

021202 Baby Buggy

November brought with it the incessant rain and gloom that is Scandinavia in the winter. The days are short and will it ever stop raining? When one of the new students asks when the rain will stop, Danes reply in a half jest, half serious manner that they will have to wait till April for the sun to come out again.

Something that I don't know if I have mentioned before is the proliferation of baby carriages that can be found throughout Denmark. Either the Danes are just fertile people or it just seems like there are a lot of baby carriages in this country. These are not just little strollers. No, these are carriages with fat, inflatable tires and large, solid metal frames. The basket part of the carriage is usually massive and includes a hood as a precaution in case the sun were to ever come out in this country. The basket can be wrapped with a plastic cover in case of rain. My theory is that since SUVs and minivans are not common here in Denmark and since most people walk or ride their bikes, the baby carriages take the place of the large cars. The parents need some place to put all of the nappies, toys and other various baby things and so while parents in the US might have their big cars, the parents here in Denmark have their big carriages.

Since the carriages are so huge, a lot of stores won't let parents bring them into the shops. The chain stores are the exception, but if you ever get stuck behind one of these carriages in an aisle, you realize that even in the big stores, the carriages are impractical. So often parents leave the baby in the carriage outside of the shop while they run in to pick up whatever they need. The same goes for restaurants. Micah and I were sitting outside at a restaurant in Copenhagen last spring when a mother came along and deposited her massive, two baby carriage across the narrow road from the restaurant before going inside to dine. Granted the babies were only a few meters from the restaurant, but they were on the other side of the street with lots of people walking past.

Or one time, Tove's daughter came by with her new born infant for a visit. As I was leaving the apartment, Tove mentioned that I could see her grandson out in the garden as I walked past. I thought she was a bit loony until I spotted the carriage parked on the sidewalk at the front of the building. Sure enough, the baby was inside sleeping while his mother was upstairs chatting. Different culture.

As you may or may not be aware, the media giant MTV has different programs for different parts of the world. I remember seeing MTV in India which had videos and commentary in Hindi and the same goes for most of the large global markets. Scandinavia picks up the general European signal, but there is a special program just for Scandinavia. The commentary is in English and the show features Scandinavian artists. The program premiered last year and the opening segment features footage of penguins. During the second show, the host thanked the numerous people who had emailed or SMSed the show and said that they did realize that penguins can not be found in Scandinavia since they only live in the southern hemisphere, but that the penguins were staying put as far as the show was concerned. I am surprised that MTV did not import penguins to Scandinavia just to save face.

I write all of this to tell you about a few of the Scandinavian artists who are quite good, but are probably unknown as of yet. These include:

Röyskopp from Bergen, Norway who are very good. Check out their song *Eple*.

The Crash from Finland. Check out their song, *Lauren Caught My Eye*

Saybia from Denmark - *Day After Tomorrow*

Kent from Sweden - *Dorm Andra*

Last week, my Audiology class took a field trip to visit Bang & Olufsen, a Danish company which manufactures telephones, stereos, loudspeakers and televisions. The company is located in the small town of Struer on the west coast of Denmark. What immediately sets the B&O products apart from others is that they are designed to be pieces of art. For example, the televisions don't come in plastic housings, but rather they are made of metal. The remote controls are created so that the buttons feel good to the user and the remote feels properly balanced in the users hand. B&O contracts independent designers to first come up with unique and innovative designs for the products. It is then the challenge for the engineers to fit all of the electronics into the new package and to make sure that the quality is such that the consumer will want to use the product. www.bang-olufsen.com

I was first exposed to B&O last year when one of their engineers came to speak at my electroacoustics class. He told us about the extensive research that B&O performs on their products to try to quantify why a viewer prefers one TV over another or why a listener prefers one loudspeaker over another. The research is at a high quality level which apparently sets the company apart from others. On this visit, I got to see some of their impressive test labs where they perform their testing. For example, we went into a viewing room where they had four televisions lined up at the front. The room itself was small, maybe 4m x 3m with couches set up in front of the televisions. There were false windows with lights behind them which could be turned on to simulate watching the televisions with a bright backlight. The light could also be arranged to come from the front or the sides. We watched some test videos in which test subjects are asked to choose which television has the sharpest contrast, the truest black color or the best picture when noise is introduced into the signal. The televisions that I saw included three plasma televisions (one each from Panasonic, B&O and Philips) and a traditional CRT television from B&O. What I learned is that the plasma television technology has matured, but is not quite there yet. The B&O CRT television was the best in my opinion.

