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Pulp Fashion – A Norwegian viscose producer's relation to fashion in the sixties

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In the years after the Second World War great changes occurred in the Norwegian society as well as in the rest of Europe. Five years of war had led to destitution of daily life, trade and industry. In the sixties the standard of living raised after some hard economical years in the forties and fifties. The changes came gradually. The restrictions on imported goods as well as important articles of consumption as food and clothes came to an end. The consumption increased and the domestic producers had to compete with international and often much bigger companies to sell their products. According to the textile market this meant a shift in the consumer's attitude. There was an increasing interest in fashion pushed forward by mass media through newspapers, magazines, movies and the new television media.

In the same years new synthetic fibres got a break-through within the textile market. Strong commercial labels produced by big chemical companies got an impact on fashion through intense marketing. But much of the European textile and clothing industry was still dominated by small plants, making products for home markets. This was also the situation in Norway. An old-fashioned textile industry was not particularly interested in marketing and international competition. The import restrictions after the war had led to favourable circumstances for the domestic industry, but the reduced protection barrier led to a growing interest in issues as design and fashion used as competitive advantage among the consumers.

Traditionally the typical Norwegian textile plant made yarn and fabrics of homebred wool or cotton clothes made of imported fibres or yarn. Some of the factories had in the fifties started cooperation with the producers of synthetic fibre, such as ICI, Du Pont and Bayer. Natural fibres were partly substituted by man-made fibres. In the sixties a new producer entered the domestic textile scene. The cellulose company Borregaard was well-known for Norwegian consumers. The company was located in Sarpsborg in the South-East Norway and had been producing pulp and paper since 1889.¹ Already in the twenties Borregaard planned production of cellulose fibre for the textile industry, but the building of a new factory was delayed. The factory was finished during the Second World War by the German occupants. Fibre production on a large scale started after the war, and in 1952 the spinning mill was

established. The company's own trade name Supralan was introduced in 1957. The fibre was used for different types of yarns for weaving and knitting and for sanitary non-woven goods. In the sixties cooperation with the British chemical company ICI led to the blending of two fibres – the viscose fibre Supralan and the polyester fibre Terylene.



Fig. 1 Promoting Elegant Leisure in 1966. Photo: The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.

In the mid-sixties Borregaard together with ICI presented the slogan Elegant Leisure. It was a part of a broad campaign to sell clothes made of Supralan/ Terylene intended for the Norwegian market. The first Elegant Leisure-campaign started in 1966. The label was marketed through window displays. Borregaard arranged a competition for the most attractive display which was rewarded with travels to Southern Europe. The concept was also promoted in series of housewife films called *Husmorfilmen* produced annually between 1953 and 1972. New products as textiles, food, detergents and electric kitchenware were marketed. The movie was shown all over Norway together with fashion shows and product presentations with great success. But the presentations in the press were most important for the marketing of Elegant Leisure. Both women's magazines, trade journals and newspapers contained advertisements and articles about the concept of Elegant Leisure. At the same time both planning and marketing of the next year's collection started, and created expectations for 1967.

In women's magazines and trade journals Borregaard was given a high profile through labels and fashion reports. The company was credited as the inventor of this fruitful cooperation

within producers of fibres, fabrics and clothing. The clothes in the 1966 collection were made by two ready-to-wear-companies, Ljungbergs Sportsklær in Oslo Møreklær from North-Western Norway, a centre of this kind of industry in Norway. The style was classical, with straight skirts right above the knee, trousers and jackets. There as neither mini-skirts nor Op Art patterns that characterized fashion this year.² At the same time as the 1966 collection was presented the concept for the 1967 collection was introduced. The biggest promotion issue for Elegant Leisure 1967 was the promotion of the Paris-based and Norwegian born fashion designer Per Spook. His drawings of casual wear ordered by Borregaard were presented for the clothing industry and for the fashion-minded consumers.

