A History of Synchronized Swimming

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Proem

No fish, no fowl, nor other creature whatsoever that hath any living or being, wether in the depth of the sea or superficies of the water, swimmeth upon his back, man only excepted.2

From articles-fragments-scrounging-primary evidence-sources-references-facts-propaganda3 (the above quotation dated 1595 is the earliest of my fragments), I assemble here a history of synchronized swimming, or at the least, I compose an essay in which I ponder synchronized swimming at the same time as I tread against the flow4 of the established methodology of “sport history”

Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy—the unavoidable obstacles of their passions. . . . The genealogist. . . must be able to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats—the basis of all beginnings, atavisms and heredities. . . . Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. [It] identifies the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely—the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us. . . .5

On genealogy, historical methodology, “items” and “pondering,” I am influenced by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin insisted, “I have nothing to say, only to show.”6 Benjamin kept thousands of word passages, poetry pieces and “wish images” that he juxtaposed, fit, and disassembled to archive the arcades of the world through which he wandered. In her vast study of Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss describes this project of Benjamin:
The case of the ponderer is that of the man who already had the resolution to great problems, but has forgotten them. And now he ponders, not so much about the thing as about his past meditations over it. The thinking of the ponderer stands therefore in the sign of remembering. The memory of the ponderer holds sway over the disordered mass of dead knowledge. Human knowledge is piecework to it in a particularly pregnant sense: namely as the heaping up of arbitrarily cut up pieces, out of which one puts together a puzzle. The allegoricist reaches now here, now there, into chaotic depths that his knowledge places at his disposal, grabs an item out, holds it next to another, and sees whether they fit; that meaning to this image, or this image to that meaning. The result never lets itself be predicted; for there is no natural mediation between the two.

I humbly create my history of synchronized swimming to be Benjaminian.

**Keywords**

IOC; US Olympic Synchro Team; 40-year struggle to gain recognition; Eastern Bloc disapproval; Tracy Ruiz; gold medal possibilities; hard work paying off; poetry in motion-beauty-elegance-music-culture-athleticism; limits undefined.

*And, beyond this, there is all the symbolism of swimming—its imaginative resonances, its mythic potentials.*

**Origin of Synchronized Swimming**

The first tableau. The first tableau was the opening for doorways and windows. Paul Virilio notes that to understand the first tableau, we would have to try to return to the visual unconscious, to the nature of opening and closing.

Although my primary evidence never mentions origins, tableaux or essences, what I really wonder about is the form and essence of synchronized swimming, the history of the making and the naming of that essence. I would like to claim that in its practices and intentions, synchronized swimming has always been the same: a work of art in water. Because it is art, the life in synchronized swimming (the swimmers) must appear as if they are frozen in a moment, “spellbound.”

The performance—all performance—must be framed-by time, by a televisual screen, a pool, the water and so on. The exemplar of this framing in terms of synchronized swimming conceivably occurs at the end of the second part of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia (Festival of Beauty)*, which shows a montage of synchronous divers, summarizing all of the West’s framing notation-obsession.

At least half the material for this sequence was shot after the competition—some of the dives are clearly made in an empty stadium. After a while the angles become more extreme, the editing more abstract. Divers dive, but do not fall. There are at least two shots played in reverse. Bodies fall through the air; other bodies spin and rotate, timeless, as though defying gravity. The last few divers never reach the water, left in the air performing their gyrations.
As it may be, the prototype of synchronized swimming of modern times could be forwarded as the synchronized swimming sequence from the 1984 George Butler film *Pumping Iron II The Women.* In the synchronized swimming series of shots, the Miss Olympia body-building contestant, Carla Dunlap, is centered alone in a neoclassical geometric-design-painted swimming pool that is bordered by faux Greek and Roman statuary (i.e., the Nike of Samothrace). She dances a gracefully slow synchronized swimming routine that mirrors the posing routine she later performs on stage to win the contest. The camera angles exclusively on severe closeups of the swimmer’s arms, hand, goggled face, crotch, and sole of the foot, calling attention not only to the abstractions of femininity/muscularity that are posed throughout the film (i.e., “a woman is a woman and she should look like a woman”; “you can create a beautiful feminine body with body building”; “I hope they [the judges] stick with the feminine look”), but also to the binary of race when the camera consciously pans to the white sole of Dunlap’s black foot during the synchronized swimming routine.

