

UC Davis Streetnotes

Title

Tailoring Cosmopolitanism in the Italian Nordest

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2dn493cv>

Journal

Streetnotes, 20(01)

Author

Brazzale, Claudia

Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed

Tailoring Cosmopolitanism in the Italian Nordest

Claudia Brazzale

Abstract

Cosmopolitanism has become a potent means through which the fashion industry captures value in the global economy. Recognizing the selling power of a cosmopolitan imaginary, the provincial clothing firms of North East Italy actively cultivate associations with global cities— drawing from their flow of people, cultures, images, and ideas—to absorb their urban edge and worldly aura. Located in predominantly rural areas far from established fashion centers, these firms symbolically capture the *urbs* through distribution, communication, and marketing strategies that endorse cities' mythologies of modernity and excitement. Using stratagems centered around metropolitan cosmopolitanism, firms like Benetton and Diesel—prototypes of the industrial system of the region—skillfully transformed their labels into trendy “cosmobrands” and gained a central place in the topography of transnational fashion networks.



1. Benetton's hanging towel in Venice. (Photo by C. Brazzale)

I started thinking about the relationship between fashion and global cities in my first years of graduate school in Los Angeles. It was the Spring of 2002, when, driving along Santa Monica boulevard on my daily commute to UCLA's campus, I would stare at a billboard publicizing "Diesel's Happy Valley" and ponder the worldly reach of the small denim company I remembered from a couple of decades earlier. Along with Americanino, Mash, Gas, Replay, Carrera, and others, Diesel was one of the several denim firms scattered around the area where I grew up in the Veneto region of northeastern Italy.¹ With its billboards blanketing Los Angeles's boulevards and its flagship stores colonizing key shopping sites in the city, Diesel had clearly grown out of its provincial birth place and spread all the way to southern California and beyond. In fact, judging from my browsing through the international newsstand across from campus in Westwood village, Diesel's advertising appeared extensively in exclusive high-end fashion magazines as well as alternative design and music periodicals around the globe. My quotidian musings on Diesel's worldly expansion eventually prompted me to explore the globalizing trajectory of other successful

¹ These, among others, were popular denim brands produced in the 1970s and '80s in the Veneto region of North East Italy. Although some of these labels were discontinued, a few of them are still growing strong in the global denim marketplace. For more information on the production of jeans in Veneto, see the 2007 *Fuori Biennale* titled "I love Jeans. The History of Jeans in Veneto" (<http://www.fuoribiennale.org/2007/notizia.asp?menu=notizie&IDnews=100&LAN=ITA> Accessed June 1, 2012).

firms based in my home-region. Ultimately, this exploration turned into my dissertation research, an ethnography of the small and medium scale, family based firms that fueled the 1980s' economic boom of an area commonly referred to as the Italian "Nordest" and the disjunctures between the firms' provincial patriarchal logics and their worldly aspirations.²

Alongside geographical location, Diesel shared with the other regional enterprises of the Italian Nordest a successful production system based on local networks of contracting and subcontracting manufacturing firms clustered in highly specialized industrial districts that ranged from textile and clothing to home design and mechanics (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Bonomi, 1997; Burroni and Trigilia 2001).³ More importantly, the denim company shared with the firms of the Nordest, in particular those producing luxury life-style articles, an international popularity that was actively cultivated through globalizing branding stratagems centered around urban themes and content.⁴ Located in predominantly rural areas far from established fashion centers, the Nordest enterprises symbolically captured the *urbs* through distribution, communication, and marketing strategies that endorsed cities' mythologies of modernity and excitement.⁵ Denoting dynamism and coolness, urbanity became central to the identity of these companies and their international expansion. Although favorable national and international economic conjunctures and the increasing demand for designer goods helped securing the financial success of these enterprises outside of Italy, it is also thanks to their cleverly tailored associations to metropolitan cosmopolitanism that the firms of the Nordest were able to enter the global marketplace in spite of their small, familial, and provincial organization.

The cosmopolitan experience of global cities became crucial not only to the brand identity of these companies but also to that of the firms' entrepreneurs, who found personal affirmation through the international success and profile of their business. Local affirmation is key to understanding the firms' obsession with cosmopolitanism in the Italian Nordest, an area that up until the 1960s was marked by poverty, outward migration, and political marginality within the nation. The successful international profile of these businesses enabled the

² The term "Nordest," a contraction of two cardinal points—North and East—has come to denote the economic and political development of an area that comprise the region of Veneto and parts of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino.

³ Celebrated by economists as a new post-Fordist industrial model of production, the manufacturing system of North East Italy, proved successful for a limited time. Threatened by cheaper imports from China and a series of economic crises, the local system of subcontracting was soon replaced by off-shore subcontracting.

⁴ Alongside Diesel and Benetton some other regional firms that are internationally renowned include the clothing companies Stefanel, Replay, and Gas; the eyeglass empire of Luxotica and Safilo; the shoe brand Geox; the luxury leather goods Bottega Veneta; and the sportswear brand Lotto.

