

## Afterword

### *The True Cost: A Capitalist Critique*<sup>1</sup>

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In Andrew Morgan's documentary *The True Cost*, New York University Professor Mark Miller calls advertising a "species of propaganda," at which point the film cuts to archival footage of actual Nazis goose-stepping in formation. Miller goes on to explain that commercial advertisements are designed to trick consumers into associating positive emotions such as personal satisfaction and social acceptance with particular products, despite there being no legitimate connection between the two. Advertisements are thus effectively tricks which covertly alter a consumer's mindset so that he or she views the world as the advertiser sees fit.

*The True Cost* argues that the modern fashion industry is a literally world-destroying force in which callous corporations and mindless consumers trash the environment and oppress Third-World workers for the sake of cheap garments and high fashion. In order to demonstrate its point, the film consists of endless juxtaposed shots of flashy model runways in Milan and impoverished sweatshop workers in Bangladesh. It presents wholesome organic cotton farmers talking about the dignity of rural agriculture intercut with a scientist lamenting the effects of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) by saying the word "chemical" as many times as possible in a ten-second sound bite. The documentary calls the popular desire for cheap clothes an example of mindless consumerism and then shows crazed Black Friday shoppers storming a storefront. The irony of Morgan's condemnation of advertising as propaganda—and the very existence of this film—is apparently lost on him.

Morgan admits at the outset of the documentary that prior to beginning his investigation of the fashion industry, he had only a layman's knowledge of its existence. According to a *Wall Street Journal* interview with Morgan, he became interested in the fashion world after over 1,100 individuals died in the 2013 Savar factory collapse in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> In just

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<sup>1</sup> *The True Cost*, directed by Andrew Morgan (Untold Creative LLC, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Robin Kawakami, "Documentary Exposes Hidden Costs of \$8 Jeans," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 29, 2015), accessed online at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/05/29/fashion-documentary-exposes->

over two years Morgan managed to write, direct, and produce *The True Cost* via a Kickstarter campaign and some high-profile activist support.

Whatever else can be said about Morgan's effort, it certainly can't be called unambitious. Despite his lack of prior knowledge about the subjects, Morgan tackles the connections between the fashion industry and Third-World impoverishment, worker mistreatment, manipulative advertising, mindless consumerism, corporate greed, political corruption, environmental degradation, harmful GMO proliferation, free trade, and the inherently predatory nature of capitalism. I imagine that even an individual who theoretically bought into all of Morgan's arguments would find it all a bit overwhelming. Such an individual would probably start the documentary thinking that the fashion industry was too powerful and needed to become more socially conscious, and end the film thinking that the fashion industry was literally one of the worst things in the entire existence of mankind.

If that sounds excessive, it may help to understand that Morgan assumes that prior to watching *The True Cost*, his viewers have already bought into the narrative that the entire world is going to hell. Various interviewees offhandedly refer to the planet as "dying," "declining," or having "overstepped [its] limits." No one ever actually identifies what these calamitous global breakdowns consist of (global warming isn't even mentioned, though "greenhouse gases" get one reference), but they are all quite certain they exist.

The current state of civilization doesn't fare any better than the environment, according to Morgan and his interviewees. There is no mention of the one billion individuals who rose out of absolute poverty across the world between 1990 and 2010,<sup>3</sup> but there are repeated references to constantly falling wages, deadly working conditions, and widespread government oppression across the Third World. Unfortunately, all of this misery is not creating a blissful existence in the Western world either. Tim Kasser, a professor at Knox College, argues that consumerism actually makes people less happy, and thus the United States and Europe are psychologically worse off than ever before. Morgan asserts that the entire world is locked into a system of "consumer capitalism" in which elites (the government and big corporations) require increasingly high levels of consumption for their own continuity, even though it depresses Westerners, oppresses the global poor, and destroys the environment.

In the words of John Hilary, Executive Director of the "War on Want,"

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[environmental-and-human-costs-of-those-8-jeans/](#).

<sup>3</sup> "Towards the End of Poverty," *The Economist* (June 1, 2013), accessed online at: <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21578665-nearly-1-billion-people-have-been-taken-out-extreme-poverty-20-years-world-should-aim>.

