



**Culture and Identity in Brazilian Fashion:
A Semiotic Approach**

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze how Brazilian fashion brands, projected in the discourse on the role of the one who enunciates, position their collections (from fashion shows to advertisement campaigns) as a value-object to consumer-subjects, building a simulacrum of identity in contemporary Brazilian fashion. Using the theoretical references of discursive semiotics, notably the postulations by Algirdas Julien Greimas and his collaborators, the analysis brought up that intertextuality and irony are used by the enunciator as an important component of meaning, incorporating and refreshing other cultural texts in his own textual constructions. It was concluded that this knowledge donates competence to the consumer-subject, empowering such consumer to interfere in the fading of meaning in everyday life.

Key words: Brazilian fashion; communication; branding; discursive semiotics



Introduction

In the 80's, when fashion in Brazil was merely a subject for female magazines and social gossips, young designer Ronaldo Fraga was drawing party dresses for clients in a textile shop in his hometown, thanks to his abilities with colored pencils. At that time, he didn't have the faintest idea on how many meters of cloth a certain dress he draw would require, nor did he dream of being a part of the national fashion scene. During his lunch break, he would walk alone around downtown Belo Horizonte only to get ideas for shapes and cuts from passers by. Nevertheless, this daily observation activity, which was just a way to make a living at first, came to fascinate him. While working as an image consultant in the textile shop, Ronaldo took a course in Fashion Design at Minas Gerais Federal University, won a national contest and went on to further his studies at Parson's School (New York) and Central Saint Martins (London). This was longer before he was recognized as an emerging Brazilian talent by Phytoervas Fashion Awards – what happened more than a decade later. The designer showed seven collections at Fashion Week/House of Creators before entering Brazilian Official Fashion Calendar in 2001. He currently presents his collections at São Paulo Fashion Week and his work is characterized for the continuous interlacement of certain cultural inputs so as to extend self-esteem and to add value to consumer beliefs. His looks present elements of various cultures - recognizable and already assimilated in other circumstances - incorporated and transformed so as to lose their connections with the original situation in order to organize a distinct sense effect and *look original*. This procedure of structuring a different meaning from a conjunction of speeches is known in structural semiotics as intertextuality.

So, it's under the hypothesis that *“the recognition of a fashion designer depends on his ability to invent unusual combinations which might establish proximity and even intimacy through [emotional] bonds”* (Garcia) that I present his work. Structural semiotics assumption is that language, as an autonomous element, helps us build world visions. It occupies itself on how sense effects are articulated and the ways they are built to be perceived, including the strategies used to do so. By means of intertextuality strategy, the aforementioned fashion designer allows prospective consumers to discover in his creations elements of sense construction by comparing these tracks with their own memories and knowledge. Consequently, they might adhere - or not - to what these marks mean in the new arrangement. Thus, to reconstruct this problematic is to go beyond the thematic and figurative dimensions



of the looks Ronaldo Fraga builds, discovering the values presented in his clothes and understanding the mechanisms that support his strategies of attraction and persuasion.

Methods and Procedures

Considering the above mentioned situation, this paper will address specifically the study of how Ronaldo Fraga creations are articulated, which values his design presents and which discursive strategies are used to produce the sense effect of authenticity that might relate his work to an authorial style. Basically, we suppose that the way such creations are enunciated propel their commercialization through sense effect manipulation. The theoretical and methodological approach that guide our thoughts come from French discursive semiotics, the so called *École de Paris*, notably the concepts established by Algirdas Julien Greimas and his collaborators, whose thoughts aim to decipher the proceedings that build meaning. Such approach comes from structuralism and maintains close relations with anthropology and phenomenology, adopting Saussure and Hjelmslev linguistics as well. Discursive semiotics assumes the conception that it is language, as an autonomous unity, that allows us to produce world views. It occupies itself on how sense is articulated, that is, it studies the ways it was built to be perceived. Due to this point of view, discursive semiotics dedicates itself to study everything that is meaningful in daily life, including practices such as dressing.

