

The Aestheticization of Place, Politics and Products

Selling 'The Nordic Way of Life'

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Abstract

Aestheticization is a pervasive force in consumer culture (Featherstone 2002); it is central to the invention and reinvention of symbolic resources that structure current market economies (Reckwitz 2017). A recent example with a complex nexus of consumption, identity, politics and nostalgia, is the reinvention of 'Nordicness' and 'The Nordic Lifestyle', with sub-fields such as (New) Nordic Cuisine, (New) Nordic Design and (New) Nordic Cinema (Leer 2016, Andersen et al. 2019, Skou and Munch 2016). This paper investigates the aestheticization of 'The Nordic Way of Life' as commodified and marketed in the form of the magazine *Oak - The Nordic Journal*.

Keywords Aestheticization of consumption, Nordicness, consumer culture, lifestyle magazines

Lifestyle media is an ideal 'surface archive' of consumer culture, and a place where design professionals negotiate and market their

(re-)interpretations of practices such as art, design, architecture, fashion, and food.

During the last decade, Danish and Swedish lifestyle magazines previously published in Nordic languages for local audiences have been reinvented as 'Nordic' and published in English. To mention a few examples: the classic Danish magazine *Bo Bedre* ('Live Better' or rather 'Dwell Better') now publishes the magazine *Nordic Living by Bo Bedre*, the magazine *DANSK* offers Nordic fashion advice (despite the name, in English). *Lagom* magazine offers Scandinavian lifestyle advice to the global creative class ('lagom' is a Swedish concept, but it is based in Bristol, UK). The magazines vary in price and quality, but many are book-quality in print and seem designed for conspicuous placement in the home, rather than a quick read-and-recycle mode of consumption. In this paper, the aestheticization of place, politics and products is discussed with examples from a magazine in the up-market end of this scale: *Oak, The Nordic Journal*. The Journal has the slogan or tagline 'Echoes of The Nordic Way of Life'. *Oak* explains itself as "an international lifestyle publication celebrating the power of conversations – a meeting of ideas and personalities. Celebrating creative conversations." (*Oak* n.d.) These declarations seem to be an invitation to join a creative project, framed in an agentic and inclusive discourse of dialogue. "Echoes..." seem to promise a non-essentialist, non-orthodox approach to the Nordic lifestyle. This seems somewhat of a paradox, as 'lifestyle' is usually considered a structure that negotiates social status and inclusion/exclusion.

Lifestyle and the Rise of the Aesthetic Economy

Already at the turn of the 20th century, Veblen (2007 [1889]) offered an account of how consumption was an important performance of social structure, not only for *The Leisure Class*. He did not use the term 'aestheticization', but nonetheless offered highly detailed analyses of the symbolic significance of contemporary 'honorific' consumption. The primary focus of Veblen was 'modes of dwelling' and fashion, which a household needed to perform in order to signal that it belonged to a certain class or professional segment. His account of *conspicuous consumption*, has often been reduced to a concept of trickle-down-'bling' and aspirational consumption (Trigg 2001), which ignores the detail and complexity of his analysis and

how it anticipated the aestheticization of the consumer society about to unfold. Veblen claimed that consumption was primarily about identity, status, values and honour, and that even the least affluent members of society would rather cling to ‘trinkets’ and starve than rationalise consumption to fit basic needs (2007 [1889]). Veblen argues, “In modern civilised communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient...” (Veblen 2007, 59), but continues to explain how this is making it even more – not less – an existential imperative to perform symbolic consumption. It is tempting to extend this argument to the vague and transient status demarcations of the apparently egalitarian Nordic welfare states.

A century after Veblen, Featherstone (2002) points to Baudelaire, Benjamin and Baudrillard claiming that aestheticization has become pervasive in consumer culture (Featherstone 2002, 80-82). It is the mode in which the meaning of mundane, middle class existence is negotiated. Rather than aligning with postmodern ‘no rules, end of history’-claims of implosion of social space, Featherstone claims that the structuring of social space must be understood by the symbolization and aestheticization of everyday living as ‘lifestyle’, considering the ‘cultural matrix’ and specificity of particular societies (ibid., 84). Thus, it is not the ‘end of hierarchy’, but a move within the system towards increased reflexivity and complexity, and an ever-widening global constituency of aestheticization of life (ibid., 110). It opens a new market of second order aestheticization: the commodification of symbolic knowledge by specialists such as ‘lifestyle’ experts (ibid., 125), as service- and shopping-scapes, packaged and mediatized as lifestyle magazines, movies, TV programs (and today, influencers in social media). This development is often conceptualized as the rise of a *new class*, e.g. ‘the knowledge class’, ‘the new middle class’ (ibid., 125) or the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002). Reckwitz (2017, 85) takes it even further, as he claims that the ‘creativity dispositif’ restructures society into a new economic order dominated by the *aesthetic economy*. An economy where aestheticization takes precedence over rationalism and ‘scientific management’. Innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship merge into a new mode of ‘management by design’ as aesthetic management for the affective capitalism (ibid., 122). In the aesthetic economy, production and consumption are not as distinctly separated

