Dreams of runway

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The interpretation of images, documents, events..., says a lot about the narrator’s place of speech. For quite some time, my place of speech has been pervaded by concerns with the difference, or as the “different ones” are instigated to become “equal”, in a way not to explicit the plea of established rules. In this small essay I analyze two images. It took me two days to choose between seventy photos, and I quietly wondered what made me chose one and not the other. The doubt vanished when I established a connection between them. In the first one, two girls appear in first communion gowns; in the second one, a wedding dress in a shop's window. The wedding dress and the first communion gowns keep some similarities. In both situations the girls, and the women, are the center of attention, what perhaps turns them into the greater responsibles for the perpetuation of the commitment and the faith. The sometimes indelible symbolisms of these events are part of the “shared meanings” (Vagner, 2010) in a culture.

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The images had been taken by transvestites who were in São Paulo visiting the Museum of the Portuguese Language and the “wedding dress street”\(^2\), both in the city of São Paulo. I venture one interpretation of these looks and even more, a connection between them.

Note that I said "one", because surely the interpretations, many and varied, are connected with the life of the photographers and the interpreters of the photo. I begin with my reading.

If for many girls the ritual of the first communion is presented as a burden, others give it another meaning. In the end of the 60’s, in a small city of the State of São Paulo, I lived the ritual of the first communion with a group of friends. Less of faith - existing, but not central -, our dreams of runway materialized, and went beyond. The catechism lessons allowed a greater contact with the boys, extending flirtation beyond school time. In my imagination of old times, but certainly informed by the present, the attraction to “the other” was exclusively heterosexual. However, due to the importance of the girls in the preparation of the event - the thrill of choosing the dresses and its accessories - a certain "envy" of some boys didn't go unnoticed. When caught dreaming of this importance, the boys were the targets

\(^2\) In all its extension, the São Caetano street - situated next to the Luz subway station in the central region of São Paulo - is known by the enormous amount of wedding dress shops, that also sell clothes for the groom, best men, pages, brides maids, and accessories - from shoes to head arrangements.
of humorous comments, what compelled them to go back to their place, in this case the background. The sex defined what and who to dream of.

One of the highlights of the preparation was the permission to use garlands or wreaths, in some cases, the same used by the mother or grandmother in their weddings. In search of this special accessory, trunks and memories brought back some moments perceived as unique. First communion and marriage have distinct time and space, as if the first event was a preparation for the second, the “appropriate” destination for the majority of women.

One of my godmothers stood out in that context. Dolores used to travel a lot in the trains that covered the railroad Ribeirão Preto-Rio de Janeiro in the middle of the 60’s. Returning from one of these trips, she told us about a theater play that had drawn her attention due to its name - Vestido de Noiva (Wedding Dress).³ As a wedding dress designer for farmers’ daughters, her trips to Rio de Janeiro were a way to keep her own creations up to date, besides keeping her in evidence. The perceptions of the men, never directly announced, were close to recrimination - “too much freedom”; the women, enthusiastically, were always eager to know a little more of Rio de Janeiro through her stories, sometimes with pride, sometimes with envy.

During the narrative of Nelson Rodrigues’ play to the family group during a Sunday lunch, without realizing it (or pretending not to), Dolores used lines of the play to start a conversation about betrayal, desire, punishment, addictions, which, for many men present, fitted like a glove, including her own husband who, embarrassed, said he had pressing engagements and was forced to leave before dessert. Dolores spoke of something many women of this family used to whisper around, always ending with a remarkable sentence: “Bad with him, worse without him”. “Worse” meaning the woman left by the husband⁴, situation that exceeded financial questions - many women of this family earned their own money, including Dolores, and they had bought their houses before they got married.

In this beginning of the 21st century, more than fifty years later, marriage is still a much celebrated event. Good examples appear in the soap operas that, as continuity between fiction and reality, celebrate the marriages and all the paraphernalia peculiar to them. The soap operas’ endings, with rare exceptions, generality reserve the climax to the marriage of the main couple of the story. The rest of the cast, with pomp and circumstance or discreetly, will also be part of a couple. More recently, in these narratives, it is better to be with someone than alone, even if the partner is of the

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³ A Nelson Rodrigues’ play staged for the first time in 1943, in Rio de Janeiro, directed by Zimbinsky. Part of the work of the controversial author, including Vestido de Noiva, was turned on the television series A Vida Como Ela É ..., broadcast in Brazil in 1996 in the show Fantástico (Globo).

⁴ I thank Aline Tavares for reminding me of this recurrent expression at the time.
same sex, as if the union, thought as monogamous, regulates in some way the lewd imagination of a homosexual relationship (Beleli, 2009).

To the “unworthy” remains the “solitude”, synonymous to be without a pair (Gonçalves, 2011). To be alone is the punishment for the ones seen as outsiders, and there the confusion starts. Thieves, assassins, dodgers, who can, and must, be punished by the law, are placed side by side with prostitutes and transvestites. The fact of being a transvestite not rarely appears as synonymous of prostitution (Pelúcio, 2009), and here we find two powerful demerits: to be thought as prostitute and to have a body that questions the coherence between sex, gender and desire (Butler, 1990). Most of the time, this questioning is explained as “madness”, shame, lack of moral and faith. Few media speeches show transvestites in playful spaces - as in trips, photographing - when trying, they generally get associated with misery, lack of a solid familiar reference, drugs... (Beleli and Olivar, 2011).

At the end of this text, I was asking myself why the transvestites had chosen to photograph clothes that bring to mind events with a strong social recognition and crystallized in time. Perhaps the choice to eternalize in a photo the girls in the first communion is a way to materialize something that probably some of them had lived as impossibility in the past. Now, the wedding dress - eternalized as the symbol of unions, generally seen in the love/affection/sex triangle - is perhaps a way of contestation. A way to say “I can”, also through the clothes that produce femininity, to be part of a feminine “standard”.

In spite the fact of wanting to get married or not, the "thrill" to try a wedding dress, even if it is through a photo, is perhaps part of the possibility to commit, which can be to a partner, but basically brings to mind the social recognition of such a slandered group.

If this interpretation is feasible, we have a paradox here. In the dreams of runway - to be the main character in established events -, the wedding dress enters the imaginary of what changes the different into equal, but it is precisely this difference that destabilizes the opposite that binds subjects to fixed places because of their bodies, sexes, genders, desires... The recognition of these mixed categories would hardly be given through marriage, whose premise is the constitution of the heterosexual pair, but dreams are dreams!

Bibliographical references


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5 I thank Jose Miguel Olivar for reminding me of this issue.