In the semiotic model, the minimum unity of analysis is the text. This notion is conceived trying to describe and examine thoroughly what the text says and how it does to say what it says. Therefore, it's necessary to identify minimum elements in it and build relations among such elements in order to find out meaningful spots. Barros synthetizes the text as being a "*whole of meaning*"¹, which not only signifies, but also establishes bonds among subjects, finding its way in society as a cultural and communicational object. It's a fact that every text relates itself with other textual constructions that live in society, which form a certain context. Greimas and Courtés define it in their *Semiotic Dictionary* as "*a group of texts that precede and/or accompany the considered syntagmatic unity, of which meaning depends on*"². Barros observes that the context must be understood and examined as a "*bigger text*"³ that dialogues

¹ Barrosna Luz Pessoa de. *Teoria Semiótica do Texto*. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1990, p. 07.

² Greimas, Algirdas Julien; Courtés, Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

³ Barros, Diana Luz Pessoa de, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

with the text in analysis, being integrated in it without mingling into the “*world of things*”. This premise allows us to observe that the search for meaning is updated in the text and for the text.

Sense organization in the text is manifested in two different plans. The expression plan, where sensible qualities are selected and organized, and a content plan, where meaning is born according to the way ideas expressed in it are shown. They are homologated in order to confirm the sense effect found. Both are language plans, to Hjelmslev, or significant plans, to Saussure, whose homologation is confirmed through isotopes, element repetitions that maintain semantic coherence characterized by a syntagmatic line. The perspective that we adopt in the following analysis focus on both plans that are native to any language, going from one to another so as to identify and examine pertinent traces that create invariables able to offer a sense proposal. The content plan is constituted of three levels: fundamental, narrative and discursive. These three levels build a trail that establishes how the text meaning was carefully built. On the other hand, the expression plan is articulated by minimal structures called formers, which are organized in groups so as to build expression figures. These formers might be linked with colors, shapes, materials and their distribution on the text. Organized and arranged, they form expression categories, which are finally homologated with content categories.

In structural semiotics analysis, as previously mentioned, four expression aspects must be taken into account: material, color, shape and the way they relate topologically speaking. In order to provide closer evidence, let us analyze one piece chosen randomly from his second collection, “Family Album” (Summer 1996/1997), which led him to obtain the most desired Brazilian prize at the time, Phytoervas Fashion Award. The look consists of a fitted jacket and a pair of longer shorts made of printed cotton, shapes which have been consistently rearticulated in later collections such as “Raw Body” (Winter 2002) and “China” (Winter 2007). According to Greimas and Courtés (1985), the first condition for the sprouting of meaning is precisely the appearance of a contrast or a difference as we will see when comparing material to pattern.



Cotton is a light and soft cloth, invested of values such as comfort and naturalness through history. Deriving from a Brazilian native plant, it is absorbent to sweat, making it pleasant in hot climates; it doesn't produce static energy, prevents skin eruptions; is wash resistant, which facilitates its maintenance; and has good "textile memory", which guarantees that original shapes will keep stable despite their use, estimating bigger durability. Given these characteristics, this cloth dressed Brazilian workers since slavery, granting it immense popularity.

On the other hand, the jacket patterning cannot be considered popular breed. The top, known as "riding jacket", has its structure retracing to the 19th century, when it was worn for horseback riding. Moreover, this suit comes from men's wardrobe, where it became a classic thanks to English tailors' abilities. In order to adapt the once masculine shape to the female figure, these professionals used to delineate the waist, making the cloth fall straight on the hip and the legs so as to facilitate horse riding related activities. Long sleeves of straight cut come out the shoulders adjusted to the width of the arm itself in order not to restrain the body. To achieve this form the fabric is distributed around the neck, forming a great opening on the chest. The fitted shape is also supported by three lined buttons covered with fabric, which go up parallel from the hip to the thighs. This partial buttoning does not restrict corporal mobility and the independence of movements is reiterated by the shape of longer shorts. Consequently, it homologates, in terms of content, the thematic of freedom.