and differently valued as it were in the old Fordist capitalism: production creates value through hard labour, consumers destroy it by hedonic fulfilment of needs. In aesthetic capitalism, affective and sensuous practices of consumption is as creative and productive as production (ibid., 126). Here, and in many other ways, Reckwitz (2017) align with the ideas of service dominant logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006) and experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and cultural branding (Holt 2016). Home and fashion no longer privately consumed through leisure, but constantly refined through innovative creative work, a pseudo-intimidating experience to be performed and distributed as a creative product on media-platforms such as Instagram (Holt 2016). Askegaard and Linnet (2011, 400) remind us, that we should never be too naïve about the scope of creative freedom of consumers, as it happens “most often according to a score that they have not written themselves.”

The aestheticization through (re-)invention of place and novelty

According to Reckwitz (2017), the most basic principles of the aesthetic economy are novelty and innovation. Production and consumption are in a perpetual race for re-invention and re-interpretation to be valuable. This is not happening on blank slates in a cultural vacuum, so existing pools of symbolic resources are re-worked and recreated to become fresh ‘creations’, often conspicuously communicating their radical, innovative ‘newness’. The cultures and aesthetics of the local, the nation, and the region are rich symbolic sources for reinventing fields of production and consumption (Gyimóthy 2017, Ostberg 2011, Waade and Jensen 2013). Likewise, place is in constant need for re-invention to be attractive and meaningful (Andersen et al. 2019b, Cassinger and Eksell 2017).

A telling sign of the cannibalistic nature of re-invention is the names given to the trends and movements, with the prefix of “New”. Another is the revolutionary posing of cultural entrepreneurs through ‘manifesto’-mythologizing-marketing as ‘movements’ (even in academia, see Bode and Østergaard 2013). When we look at the recent global interest in the Nordic region, these principles of aestheticization are quite clear. *New Danish Cinema* was bootstrapped by the DOGMA manifesto, which inspired (New) Nordic Noir (Waade and Jensen 2013), and *The New Nordic Kitchen*

Manifesto that started the wave of New Nordic Cuisine (Leer 2016), which in turn inspired *New Nordic Design* and the broad scope of Nordic reinvention, eventually also as a (Nordic) counterrevolution against the rigid focus on Nordic localism in the New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto (Skou and Munch 2016, Andersen et al. 2019a, 2019b).

A recent example of reflexive Nordic manifesto-marketing is that of Monki, a Swedish fashion brand targeting younger women. The campaign aptly named 'Monkifesto' featured advertising with bold images and statements on female body-pride. For example, an ad with the headline "periods are cool. period." featuring an image of a woman posing proud, standing in a puddle of red liquid. Another ad features a female blogger striking a pose in front of a giant stylized pink vagina under the headline "Please yo'self" (Monki n.d.). It is tempting to read some level of aesthetic reflexivity into the playful over-the-top visualizations, verbal puns and romanticising of social reform. The integrated social media campaign was rallying consumers to join a revolutionary 'sisterhood', defying suppressive taboos on female masturbation and menstruation. The campaign is indicative of the aestheticization of values that does not flaunt 'New Nordic' label anywhere, but still utilizes a mode of *Swedish* feminism in a bid to infuse the brand with retro-revolutionary gender politics. In their foundational brand narrative, the founders of Monki connect their 'feminist' values to their origin, the city of Göteborg (Monki n.d.).