Per Spook (born 1939) was highly profiled in Norway as a successful young designer in Paris. He had practised at the famous fashion houses Dior and Yves Saint-Laurent. In 1962 he started to work for Louis Féraud, and he soon took a leading part in the company's design of innovative collections for sporty and modern women.³ The interest for cuts, hemlines and colours was high, and Parisian fashion passed on by newspapers and women magazines had for years been an exotic world for Norwegian producers and consumers. There had been fashion reports from Paris in the journals since the middle of the 19th Century. In the reports there had usually been emphasized a distance between Parisian and Norwegian women. The Norwegian women could learn how to dress by looking at the elegant French ladies. The break-through of a young Norwegian designer in Paris meant that fashion came closer to the consumers. It was possible also for a Norwegian to succeed abroad.



Fig. 2 Per Spook photographed in the women's magazine *Alt for damene*, 1966. Photo: The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.

It was therefore no coincidence that Borregaard chose Per Spook to profile their collection. He was in a way synonymous with the values Borregaard advocated as elegant casual clothes.

In the fifties and sixties Parisian fashion houses turned their attention towards the less prosperous women to reach a broader market. The result was less emphasis on *haute couture* and a trend towards ready-to-wear collections and casual clothing. Fashion was democratized.⁴ In retrospect it seems clear that Parisian fashion in these years was losing control and street wear from London and New York was coming up, influencing every day dressing to a higher extent than before. But still Paris was like a mantra both for consumers and producers. And the idea of Paris as the centre of fashion was used to market clothing, even though they were designed and produced at other geographical sites.

The synthetic fibres got their break-through in the fifties. These were given trade names such as Orlon and Dacron from Du Pont and Terylene from ICI. The qualities of the synthetic fibres were specially designed as a part of the fibre. For example Orlon was meant for jersey and other knit-wear, while the polyester fibre Terylene often was blended with wool and was used for male trousers. There was great competition between the producers. Nylon had been a great success when the fibre was introduced in the late thirties by Du Pont. After the war chemical companies in USA, Britain and Germany concentrated on developing new oil-based fibres. Challenges however were many. The synthetic fibres were sticky and were not as comfortable as the natural fibres. The producers needed to build an attractive image to get the consumers interested to buy their products. Creating a loyalty for the brands among the consumers was a part of this concept. This was done by promoting the labels in magazines and shops. Another strategy was to connect the synthetic fibres to Parisian fashion houses. Du Pont was the leading company in both production and marketing. Well-known designers as Givenchy, Lanvin and Jacques Heim created dresses in the end of the fifties to inspire Du Ponts' customers.⁵ In the sixties the link between fashion and synthetics was even more obvious. But at that time it was the youthful and trendy fashion, and not the extravagant Parisian creations that were in focus. Swinging London with British designers as Mary Quant and Zandra Rhodes promoted both British and American fibres.⁶

ICI was Borregaards partner from the beginning of the sixties. The company may have inspired Borregaard to focus more on fashion. The two companies discussed marketing of the two brands in 1964.⁷ But the discussions between the two companies were mostly technical. The concept of Elegance Leisure was developed in 1965. The product engineer Einar Berg at Borregaard was responsible for the marketing campaigns. He promoted the company as an actor of fashion both internally and externally. In May 1965 he went to Paris to visit the

agency Textiles Paris Echos to discuss fashion and trends.⁸ Mr Beck from the agency informed about patterns, qualities and colours based on two Parisian fashion shows, called “Boutique” and “Ready-to –wear”, meant for clothes for everyday use. Berg picked out twenty samples that were used as the basis for the developing of Borregaards own proposals for the winter 1965/66.

Einar Berg visited also Le Comité International de la Rayon et des Fibres Synthétiques in Paris. Borregaard had been a part of the international collaboration within the artificial and synthetic fibre producers, at least since the fifties when the company participated as the only Norwegian one, at the first international congress within this field in Paris in 1954.⁹ Berg discussed the possibilities for the Parisian fashion house, Carven, to present their designs. Carven, most famous for making the Air France uniforms in the sixties, was interested in promoting their designs at new markets, even a small one as the Norwegian. The discussed fashion show was intended to be a part of the 25 years anniversary for the technical division (NTTF) within the Norwegian organisation of textile producers. The jubilee was celebrated in Bergen in March 1966 in another form. The headline for the congress was “The Textiles of Tomorrow”. Nine fibre producers displayed their products as a part of the event. Borregaard, ICI, Du Pont, IWS (International Wool Secretariat) and Hoechst were among them.¹⁰

