

Catwalking the Nation: Challenges and Possibilities in the Case of the Danish Fashion Industry

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Abstract

This article discusses the mobilization of the nation for fashion, based on how the relationship between fashion and nation unfolds in the case of fashion design practice and the fashion industry in Denmark. The otherwise globalized fashion industry is equally involved in what I term “catwalking the nation,” both as a way to construct a cosmopolitan nationalist discourse for the post-industrial nation and as a strategy for local fashion industries to promote collective identity in order to strengthen potential market share, which is the focus of this article. What may at first appear in the Danish case as an absurd and non-productive relationship is actually significant, I would argue, despite its complexity. It has the potential to stimulate critical fashion design practice and give fashion designers a voice, allowing them to take an active part in contemporary public debates on important issues such as nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the age of globalization.

Keywords: Fashion, design, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, Denmark.

Introduction¹

“Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the World’s Greatest Catwalk”
(speaker at the fashion event on August 14th, 2010)

The built stage rising from City Hall Square in the center of Copenhagen is totally pink – shocking pink, as the legendary 20th century fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli would say. Thousands of people have gathered in the square on a Saturday afternoon in mid-August 2010 during Copenhagen Fashion Week. Despite the rainy weather forecast, people have come to get a close-up view of next season’s fashion, hip celebrities, and the glamour of the fashion industry, paid for with local tax money to promote Denmark through Danish fashion design.² It is a true day of celebration. The Copenhagen Fashion Council – a joint committee of the Danish fashion industry’s major organizations and independent fashion fairs – is about to break a world record. According to the World Records Academy, the longest catwalk to date had been 1.3 kilometers in length, at the Centro de las Artes Centenario in San Luis Potosi in Mexico.³ The World’s Greatest Catwalk is 1.6 kilometers long. It presents more than 200 fashion models walking on the elevated, pink-carpeted catwalk on Strøget, the pedestrian street running between Copenhagen City Hall and Kongens Nytorv. It is indeed a high-profile event of artists, politicians, celebrities and professionals connected to the local and international fashion world.

Following a live music performance, the show begins as the Danish Minister of Economic and Business Affairs, Brian Mikkelsen (from the Conservative party in Government) enters the center stage, sharply dressed in a cosmopolitan, tailored black power suit, crisp white open shirt and no tie. His attire signals that this is a fashion event, not a formal event. Broadcast internationally by CNN and on huge screens in New York’s Times Square, Mr. Mikkelsen welcomes everyone by praising the success of the Danish fashion industry. He calls it one of the country’s most visible export and creative industries: “Copenhagen Fashion Week and World’s Greatest Catwalk bring fashion to the street and bring unique opportunities to Denmark’s fashion businesses.”⁴ Helena Christensen, the former international supermodel and patron of the event, follows on stage and expresses her pride in Danish fashion and its recent developments. Helena Christensen declares that Danish fashion is “functional and unique, democratic fashion, built on values in many ways characterizing the Danes.”⁵ Next, the stage is given to another personality of the international fashion and celebrity world – Ali Hewson, the founder of the ecological and ethical fashion brand Edun and wife of U2 lead singer Bono. She is in Copenhagen not only to celebrate the fashion week, but also to express gratitude for the donation of one percent of Saturday’s revenue by a large number of Copenhagen fashion boutiques to her Chernobyl Children’s Project International Foundation. With her voice full of enthusiasm she salutes the cat-

walk event by declaring, “Let’s make fashion change the world!”⁶ The first fashion model enters the catwalk dressed in fall-winter 2010 Danish fashion, to the sound of the legendary 1974 Danish pop song hit “Smuk og dejlig” by singer Anne Linnet and the band Shit & Chanel. Despite the rain, Denmark is making a fashion statement – not only at home, but just as importantly, to the rest of the world!