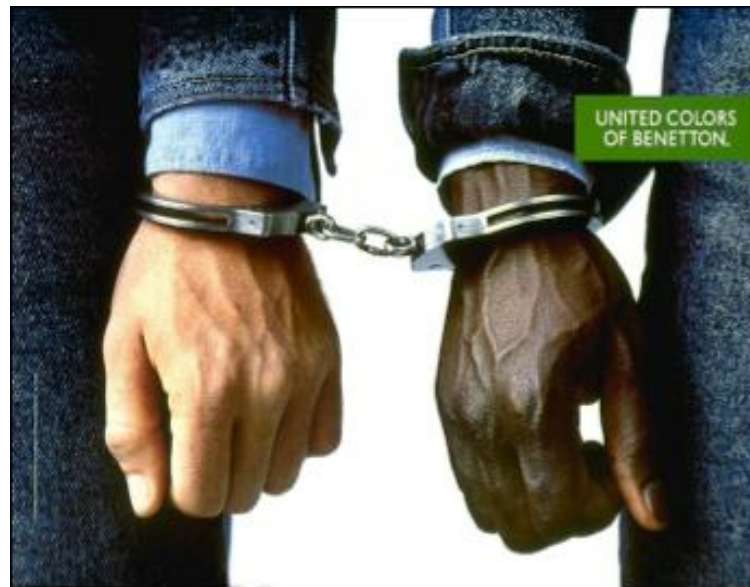
⁵ Appropriation of an urban aura also occurred in the architectural design of these firms' headquarters. For a description of the local industrial landscape of North East Italy, see Brazzale 2009.

region to leave behind its history and associate with a modern and forward-thinking world. Although most firms outsource communication strategies to international creative agencies, entrepreneurs are still responsible for their commitment to global rather than national affiliations and, as we will see, for their bold decisions to go with controversial advertising campaigns. Such decisions are best understood by taking into account Italy's anxiety over its presumed backwardness in a European hierarchy of modern nations and the region's eagerness to distance itself from its past and from a lagging nation-state (Agnew 2002; Brazzale 2007). The anxiety over the backwardness of the region and the nation explains why Diesel and a significant number of firms of the Italian Nordest abandoned associations with the traditional Made-in-Italy label and chose, instead, to market themselves as global firms.

The famous forbear of this globalizing and urban-centered marketing was Benetton. Originally a family firm established in 1955 in the Veneto's province of Treviso, Benetton was the first local firm to understand the globalization of world markets and the importance of creating a distinct brand identity and image.⁶ Prioritizing a globalizing perspective, it created the slogan "United Colors of Benetton" and promoted a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan image of the brand. Metropolitan multiculturalism, a constitutive part of how we have come to think of cities, became the company's preferred means to produce added value. Another of Benetton's strategic move was to launch deliberately controversial marketing campaigns typically against bigotry, racism, and homophobia—the most famous ones include a priest and a nun kissing, a newly born baby with uncut umbilical cord, a black stallion and a white mare mating, a colorful mix of condoms, and a black woman breast-feeding a white baby.⁷ Mobilizing a seemingly enlightened politics of integration, these ads worked to imbue Benetton's apparel with a worldly and forward-thinking aura (see figures 2-3). Following Benetton's precursory marketing strategies, the firms of the Nordest learned to produce value in the global economy through communication stratagems centered on metropolitan cosmopolitanism and urban savvy. Diesel, in particular, took Benetton's globalizing branding a step further by articulating a postmodern era beyond differences of gender, sexuality, race, culture, and geography and by promoting a view of a world without national borders. As prototypes of the industrial system of the region, the examples of Benetton and Diesel illustrate how companies draw from global cities—their flow of people, cultures, images, and ideas and the dynamism and vitality of urban life—in order to position themselves in a global hierarchy of brands, imbue their clothes with an urban flavor, and produce a modern, cosmopolitan, and progressive fashion.

⁶ In 1986 Benetton went public and then returned to being a private group in 2002.

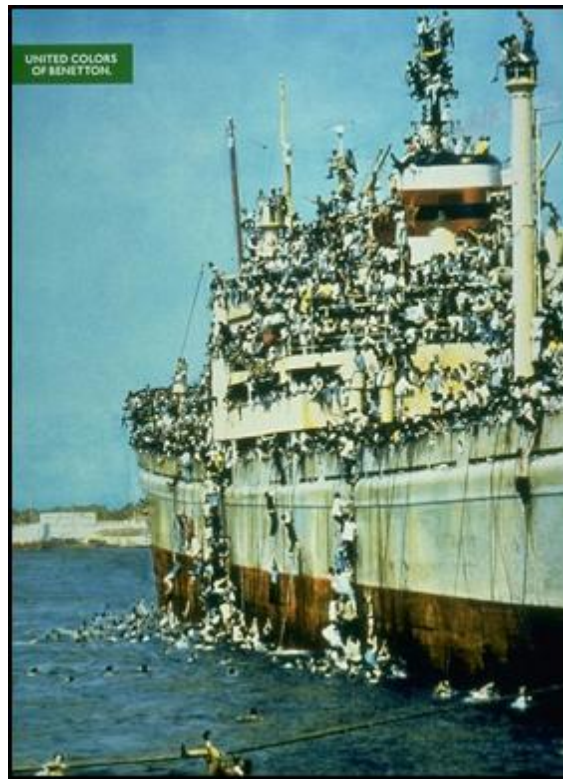
⁷ All of these advertising campaigns, including "La Pietà," which portrayed David Kirby dying of AIDS in an Ohio hospital bed, were created by the photographer Oliviero Toscani, Benetton's creative director for eighteen years.



