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A Shirt: Domesticated Ingenuity

By Dr. Regina Barbosa Ramos & Dr. Felipe Guimarães

Universidade Mackenzie

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A Shirt: Domesticated Ingenuity

Dr. Regina Barbosa Ramos [α] & Dr. Felipe Guimarães [σ]

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... I would like to know what, in that Picture, snaps in me. Like that, it seemed to me that the most accurate word to design (for the time being) the attraction that some pictures had over me was adventure. *That picture* comes to me, *the other one comes not.*

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida[1]

I. Introduction

When one speaks about Fashion, one reaches out to the fabulous, surrounding an impressive activity that is possible to document, made by great and eccentric creators that pursue creative processes that design intricate routes across the globe.

There is, also, another kind of Fashion that - for its simplicity and because it is so related to the daily life and the objectivity existent in just wearing clothes – is not even associated to the idea of fashionable. This daily construction of clothing artifacts is our point of interest to build this paper. We do mention this idea of Fashion that gets itself related to the concept of usage as the "constant and permanent habit that determines the behavior, the conduct, the way to be of a community, a social group[2]" (CALANCA, 2008, p.11), identifiable at a given time and place.

We define artifact, according to Coelho (2008), as the object produced by the human effort, brought to existence through a process that transforms idea into matter. In addition, according to the same author, the artifacts can be seen as "the most eloquent vestiges of our action as culture and species[3]" (COELHO, 2008, p. 22).

That is why we get ourselves close to this day-to-day Fashion usage and production, made out of products that speak of the History of societies and reinforce its role, defined by us in our thesis (BARBOSA RAMOS, 2019) as a dialogue area, a space where ideas are allowed to bloom and be discussed, just as the techniques and technologies surrounding the production of those things that are materialized in consequence of all of those factors, the product.

II. Clothing as Artifacts

In our first paragraph, we mention the "document", that one thing that proves the truth of someone – researcher or journalist[4] - that, *a posteriori*, feels like talking about the piece, artifact, collection, materials or technique. However, about those clothes seen as artifacts, the daily Fashion items, even though we may have abundance of records, they don't present the document qualities of the previous selection.

So, we surround the history of common people, through their family pictures, taken by us as the valid registers of the artifacts. These registers evidentiate the quotidian solutions found, without the vigilance of the designer and that, yet, bring to the surface the profound knowledge of habits, desires and needs, both from users and target[5], besides the technical-technologic resources available at that moment and place in order to produce such range of artifacts.

Then, it is our starting point to discuss what is seen – or used to be seen – as ingenious and produced in the seclusion of the home.

... a shirt.

There is an image that challenges me since I saw it conciously.

At first, I used to think, it was about understanding that my father, a fully grown up man since forever, once upon a time has been a boy. Wearing a bad hair cut, very thin, wide forehead, eyes narrowed because of the luminosity, a tear from the mouth that is neither serious nor smile, ears detached from the skull. Much like himself today. He was wearing short pants and a shirt.

Doing some rough calculations, estimating age like that by a long way, we can say that the photo was taken in the mid-1950s. He was still a boy, it would still take a few years to be a teenager, a category that, at that time, was not even taken very seriously.

Author α: Universidade Mackenzie – Fashion Law Post-Graduation Program – São Paulo – BR. e-mail: reginabarbosaramos@gmail.com
Author σ: Universidade Anhembi Morumbi – Fashion Design Bachelor Program – São Paulo – BR.

[1] Translated by the Author
[2] Translated by the Author
[3] Translated by the Author

[4] We nominate as journalists those who produce contents to newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs or videologs. We won't make any distinction on professional upbringing or vehicle of information.

[5] User and target are treated by us as different players, and we will talk about it a little more later.

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I only have a partial of this Picture. And this became something of importance, once I remember that I saw the whole of it, a real family portrait, at one of my older uncle's house.

In this Picture, you can identify my father and his Brothers. The five young men (my father's older brother is 9 years older than him; father is the 5th of nine children) wearing similar clothes. The shirt, my second source of amazement, was the same for all of them.

Of course, the size changed. As it used to be, the older ones probably were wearing undershirts. Again, it was the middle 1950's, and the only boys wandering around wearing white T-shirts and denim pants were Brando e Dean[6], and those boys had no access to those movie pictures.

In the interior of the state of Espírito Santo, underwear would still remain under the clothes until those boys started to migrate to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as, in fact, it happened shortly afterwards. But those are the other stories.

Let me show you the first picture:



Picture 1: Nelson as a boy, age 10 – approximately - in family photo. Circa 1955, in the Serra district, in the interior of the state of Espírito Santo. Personal collection.

Now, on the second, I will count with the same kindness as the reader of Barthes[7] he has with him when he describes, without showing us, the captured image of his mother as a young woman. I only count on you to believe me, and understand what is fascinating about these five shirts identical in materiality and manufacture, different only in scale.

III. Domestic Ingenuity

These shirts were made by the same person, my grandmother.

Like the many Brazilian women born until approximately 1960, my grandmother (she was born in 1913) was trained in domestic trades, for which she would be responsible when, in due time, she would get married. In the meantime, she graduated as a teacher, an acceptable occupation for a girl, which she continued to exercise for many years, even after she was married.

My grandmother was not so fond of domesticities. I don't remember her involved with needlework. I must confess that what she did best in the kitchen was beans - and, certainly, that memory carries a huge touch of affection. The reality is that black beans, thick, beaten in a blender, tasted to me like vacation and it was neither good nor bad. It was just my grandmother's beans.