To me this event is the literal materialization of what I term “catwalking the nation.”⁷ The World’s Greatest Catwalk is the culmination of years of joint industry engagement in Denmark aimed at strengthening the Danish fashion industry, following its deindustrialization during the 1980s and 1990s. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the fashion industry has been of key interest to the Danish government’s creative industry policy, which promotes the economic development of the postindustrial nation through design and innovation by supporting the creative industries, improving conditions for business innovation, and promoting investment in nation-branding (Melchior, Skov & Csaba 2011). Still, it is a relatively small industry, consisting of approximately 620 companies as whole-sellers of clothing and approximately 11 000 local full-time employees. Yet, in combination with the textile and leather goods industries, the significant export revenue of the fashion industry makes it Denmark’s fourth biggest exporter among the country’s manufacture industries.⁸

It would be misguided to perceive the World’s Greatest Catwalk event as a traditional way of flagging the nation in the manner practiced at World Fairs for more than 150 years. Indeed, the August sky is filled, not with red and white national flags, but rather with pink balloons! The World’s Greatest Catwalk is a performance informed by a cosmopolitan nationalist discourse of the Danish post-industrial nation. On one hand, it can be seen in the context of nationalist movements currently emerging in numerous countries worldwide. At the same time, it should not be conflated with the fierce nationalist movements orchestrated in Denmark by the right-wing nationalist party, Dansk Folkeparti (English: The Danish People’s Party), whose political agenda is driven by an anti-immigration stance and a defense of what they consider true Danish values. Nationalism has many faces, as Michael Billig demonstrates in the book *Banal Nationalism* (Billig 1995), and its broad scope encompasses more than ethnocentrism. In Denmark, through the lens of fashion, two contrasting versions of contemporary nationalism stand out – a cosmopolitan nationalist discourse and an insular nationalist discourse. The first version has evolved Denmark’s self-perception beyond that of a distant country in the north of Europe, proud of its 20th century social democratic welfare state, its dairy export, and cultural icons such as Hans Christian Andersen, Karen Blixen and the Tivoli Gardens. Denmark may be small, but on the day of the World’s Greatest Catwalk, it perceives itself as internationally important and trendsetting beyond national borders in the areas of fashion, lifestyle and design. It demonstrates an interest in fashion consumers and a desire to invite tourists,

knowledge workers and investors to spend time (and money) in Denmark. Of course, this vision could be seen as hypocritical in light of the recent strict Danish immigration law – “green light for the tourist, red light for the vagabonds,” to borrow Zygmunt Bauman’s slogan for the current social mobility across borders (Baumann 1998: 93). At least the invitation is limited to resourceful individuals ready to spend money, share their knowledge and pay a high tax bill to redistribute wealth in the characteristic manner of the Danish social democratic welfare state.

Returning to the term “catwalking the nation,” though, my intention here is to emphasize the double meaning of cosmopolitan nationalism unfolding with the globalization of the fashion industry and the political interest of governments in the fashion industry. This process of globalization and how it is locally negotiated is taking place not only in countries recognized as key international fashion centers for creativity and trade, but also in countries like Denmark with no distinct or commonly acknowledged fashion history (Melchior 2011). In order to increase market share and sales figures in a highly competitive international market, the articulation of cultural distinctiveness has become a pivotal business strategy for many fashion brands and local fashion industries (e.g. Skov 2003, Palmer 2004; Brand & Teunissen 2005; Goodrum 2005; Skov & Melchior 2011). The Danish fashion industry is no exception, exemplifying the complexity of and challenges to this strategy.

When Copenhagen Fashion Council stages fashion through the nation on the pink catwalk, the purpose is to attract the attention of local and international buyers and consumers. The 220 fashion models, dressed in the Autumn-Winter 2010 collections of mainly Danish fashion brands, have been styled by design agency Femmes Regionales to communicate unequivocally, “Look, it’s Danish!” The overall look is attractive and appealing, consisting mostly of streetwear crossed with the latest 1950s retro style, popularized by television series such as *Mad Men* from the U.S. Yet, apart from the soundtrack of the show (highlights from the last fifty years of Danish pop music history), the uniformed Danish navy officers escorting a number of models, and several icons of the Tivoli Gardens universe (Pierrot, Harlequin and Columbine) taking the catwalk between the models, it is actually difficult to pinpoint the Danishness of Danish fashion design on display. One can only wonder what the foreign spectators get out of it; can they see the cultural distinctiveness in the fashionable clothes on the catwalk? It is almost ironic that, in mobilizing a new image for the nation through fashion (as in fashionable clothing), the government intends to distance the identity of the nation from the very national icons needed to communicate the particularity of Danish fashion on the catwalk! The concluding song of the catwalk show – “Copenhagen Dreaming”⁹ – says it all, perhaps. The Danish fashion industry is still dreaming about – and searching for – what makes its products particular, in order to create a sense of place as a key selling point. This is a central dilemma to the Danish fashion

industry. On an institutional level, government policy encourages the promotion of a collective identity, but on the individual brand level, nationality is not addressed. The substance of the vision of Danish fashion appears to be unclear. It is called “democratic fashion,” but the meaning of this is rather generic for international fashion brands in the mid-price range, making it ineffective as a mark of particular Danish distinction.