2. Benetton's multicultural ad.



3. Benetton's multicultural ad.



4. Benetton's ad.



5. Diesel's ad.

Inhabiting Global Cities

Although maintaining their headquarters in the region, companies like Benetton and Diesel created a distribution and retail network that plugged into a global order of world cities. In the early 1970s, the still emerging Benetton family firm started plastering Italian cities with its billboards and, a few years later, occupying them with its franchised stores. Its tightly controlled franchising ensured a capillary distribution of Benetton's stores in urban centers around the globe. Today its 6000 stores are found in 120 countries.⁸ Benetton was the first international brand to set up a store in Turkey (1985), Moscow (1987) and, more recently, in Tbilisi, Georgia, followed by the controversial decision to open an outlet in disputed Sukhum/i, the capital of the secessionist republic of Abkhazia, which Georgians regard as their own territory (the decision was revoked after Benetton's stores in Georgia shut down in protest for three days).

A couple of decades later than Benetton's initial expansion, Diesel chose to create a more concentrated network of its own flagship stores in key cities such as New York, London, San Francisco, Barcelona, Rome, and Mumbai (Gilbert 2000:8). In *Schei*, a commentary on the entrepreneurial culture of North East Italy, the Italian journalist Gian Antonio Stella commented Diesel's first flagship store in the following terms:

The owner of the company, who has a couple of sheds in a countryside town, went to make war with Levi's right in its backyard, opening an enormous store of fourteen hundred square meters of Diesel jeans and clothes at 770 Lexington Avenue, New York, exactly across the Levi's warehouse. (2000:11)

As Stella suggested, the opening of its first retail flagship store in New York back in 1996 helped the small denim company compete with the larger or more established Levi's brand. At the same time, the worldwide network of flagship stores served as a fortified outpost that simultaneously promoted the label in key cosmopolitan centers and positioned the company in the hierarchy of fashion's cities. Diesel's flagship strategy continues today despite the bad economy—in 2009 the company opened a three-floor megastore in the heart of Milan, followed by one in Soho, New York, in the beginning of 2012, and the most recent one in Shinsadong, Seoul, inaugurated at the beginning of September 2012.⁹

⁹ "Diesel Fueled" in *Style.Com* January 21, 2009 <http://www.style.com/stylefile/2009/01/diesel-fueled/>. Accessed June 15, 2012; "Diesel Black Gold Gets a New Look in Soho" in *The ShopHound*, February 14, 2012 (http://theshophound.typepad.com/the_shophound/2012/02/now-open-diesel-black-gold-gets-a-new-look-in-soho-with-a-contemporary-showcase.html). Accessed June 15, 2012)



6, 7. Benetton stores in Tapei and Bangalore.



8. Diesel Wall Ads in Madrid. (Photo by C. Brazzale)

Alongside setting up retail stores in key metropolises and urban areas, the clothing companies of the Italian Nordest inhabit and fashion the urban landscape of cities through their billboards and sponsored art. Sisley, one of Benetton Group's brands, recently sponsored a philanthropic advertising project in Venice that caused much controversy. For the past few years Benetton Group plastered the Doge's Palace and the Bridge of Sighs in Venice with gigantic billboards advertising the Sisley label (see figure 7). While these posters cover the city landmarks with ads, they also serve to pay for the vital restorations of the buildings and monuments. Similarly, in 2003, Diesel started shaping the facades of metropolitan centers with its "Diesel Wall," a competition meant to sponsor artwork to be displayed in large, unused walls of major cities. Mixing the commercial aspect of the billboards with a philanthropic mission and artistic messages, these companies both redefine the use of advertising posters and of decaying cities' facades.