'Nordicness' – commodified and codified

Oak is a very appealing commodification of the Nordic Way of Life. It is founded by two Danish women, and it is published from Copenhagen. The magazine is printed as a heavy coffee table book, with a hard cover made with a sensuous soft texture more similar to the matte texture of cloth than the common glossy print of a fashion magazine. We are far from the 'tacky' tabloid feel of ladies' magazines about movie stars, royals, fashion designers and their entou-rages. And so is the content, *Oak* is about (high) culture: art, design, architecture, film, fashion and cuisine (but only if it is innovative, visionary and inspirational).

Every issue is structured by sections with the headlines: Partnerships/Inspiration (mostly a version of native advertising), Contrib-

utors, Visionaries, Design, Features/Ideas, Escapes (the structure of the *Oak* web page is very similar, see *Oak* n.d.).

On the cover of *Oak* (volume 9) we find a photo of the artist Olafur Eliasson in his studio, surrounded by a white frame. Under the image, the tag line of *Oak* is written in black, all caps: "ECHOES OF THE NORDIC WAY OF LIFE". He is posing in a rather empty, austere space, casually leaning on small yellow steps, glancing to the left. The image and its framing of Eliasson function as an iconic expression of the Nordic Creative Genius.

Inside, in the section of *features*, the cover story is about his artist-studio on Iceland.

After 28 pages of 'partnerships' advertising such items as vases from Iittalla and products from Vipp follows the brief section called *Contributors*, about the creators of *Oak*, writers and photographers, both ethnic Nordics and non-Nordics. The journal's brand of cosmopolitan 'cultural reflexivity' is evident already in these very condensed portraits. The template is somewhat as follows: Below a photo with their portrait, a direct quote or statement is presented in large font and double inverted commas. This is followed by a brief bio (in a smaller font size) that establishes them as members of a professional cosmopolitan class. For example, Daisy Woodward is quoted "Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek art museum in Copenhagen is magical. I especially love its glass-domed Winter Garden, filled with leafy palms of all sizes interspersed by gangly iron columns. The perfect spot to sit and think on an icy Danish day." After this expression of poetic connection to a place of contemplation, the following bio seems almost laconic, "Berlin Based arts and culture writer Daisy Woodward is a regular contributor to titles including [...list of magazines etc.]". In his portrait Owen Smith declares, "The Kungsleden train in Northern Sweden always leaves me awestruck. Wiliam Blakes said that 'great things are done when men and mountains meet'..." His bio, "Owen Smith writes about politics, culture and technology..." And Mikkel Adsbøl declares that, "The wildest parts of the countryside in the north of Denmark on a cloudy and foggy day are intensely inspiring. The raw natural elements combined with the rich palette of colours that come with bad weather is truly a sight worth seeing." His bio, "Photographer Mikkel Adsbøl tackles assignments for advertising agencies, commercial clients and the media from his tastefully-designed studio in Copenhagen...". In all

these highly condensed portraits, we find statements of deep emotional attachment to the Nordic *as place for cultural innovation, contemplation and creation*. The connected brief bios are so mundane in contrast that the presentation of merits and credentials suddenly appears a bit tacky as thinly veiled self-marketing.

The 'contributors'-section is indicative of *Oak's* mode of mythologizing the Nordic Creative Genius. In the following sections, the portraits expand. In the section called *visionaries* and in the section *features* they blend into a mode of reportage of the creative spaces of the visionaries, such as the cover feature on Olafur Eliasson. The feature starts with this fanfare, mythologizing the innovative creative powers of Eliasson, "*Oak* stopped by to talk to Eliasson himself about avoiding the mythologizing that comes with running the world's most famous studio and how he's built the unlikeliest of things, a deeply pragmatic utopia." (*Oak* vol. 9, 109)

It is interesting that the focus in this feature is not on his creations or himself as a genius (though it certainly covers this as well), but that it is framed as a reportage of a social place: the organisation of about 100 employees into a "pragmatic utopia" - not just another workplace with a canteen - a movement of "intellectual heft and infrastructural power" with "incredible cooking" and paternal leave. This is The Nordic Way of Life in a *pragmatic* utopia; the work of an outstanding genius as community, "It's just so important to say we are a co-producer of society like any other place." (Eliasson in *Oak* vol. 9, 114) The individual is free to be creative, because the values of the organisation and society around it support it - this is what sets it free.

The story also uncovers, from where Eliasson got his creative, aesthetic inspiration: The Nordic light in Iceland. Literally. As a child, he was deeply influenced by the Nordic landscape, sensing the 'amazing blue light' of the Icelandic twilight, entering his window.