The effort to “catwalk the nation,” put forth by the Danish fashion industry’s institutional bodies, highlights the challenges posed to the industry and especially to the work of its designers. It refers to the global-local nexus arising within the globalization process. The view of fashion as belonging to some “far-flung cosmopolitan sites elsewhere,” as Jennifer Craik (2009: 409) describes the popular understanding in Australian culture, is no longer the norm in the traditional periphery of global fashion centers. However, I want to stress that when mobilizing the nation for fashion, the so-to-speak “nationalization” of fashion, is not aimed at creating uniform looks and forcing fashion designers to channel their creativity into strictly defined design formats. If treated as such, its potential to boost the industry would be short-lived. Instead, it is directed at a reflective form of nationalism that I, together with Lise Skov and Fabian Faurholt Csaba, have termed cosmopolitan nationalism (Melchior, Skov & Csaba 2011). It enables fashion designers to use their awareness of cultural heritage for creative inspiration, enabling openness towards others and the negotiation of contradictory cultural experiences. The mobilization of the nation for fashion encourages “having ‘roots’ and ‘wings’ at the same time,” to quote Ulrich Beck on the characteristics of cosmopolitanism (Beck 2002: 19). My argument, considering international examples of fashion designers engaging with and questioning their cultural heritage, is that current Danish fashion designers are not sufficiently aware of this possibility; if they embraced it, they could have a meaningful voice in constructing an alternative discourse to the dominant insular nationalism that thrives not only in Denmark but also elsewhere (in the U.S., the Netherlands, France and Sweden, for example). This voice is needed from such a significant part of popular culture as the fashion world, as it already has the attention of many people (is there anyone who honestly has no interest in fashion and clothing whatsoever?). Fashion design need not merely respond to political issues – as in the idea of fashion mirroring society – but could just as well take an active part in shaping those issues via the clothes on offer.

To clarify my argument, the following text will unfold the challenges presented to the Danish fashion industry by the government’s vision that the creative industries hold the key to the country’s future. From there I will discuss the possibilities of mobilizing the nation for fashion, from the perspective of cosmopolitanism. That is to say, this article uses the case of the Danish fashion industry to call for a more activist and idealist fashion world.

The Problem of Belonging – Danish Fashion, Past and Present

The development of the Danish fashion industry since the late 1950s has been characterized by a constant struggle to stay in business for many of the industry's companies, with different causes over the years. This has led to arguments within the industry for strategic moves to improve the design of the clothing produced. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the increased import of clothing threatened the Danish producers' leadership of the home market. Tage Vangaard, the leading manufacturer of women's dress in Denmark and chairman of the clothing manufacturer's trade organization, made it clear in the industry trade journal that the competitive resources of the Danish fashion industry's future were quality and design, not price (Klæder Skaber Folk 1970: 39-40). Tage Vanggaard was an example of a company collaborating with a professionally trained fashion designer, Margit Brandt, to give an edge to a range of his production aimed at young women. However, from the perspective of the government, today's call for design is intended to promote place-making, not dress-making.

The paradox and complexity of the Danish fashion industry is evident: although the industry's dominant argument revolves around design, the current three largest Danish fashion companies in terms of market share and revenue – Bestseller, BTX Group, and IC Companys – focus instead on competitive prices combined with fashionable designs, as well as on the integration of fashion retailing for two of the companies. Their role models in this respect are Sweden's H&M or Spain's Inditex. The three companies that define the Danish fashion industry in terms of size have limited engagement with the industry's institutional activities, which instead concern the many small companies and fashion brands that define the industry in numbers.

