror girl may have a secret identity and unusual strengths like Spiderman, for example.

Clothing and accessories are related to a possible narratives and possible identities.

The process, in relation to time, has the three characteristics of time, the past, future, and present. Storytelling and narrative deal with memory and reshape history to fit our identity within the moment. Fashion is, on the other hand, connected to our aspirations, hopes for the future, and work as an affirmation in the present. In our identity, memory and aspiration meet, and they are both created by our fantasy. We are myth makers and liars, and we need the myths and lies to be acknowledged and witnessed by others.

In the documentary Back, fashion designer Ann-Sofie Back states that she works with “aspirational fashion”. The documentary illustrates that fashion-designers work with the idea of the myth making and lies, not only communicating with others, but also points to the possibility of inspiring oneself by the way of dressing.

The importance of the lie and the invented story, in shaping of identity comes alive in the film Big Fish by Tim Burton.

The expression “big fish” has different meanings. It can mean the really big fish, the trophy that every fisher wants to catch, and also to the stories that fishermen tell each other where the truth of the size of the fish is a bit stretched.

In film, the father has been altering the mundane stories of his life, to become fantastic stories about giants and hidden worlds. His son, who has always listened to the stories over and over again is pretty tired of them, and regards his father to be the greatest liar in his life. He thinks of his father as an escapist, and one who can not handle the reality of life. They meet when the father is on his deathbed, and the father asks the son to tell him the end of the story, he needs to know before he dies. So the son continues his father’s story by adding the last chapter, wherein he becomes the big fish he always was, and is released in the sea by the son.

Clothing reveals something about who we are, and who we wish to be. In the film, the lies and the stories not only tell something about the father, the stories are the
father. Following this, and from one perspective, clothing can be said to be who we are.

The narratives, or possible narratives, are important aspects of fashion design. It is also connected to the shaping of identity and for this, clothing is used.

In this project, the capture of possible narratives, some perhaps revealed in passing comments, is a goal for the project, and even a guideline for the design of the clothes themselves. In this case, a specific interest in design that provokes interaction between people.

(NOTES)

2 Documentary by Stefania Malmsten/Maria BenSaid/Göran Olsson, www.pipel.se
3 by Esbjörn Guwallius, www.film.nu