9. Sisley's ad covering the Doge's Palace in Venice. (Photo by C. Brazzale)



10. Diesel Wall competition. (<http://www.notcot.com/images/dieselwall-thumb.jpg>)

The firms of the Nordest have learned to absorb a metropolitan aura by taking on the cities' role as artistic and intellectual hubs and posing as think tanks or avant-garde institutions that sponsor art, social, cultural, and educational events as well as philanthropic projects. In 1991 Benetton launched its *Colors* magazine, which targeted young people across the world in four bilingual languages (English-Italian, English-German, English-Spanish and English-French). In 1994, the company established *Fabrica*, a foundation supporting young artists from all over the world and promoting projects across a diverse range of communication media (as we will see, the philanthropic mission of the

foundation is often mixed with the company's marketing ventures).¹⁰ Replay, another important casual fashion brand from the region, created the *Fondazione Buziol* upon the premature death of the company's owner in 2005. Diesel, on the other hand, launched a number of popular entertainment initiatives, including the Diesel:U: Music, a worldwide support network for undiscovered musicians, sponsoring music awards and, more recently, its own internet radio station; the Diesel New Art, a competition to sponsor young artists for solo exhibitions and art fairs; and ITS, a competition for young designers and fashion photographers; and the previously mentioned Diesel Wall. It is only in 2008 that Diesel ventured into philanthropy by starting its own non-profit organization—Only the Brave Foundation—to support and develop projects in Africa. (The name of the foundation comes from the company's motto, which was tattooed on the owner's fingers at his 50th birthday and was later used to name one of the brand's male fragrances.)¹¹

As I write this, Benetton with the aid of Fabrica's communication team just launched a new concept for a crossover between an art gallery and a flagship store, mixing in this way not only the role of the company with that of the foundation but also that of art and fashion. "The Art of Knit," a three months mix of retail, gallery, and craft workshop event (9 Sept.-31 Dec., 2012), was opened in a dismissed garage now covered with street art in the prime neighborhood of Nolita in Manhattan. Describing it as a "new pop up experience" that celebrates "diversity," through this pop up store the company simultaneously capitalizes on Nolita's modish vibe, on nearby's Soho's former artistic character, and on New York's renown ethnic diversity all the while putting to use Fabrica's artistic creativity.¹²

Another crucial way in which the clothing firms of the Italian Nordest capture an urban and cosmopolitan spirit is through traditional advertising in magazine ads, companies' catalogues, and billboards., where images of cities' landmarks and skylines provide a set backdrop. Examples of this visual use of urban landscapes include the 2005-06 campaign of Playlife, a label owned by the Benetton Group, which portrayed models on the rooftop of the Standard Hotel in Los Angeles, a city landmark for hip Angelenos; Stefanel's 2003 campaign "Everything Is Always Happening Now," which labeled different urban scenes inserting names of global cities, such as "Now in London," "Now in Tokyo," "Now in Venice;" and the 2008 campaign of the denim label TakeTwo, picturing a model at the top of a mountain looking out at the distant skyline of a city entrapped in a cage (see

¹⁰ Artistic and communication projects range from cinema, music, and photography to graphics, industrial design and publishing. See Fabrica's website at <http://www.fabrica.it/>

¹¹ Only the Brave (OTB) is also the name of the holding group that Renzo Rosso founded, which comprise not only [Diesel](#) but also [Maison Martin Margiela](#), [Viktor & Rolf](#), and Staff International (who manufactures and distributes DSquared2, [Just Cavalli](#), [Vivienne Westwood](#), and Marc Jacobs Men).

¹² For more details, visit: <http://www.benetton.com/popup/>

figure 9-10).¹³ Although in the latter ad there is a critical rejection of the city as a place of conformity (the model is free because she chooses TakeTwo), the metropolis is central in these ads, serving as a concrete place from which to construct representations of edgy urbanity. If brands like Playlife, Stefanel, and TakeTwo appropriate metropolitan centers through straight-forward associations in their ads, Diesel generally chooses to do so more indirectly. Diesel does not declare, but rather suggests the metropolitan character of the company by co-opting street-wise counter-culture and the ever-shifting dynamism of cities.



11. TakeTwo's advertisement.

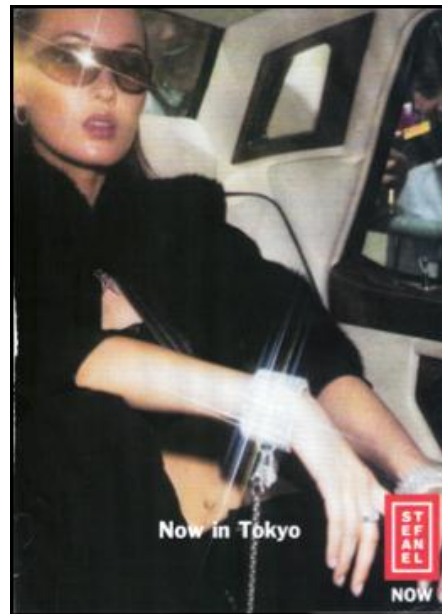
¹³ A knitwear company founded in 1955 in Treviso, Veneto, Stefanel has a strong presence mainly in Europe and Asia. TakeTwo, a much more recent denim firm, is based in the Veneto's province of Padova.