As the World's Greatest Catwalk event demonstrates, the current ambitions for Danish fashion are high. The Danish fashion industry is subject to the government's policy of stimulating the country's creative industries, using innovation and design to boost the "experience economy" – to some extent informed by the American economists Pine and Gilmore (1999) – hopefully leading Denmark through otherwise tough prospects as a postindustrial nation. In 2005, the Danish fashion industry received its first specific fashion policy, built on the vision of Denmark/Copenhagen as the fifth global fashion cluster, after the four existing centers of Paris, London, New York and Milan (FORA 2005; Melchior 2011). Previously seen as a diminishing sunset industry left to its own devices, the fashion industry was called upon as never before. A 2005 report recommended the increase of internal industry collaboration to bridge the original divisions between, on the one hand, manufacturers in the mid-20th century textile and clothing production center in the provincial town of Herning, and on the other hand, manufactures of the predominant design-based fashion companies located in the Copenhagen area. In other words, the policy would unite the industry around a single vision by erasing the history and culture that built its internal myths and beliefs. It

suggested that so-called network architects be introduced to the industry, leading to the establishment of the Danish Fashion Institute shortly after the launch of the government's 2005 fashion policy. The report argued further the importance of user-driven innovation in the fashion industry, though it did not explain what that actually meant in a fashion design context, apart from the integration of the fashion industry in the overall Danish industry policy of the time. This policy focused particularly on user-driven innovation – not only as an innovation method, but also as a characteristically Danish consideration of the user/consumer when making things and solutions. User-driven innovation was believed to strengthen the competitiveness of local industries in global markets, calling for more focus on specificity and projecting a stronger and more independent image of Denmark (Christensen 2006). In reality, it is debatable whether the government fashion policy was intended *for* the industry or if the nation merely wanted to be associated with the luster of fashion (Melchior, Skov & Csaba 2011).

With this in mind, one of the first initiatives of the new Danish Fashion Institute was to commission a report on what it called the “DNA of Danish fashion.” Due to the doctoral research I was doing at the time on the concept of Danish fashion and the Danish fashion industry from 1950 to the present, I was asked to take part in writing the report, summarizing the history of Danish fashion, formulating the conclusion, and identifying the common denominators of Danish fashion design as accessibility in terms of wearability and moderate prices (Rasmussen 2006). Both now and historically, it is actually difficult to define Danish fashion in terms of specific style preferences, design methods or clearly defined cultural values that inform the design. To put it another way, Danish fashion has had an identity problem, a problem of belonging, historically and in an increasingly global world. Taking into account the sum of the industry's output, Danish fashion does not seem very distinctive. Danish fashion designers practice a rather silent creative endeavor, which has no tradition for outspoken ideology among designers, manufacturers or company owners. A common ground in accessibility is hardly enough to differentiate Denmark internationally, posing a challenge when the government demanded nation-branding through the creative industries and indeed the fashion industry, as the World's Greatest Catwalk event demonstrates. Part of the difficulty could also be that the economically dominant companies of the industry relate more to the image of Danes as good trades people, linking to the era of the Vikings (800-1050 AD) as traders and not just brutal fighters. In heated discussions during Copenhagen Fashion Week in February 2010, the diversity of the industry's companies was publicly exposed when the head of communication of the industry's trade union stated in a radio interview that Denmark is a rather a trades nation, not a couture nation, as she felt the Danish Fashion Institute was claiming (P1 Business, February 11th, 2010).

Perhaps for the same reason, a collective branding strategy has never officially been made since the 2006 report on the DNA of Danish fashion. Even though it

remains on the agenda of the Danish Fashion Institute, it is continuously postponed due to a lack of money and time. Yet the Danish Fashion Institute and other spokespersons of the industry continue to label Danish fashion as “democratic fashion” in the sense given in the report, while the industry itself is rather silent on the issue of the cultural distinctiveness of Danish fashion (Melchior 2008).

In other similar “second-tier” fashion centers, Lise Skov observes that fashion designers often find themselves in a dilemma when forced to focus on cultural distinctiveness. She suggests, based on a tripartite model of culture, that fashion designers are often at ease when engaging with high culture (e.g. the inspiration from art on fashion) and popular culture (e.g. the inspiration of street style on fashion), but uneasy when it comes to folk culture.