What was very interesting to learn was that there are only three picture tube manufacturers in the world, one of them being exclusively for Sony. Therefore, any television that you purchase basically has the same picture tube whether you buy a \$5000 TV or a \$100 TV. The difference, however is what the company who assembles the TV does with the electronics. The same applies to the plasma screens. B&O purchases its screen from Panasonic, but the difference between the B&O and the Panasonic televisions was readily apparent. The Philips plasma television was the worst of the three, the Panasonic was better and the B&O was the best. The B&O version isn't just the screen. The TV is a square with the screen at the top and a colored panel beneath it. The whole square is surrounded by a copper border so that the television looks like a piece of art when you hang it on the wall. For the price, it should be a piece of art. The B&O plasma television costs Kr. 150,000, or \$20,000. In comparison, the B&O CRT television is a measly \$7000.

Such amazingly high prices are common for B&O products. They justify the cost in that you are not just buying a television, you are buying the B&O experience. The buttons are fun to press and the equipment is a work of art. And the company does sell its products. Tove has a B&O TV as do many Danes. Plus, B&O has stores all over the world. Apparently, their biggest market is women who want the equipment not only to work, but to look nice in the room. Is the B&O plasma television four times as good as the Panasonic that I saw to justify the price? It was the best of the plasma televisions, but I would have a difficult time shelling out that much money for a television when I don't think that the additional \$15,000 was buying me that much more television and I would have a difficult time justifying spending \$20,000 on a television in the first place.

What was also interesting was the discussions that followed our tour. To justify the expense of closing their research labs for a day so that we could see them, the company had their human resource people come to talk with us. B&O is not shy in admitting that it has a problem in convincing good engineers to come to the small town of Struer which does not have the lure of Copenhagen. So, they wanted to take the opportunity to talk to a group of students who were studying acoustics about job opportunities. What amazed me was the application process. It begins by the applicant making contact and sending in a CV (resume) and a cover letter. If B&O is interested, a meeting is arranged to discuss the position and to learn about the applicant. If that meeting goes well, the applicant is asked to then take a series of tests. The first of these tests is a personality test which takes about two or three hours to complete. The purpose of the personality test is to see if the applicant has the correct personality for the position and the company in general. Other tests include a test with engineering problems so that the company can see how the applicant approaches problems and if they can solve them. Once the tests are concluded, the applicant is invited back again to go over the results and if the match is a good one, the job offer is made.

I have had to go through similar engineering tests when I applied for engineering positions after I returned from China and I can see their value. However, the idea of the personality test amazes me. Is that even legal in the US? I asked my Danish friends who were on the trip about the test. Apparently, the personality test is quite common in Denmark as a means of assessing how well the applicant will fit in with the company. One friend told me about a test that her father took which included the question, "If you were going to be killed, would you prefer strangulation, gunshots, or fire". What?

However, like the US, there are questions which you can not ask of an applicant such as "are you pregnant". However, I mentioned this to an Italian friend of mine and she told me that in Italy such a question is common and women are expected to answer truthfully. Women are allowed to take a year of leave after the birth of the child and therefore, the company of course does not want to hire a woman who will be a cost burden in a short time. So, if you are pregnant and unemployed in Italy, you are out of luck since your only choices are to lie to the company (which is frowned upon) or to be truthful in which case you needn't bother applying.

Even though B&O is cutting edge in its designs and I think that working there would be interesting, I don't think that I would want to work for them. I was left with an impression that the company has an arrogance which may or may not be justified in their products. My professor, who is not shy posed the question to the HR people about salaries and asked how they lure people to the small town. The HR people said that their salaries were good, but that they felt that because the company is located in a small town in the countryside, the salaries did not have to be as high as Copenhagen since the cost of living is lower. I don't buy this sort of argument because I spent two weeks only 50 kilometers from B&O over the summer when I was working on my research. I found the costs in the grocery stores to be equal or higher to those that I shopped at in Copenhagen. Obviously the cost of houses is probably less, but with the rent control in Copenhagen, I am not sure. Plus your car payments are the same whether you live in Copenhagen or the countryside. So, I don't buy the argument and think that instead the company believes that people should want to be paid less just for the honor of working for them. But, nonetheless people from all over the world constantly apply.

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