This cover story is clearly building on the mythologies around Eliasson, elaborating these, and in participating Eliasson is also marketing himself and his design studio. However, myth making and marketing should be denied as such.

In the section of *visionaries*, *Oak* presents Anu Partanen, a Finnish author and journalist (living in New York). Her migration from Helsinki prompted cultural reflexion that she interpreted in her book called *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life*.

In this book, she explains the “Nordic Theory of Love” (inspired from the work of Berggren and Trädgårdh 2015). The theory claims that the Nordic welfare state release people from dependence on the structure of families and other relationships that entail many (oppressive) underlying motives and needs.

The individual is then free to be purely driven by love, curiosity and creativity. *The Nordic Theory of Everything* is an example of the many books that (like *Oak*) translates the Nordic to a global audience. In this brief story on Partanen, we find another version of the Nordic Creative Genius. This version of Living The Nordic Way in New York, is striving to make Nordic values appreciated in the America of Donald Trump. Essentially this endeavour could be paraphrased as a ‘Nordic Womans’ Burden’, teaching the Americans about the “Nordic Theory of Love”.

Concluding perspective: Paradoxes abound

‘Echoes of The Nordic Way of Life’ is the tagline of *Oak*. This tagline is enticing in that it only promises ‘echoes’ and not ‘essence’, which might be too blunt to cater to a refined audience.

Everything in *Oak* is richly illustrated with a spacious layout of perfectly chosen (soft) colour or white around text and creative photos of the artists, their homes, studios and favourite getaways. Even if *Oak* does contain advertising and plenty of commodification of art and culture, such as designer ceramics, chairs or lamps, it never seems out of place, as authoritative lifestyle dictate or vulgar product placements. It is the perfect non-sales-pitch to the creative, cosmopolitan middle class: it denies being marketing (‘partnerships’ is the euphemism for ‘ads’), it promises ‘echoes’ but often relies on the ‘essence’ in the Nordic terroir, myths, and ‘values’. It promotes communality and social inclusion, but almost every story is mythologizing the strong individual as a Nordic Creative Genius (Eliasson, Partanen etc.).

Despite all the claims of ‘new’ and visionary innovation above, it has been suggested that the important impetus in these are actually nostalgic longings for ‘authenticity’, both for the modernity lost (Reckwitz 2019, Skou and Munch 2016) and the tainted romantic myths of national identity (Leer 2016, Andersen et al. 2019a). These tensions were evident already in the New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto, a strict imperative on ‘rational’ healthism combined with a

surprisingly candid Nordic-centrism (Leer 2016). In an analysis of the values and aesthetics of New Nordic Design, Skou and Munch (2016) conclude, “New Nordic Design contains nostalgia for the good old, modern days, where the shape and materiality of the singular objects of use were believed to change the scope of life.” A paradoxical nostalgia for a revolutionary progress, of ambitions of societal innovation on a grander scale.

It has been suggested that the ‘innovative newness’ of the New Nordic re-invention of the Nordic region is nothing but a strategy to circumscribe the nostalgic for *the nation* and *the people* etc., in order to sanitize these contested nationalistic emotions for the urban middle class (Leer 2016, Andersen et al. 2019a). Thus, the ‘Nordic Way of Life’ is a complex nexus of aestheticization of consumption, identity politics, the tensions of nostalgia and modern imperatives of ‘progress’. Drawing on Anderson (2006 [1983]), we may consider the ‘Nordic Way of Life’ a banner for an imagined aesthetic community of Nordicism, regardless of any empirical ‘truth’ in the imagined narratives, and regardless of the members being ethnic Nordics, living in the Nordic countries or anywhere else. What binds this imaginary community together is ‘Nordicism’ imagined, performed and reinvented. It offers the urban middle-class symbolic resources for cultural reflexivity (Askegaard et al. 2009), also as self-exoticisation of indigenous Nordics (Skou and Munch 2016). The cultivation of The Nordic Creative Genius and The Nordic Way of Life is clearly a viable business model in The Aesthetic Economy. What is subtly hiding in the shadows of ‘The Nordic Light’ could be a reclaimed Nordic Nationalism: ‘Nordic Womens’ Burden’. A tension of, on the one side, the ‘authentic’, singular, local specificity and, on the other side, the grand, revolutionary narrative of the social utopia globally marketed as the *Nordic Way of Life*.

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