For many fashion designers, this brings out a fear of overdoing cultural stereotypes, exacerbated by the common perception that folk culture is the opposite of fashion – rural, static, backward and soaked in nationalism. The discomfort many Europeans feel with this kind of self-exoticization is ironical because fashion in the twentieth century, with its long-standing tradition for exoticism, has had no qualms about incorporating all kinds of colorful elements from non-Western, including Russian, folk culture. The new demand is that designers engage with their national culture and dress tradition, but in such a way that it can be attractive to outsiders. (Skov 2011: 149)

Fashion designers should pay attention, I argue, to the cosmopolitan nationalist discourse invoked by the Danish government when addressing the fashion industry as important for the branding of Denmark. As Skov further stresses, it has proven creatively productive to international fashion designers such as Alexander van Slobbe of the Netherlands, who adopted the notion of abstraction from Flemish art and crafts into his then Dutch-informed fashion design (Skov 2011). Fashion researcher Alison Goodrum’s study of British fashion is also relevant, showing how fashion brands like Vivienne Westwood, Paul Smith and Mulberry, each with their own image of Britishness, use their cultural heritage productively to stimulate creativity, make critical comments on nationality (particular in the case of Vivienne Westwood) and consequently produce cultural distinctiveness (Goodrum 2005).

The question, then, is what causes the hesitation towards articulating cultural distinctiveness in Danish fashion design and the revitalization of cultural heritage? One answer can be found in the history of fashion in a Danish context. To begin with, fashion was not considered to have roots in Denmark until the late 1950s. Until then, new fashions in clothing were seen as exclusive imports from great cities abroad. This perception was strengthened by the 19th century National Romantic movement and the building of the independent democratic nation-state in Denmark since 1849. The contemporary public discourse saw fashion as the antithesis of the nation-building process, in contrast to particular local peasant festive wear, viewed as static in style and therefore consecrated as national folk dress (Lorenzen 1987, Stoklund 2003). This distinction between fashion and folk dress fed into an understanding of two kinds of clothing coexisting in Denmark; the first

was oriented historically backwards, while the second was future-oriented and neutral in terms of national significance, and connected Danes with the rest of the world (Melchior 2011).¹⁰ For the same reason, the living use of folk dress today is limited to the minor folk dance community – in sharp contrast to Denmark’s neighboring Scandinavian countries, where many people still dress up in folk dress for National Day celebrations as well as private festive occasions (particularly in Norway).

The nationalization process of fashion design is challenging for a reason. However, when the term “Danish fashion” came into use by the late 1950s and 1960s, this corresponded to general changes in the fashion world. Often described as the democratization of fashion, it was a time of change from “class fashion” to “consumer fashion,” to use the terminology of Diane Crane (Crane 2000), or from a monocentric fashion system to a polycentric one, according to Fred Davis (Davis 1992). The perception of fashionable clothing as something elite, socially exclusive and instigated by Parisian haute couture fashion houses was transformed into something youthful and mass-produced. The fashion world became decentralized (Lipovetsky 1994). Newspapers and magazines began to include popular writing on fashion, observing and acknowledging fashion design from many different places of the world (though mostly from the Western world). Danish fashion emerged in this context, and the export adventures of youth fashion brands appeared in newspaper headlines at home and abroad; this highlighted the independence of Danish fashion, no longer a copy of international fashion, but something new and independent. It is difficult to determine if any of the fashion designers at the time worked with the revitalization of folk dress or national cultural heritage. Instead, fashion design seemed more engaged with its present, creating a dress identity for the young international youth culture movement. At the time, the government noticed the growing visibility of Danish fashion and did occasionally use it to promote a modern Denmark abroad, but otherwise, as already mentioned; the government did not pay any specific attention to the industry.¹¹

Another problem for the expression of cultural distinctiveness is that, generally, fashion designers communicate only a direct description of their designs in the context of upcoming trends and what the consumer can expect to find on the sales racks in the coming season. There is no tradition of public speaking or even debates on design values among Danish fashion designers, which I think feeds into the hesitation to handle issues such as cultural distinctiveness. In complete opposition, the mid-20th century environment of Danish modern industrial design included very outspoken designers and architects, who expressed their view on the power of everyday design to foster the good life in the young social democratic welfare state. It is remarkable how silent the young fashion designers were at the time. Perhaps, though, the two are related, as Danish modern design was perceived as the antithesis of fashion (Davies 2003). What could the fashion designers have to say? A critical newspaper article from 1969 quite accurately compared

the Danish fashion scene to a silent film, showing that the industry capitalized from image-making and creating lifestyle dreams, not challenging the consumers to listen, learn or reflect, but to absorb and spend (Kistrup 1969). Some designers might have had something to say, but it was difficult for them to get a word in the heated political climate between socialists and liberals that took place at the time. The fashion industry was strongly associated with capitalism, and the success story of the new Danish fashion told in newspapers and magazines centered on the sales and earnings of the fashion companies. In the 1971 book with the telling title *De nye millionærer* (English: The new millionaires), the couple behind the (at the time successful) fashion brand Dranella is interviewed and, by exception, speak of their views on money, politics and society. They declare, though, minor interest in earning money, support for equal earning in all jobs, and their conscious choice to produce collections at small manufacturing sites in provincial Denmark in order to support the local work force; but they also make it clear that they feel typecast (as liberal capitalists) and therefore have limited options to express themselves without being misunderstood (Elleman-Jensen 1971: 180-196).