The fashion show was arranged by the five exhibitors. It was a great success with almost five hundred spectators present. Per Spook’s creations were in focus. He was described as “the sensation of the year” in Paris, showing geometrical dresses in contrasted colours with mini-skirts. A dress with a big hole attracted especial attention. Additionally plastic raincoats, garments for flying and casual wear were shown. The futuristic style dominated fashion that year as it was influenced by materials used by flight and space industries which for many were synonymous with modernity.¹¹ Therefore it is interesting to note that IWS that marketed the 100 % pure wool focusing on nature as an advantage was presented within this concept. But in fact, both the wool and cotton producers learned from the synthetic fibre producers and made efforts to meet the competition from them. The natural fibres got their own labels, and designers promoted wool and cotton as fashionable. In many ways they succeeded. Natural lifestyle and natural fibres as a part of that, was coming up as fashionable in the end of the sixties and seventies and meant a serious setback for the synthetic fibres.

Borregaard cooperated with Per Spook within a limited period in 1966. Beside the fashion show, the sketches for *Elegant Leisure* were drawn at the same time. Spook continued working for Norwegian ready-made clothing, making sketches for the clothing company Abo in 1969, where Courtelle jersey was profiled instead of Borregaards labels. But the company's interest in fashion did not end with this. The sketches had only been the starting point for its campaign. Models were made by Plus Fashion Studio.¹² Plus was a design centre established in 1958 and located in the old military town Fredrikstad in the south-east of Norway, near the Borregaard plant. Different studios made different designs, mostly hand-made glass, pottery, textiles and jewellery sold in the artists' own shops. In the middle of the sixties the management intensified the cooperation between the design centre and the industry. The idea was that the artists made designs and prototypes for different companies. The artistic studios were partly owned by industrial companies. Plus Fashion Studio cooperated with two ready-to-wear companies, Vigdis Konfeksjon AS in Sarpsborg, making ladies and children wear, and Hanco in Fredrikstad making leisurewear. The fashion studio also made clothes of fabrics made at Plus' printing and weaving divisions for the Oslo-based design shop Norway Design. Of special interest here was the job for Borregaard – to make models after Per Spooks designs. The fabrics made of Terylene/ Supralan were woven at Seiersborg tekstilfabrik AS in Fredrikstad, another owner of the fashion studio. The models were meant to profile *Elegant Leisure* towards the ready-to-wear industry as an example how to use the fibre and the idea of how to be elegant.

The magazine *Bonytt* dealt with architecture, interiors and design, and was important for Norwegian producers and consumers in the fifties and sixties. The magazine only occasionally wrote about fashion and clothing. However in the mid-sixties there was a change in attitude. Fashion was exhibited in museums and designers were obviously inspired by art and architecture, as in Op-Art and the constructivism that became a part of the geometrical fashion. *Bonytt's* journalist commended Borregaard because of their engagement for making Norwegian clothing industry more fashionable and the company's efforts to urge the consumer to dress more elegantly. But the reference to the project was not totally focused on the textiles. There was also an interest in the designers behind the clothes. Female designers were often girlfriends or wives of bohemian writers or famous architects. These stories were told in women magazines and built up the idea of fashion and design as a part of the avant-garde of the decade influenced by the Anglo-American and youthful pop-culture as well as fashionable Paris.¹³ The Swedish designer Lena Folke-Olsson worked at Plus Fashion Studio

and was educated at the University College of Arts Crafts and Design in Stockholm, and had practiced at fashion studios in Paris, London and New York. But she was even more famous for her marriage to Axel Jensen, a Norwegian writer of beat-novels.¹⁴ Borregaards ideas about fashion and elegance were spread to the consumers in many ways.



Fig. 3 Gruppe 3 making designs for Borregaard in 1967-68. Photo: The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.

In 1967 the designers from Plus Fashion Studio were substituted with another fashion team called “Gruppe 3”. The forecasts and models for 1968 were made by three young female designers, Badi Batchelor, Ann Frømyhr and Marit Tømmerås.¹⁵ They drew up fashion trends for future seasons based on information from “Comité International de Couleur” where they were members. The trends were passed on to the Norwegian textile and ready-to-wear industry through the concept of Elegant Leisure. Models were designed together with the industry. The next step would be developing the models to a ready-made product.