[W]hen everything is concentrated on making profits for the big corporations, what you see is that everything, human rights, workers' rights, the environment, get lost, all together, you see that workers are increasingly exploited because the price of everything is pushed down and down and down just to satisfy this impulse to accumulate capital. And that's profoundly problematic because it leads to the mass impoverishment of hundreds of millions of people around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Who is to blame for this mess? The answer is pretty much everyone except garment workers. Among the top culprits are the major fashion corporations, which created an "enormous, rapacious industry" for the sake of the "impulse to accumulate capital." Also to blame are the Western and foreign governments that serve as lackeys to the corporations. Western governments not only refuse to regulate international trade, but even protect it through free-trade dogma. Meanwhile, Third-World governments oppress their own citizens by refusing to enforce regulations and provide a living wage in an attempt to attract lucrative foreign investment. Further down the line, local business owners in Third-World countries ruthlessly exploit their own workers for the sake of an ever-shrinking profit margin at the behest of the big fashion brands locked in fierce capitalistic competition.

But none of the above are the worst offenders of all. Worse than the factory owners who let their buildings collapse on workers, worse than the foreign governments that wield military force against their own, worse than the Western governments that hold the system together, and worse than the big fashion corporations that orchestrate it all, are Western consumers.

The documentary makes it amply clear that it is the ordinary, individual consumers of fashion who fundamentally fuel the whole process. "Business through advertising has pulled society along into this belief that happiness is based on stuff, this belief that true happiness can only be achieved by annual, seasonal, weekly, daily, increasing the amount of stuff you bring into your life," according to Patagonia's Vice President of Environmental Affairs. Though the film optimistically hopes for a reorganization of the whole fashion industry and the entire international trade system, it explicitly states that the change should start with the individual consumer, since that is what drives the whole process.

*The True Cost* begins its story with one of its many oddly culturally conservative (if not reactionary) moments. The film harks back to the good old days prior to the 1970s, when the vast majority of clothes were made domestically in the United States and, as a result, clothes were far more expensive and purchased less often. Sadly, Morgan laments, the price of

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<sup>4</sup> Joe McCarthy, "Documentary Indicts Fashion Industry, Points to a Way Forward," *Luxury Daily* (May 27, 2015), quoting John Hilary, accessed online at: <http://www.luxurydaily.com/documentary-indicts-fashion-industry-points-to-a-way-forward/>.

clothing has dropped precipitously ever since, and the fashion industry transferred into a new model called “fast fashion.” In response to an endless desire for more and cheaper clothes, the fashion industry dramatically increased its output at all levels, but especially of discount clothes.

From there, Morgan jumps between Bangladesh, India, New York, Milan, Texas, and Tokyo to explain the wide-reaching scope of the fashion industry, which allegedly encompasses one-sixth of the world’s population. In order to increase output, the major fashion corporations rely on cheap and unregulated Third-World labor in countries like Bangladesh and India. (China, the most famous example of a Third-World outsourcer, is oddly left out of the picture.) In these countries, local independent manufacturers are incentivized by the major brands constantly to squeeze their costs so as to make low-priced garments that will be sold profitably in the West. The manufacturers respond by consistently lowering wages and neglecting working conditions, which often leads to strikes and occasionally to deadly accidents like the 2013 Savar factory collapse.

Meanwhile, the agricultural inputs for garment production have been drastically expanded by the use of GMOs, which the documentary argues are like “ecological narcotics” that boost short-term production but rely on ever-increasing use to maintain their output. Worse yet, the producers of GMOs (well, really just Monsanto) use their power to corner the global markets and exploit small farmers with unscrupulous business practices. After decades of use in the Western and Third Worlds, GMOs have led to devastating consequences, including cancers and birth defects in affected areas, and an epidemic of suicide among Indian farmers that is attributed to debt-related troubles caused by adopting expensive GMO crops.

On top of this myriad of social costs, the garment industry only exacerbates the massive environmental problems on planet earth. The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world behind the oil industry. In the Third World especially, the rise and spread of factory production has left many localities in environmental despair. Morgan shows us how the Ganges River, considered to be holy by Hindus, has been trashed by industrial run-off to the point of being considered unusable for drinking or bathing purposes. Yet the workers who operate the relevant factories are too poor to afford a safe water source, so they continue to use the Ganges at the expense of their health and well-being. Back in the Western world, the mindless consumption and disposal of clothes have caused textiles to pile up in and clog landfills. Since the vast majority of these garments are not biodegradable, they will sit in the landfills for decades, if not centuries.