Though 1971 is a long time ago and the political climate and public views on millionaires and people earning money has (at least in the Danish case) changed dramatically, the silence of the fashion industry has prevailed. It is a problem when the goal is “catwalking the nation,” as on the day of the World’s Greatest Catwalk. But what could the solution be? In the following I shall try to provide an answer to that question.

Making Danish Fashion Cosmopolitan Danish

It is of utmost importance that the fashion industry realizes its voice for a cosmopolitan nationalism. It would thus avoid being “soaked in nationalism” or producing souvenirs of “cultural stereotypes,” to quote Lise Skov. Let me therefore first explain what should be understood by cosmopolitan nationalism.¹²

In the last ten to fifteen years, many philosophy and sociology scholars have taken an intense interest in cosmopolitanism. It is seen as a new world order, meaning a new moral and ethnic standpoint, suitable for contemporary global life, but also as a descriptive way to distinguish between cosmopolitans and non-cosmopolitans (Roudometof 2005). To sociologists like Ulrich Beck, the interest in cosmopolitanism is twofold. Firstly, as a methodological concept, it has the ability to overcome the methodological nationalism that has dominated social science studies until recently; it can do so by building on a so-to-speak “dialogic imagination,” as opposed to the “monologic imagination” characteristic of methodological nationalism (Beck 2002: 18). This analytical approach is suitable for understanding what Beck terms “internal globalization,” meaning how globalization is experienced in the everyday lives of people, institutions and national governments engaging in transnational activities. Secondly, Beck campaigns for a

“cosmopolitan nation” built on the idea of a society that is open and tolerant and embraces the otherness of others. The idea of cosmopolitanism should not to be mistaken with multiculturalism, as the latter does not acknowledge the individual, instead positing him as “the epiphenomenon of his culture,” whereas cosmopolitanism “presupposes individualization” (Beck 2002: 37).

Using the term “cosmopolitan nationalism” draws on the ideas of Ulrich Beck, but puts a stronger emphasis on the fact that nations matter, and still have an influential “afterlife” in the age of globalization. Craig Calhoun is a social science scholar representing such a view, as he suggests cosmopolitanism and nationalism are mutually constitutive:

Globalization has not put an end to nationalism – not to nationalist conflicts nor to the role of nationalist categories in organizing ordinary people’s sense of belonging in the world. (...) Nationalism still matters, still troubles many of us, but still organizes something considerable in who we are. (Calhoun 2007: 171).

Fashion may seem more appropriately linked to cosmopolitanism than to nationalism. As a catalyst of material change (change in style of clothing), fashion is decidedly fluid and border-crossing in character; as the Danish case demonstrates, it has produced an understanding of Denmark positioned in the fashion periphery of fashion centers. With globalization, particularly from a Western worldview, the fashion industry is now generally seen as a globally interdependent, transnational operation. Design is conceptualized in one country, produced in another country, shipped to a third country and perhaps even consumed in a fourth country, though international and bilateral trade agreements still regulate these flows. Because outsourcing has been ingrained into the Danish fashion industry for decades, it is no longer realistic to nationalize fashion through the label “Made in Denmark” or the idea that certain production qualities reveal the national identity of clothes. Of course, a few exceptions exist, and, significantly, they are perceived as beacons of Danish fashion, though solely in a Danish context. One example is a very plain, cotton jersey long-sleeved T-shirt made by Nørgaard paa Strøget, included as a Danish design icon in the Danish Museum of Art & Design. First made in 1967, it has been in production ever since, the design rarely changing beyond the selection of colors and their combinations; it was sold by one of the first youth fashion shops in Copenhagen, which has become an institution in itself, due not only to the T-shirt but also to its selection of avant-garde local and international fashion brands. Another example is a range of so-called fisherman sweaters of bubble-pattern knitted wool, made by the company S.N.S Herning since the 1930s. These sweaters achieved international acclaim when Rei Kawakubo, the cult Japanese fashion designer of *Commes des Garçons*, discovered the sweaters and collaborated with S.N.S Herning to sell their sweaters in her shops – not because they were Danish, but because they were retro chic.