After all, I decide to mark synchronized swimming as a glorious *tableau vivant,* the archetype of which must be Hollywood’s choreography of Esther Williams’ 1950s movies *Million Dollar Mermaid,* *Dangerous When Wet,* *Bathing Beauty,* and *Neptune’s Daughter*—lavish smoke and water spectacles of swimming synchronicity. These filmic depictions of synchronized swimming transcend anything that the Olympic Games have ever produced. Or, maybe not. . . Coca Cola advertisements showcasing musician Robert Palmer and back-up synchronized swimmer-models-singers, as well as various MTV videos that incorporate synchronized swimming into their art, are quite marvelous tableaux, too.

But for now, dive into *my* narrative tableau of a history of synchronized swimming. You can swim in circles, above and below, without having to gulp a linear argument.

**Definition**

“Synchronization: art of becoming one with the other and with the music.”

Or, as Walter Benjamin would say, “Making gestures quotable.” Or, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker’s dialogue recounting *Swimmer and Sun,* a painting by Alex Colville that depicts a swimmer’s head, face-on just breaking the surface of water backgrounded by a fluorescent sun, as the definition of synchronization:

... the head only breaks the surface of the water to announce the bleak truth of the future of the virtual head... here there is no communication, only the floating eye as a liquid sign of the virtual body’s disappearance into an optical after-effect. No social solidarity... And certainly no memory, since the silencing of the mouth intimates the suffocation of the fleshy body below the plane of the water.

Or, Giorgio Agamben’s passage from *The Coming Community* to stand as the definition of synchronization:
What was technologized was not the body but its image. Thus the glorious body of advertising has become the mask behind which the fragile, slight human body continues its precarious existence, and the geometrical splendor of the “girls” covers over the long lines of the naked anonymous bodies in the camps, or the thousands of corpses mangled in the daily slaughter on the highways. 22

Yet, these dystopian definitions are too nihilistic for me. I like synchronized swimming!

Literature Review

(to know all that is here:)
all is here, even the gods
who have climbed out of their forms
to reproduce and be smelled
touched, tasted, seen—. . .
silent themselves as great opened books
with all the seductive powers words dryly mimic
the names you give enclose stale air
but their documents of cells breathe life
still you may bear new music
in each limitation, each bound name
for it will propagate a thing.) 23 (italics mine)

Synchronized swimming “not of American origin. Germany had floating competitions for years; England held group swimming galas; Canada held Annual Championship of Ornamental Swimming. . . . But, competition did originate with us in the United States.” 24 In 1923 Katherine Whitney Curtis founded the first synchronized swimming club called the “Tarpon Club” and later the “Century of Progress Modern Mermaids Club” at the University of Chicago. 25 Whitney Curtis recounts:

My interest in stunt swimming originated in 1915 while I was a student at the University of Wisconsin under... Coach Joe Steiner. I was a graceful versatile swimmer, but had neither the speed nor the interest necessary for competitive swimming. Stunts... were a challenge to me... stimulated my imagination. I started one of the first, if not the first of the College Women’s swimming clubs, the Tarpon Club. While working with this group the ballet or synchronized type of performance was developed. . . . we added music to group swimming. . . . At first this music was merely an accompaniment but later the movements in the water were synchronized exactly with the beat and measure of the music just as one would synchronize dance steps. 26

Origins

Origin of the term “synchronized swimming”: Norman Ross in 1933 at the Century of Progress at Chicago—or, Norman Ross in 1934 at Chicago World’s

A University of Wisconsin master’s degree student has already written The History of Synchronized Swimming, in 1956. For the next twenty years, Beulah Gundling filled in the missing pieces—Dancing in the Water; Fun with Aquatic Figure Variations; Aquatic Enchainements and Petite Compositions; The Aquatic Art Book of Water Shows; and Creative Synchronized Swimming. She also formed the International Academy of Aquatic Art. The North American Society for Sport History’s (NASSH) Betty Spears contributed, too—she gave us Fundamentals of Synchronized Swimming in three editions (1950, 1958 and 1966). For an update on the historical truth about synchronized swimming, see The Athlete’s Handbook /United States Synchronized Swimming, Inc., 1996.

Also Known As

Water ballet, ornamental swimming, water acrobatics, water show, water pageant, aquatic art, aquacades, syncro.

Scoring

135 recognized figure with difficulty ranging from 1.1 to 2.4. Execution-synchronization—difficulty-confidence-poise-timing-height-stability-control. Points awarded, 0-10.

The validity of two subjective approaches to judging in synchronized swimming were examined through a multitrait-multimethod matrix. Results indicated that judging panels tended not to differentiate between execution.