Per Spook, Lena Folke-Olsson and the other designers were highly profiled. But equally important were other arguments for Elegant Leisure more concerned with quality. In an interview in the Norwegian retailers’ magazine Carl Henrik Harlem from Borregaard’s direction stressed that the company’s aim was to “contribute to a development towards more elegant casual wear”.¹⁶ He emphasized that “ordinary people” mostly wore old clothes that were worn out and had earlier been used for situations when they needed to dress up. Harlem meant that it was important to wear more elegant clothing, and he stressed the importance of easy care. The slogan Permanent Press was often used by Borregaard and the other fibre producers. Easy care and long durability meant style in that vocabulary. And by urging the importance of being stylish, the arguments for buying Borregaards products were strengthened. The aim of the campaign was more than selling yarn. Borregaard and the other

fibre producers tried to create a demand from the consumers for easy care clothing that only the producers of synthetic fibres could fulfil. They tried to create a market for their own products.

A lot of resources were used by the producers to market the new fibres. And it was needed because there were problems according to comfort and use. Many of the new fibres felt stiff and sticky. Plastics had negative connotations. But the consumers were overburdened with commercials about how fantastic these products were. The campaigns were no doubt expensive. And all advertisements argued for the same; fashion and easy care. The companies tried to create a loyalty towards their special brand, but it was difficult for the consumers to see the difference. Borregaard was the only Norwegian company that promoted textiles in this way. But together with the more global brands both the Danish label Spinnon and the Swedish Swelan competed with Supralan to control the Scandinavian market. The competition was hard. The company was in contact with other Scandinavian ready-to-wear companies to promote the Elegant Leisure-concept for these markets. But the success didn't come, although the ideas were more approved in Sweden than in Norway where the majority of the clothing industry was sceptical. The Norwegian textile industry was little interested in fashion and design. The companies wanted to produce what they "always had made" and what had been sold for years. The problem was an old one. Fashionable textiles and clothes had been imported from Germany, France and Great Britain since the Eighteenth Century, and the Norwegian mills produced mostly cheap everyday wares. After World War II there had been seller's market for some years because of import prohibition. But in the end of the fifties the import rose, and this accelerated. It was clear that the industry had to try new strategies to sell their goods, even at the domestic market. The design organisations and the trade associations asked for a more positive attitude to fashion and design to meet the increasing competition. Borregaards advertisements can be seen as a response to that challenge.

The difficulties within the Norwegian textile industry were not only a question about marketing. There were technical problems too. Reports from the Borregaard archive mentioned different problems with quality. The yarn could be unclean, meaning that it was blended with other fibres. Some of the weaving mills had problems too. The looms were made for wool, not synthetic fibres. Neither the Swedish nor the Norwegian producers were satisfied with the quality of Supralan.¹⁷ The dissatisfaction was further complicated by bad reputation of the viscose fibre in the fifties and sixties. This could partly be explained by the

producers of oil-based fibres and their efforts to promote their own products, but there were also problems with bad durability and a shabby outlook after washing that did not harmonize with the stylish ideal. Borregaard was a big producer of viscose fibres, but the majority of the fibres were sold to poor markets in Eastern Europe and Third World. These countries did not have the same demands neither to fashion nor quality as in Western Europe. The company had not the needed experience and knowledge to compete with Du Pont and ICI. The experience was with export and other markets as a producer of raw materials, not fashion commodities. The company may have realised that, and in 1966 they started spinning Du Pont's brand Orlon for the Scandinavian market. The slogan in this connection was Scandinavian design, a well-known label. This was a bigger success. The Swedish industry was more interested in cooperation. Especially the company Almedahls made attractive and fashionable fabrics by their own designers. Clothes wear were made of these fabrics and sold both in Sweden and Norway. At the end of the sixties the Orlon-project was under focus in the magazines. *Elegant Leisure* still existed, but was in trouble. The ambitions had fallen. In 1969 Borregaard contacted the textile school in Borås in Sweden to get designs for the 1970 collection.¹⁸ The company thus started with the designs from the celebrated Parisian designer Per Spook and ended up hiring anonymous design students.

