SAVING DOLCE&PRADA SHOES: THE CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY OF A HYBRID

O RESGATE DO SAPATO DOLCE&PRADA: A BIOGRAFIA CULTURAL DE UM HÍBRIDO

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Abstract: This article aims at telling the story of a pair of shoes, made in Italy, whose manufacturing error finishes bringing it to Brazil, after being rescued from its factory. We approach meanings, discourses, materialities and provocations that the shoes evoke in our interlocutors bearing in mind its peculiar condition of being a brand-hybrid: at the same time a Dolce&Gabbana and a Prada. The lack of identity gives place to an exotic status to be exposed and that, in spite of reducing the status of the shoes, puts it in unexpected conditions.

Keywords: biography; materiality; hybrid.

Resumo: Este artigo objetiva contar a história de um par de sapatos fabricado na Itália cujo erro de fabricação acaba por trazê-lo ao Brasil após ser resgatado de sua fábrica. Abordamos significados, discursos, materialidades e provocações que o sapato evoca em nossos interlocutores considerando sua condição peculiar de híbrido: ao mesmo tempo Dolce&Gabbana e Prada. A falta de identidade cede lugar a um estatuto exótico a ser posto em exposição que, ao invés de reduzir o status do sapato, o coloca em condições inesperadas.

Palavras-chave: biografia; materialidade; híbrido.

INTRODUCTION

Color, dimension, form, texture, brightness, depth, weight... Objects are good to touch, to act, to look at. Their materiality provokes senses, thoughts. What is an object, what does it make us think about, what does it make us see or learn about the other, about the one that makes it, uses it, transforms it? (DIAS, 2013, p. 193).

“I wanted a Prada shoe... I had already had a Dolce&Gabbana’s.³” That is why Cláudia⁴ tried to rip off the label of one of the golden high hill shoes she had bought from a friend more than

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³ Both Prada and Dolce&Gabbana are Italian brands that produce luxury goods.
⁴ The name was changed by request of the interviewee.
two years earlier. The evidence of the “atempt” is discreet, but it is there. Our native claims it was an impulsive act when facing a “confusion” provoked by the presence of two labels in the same object, a hybrid which is not a copy, nor a fake. It was rejected by the quality control at the factory because it received, by mistake, Prada label on the outside sole and D&G label on the inside sole.

As a mistake – both Italian labels hire the same factory –, the pair of shoes created to experience luxury was condemned to garbage. From an accessory to shine in parties among other luxury shoes, it became undesirable, impure for the labels’ reputations. Its destruction was necessary. But Dolce&Prada destiny changed when someone rescued the object from the factory’s waste. Who? How? We do not know and we do not plan to answer that question. We are interested in the fact that the hybrid shoe got to Claudia’s hands and feet.

Before moving forward, it is important to point out that studies departing from artifacts, which can be garment, must evoke the emotional world. What we are interested in here are some transitoriness of a pair of shoes. In our considerations to come, we will bring some lines to discuss the possibility for this object to be projected to the category of art, as it was suggested by natives when they proposed us to display it in museums. During the research process, we identified different kinds of sensations, emotions and perceptions.

“I THOUGHT I COULD CHOOSE THE LABEL I WANTED”

Introduced to the artifact, Cláudia perceived right away the presence of both labels, and, already knowing the process of manufacturing, she understood the reason for the rejection. According to the native, the existence of a defect was not left out by the person who offered her the product – Cláudia as only challenged to find “the mistake”. “I saw it was both: Prada and Dolce&Gabbana, two in one. I thought I could choose the label I wanted”, she said. “I bought this shoe because I thought it was gorgeous, even though it was two numbers smaller than mine.” Cláudia inaugurated the accessory during a brunch in the village where she lives. The experience is remembered specially for the sorrow caused by the small shoe. “I almost lost my toes”, she recalled.