Type of Meet

Intermediate, Senior, Midwestern, Invitational, Association Meet, North Zone Championships, Junior Nationals, Jantzen U.S. Nationals.
The History of the Science of Synchronized Swimming


The memory of water along with the indivisibility of particles and the black hole hypothesis (there being a secret correspondence between all these things) is the greatest gift science has made to the imagination in recent times. Even if this remains eternally improbable, it is true, from now on, as a metaphor of the mind.

Synchronized Swimming Competition Themes


Oral History

“We’re forming patterns and moving together, so we all have to be doing exactly the same thing at the same time. . . Pretty much we all even have to breathe together.”

“The smiles on their faces, their hair neatly tucked under a beautifully designed water-proof sequin hat, and the synchronicity of movements you have taught them makes the whole process worthwhile.”

Heart rates were recorded by radiotelemetry in ten elite and national-class synchronized swimmers as they performed competitive figures of high degrees of difficulty. The focus was on changes in heart rates and electrocardiogram patterns for each body position, especially those requiring facial immersion and breath-holding.

Fin de Millennium Synchronized Swimming

—Donald Chu is the 1996 Olympic Syncro Team’s strength trainer. Chu brags, “We keep the team working at an anaerobic threshold of 160-180 heartbeats a minute. . . . We keep them working fast and hard. . . . The goal is to build ‘six packs,’ the seriously developed washboard abdominals of magazine cover fame, to serve as another kind of unheralded base.”
—In July 1996, US Olympic team synchronized swimmers Nathalie Schneyder and Margo Thien posed nude for Life magazine’s study of the muscles of Olympic athletes. I download the 482x360 pixel image at http://grosystem.gsfc.nasa.gov/images/swimming.jpg and make it into a slide using PowerPoint software. These photos are surely pinups, but they are not unique to this photographic genre. All of the synchronized swimmers’ photos that I lay bare on the WWW duplicate the stance and look of the centerfold. 72

—Anna Kozlova, 1992 Russian synchronized swimming team: gold medals in team, duet and individual competition.

—Bill Mays made Olympic history when he competed at the Jantzen National Synchronized Swimming Championships in Indianapolis on April 24-28, 1996. He trains with the Santa Clara Aquamaids.73

—Synchronized Swimming is chartered as an all-female sport at the Olympic level.74

—Extraordinary comedic synchronized swimming routines were aired as “Saturday Night Live” and Jay Leno skits.75

—98,300 sites match my WWW “Tracy Ruiz” search. 319,732 sites match my “synchronized swimming” search.

—I visit a WWW video room of Japanese synchronized swimming76 at the University of Tsukuba. I download the movie, then peek into the “swimmers” and “coaches” “rooms.” All filled with conversation about training the body, waterproof make-up, hair plaster, perpetual smiles, secret routines. These are now my primary sources, all sites where history is being made, sites of the coming community.77 I link to synchronized swimmers’ WWW pages from Finland, Canada, Belgium, Italy, Russia, France, Mexico, China, Cincinnati, Troy, Tualatin, Kortrijk, Ottawa and Tucson.78

“Truth”79

There is an essential rightness about swimming, as about all such flowing and, so to speak, musical activities. And then there is the wonder of buoyancy, of being suspended in this thick, transparent medium that supports and embraces us. 80

Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. . . . Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which induces it and which extends it. A ‘regime’ of truth.81

One can move in water, play with it, in a way that has no analogue in the air. One can explore its dynamics, its flow, this way and that: one can move one’s hands like propellers or direct them like little rudders; one can become a little hydroplane or submarine, investigating the physics of flow with one’s own body.82
Finale

Reason, empiricism, progress, toleration, freedom, secularism, America, streamlining, weightlessness, assembly lines, musealization, stockpiling, the spine, the body, time clocks, the city, scientific management, travel, voyeurism, “fear of flesh that moves,” geometric formations, miniaturization, speed, pornography, flight mime, the slow motion of film, the actor in front of the camera, disciplined bodies, colonialism, binarism, cyborgs, play, performativity, gender, capitalism, violence, spectacle, celebrity, liminality, sport history: all are tableaux vivant that frame the inventions, performances and reproductions of modern ways of living in culture. These and more, in the end, are what this essay has been about. This is a history of synchronized swimming. The formations, lines and centerfolds of the essay can also be read synchronously as a description of the academic field/subdiscipline of sport history in North America, and as a history of our times. The keywords of the article that I listed at the beginning of the essay both echo and juxtapose all of the words of this essay’s subsections and finale. They perform a history.