12. TakeTwo's advertisement.



13. PlayLife at the Standard Hotel, LA.

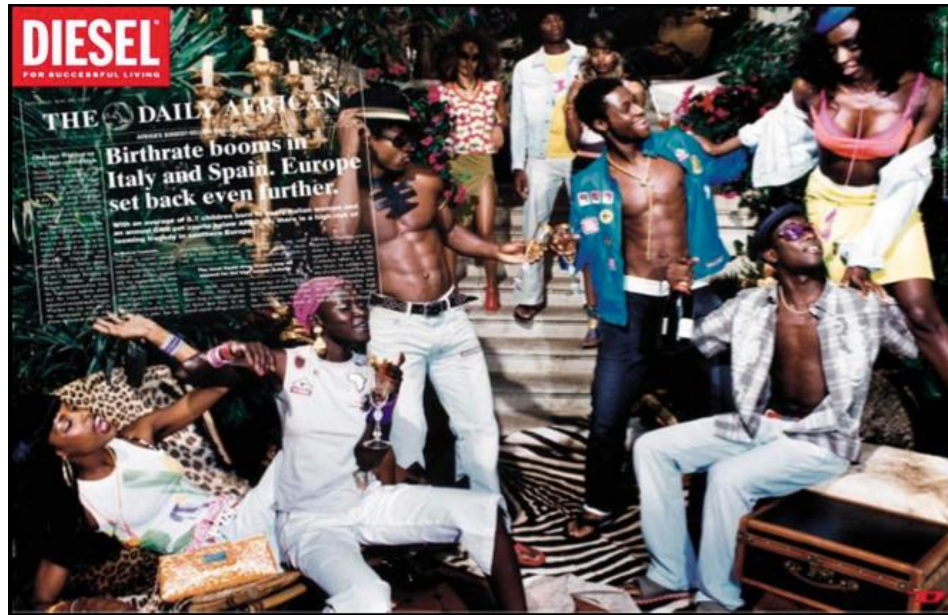


14. Stefanel's advertisement: "Now in Tokyo".

Diesel's Postmodern Urban Planet

Similarly to Benetton's shocking billboards of the 1980s and '90s, where the product disappeared to focus instead on social issues, Diesel's marketing campaigns often revolve around contemporary social themes. However, unlike Benetton, Diesel does not take controversial stances, but rather offers humorous, ironic, and irreverent commentaries on the paradoxes of consumer culture. Diesel's initial marketing campaign played with the standard promise of success found in most advertising by appropriating the "consumer products make better living" theme of the 1950s, translating it into its own slogan, "Diesel—For Successful Living," and exaggerating it to the point where it became an evident joke. The company's advertising strategy also relies on unexpected ironic juxtapositions that often invert traditional hierarchies and values. In its 2000 "Chic Afrique" campaign, for instance, stories that typically appear in Western newspapers are placed in fictitious African papers that reverse traditional economic and political hierarchies. Diesel's Press Pack explains how these ads address the cool and youthful urban crowd sophisticated enough to get the humor. Further elucidating Diesel's communication strategies, the marketing literature tells us that Diesel's irony works to produce edginess while its critiques of consumption create an in-synch complicity with consumers geared to strengthen the brand's coolness (among others, Fabbris 2003; Cillo and Lanza 2000). Diesel's postmodern, relativist, and detached perspective

force viewers to negotiate meanings and make up their own mind, a tactic that is supposed to help the company establish a feeling of an ongoing dialogue with consumers. Finally, marketing literature points at how the focus of Diesel's ads is always on the story and not on the models, who are usually unremarkable groups of young people seemingly living beyond gender and racial difference. The theatricality of the models consciously performing the stories enacted in the ads once again support Diesel's postmodern understanding of the world as the society of the spectacle.



15. Diesel's "Chic Afrique" campaign.

In support of the company's postmodernist and post-national perspective, blatant exaggeration and deliberate politically incorrect statements are often used to tease fixed notions of nations and cultures. The 2007 "Global Warming Ready" campaign played with the apocalyptic transformation and partial disappearance of global cities, picturing Paris as a tropical jungle; Venice's St Mark's square crowded with parrots rather than pigeons; London as a mere tiny island; and Rio de Janeiro's Christ The Redeemer and New York's skyscrapers half-submerged by water. The 2011 "Diesel Island" campaign went so far as to suggest that consumers start a nation-state from scratch and "take what is great from the countries we know and ditch what is bad." Another ad from the same campaign, labeled "the birth of a nation," depicted people landing on a deserted island and declared: "Pioneers arrived on the Diesel Island, seeking refuge from tyrannical regimes, economic crisis, political corruption, and reality shows." These ads would call for a discussion of the commodification of environmental and political issues as well as a critique of the postmodern practice of pastiche in fashion and the gendered, racialized, and class-identified subjects they simultaneously make and render invisible. However, for the purposes of this

article I would like to focus on their hyperreal, and yet subtle, visual references to cities and to the transnational flow of people associated with globalization. The postmodern urban pastiche that characterizes these ads helped Diesel transform a garment like denim, which is traditionally associated with the outdoors, into the ultimate urban wear. On a representational level, Diesel appropriated the fragmented nature of contemporary street culture to assemble elements of the Wild West (Diesel's original logo depicted an Iroquois man's head), American vintage, and 1960's hippy, psychedelic culture with non-Western funky motifs. On a sartorial level, the company also relied on the clothing *bricolage* typical of street culture. Adopting the faded and worn-denim look—at the time typical only of construction workers and hard rockers—and mixing it with high-tech fabrics, high-quality manufacturing, and modern details, Diesel tailored stylish and hip jeans that blurred distinctions between street style and high fashion.¹⁴



16. Image of Diesel's "Global Warming Ready" campaign.

¹⁴ The company eventually created different departments distinguishing the all denim, "D-Diesel," from its high fashion area, "Diesel Style Lab."