From the party, Dolce&Prada shoe was taken back to the box and stayed there for almost two years. For being too little, it was never taken back to Cláudia’s feet. And we finally got to know story of an object which came from Italy to live a new life in Brazil.
Our native opened a box, got the shoe and set to one of us the challenge: “Try to find the defect”. Looking the inside and the outside, nothing seemed to be out of order. Would that be a fake? Cláudia claimed it was made at “the factory”. The problem was on the sole: the Prada label.

So that one of us in Italy tried the shoe on, and it fitted. And Cláudia told her to take the Dolce&Prada. The hybrid shoe ended up in the suitcase: the possibility of inspiring new reflections about the biography of things – concept created by Kopytoff (2008) – and the idea of thinking garment as not being trivial, but as things which are not superficial in the exploration of dynamics in the relationship between things and people.

Figure 1: Prada in evidence. Photo: personal archive, 2014.
The adventures of the Dolce&Prada shoe could have stayed in the stage of comedy, but we decided to use them to think about questions related to the shared capacity to understand the world through different means of our circulation and how the meaning of the objects change once they enter different fields or symbolic systems that are not restricted to the world of fashion nor to the market of luxury goods (BOURDIEU, 1983). Why do not to think about them through art, since many people who met the shoe suggested us to have it as a decorative or an art object? Once expressed that possibility in the biography of the shoe, it changes its status.

As Baxandall (1991) and, later, Geertz (1999) say, all of us have the same capacities for cognitive apprehension, but we apprehend in different ways, once previous experience is relevant for interpretation, it is a complex process which deals with visual capacities that we learn and they lean to obey rules and categories. To look at a luxury shoe and apprehend it as such a thing requires to dominate an unique lexicon and to have abilities that allow the identification and the understanding of a certain system. The general experience affects our representative conventions which have an impact over our capacities to recognize and interpret.

Carrying two brands, the perception of the shoe lost the protection of the hidden effect, the invisibility of the illusio (BOURDIEU, 1983, 2008), that promotes the field’s collective adhesion to
the game. It is possible to suspend the charismatic ideology of creation, which is the visible expression of this belief and constitutes an obstacle to a science of value production of cultural goods. The designers who make the work are themselves made, Bourdieu (1983, 2008) reminds us. They are made in the production field by ones who contribute for their consecration as artists.

Reflecting from Geertz (1999) and Baxandall (1991), we can look at what is called a system of interpretative capacities, representative conventions, and hypothesis extracted by general experience. Here we will think about the relation of the objects in their social dimensions. It is an object for consumption that is part of a circulation system and stimulates different interventions in distinct moments and places.

Social life is empty of material objects that circulate producing identities, sensations, and lifestyle expressions. Filled up with symbolism, we see Dolce&Prada shoe participating in social relations and provoking actions and emotions because it “talks” about people and places.

Goods do not have meanings just by themselves – they only get value or authenticity within certain social contexts. That means the value of an object is not in intrinsic property, but it is a social and symbolic act of groups that dominate symbols and legitimate these artifacts. Following an object, we can reach places and find luxury goods deviated to a generalized consumption. We are not talking about fake products, we are talking about a shoe which was a victim of a mistake in the process of production and, because of two expensive brands put together in a singular item, had its value drained to the point of being thrown away and convicted to destruction.

We could think about Dolce&Prada as an aberration surrounded by an aura of distinction (BOURDIEU, 2008), protected by luxury brands and desired by who would like to wear them. It is dubious, but it is desirable. Its aura of seduction, dream and social distinction moves again when the shoe is suggested as a work of art. A solution to get back the aura of superiority and solve the problem of aberration is to convert a mistake into art.

It is not a coincidence that the suggestion for the shoe to be a work of art took place far from its origin context. The closest it is to the site of its production or to the people to whom it was made for as a luxury good, more the aspects of being a mistake or aberration will salient. Taking it away from the initial context and giving it new meanings by subjects who do not share de universe of consumers of real Prada or Dolce&Gabbana shoes, the object gets other representations.
TWO DYNAMICS, LOTS OF SENSATIONS

In order to expose our argument, we highlight two dynamics we created, in different groups at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), institution where we both are attached to as researchers. The first happened during an English class offered to undergraduate and graduate students. Dolce&Prada passed from hand to hand and one of the students identified the violated label. The presence of the two labels was soon pointed out, what directed the discussion to the combination of two product brands recognized by all participants. Then, the conversation turned into the suspicion regarding the authenticity of the artifact. The biography of the shoe was narrated at the end of the exercise, but hadn’t deviated the attention from the discussion on piracy and price.