For the majority of Danish fashion brands with neither local production nor a long heritage, however, cultural distinctiveness can be expressed through the design of clothing and the values that inform the clothes. Again, significantly for the

situation, the label “Designed in Denmark” has not yet caught on, though it frequently occurs among fashion brands in other countries. The trade organization of Danish fashion and textile industry may be to blame in this case, as until 2007 they did not recommend that Danish fashion companies use the label; they saw it as a vestige of the domination of the industry by manufacturing companies, and likewise were reluctant to confuse the consumer who hoped to buy Danish-made, as labor unions had fought endlessly to keep jobs in the country. Again, the history of the industry can be seen as adversarial to a sense of belonging, the desire for the future. A national awareness and engagement of Danish cultural history will hopefully strengthen the cultural distinctiveness and brand value of Danish fashion design, but the fashion industry will have to transform its self-perception and designers their way of working.

Cosmopolitan nationalism argues for reflective knowledge of one’s cultural heritage, not cultural diversity within one’s country, in order to understand and appreciate the cultural heritage of others. It is precisely not either/or, but allows the individual to appreciate the rootedness of cosmopolitanism, the participation in a national context, and the shared past that constitutes a ballast for understanding what Beck terms the “otherness of others” (Beck 2002). From this perspective, the hesitation of designers towards cultural distinctiveness is ultimately a choice for ignorance. To strengthen the cosmopolitan Danishness of Danish fashion, I ask Danish fashion designers to be more reflective towards their cultural heritage, to discuss and define it. Distinctive national fashion design can do more than gain market share; it can also become an ethical-political project, taking part in the public debate of nationalism and providing an alternative to the publicly dominant discourse of insular nationalism in Denmark and other places in the world. Numerous Danish fashion designers seem to have the potential for such an ethical-political engagement. Brand names such as Henrik Vibskov, Vilsbøl de Arce, Baum und Pferdgarten, Wood Wood and Soulland show a strong sense of creativity. As I see it, this goes beyond wrapping beautiful naked fashion models in the national flag for the purpose of image. The national flag should not be seen as a necessary design solution or color-code. British fashion designers have a habit of using the red, blue and white Union Jack in many contexts – as fabric, decoration, and lining – to the extent that it becomes banal and confuses the intent. Fashion designers need not address national identity in this limited way. Their approach must be more intellectually sophisticated – or avant-garde. It should identify and study dress traditions in order to revitalize them, make new eclectic mixes, and critically and outspokenly address what the Danishness of Danish fashion is.

It would be fair to ask why this is not already the case. From a researcher’s point of view, I think that the explanation lies in the way fashion designers are educated and the resources to which they have access in cultural institutions such as museums. Again, there is no tradition in Danish fashion design education of studying local fashion and dress history. Fashion and dress history is allowed to

play the role of international narrative, perhaps supplemented by an elective short course on 19th century Danish regional dress.

When asked, the heads of fashion design departments at the main design schools admit that local dress history has not been a priority; they aim to educate fashion designers to respond independently to industry needs, and hopefully to strengthen the individual student's creative, artistic and professional skills.¹³ Students should, in other words, feel free to find inspiration, and through their education they will learn how to achieve good and, if possible, experimental design solutions in terms of process, method and appearance. In the past ten years, the design education in Denmark has gone through an academic upgrade, entailing a stronger emphasis on design theory and intellectual reflection throughout the education. The education has changed dramatically, but in this case it has yet to take into account local fashion design history as distinct from general design history. Furthermore, good reasons for this can be found in the current scholarship in the field. Who should teach and what should be included in the curriculum? Academic fashion and dress research at universities is still young. In the past, it has existed in museum contexts, but for that reason it has mostly been limited or restricted to the collections, of which none could be said to have a convincing fashion focus thus far. But as the interdisciplinary research environment gradually matures, the situation may change. The future is promising, and the latest initiative to develop a fashion museum (in relation to the Danish Museum of Art & Design), the first of its kind in Denmark, has the potential to make a difference. Not only will it give students access to its collection, but it will also provoke critical debate on Danish fashion and dress history through exhibitions and educational programs. If fashion designers are asked to critically engage in important discussions of our time of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalization, I believe they must develop a culture of discussion, with the support of important institutions, such as the design schools and museums, in their endeavor.