Notes on a Postmodern History of Synchronized Swimming

The oxymoron of “postmodern” “history” notwithstanding, below find my ideas on what would constitute a postmodern history of synchronized swimming:

- not called history; perhaps instead, from Benjamin, ur-history.
- not a written text, instead performative/virtual: conceivably unrehearsed and/or choreographed theater/dance in style of Merce Cunningham, Samuel Beckett, or Bertolt Brecht’s works. Takes place in zero gravity: water, space and/or virtual reality.
- in addition to gorgeous and unsurpassed performance, music and synchronicity, perhaps also involve drownings, brandings, bleeding, sex acts.
- perchance the synchronized performers are machines with kinesthetic intelligence...
- totally exotic and new at the same time as being somehow familiar and primal.

Epilogue

Listen to Benjamin’s words in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ (Ranke) It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

This present essay about history and synchronized swimming is one example of a hybrid text that “seizes hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

I have directed this written piece to an audience of late twentieth century scholars trained in the so-categorized humanities and social sciences. I would like this essay to count as “sport history.” Within our journals and conferences, the art of doing, reporting and becoming sport history requires fluidity and experimentation.
I designate my essay as a modern text with postmodern concerns. My postmodern concerns have first to do with recognizing that history-is-science-is-art. My postmodern concerns are directed also toward illuminating disciplines, such as synchronized swimming and sport history, that Foucault argued “invest, mark, train and torture the body; they force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, and to emit signs.” The postmodern concerns of this essay have been semiotic: to acknowledge the modern conception that in, through, and out of language we create, discover, invent and signify our world. The postmodern concerns of this essay have been to show how crises of legitimation, representation—authorship—in history, synchronized swimming, and other disciplines may play out in a work such as this. That is, in this essay, I have endeavored to break up form, to imagine, to “display the seams of [my essay’s] construction.” The postmodern concerns of this essay have been directed toward illuminating the ongoing production of disciplinary boundaries, to destroying definitional attempts to classify “sport,” and to provoking conversations about sport, history and the world as they are, and as they are becoming.

In writing my history of synchronized swimming, I was loyal to the canon of historical methodology and theory. I was true to my grounding in classical source use, I was faithful to observing continuity and change, I was conscious of the complex problems concerning truth, relativism, and representation that are entangled in the practices of being an historian. And out of my allegiance to these things, I re-membered synchronized swimming, producing what I believe is my finest work in the twentieth century discipline-genre known as “sport history.”

1. Appreciation to Mel Adelman, Cheryl Cole, Steve Hardy, Nate Kohn, Kyle Kusz, Vicky Paraschak, Bob Rinehart, Ron Smith, Nancy Spencer, Chuck Springwood. I am indebted to Dwight Zakus, who organized the “Method and Methodology in Sport History: Is There Any One Way?” session, May 1997, North American Society for Sport History Conference, Springfield, MA, at which a version of this unpublished paper was first presented. I thank Steve Hardy for reading multiple drafts and providing criticism of great detail of this work.


3. In the “Method and Methodology in Sport History: Is There Any One Way?” session of the 1997 North American Society for Sport History Conference (see note 1), panel members (Adelman, Hardy, Sydnor, Zakus) representing disparate sport history perspectives each responded to a one-page article, Michael Minich, “Synchronized Swimming,” Olympian (July 1984): 52, and to the corresponding sport histories created from this article by panel members Sydnor and Zakus.

Synchronized Swimming


Cheryl Cole suggested these quotations. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 81.

From Benjamin’s filing system, Konvolut V, 574 [Nla, 8], as archived by Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1993), 222.


These keywords from the initial primary evidence (see note 3).


See Walter Benjamin, “On Semblance,” in Bullock and Jennings, eds., Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, 1913-1926, 224: “No work of art may appear completely alive without becoming mere semblance, and ceasing to be a work of art. The life quivering in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment.”

Taylor Downing, Olympia (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 83.

I thank Cheryl Cole for directing me to this synchronized swimming filmic representation. See also Christine Anne Holmlund, “Visible Difference and Flex Appeal: The Body, Sex, Sexuality and Race in the Pumping Iron Films,” Cinema Journal vol. 28, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 38-51.


See Besford, Encyclopedia of Swimming, 250: “Williams, Esther (United States). Esther Williams from Los Angeles might have been an Olympic swimming champion. Instead, she became an aquatic film star.”


Sprawson, Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero, 267.

E.g., Sprawson, Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero, 266: “Eleanor Holm would march at night on to the stage in silver high-heeled slippers and cape, which she would remove dramatically before diving into the black water in a silver leotard, where
she performed a prolonged water ballet with Weissmuller, while the orchestra played 'The Blue Danube' or occasionally Bing Crosby crooned.”