The second one occurred during the course of Art Anthropology; this time counting on undergraduates of Social Science. Firstly, without discussing any about the object’s history, one of the authors put the pair of shoes on a chair, at the centre of the room and suggested the students to interact with them. There was some initial embarrassment, whispers and a few timid comments about the shiny artifact, its height, the “richness” tangled with the shoe, luxury, power, social class and gender issues. Some asked “where can we wear it?”. The other whispered “it’s even pretty”. The professor then walked towards the pair of shoes, took one of them and analyzed it, from inside to outside. By looking to the sole, someone has noticed it was already wear out.

The professor passed the shoes to the students, who passed it from hand to hand provoking laughs and looks to each other. Someone noticed the presence of two labels and suddenly the discussion turned to piracy and copy, but again, later, turning to gender, power and comfort. In both exercises, the rupture with the ordinary, with quotidian activities of the class, highlighted invisible elements in the uncountable forms of understanding the world among subject who gathered every week.

The Dolce&Prada revealed itself by its forms, textures, distinction and usage marks. Some participants took part eagerly at the discussion while others remained in silence, only touching the shoes. “Who handles an object with indifferent fingers, ungraceful in its fingers that do not involve lovingly, it’s a men not passionate by the art”, says Edmund de Waal in The hare with amber eyes (2011, p. 56), while reporting the trajectory of a collection of Japanese miniatures that passed from generation to generation in his family, finally getting to him. In the shoes’ case, the fingers were soft on the scales. “If you touch with affection, it turns the color” observed a Social Science’s student, showing the colleagues the turning-color feature of the shoes, since it turns silvery or
golden when the sequins were turned. “So convenient, two in one” said another student. Thus, two labels and two colors were revealed while our counterparts revealed themselves too.


One of the students weared the shoes and heard “fiu-fiú”. It was the “high heels” feature referring to the woman, the magnificence and glamour related to a certain economic class that allows some to obtain this pair of shoes (in a non-hybrid version). The fetishism associated to the feminin gender also emerged as something signified as “bad”. “High heels spoils the body”. Challenged, one of the students wear the piece and felt her feet were tight. She created a character evoking and repertoire of memoires, perceptions and social representations regarding the “fashion world” regarding the idea of a model. She marched all over the room, gesticulating and changing her face. The audience did not save laughs and applauses. Then, the pair of shoes changed a certain configuration of time and space, modifying also the corporal landscape we see during an ordinary quotidian.
CLOSING REMARKS

As Miller says (2013, p. 22-23) “clothes aren’t superficial”, they make us think we can be many different people, in many different roles and moments, although, the role of the shoe is to make us believe we are something else apart from our real condition in a certain time and space. By shifting the space of the shoe, its anomaly condition vanishes and only the glamour of its appearance remains, evoking imagined performances: expressions of an imagined style substantiated through the shoes. The Dolce&Prada stars to be symbolized not in itself, but through gestures, expressions and sensations that recount a life-style of otherness. In this sense, it is interesting to highlight Garfinkel (2006), since its works point out the importance of considering the expression, gestures, admiration or repulse over the artifact. There is a constant exchange among the participants revealing different comprehensions and sharing common languages, even though those expressions shift where the pair of shoes transit. In sum, also the pair of shoes modifies according to the space it is.

The lack of a recognized label identity give place to an exotic and different status that deserves to be put in emphasis. The aberration and hybridism, instead of burying the social position of an object, handle it to an unexpected condition. According to Appadurai (2008), the object acquires very specific biographies while moving from one place to another, from one hand to another, circulating and building its memoires and reputations.

REFERENCES