Known as "cyclist", these short pants are not original from the elegant elites whose riding habits were famous in the 19th century, but from the world of contemporary sports, since it became popular in the 20th century eighties. When taking into consideration the secular comparison projected in the text - "now" of the cyclist pants in relation to "long ago" of the 19th century jacket - we observe that the designer incorporates in his look elements of other cultural texts so as to underline his point of view. Memories of previous experiences are installed to bring up to date the context of sports fashion and young energetic spirit with a taste of elite elegance. Despite dislocated of its original function to the practical one of physical activities, this strategy invests the look with the value of flexibility and empowers it to face common displacements of contemporary life. From home to work, from work to party, these clothes show their ability to go everywhere, as if they were the perfect second skin for



any consumer. We notice, thus, that the designer uses one's previous knowledge in order to emphasize product value. By using traditional sartorial methods referring to London Savile Row workshops, Fraga also shows his own knowledge on fashion history and sartorial techniques. The manual sewing method, produced not only by molding technique but also by needle stitching, claims its uniqueness in spite of industrial processes that falsely reproduce customization on scale. Therefore, these veteran masters' institutional fame is somehow appropriated and used to add value to this look.

As previously mentioned, Ronaldo Fraga lived in London, where he could see such work first hand. In the street markets of Portobello Road and Camden Town, where he once sold hats made for his first brand, "*The magic toyshop of the mind*", there are also antique shops which eventually sell drawings and books showing riding jackets, as well as samples of them. Therefore, "I, Ronaldo Fraga" in relation to "them, sartorial masters" is installed in the discourse, showing know how acquired in his London years, not only through fashion studies, but also in daily life.

Results

Sartorial techniques are one of the expression plan processes largely used by the enunciator to define distribution of emblematic items in all his collections. In this jacket stitches that eliminate excesses of fabric and show the waistline are disguised in the neckline and through the colorful print. Adjustments placed one to the left and other to the right of the frontal buttoning make the eye continue to explore the look from the legs up high. This happens precisely where one can see internal pockets placed in a diagonal line. Such unparallel line is interrupted by a black horizontal line which coincides with repeated prints, dividing the silhouette in two parts, superior and inferior. Therefore, the eye has its way defined by such lines, being taken from the neckline print to the buttons and from these to the legs, from where it returns up high. Coming up and down on the vertical, the eye can foresee a skinny silhouette and detains itself only on the "v" neckline which delineates the breast or on the hips. It is important to emphasize that the placing of printed childish icons – staring puppies – coincides with the hips, bringing up a female maternal instinct to the discourse. The dog's eyes, looking directly to the viewer, also make him interact with the jacket. This strategy

repeats itself on the back and the lower part of the sleeves as an invitation to pay attention to the print choice.

There is a reason for that. The designer adds value to the cotton fabric, making the impression that it is soft and cozy, using such prints and carefully chosen colors. For instance, the yellow background privileged on the print leads us to imagine wood walls which contrast with a large red carpet where the puppies are set beside a lovely basket. These vibrant colors underline even more the delicate figure of the animals, with their fur on neutral shades of beige and brown, colors also seen on the fruit basket that completes the domestic scene. A comfort effect is born. This ordinary material installs memories of childhood, for this printed cloth is commonly used in Brazil to produce pillows and mattresses for children's rooms. That is how the designer brings up an emotional dimension to this look, embracing the user with the sense effect of coziness.

On the one hand, we are dealing with domestic animals and puppies, emphasizing that these clothes can be a warm home to the body that looks at them. The use of puppies and domestic animals are frequent in Ronaldo Fraga's collections, either iconic or not (circus elephants, garden snails, lovely sheep, teddy bears, fairy tale swans, among others), integrating the subject of childhood years. This subject is also present through other adornments that materialize toys (drawing notebooks, paper dolls, balls, balloons) and food (popcorn, candies, soda, birthday cake). Therefore, nostalgic thoughts of childhood years are added to produce a certain coziness, bringing up the importance of subjects such as love, friends and family. One can note that the criteria taken to choose prints do not refer to biological appeal only, but especially to non-material needs such as security, social skills, self-esteem and self-realization. These preferred content figures oppose Maslow (1954, pp. 80-106) scale of human surviving needs.