36. See footnotes 1-16, 19-22.


38. E.g., Beulah O. Gundling, “Synchronized Swimming-A Sport or an Art?” Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation vol. 24 (April 1953): 7; Gundling, The Aquatic Art Book of Water Shows (Cedar Rapids: International Academy of Aquatic Art, 1969); Gundling, Fun with Aquatic Figure Variations (Cedar Rapids: International Academy of Aquatic Art, 1971); Gundling, Aquatic Enchainments and Petite Compositions (Cedar Rapids: International Academy of Aquatic Art, 1972); Gundling, Dancing in the Water (Cedar Rapids: International Academy of Aquatic Art, 1976); Gundling and Jill E. White, Creative Synchronized Swimming (Champaign, IL: Leisure Press, 1988).


Selleer and Gundling, Aquatic Art: A Textbook for Swimmers and Instructors in Aquatic Art, 1.

Sprawson, Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero, 266.


Jean K. Lundholm and Mary Jo Ruggieri, Introduction to Synchronized Swimming (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Publishing Company, 1976), 123.


See footnote 14; and Karen Allen, “Despite Bumps, Bruises, This Isn't a Contact Sport,” USA Today (July 1, 1996) at http://gro-system.gsfc.nasa.gov/070lbrt.htm.

Beford, Encyclopedia of Swimming, 206.


See also Frances Jones and Joyce Lindeman, The Components of Synchronized Swimming (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Advanced Aquatic Skills in Synchronized Swimming Activities; Report of the Workshop on Advanced Aquatic Skills and Related Activities, held at the Twelfth Annual Meeting, Conference for National Cooperation in Aquatics, Summer 1998 263

54. According to Robert Rinehart, former University of Redlands, United States Swimming, “Bruce Miller Learn to Swim Camps” coach.


70. On synchro coaches, see Margaret Swan Forbes (with contributions by Donald T. Kane, Dawn Bean, and United States Synchronized Swimming Staff), *Coaching Synchronized Swimming Effectively* (Champaign, IL: Leisure Press, 1989); and Van Buskirk, *Coaching Intermediate Synchronized Swimming Effectively*, 129-131.


SYNCHRONIZE SWIMMING


76. See http://www.taiiku.tsukuba.ac.jp/~ohgi/JSW/Synchro/index_e.html.

77. See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, “Example,” 10.1: “[the coming community] is composed of pure singularities that communicate only in the empty space of the example . . . they are expropriated if all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself. . . Tricksters or fakes, assistants or ‘toons, they are the exemplars of the coming community”

78. E.g., http://www2.eos.net/gsmize/gator_home-page.

79. I am indebted to Cheryl Cole for the idea of this subsection.


88. Joanna Frueh, “The Fear of Flesh that Moves,” *High Performance* vol. 55 (1991): 71. Frueh used the phrase “fear of flesh that moves,” to describe models of feminine perfection, writing that “the flesh that moves disgusts the self that is designed out of Western thought.”


90. Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*.


98. For Benjamin’s use of the “ur” conception, which he contemplated from Goethe and Georg Simmel, see Buck-Mors, The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 71-74. Generally, “ur-phenomenon” such as an “ur-history” of synchronized swimming is “a concrete, factual representation of those historical images in which capitalist-industrial economic forms could be seen in a purer, embryonic stage” (Buck-Mors, 73).


100. Benjamin, Illuminations, 255. So, when I heed Benjamin, please do not react by “policing, punishing, mocking, even ridiculing” (Denzin, Interpretive Ethnography, 251) such an essay as mine as not ‘real’ history. Do not dismiss my take on synchronized swimming as “postmodern mumbo jumbo” (anonymous reviewer of one of my manuscripts, August, 1995). Instead, I want the reader/listener to engage with me and/or many others in disparate “complex subtle arguments” (Norman K. Denzin, Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century (Thousand Oaks, CA, and London: Sage Publications, 1997), 255, which I know this essay will provoke.


103. Also, on putting this idea into practice, see Richard Schechner, Between Theater and Anthropology, 324: “These kind of performances undermine not only classic Euro-American aesthetics but the social reality these aesthetics were constructed to reflect and support.”

105. These are the words of Stephen Muecke writing to Cultural Studies Listserv (cultstud-l@nosferatu.cas.usf.edu), Feb. 4, 1997: “display the seams of its construction,” to describe the genre of “fictocriticism.”