Conclusion

Upon the World's Greatest Catwalk, Denmark made a fashion statement to the world, calling for the support of the fashion industry and encouraging its consumers to make "fashion change the world." That day carried a big message. It challenged the Danish fashion industry and particularly its fashion designers to fulfill the well-intentioned ambitions of the industry and the government supporting the fashion industry – mostly out of self-interest, notwithstanding the donation of money from *Fonden til Markedsføring af Danmark* (English: The Foundation for the Promotion of Denmark). I have framed the event as the materialization of what I term "catwalking the nation" and focused on how fashion designers must engage with cultural distinctiveness in order to mobilize the nation for fashion. However, my argument goes further; such engagement should not be misinter-

preted as promoting insular nationalism or guarding Danish values as if they were static and could be protected from any kind of outside interaction or possibility for transformation. Instead, by understanding the government's motivation to align with the fashion industry as stimulating a cosmopolitan nationalist imagination of Denmark, I argue that fashion designers should think of their design endeavors in a cosmopolitan nationalist context. It is essential to know one's local roots before setting off to engage and understand the outside world and make one's statement. Nations matter. In politics, they sustain and develop democracies. In popular culture, the nation can be a back-drop for developing, among other things, a cultural critique within fashion design. But a cosmopolitan and enlightened outlook must not be forgotten. In the case of Denmark, the market for fashion goes beyond national borders, and it is big, complex and competitive. One must make a difference with what one offers for sale. Yet, as I have argued, it is equally important to make a difference by taking part creatively and vocally in current debates on vital topics such as nationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalization. Otherwise, fashion merely lends its luster to the nation and not the other way round, which is equally necessary to succeed in "catwalking the nation" on an August summer day.

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Notes

- ¹ The article is primarily based on research conducted in relation to my PhD dissertation – a cultural analysis of the Danish fashion industry and the concept of Danish fashion 1950-2008 (Melchior 2008).
- ² The cost of the World's Greatest Catwalk is estimated at 2.5 million DKK, paid by *Fonden til Markedsføring af Danmark* (English: The Foundation for the Promotion of Denmark) a cross-cutting initiative launched in 2007 in the action plan for the global marketing of Denmark.
- ³ http://www.worldrecordsacademy.org/society/longest_catwalk_world_record_set_by_The_Copenhagen_Fashion_Week_101822.htm, August 16th, 2010.
- ⁴ Field notes August 14th, 2010.
- ⁵ Field notes August 14th, 2010.
- ⁶ Field notes August 14th, 2010.
- ⁷ Orvar Löfgren has introduced the concept of "catwalk economy" as a contemporary mode for many kinds of businesses, as well as in the regular public discourse of packaging and launching novelties (Löfgren 2005). I find great inspiration in this way of thinking and drawing attention to the technology of the catwalk as a metaphor for the production of the new and the fashion industry.

- ⁸ In 2010 the total revenue of the Danish fashion industry was approximately 24.1 billion DKK (3,23 billion Euro). 93.5 percent was gained from export (www.dmogt.dk, February 10th, 2011).
- ⁹ “Copenhagen Dreaming” by the Danish pop-band Love Shop, 2004.
- ¹⁰ This distinction resembles Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg’s notion of “world dress” as opposed to “ethnic dress,” the first transnational in nature, the second informed by the traditions and dress practices of ethnic groups (Eicher & Sumberg 1995).
- ¹¹ This was particularly significant in 1969 when the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its magazine *Denmark Review* dedicated to celebrating and promoting young Danish fashion designers and the quality of Danish fashion design (Melchior 2008).
- ¹² I try to develop this concept further from its inception in the article I wrote with Lise Skov and Fabian Faurholt Csaba. In analyzing the fashion industry’s involvement in the Danish government’s creative industry policy, we introduced the concept to describe the new way of representing the nation through a cosmopolitan nationalist discourse via the connectedness of the fashion industry and government policy (Melchior, Skov & Csaba 2011).
- ¹³ As part of my research for my PhD I made interviews with key persons at The Danish Design School, Designskolen Kolding and Teko in Herning (Melchior 2008).

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