In fashion, defining patterns as done in this jacket is a mathematic exercise which requires specific calculations so as to allow the perfect adherence between body and cloth. Since we are talking about printings in series, to place certain details on top of different areas of the body definitely requires patterning skills. This ability is also stated by the non-interrupted alignment of the puppies on both sides of the jacket. This careful patterning and sewing brings

up from memory the days when tailoring was entirely hand made. Therefore, this simple cloth, commonly directed to mass consumption, is seen as able to be incorporated in a different scenario, in a mixture that does not respect any cultural hierarchy. On the contrary, it understands that all references can be potentially equivalent to produce sense effect. Even using a common cloth with a massive print, the designer invests the value of quality in this looks by using refined sartorial techniques. The use of ordinary material, associated to such techniques, subsidizes the “popular” category as a focus of unpretentious resistance in relation to “refined” industrialized items, such as intelligent fabrics and quick over locks. This category is homologated in terms of content with the concept of apparent non sophistication. Simplicity is only apparent precisely because this way of sewing configures an ingenious topology. Consequently, we might add that the real value would be in the hand patterning and sewing process. Better yet, it is the professional ability of the tailor that makes a difference.

The delegation of voice to great masters of high fashion is certainly a strategy also present in the context of this suit. When the designer invests quality as well humor in the clothes, he pleads for an intertextuality strategy with Italian designer Franco Moschino, whose style is projected in the text to add value to the look. In the eighties, when labels were highly valued due to yuppie lifestyle, Moschino followed a different path criticizing banal consumption by using iconic advertisement prints. This designer, who was formerly an apprentice at Gianni Versace’s workshop, reached commercial success with his brand *Cheap and chic*, creating these prints in *tromp l’oeil*. He subverted prints - such as a suit printed as a brick wall or a bag stained with chocolate - in funny constructions so as to provoke a feeling of strangeness. Moschino made a point because these effects created to make a joke were built by means of exquisite techniques dating back to the Italian Renaissance. Actually, those were only “apparently simple” and full of irony.

Conclusion

This singularity is exactly what distinguishes authorial style from trends in the bigger fashion scene and makes Moschino (and, consequently, Fraga) *look original*. Therefore, taking into account a narrative level, we can say that these citations of Moschino collections brought to Ronaldo Fraga looks emphasize quality and handmade tailoring as well as a certain way of

intellectual sophistication. The Brazilian creator based his action on a revisited tradition and qualifies himself as reliable, taking advantage of his hidden “Italian partner” reputation.

Once again the sartorial techniques, this time with the Italian school, are recovered by Ronaldo Fraga to add value to his own design. By valuing workshop techniques and ancient ways of sewing he creates an elegance that does not privilege perfect bodies, catwalk glamour or celebrity images. Instead, the added value is on history, memory and knowledge, be it acquired through formal instruction or not. The catwalk hustle and bustle is substituted by anonymous labor from people who build, in their small workshops, the beauty that others consume – pattern makers, tailors, fabric merchants. Such liability contract is settled through articles whose nobility was conferred by some generations of craftsmen, characterizing what Vincent-Ricard (1989) sees as “beyond fashion trends”. One can notice an unusual way of approaching elegance which lasts longer than a season, emphasizing integrity and coherence instead of a common sense of “what’s hot”.

As I once mentioned (Garcia, 2005, pp. 264-268), Ronaldo Fraga’s work make me believe that “(...) *fashion fulfills an important role for the bonds it creates among people, their ideas and the goods they choose to possess and use.*” He positions himself as the one who recovers and values human interference in dressmaking. The confidence in his discourse is injected in the speech by the authority of high fashion elite as well as from collective memories of anonymous dressmakers. Such discontinuity makes an aesthetic apprehension possible because the consumer glimpses in this suit a distinct meaning that might as well enrich his own life. This conception is definitely based on the only aspect that cannot be dismantled by global trends – a continuous effort *to make sense*.



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