But, my grandmother sewed. And wrote letters. She never answered the letters we wrote, she wrote her own, with the subjects she wanted. She had a beautiful, precise, firm handwriting. A very honest text, without flourishes.

Just like the shirt worn by the boy that one day would be my father.

The shirt we see is made of plain fabric. Knitted fabrics were not yet popular in Espírito Santo, much less for use beyond what was more intimate, the so-called underwear or, white clothing. Namely, even though it operated in Brazil since the second half of the 19th century, the country's largest knitwear was Hering, headquartered in Blumenau - SC, and started to produce and sell white goods - shirts and underwear - intensively and on a national scale only from the 1960s[8]. Therefore, it would still take a fair amount of years for them to have those pieces.

In addition, sewing these pieces requires specific machinery[9], certainly no one had access to domestic production. Thus, everyone's clothing, for all uses, was produced in plain fabric, of greater or lesser quality, depending on the purpose and the family's possessions.

Continuing to observe the photograph, and I have done it many times, over the years, you don't see such a simple shirt. It is a garment made in many parts, with a cutout on the flap, which is double and the collar. The flap is pierced, creating a "V" neckline. What seems like a detail, an adornment, an aesthetic option, was what started to illuminate that point that always bothered me.

[6] Marlon Brando e James Dean. Actors that were from the United States of America, played the main characters of the movies "The Wild One" (1953) and "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955).

[7] Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980), French writer, sociologist, literary critic and philosopher. The piece we refer to is Camera lucida, originally published in Brazil in 1980.

[8] For more information: https://www.ciahering.com.br/, seen in November 26th, 2019, at 8:23 PM.

[9] For example, overlock and coverstitch machinery.

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Why would Joanna Maria choose that shirt to dress her boys?

Strictly speaking, plain fabrics are not elastic. Or at least they were not until the development and popularization of elastane [10], in the 1970s. Thus, in order to better shape the body, one must consider cutouts and folds (called dents and pleats, used to build spaces that hold the organicity of human bodies and enable them to move more or less freely), and also openings and, therefore, the trims that, if necessary, will close them.

Thus, zippers, buttons, brackets and closing trims in all their variations come into the agenda.

Buttons. Six or seven for each shirt. At least five shirts. Nonsense. What are 30, 35 shirt buttons, in the interior of Espírito Santo, in the 1950s? Buttons that fall, that are lost, torn off. But we know that these are not just the buttons, because each boy needs to have more than one shirt - and their respective buttons.

Buttons that need to be bought in the "city", because there might be a haberdashery shop inside, but certainly not the hundreds of identical buttons that Joanna Maria would need.

The solution found, then, was not to use the buttons. And, to guarantee, by means of cuts and trespassing, that the garment could be dressed and undressed with ease.

IV. Extrapolations

Thus, although she was probably not the author of the project, we found in that Joanna Maria the ability to make choices, manage a project and scale the grid and production, understanding above all consumer and user that, we observe in our professional practice as designers and project guiding teachers, sometimes it lacks to subjects with greater access to information and tools to execute their projects.

We differentiate here between user and target audience/consumer, since the user should wear piece as it was built, without much right of vote or veto on its realization. As for the second – the consumer -, it is the producer and caregiver of the piece, therefore, at the same time that he understands the user by his needs, it also has the experience of having to maintain the integrity of the garment and it is, in large part, the main goal that leads all it's choices.

We consider everything that circumscribes the making of this shirt, in addition to the result of the common practice of domestic clothing production, a reasonable illustration - in the sense that it is close to reason - of what Bonsiepe will call project humanism: "the exercise of design skills to interpret the needs of social groups and to develop viable, emancipatory proposals, in the form of instrumental artifacts and semiotic artifacts[11]" (2011, p. 21).

Now, the person who produces and maintains the integrity of the pieces - in the case presented here, the same person - is emancipated from presumed later care and cost, because it is anticipated, at the moment simple change to the artifact is designed, still giving to it desirable attributes and meeting, if nothing else, the initial proposal.

V. Final Thoughts

We never cease to be surprised by what the attentive look during the act of designing can promote as improvements / innovation in what is produced, as a result of a process understood as from people, with people and for people (BARBOSA RAMOS, 2019).

The authors' experience, however, is about being in the place of those who design, or those who guide the processes of designing. For the present article, however, it was necessary to change the perspective: historically allocate it elsewhere.

When performing this movement, it was possible to read, from the image of an artifact, the contexts for its realization and, thus, to understand what some buttons, or rather, their absence, meant in terms of technical, aesthetic, technological, ergonomic solutions and economic and, in a way, choosing not to have them, ingeniously frees Joanna Maria[12] inevitable and boring household chores to which by necessity and custom she would be obliged.

It is also worth noting the Professor Felipe Guimarães valuable contribution, accepting to be an interlocutor and answer queries about textile technologies, as well as the history of the textile industry in Brazil, in addition to providing material on this subject, thus becoming a co-author of this article.

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[10] About elastane, Felipe Guimarães, Design PhD student and whose research and professional performance is about Design and Textile Technology, informs that Elastane is a synthetic fiber based on segmented polyurethane, a chemical polymer, whose main characteristic is the high level of elasticity. Popularly known as *Lycra* (registered trademark) or *Spandex*, the fiber has properties similar to rubber, its main competitor, but has less durability. Researches for the development of Elastane began during World War II, when the supply of rubber was unavailable. The fiber was introduced by DuPont in 1959. (information provided by email, on February 27th, 2020).

[11] Translated by the author.

[12] And so many other women of her time and location.

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