16. More images of Diesel's "Global Warming Ready" campaign.

Lastly, Diesel forged associations with cities and their urban vibe through the public persona of Renzo Rosso, its founder and sole owner. A self-made man who made it from the province to the urban jet-set, Rosso is the ultimate global-trotter. Like many other firms of North East Italy, the history of Diesel can be traced back to that of the *operaio-imprenditore*, a worker-turned-entrepreneur. After attending a technical textile school, Rosso started working for Adriano Goldsmied, the pioneer of Italian casual wear. Within a few years of working as an employee, in 1978 Rosso embarked on his own entrepreneurial career and together with his ex-boss founded Diesel, a new jeans brand, which he eventually bought out in 1985, thus becoming its single proprietor. Today Rosso has become a trendy icon regularly appearing in the national press. Fond of Rosso's dizzying ascent, the leading Italian financial newspaper *Il Sole 24Ore* has included him in its rubric of successful innovators and frequently covers stories about him. In its brief press history (2003-2012), the magazine *Economy* also featured several accounts of Rosso's accomplishments, dedicating the entire magazine's cover to a portrait of the entrepreneur sitting in a couch in the middle of Times Square, with the title "*Il Barone Rosso*," the red baron (*Economy*, 2005).

Always dressed in his trademark jeans, Rosso looks more like a middle-aged rocker than the head of a fashion empire. He is known to listen to heavy metal, practice yoga and snowboarding, and spend holidays in his own Pelican hotel in Miami or else skipping his 31-meter vintage yacht. Rosso also keeps an active, open Facebook profile that is filled not only with official pictures and videos of himself and the company's runway shows but also with his own instagrammed photos portraying friends and family and his frequent trips (as one of his pictures shows, Rosso reached 3333 followers on Instagram on July 16, 2012, while on Facebook he has 21,412 likes). At Diesel's 30th anniversary, Rosso celebrated by throwing seventeen parties in eight time zones, from Tokyo to New York via Dubai and Oslo.¹⁵ More recently, he has been reported at his massive Mumbai launch party for the brand's Indian entry surrounded by Bollywood fashionistas.¹⁶

Rosso likes to not only consider himself a "citizen of the world" (Zargani, 2012) but also declare that his company "can legitimately claim to be the first brand to believe truly in the global village and to embrace it with open arms."¹⁷ Another of Rosso's favorite globalizing claims is that Diesel "views the world as a single, borderless macro-culture and this is why the company is so successful worldwide."¹⁸ Although continuing to profess his globalizing philosophy, in recent years Rosso has been publicly embracing his local roots moving towards

¹⁵ See Alessandra, Ilari. "Three Decades of Diesel." *WWD* 196, no. 77 (Oct 10, 2008): 12-n/a, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/231243189?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).

¹⁶ Gayatri, Shah, R. "Diesel's fake and stupid launch party in Mumbai," in CNN-GO International, 5 May 2010. <http://www.cnn.go.com/mumbai/shop/diesels-fake-and-stupid-launch-party-mumbai-144932> (accessed June 1, 2012).

¹⁷ From Diesel's Press Pack. Retrieved from <http://www.diesel.com/> (October 10, 2006).

¹⁸ Ibid.

a more up-to-date perspective of globalization centered around the concept of glocality (Dirlik 2001). Therefore, alongside being reported having dinner with celebrities like Bono, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Marina Abramovic he is also captured at home celebrating his fiftieth birthday together with his employees in Bassano, near the company's headquarters, or else discussing his recent winemaking venture in his local Diesel Farm in North East Italy.¹⁹ The recent incorporation of Rosso's local life seem to once again feed into the company's cutting-edge representations of a worldliness that is no longer just about globalization, but rather about a glocality conscious of both global and local forces.