As we have seen Borregaard tried to develop a product concept influenced by the big international chemical corporations. The point was to design a fibre with the aim to get a perfect material for perfect casual clothing. Fashion was used to catch interests from as well producers and consumers. It was a success for a couple of years, but it didn't mean a durable change in the attitude of the Norwegian textile industry towards fashion. One of the reasons was obviously already mentioned problems within the cellulose fibre industry. The prices fell in these years both because of overproduction and negative attitudes among the consumers. Clothes made of viscose fibres were regarded both as unfashionable and of bad quality. As a result the Terylene/ Supralan blend was outdone by 100 % synthetic fibres. And at the same time a more natural lifestyle became in vogue, a trend that increased throughout the seventies. Natural fibres as wool and cotton were fashionable, and the elegant look became less important.

But even if the trends had been in the favour of both viscose fibres and elegance, there would have been problems between the textile Norwegian industry and fashion. The old-fashioned textile industry had machinery made as far back as in the end of the Nineteenth Century. It

was not constructed for the new qualities of thin synthetic yarns. The weaving mills were used to long series with basic wares and the production of these simple fabrics went on for years. Optimistical talk about fashion and quick changes was not enough to modernize the industry. To go for fashion would have meant high and long-term investments and long-term planning. And there were neither economy nor enough interest to change the Norwegian textile industry to a part of the international fashion industry.

Another issue was textile industry's relation to the export market. The Norwegian textile industry had historically been producing for the domestic market. Borregaard wanted to expand and to be a heavy actor within Scandinavia. Both fibres and fashion were intended to be sold all over Scandinavia. Because of the big export share as producer of raw materials the company seemed to be fitted for this activity. The high export rate of 90 % of the viscose fibres was marketed as an advantage for the company. And without doubt the international experience helped the company towards an internal positive attitude to export and internationalization. But it could not be transferred to fashion and ready-made clothes. Fashion needed another kind of marketing, and a quicker turnover than both Borregaard and the rest of the textile industry could offer. Borregaard had to both compete and cooperate with professional actors as Du Pont and ICI to succeed. And these companies were much more professional with more experience toward bigger markets. In retrospect it seems impossible to succeed within the fashion field for both Borregaard and the Norwegian textile industry. But it also shows how close connected fashion and textile production are, and how the one may help the other for shorter or longer time.

¹ Trond Bergh and Even Lange, *Foredlet virke: historien om Borregaard 1889-1989*, Oslo 1989.

² "Vi går om bord!" *Alt for Damene* 1966.

³ Jon Gunnar Arntzen and Knut Helle, *Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Oslo 1999-2005.

⁴ Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, *20th Century Fashion*, London 1999, p. 189-191.

⁵ Susannah Handley, *Nylon The Manmade Fashion Revolution*, London 1999, p. 79-87.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 106-114

⁷ The archives are at Borgarsyssel Museum, Sarpsborg, Norway.

⁸ Borregaardarkivet Box 135 1965, Reiserapport mai 1965.

⁹ *Livre d'or Premier Congres International Textiles Artificiels et Synthetiques*, Paris 1954. Archive Rayonullfabrikken ved A/S Borregaard, Box 1564. The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.

¹⁰ "Mer fra NTTF-jubileet" *Norsk Tekstil Tidende* 1966/4, s. 33.

¹¹ Suzanne Baldaia, "Space Age Fashion", p. 169-189. *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, ed. Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, Oxford 2005.

¹² Harriet Clayhills, "Mote fra Fredrikstad" *Bonytt* 1966, nr. 11/12.

¹³ About the beat-generation's influence in Norway, see Sissel Myklebust et.al.. *Temmet eller uhemmet*, Oslo 2004, p. 321-366.

¹⁴ Sverre Evensen, "Hos Lena & Axel i Vaterland", *Alt for Damene*, 1966/ 21, s. 24-25.

¹⁵ "Ny i motebildet: Gruppe 3" *KK*, 1967/16, p 12-13.

¹⁶ Manufaktur 1967/ 18, s. 1054 "Fleksibelt opplegg av kampanjen "Elegant Fritid 1968", bygget på nært samarbeid med detaljistene."

¹⁷ Borregaard arkivet, Box 147 1966, Box 165 1968 and Box 187 1970.

¹⁸ "Design-elever i samarbeid med Borregaard", *Manufaktur* 1969/12, p. 718-719.