17. Renzo Rosso sitting in Times Square. (cover of Economy, 2005.)



18. Pelican Hotel in Miami, Florida. (from <http://www.pelicanhotel.com/>)

¹⁹ For Diesel Farm, please go to <http://www.dieselfarm.it/>

Diesel's (Post)National Cosmopolitanism

Through its network of flagship stores Diesel plugs into a top tier of contemporary global cities, thus confirming and re-inscribing a geographical hierarchy of fashion's capitals. At the same time, the company partly rejects this ranking by choosing to maintain its headquarters in the small and rural town of Breganze, in the Veneto's province of Vicenza.²⁰ Diesel has been using its peripheral location as proof of its independent path outside of fashion mainstream. Marly Nijssen, one of Diesel's designers, legitimates the company's geographical position in the following terms:

Because we're not in the center where it's all happening in the fashion world, we're not so likely to just go with the flow. We're not influenced by the things that everybody else gets excited about. But we all travel a lot and that plugs us into the world. In the last four months, I've been to Morocco, Holland, Belgium, Hawaii, Bali, Singapore, Tokyo, L.A., Miami, and London. (in Polhemus 1998:11)

Following Diesel's script of rebelliousness and independent creativity, Nijssen translates distance from traditional fashion centers into stylistic freedom and autonomy. She also seems to suggest that the periphery, in contrast to the metropolis, a focal point of attraction accustomed to incoming movement, is better geared to deal with the outward mobility that globalization necessarily entails. Nijssen, in fact, indicates the importance of traveling around the world to hunt for new trends. Paramount to her understanding of a designer's ability to craft new fashion styles is her mobility rather than her central location. Therefore, contemporary global cities are important to Diesel only as far as they can offer a confluence of different mobilities rather than static place of urban centrality.

Whether understood as a dynamic confluence of flows or as urban centrality, the trope of the city as a receptacle of creativity and hipness has been crucial to Diesel's transformation from a jeans-only company to an urban fashion brand. As we have seen, Diesel drew from a *mélange* of urban elements to activate a postmodern, cosmopolitan imaginary that was to be associated with the brand. Of course, Diesel tailored a commodified version of cosmopolitanism devoid of any ethical and socio-political ideals. This market-place co-optation of a politico-philosophical concept draws on popular understandings of cosmopolitanism that interpret "world citizenship" as a modern life-style taken as universal. Despite the concept's premise of allegiance to the wider world, Diesel's centered its *cosmo* imaginary on a North American model of melting-pot urbanism (and, as discussed earlier borrowed an array of North American symbols, images, and styles, from the Wild West to American vintage). In this

²⁰ The old headquarters were in the nearby town of Molvena. In 2010, the company inaugurated its new offices, called Diesel Village, in For pictures, see: Breganze.http://foto.ilsole24ore.com/SoleOnLine5/Economia/Aziende/2010/diesel-nuova-sede-breganze/diesel-nuova-sede-breganze_fotogallery.php?id=1

way, the company not only embraced a cosmopolitanism linked to the universalism of Western thought but also relied on a specific Western nation and its cities to construct a vision of worldliness.

The paradox of Diesel's post-national imaginary fashioned around the North American melting-pot metropole can be understood in consideration of the cultural and economic hegemony exercised by the US. Providing both a model and a prototype to measure itself against, the US has had a profound impact Diesel, as Rosso reveals when recounting his initial venture to sell jeans to the North American market,

In the 80s we went to the USA to sell jeans and somebody said it was like selling ice to Eskimos. Well, with a lot of sacrifice, we succeeded and today a lot of people mistake us for an American brand." (Asnaghi 2006:36)

Rosso often discusses his penchant for the American dream and the myth of the Wild West.²¹ In Ted Polhemous's booklet, *Diesel: World Wide Wear*, Rosso describes that when he was young everyone dreamed about America because it showed another world (1998:9). Although venturing in different markets of the worlds, Rosso's favorite business and travel destination seems to have remained the USA. When asked by a journalist about the company's purchase of a twelve-story building in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City, Rosso explained the acquisition in terms of its economic importance, "America is the land of big opportunities, and for this reason it is really important to have runway shows here" (Asnaghi 2006:36). In sum, as Rosso's statements illustrate, Diesel's planet has always looked up to and modeled itself around the American market and its representations of cosmopolitanism.

Conclusion

Cosmopolitanism has become a potent means through which the fashion industry captures value in the global economy. Recognizing the selling power of a cosmopolitan imaginary, the provincial clothing firms of the Italian Nordest actively cultivated associations with global cities in order to absorb their worldly edge. Unlike other Italian companies capitalizing on the Made-in-Italy label—a consolidated signifier of quality—the Nordest firms emphasize their transnational affiliations and market themselves as global firms. Diesel, for instance, initially chose to connect to an imagined global village without advertising its origins other than suggesting them in subtle ways (Gilbert 2000). Such strategic alignments with a globalized planet contributed to their worldwide success and to the effective construction of their cosmopolitan image, which was tailored through an array of other stratagems that connects

²¹ See Mario Platero's interview with Rosso, "Diesel scommette sugli States" in *Radio24* <http://www.radio24.ilsole24ore.com/main.php?articolo=diesel-states-renzo-rosso-abbigliamento-newyork-soho> accessed June 18, 2012.

the firms' brands to contemporary global cities. This is why, despite their provincial locations and distance from cities and key fashion centers, the clothing firms of the Nordest were able to manufacture and embody the coolness so dear to the new cosmopolitan elite that David Brooks describes in his *Bobos in Paradise* (2000). The ways in which these peripheral clothing firms transformed their labels into trendy "cosmobrands" and gained a central place in the topography of transnational fashion networks shed light on the symbiotic relationship between fashion and cities and, in particular, on cities' ability to make garments fashionable. As we have seen, cities have the unique capacity to generate new styles and trends not only *in-locus* but also outside of their perimeters thanks to their power to confer a cosmopolitan aura to those skillfully associating with their lifeways, aesthetics, and landscapes.

References

- Agnew, John. *Place and Politics in Modern Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Asnaghi, Laura. "Ombelico Addio, Torna La Vita Alta: Pance Coperte, a New York Sfilano I Nuovi Jeans Diesel." *La Repubblica*, (15 September, 2006): 36.
- Brazzale, Claudia. "Family Firms and the Making of Cosmopolitanism: The Effacement of Gender in the Global Capitalism of the Italian Nordest." PhD. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007.
- Brazzale, Claudia. "Meandering Through the New Global Urban," in *Streetnotes*, 18. Special Issue "Urban Feel," Winter 2009.
- Bonomi, Aldo. *Il Capitalismo Molecolare. La Società al Lavoro nel Nord Italia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1997.
- Breward, Christopher and Gilbert, David eds. *Fashion's World Cities*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006.
- Breward, Christopher and Evans, Caroline eds. *Fashion and Modernity*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005.
- Brooks, David. *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Burroni, Luigi and Trigilia, Carlo. "Italy: Economic Development through Local Economies." In C. Crouch et al., *Local Production Systems in Europe: Rise or Demise?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Cillo Paola, Lanza Andrea. "La Costruzione dell'Identità di Marca: Il caso Diesel." In *Micro and Macro Marketing*, IX, n. 1, 129-156, 2000.
- Dirlik, Arif "Place-based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place." In *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Ebenkamp, Becky. "Gross National Product Ads-Diesel Jeans, Humorous Advertisements." http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0BDW/is_n8_v39/ai_20332430 (accessed May 15, 2010).
- Edmondson, Gail. "The Driving Force Behind Diesel," in *Bloomberg Business Week Magazine Online Extra*, 19 January 2003a. <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2003-01-19/online-extra-the-driving-force-behind-diesel> (accessed May 28, 2012).
- Edmondson, Gail. "Diesel Is Smoking" in *Bloomberg Business Week Magazine Online Extra*, 19 January 2003b. <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2003-01-19/diesel-is-smokin> (accessed May 28, 2012).
- Fabris, Giampaolo. *Il Nuovo Consumatore: Verso il Postmoderno*. Milano: F. Angeli, 2003.
- Gayatri, Shah, R. "Diesel's fake and stupid launch party in Mumbai," in CNN-GO International, 5 May 2010. <http://www.cnn.go.com/mumbai/shop/diesels-fake-and-stupid-launch-party-mumbai-144932> (accessed June 1, 2012).
- Ghezzi, Simone. "Local Discourse and Global Competition: Production Experiences in Family Workshops of the Brianza." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 4 (2003): 781-792.
- Gilbert, David. "Urban Outfitting: The City and the Spaces of Fashion Culture," in *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, 7-24. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Grosvenor Carrie. "Denim From Italy: Diesel," 2008. <http://www.lifeinitaly.com/fashion/diesel.asp> (accessed May 15, 2010).

- Ilari, Alessandra. "Three Decades of Diesel," in *WWD* 196, no. 77 (Oct 10, 2008): 12.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/231243189?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- Khanh T.L. Tran. "Diesel Launches Fresh Look," in *WWD* 193, (120) (Jun 06): 10-10, 2007.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/231180880?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- Lipke, David. "Diesel Embraces New Luxury Strategy," in *DNR* 35, no. 7 (Feb 14, 2005): 12-12,
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/210801368?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- Piore, Michael J. and Charles F. Sabel, C. *The Second Industrial Divide*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.
- Polhemus Ted. *Diesel, World Wide Wear*. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1998.
- Tornton, Stella "The History of Diesel Jeans Brand" in EzineArticles.com 4 December 2009.
<http://www.articlesnatch.com/Article/The-History-Of-Diesel-Jeans-Brand/857422>
(accessed May 15, 2010).
- Stella, Gian Antonio. *Schei: Dal Boom alla Rivolta. Il Mitico Nordest*. Milano: Baldini & Castoldi. (1996) 2000.
- Zargani, Luisa. "Diesel Black Gold to Show in Milan," in *WWD* 203, (6) (Jan 10): 16, 2012.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/919468926?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- Zargani, Luisa. "Diesel Black Gold to Show in Milan," in *WWD* 203, (6) (Jan 10): 16, 2012.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/919468926?accountid=13314> (accessed July 26, 2012).

About the author

Claudia Brazzale is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the Dance, Drama and Performance Studies Department at Liverpool Hope University and is a Visiting Lecturer at the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. An AAUW alumna, Brazzale has held a position as a Global Scholar at the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University from 2009 to 2012.