Just about every topic mentioned in the previous three paragraphs could warrant its own documentary, journal article, book, or possibly even a field of research (for instance, the safety of GMOs). In trying to roll all of these issues into his case against the fashion industry, Morgan stretches his documentary so thin that it doesn’t manage to address any single point in an adequate way. Yes, some viewers might be swayed by the affecting testimonies of the poor Bangladeshi factory workers, or even the rhetorical

savvy of some of the interviewees, but there is precious little content or data to back up any of Morgan's major claims.

For each topic, Morgan usually presents a single or handful of problematic cases, and then throws in some activist or academic interviewees to explain briefly the problem. For instance, Morgan (as the narrator) will state that numerous garment factories have collapsed in Bangladesh over the past few years. Then two or three interviewees say that increased competition amongst major fashion corporations caused Bangladeshi factory owners to cut costs, which resulted in dangerously negligent working conditions. Then Morgan shows a montage of collapsed factories and dead bodies with the victim tolls and dates superimposed on screen. When possible, he'll try to throw in some commentary by the victims themselves for the genuinely most affecting part of the argument. Then it's on to the next topic.

Does Morgan truly believe that the cause of the 2013 Savar factory collapse is reducible to competition between fashion corporations or, by extension, the demands of Western consumers? This is a massive claim with a staggering number of legitimate and confounding factors. The factory builder, factory owners, factory workers, factory suppliers, garment purchasers, local government regulators, and others, may all have played some part in the disaster. Was the factory owner aware of the risks and did he care? Were the workers aware and did they care (the documentary said that the workers were aware, but didn't elaborate on this point)? Are Bangladeshi building codes sufficient to prevent collapse? Are they enforced well enough? If not, why not? Corruption, incompetence, neglect, cronyism, and bad luck could all be at play.

Morgan barely scratches the surface of this complex network of relationships and incentives with every issue he touches upon. His presentation only gets worse when he tackles more technical subjects—the worst example being his treatment of GMOs. The efficacy and safety of GMO crops is a scientific and empirical question involving mountains of data (large swatches of it pro-GMO). Morgan bypasses the entire debate, however, by pointing to only two pieces of evidence: (1) one organic cotton farmer in Texas who alleges (though she admits she has no “smoking gun”) that her husband died due to pesticide exposure related to GMO crops, and (2) the testimony of two scientists who claim that GMOs have had tremendously negative financial, social, and medical impacts on India. One scientist states that GMO-related pesticide use has caused an epidemic of birth defects and cancers in rural India. I don't know whether this specific claim is true, but I do know that an epidemiological claim based on low-level correlation is massively difficult to prove even in ideal contexts—and rural India isn't one.

Setting aside the big arguments, *The True Cost* contains a number of highly questionable statistics. Is the fashion industry really the second most polluting industry in the world? How does one quantify and compare different types of pollution? Did 250,000 Indian farmers really commit suicide in response to financial problems caused by Monsanto and GMO crops? No one

even knows how many farmers there are in India,<sup>5</sup> but apparently someone knows the precise reason why 250,000 of them killed themselves. A cynic might suggest that it does not matter whether these figures are true or even plausible, as long as they are useful as sound bites that can be recycled as memes amongst ideological allies.

Granted, documentaries are necessarily condensed and largely non-technical for the sake of time constraints and entertainment, so it would be fine if Morgan made a lot of big claims as long as he backed them up elsewhere, except that . . . *The True Cost* contains no citations. There are no citations in or after the credits. None of the interviewees refers to specific journal articles or books. There are no citations on the film's website. Googling a citation list offered no results either.

*The True Cost* does not work as a persuasive documentary because it doesn't attempt to persuade with any substance. It has no shortage of sob stories, tragic imagery, sweeping descriptions, and condemnations of the state of the fashion industry, but its arguments fail to stand against the slightest scrutiny. That isn't even to say that all of its arguments are necessarily false, only that the documentary is so thin that it can't possibly support them.

This is not a movie made to persuade, but to reinforce. Its issues and arguments are presented in paradigms that are easy to digest for those already inclined toward Morgan's ideological viewpoints. *The True Cost* is progressive, anti-capitalist, reactionary-environmentalist, anti-GMO, and broadly anti-Western. (Interestingly, the explicitly anti-capitalist orientation of the film is moderated in Morgan's interview for *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>6</sup>) Looking through these ideological lenses, Morgan makes all of the same mistakes that the worst proponents of those movements tend to make.

To Morgan, just about every person in the world is evil, stupid, or oppressed. The major fashion corporations and their government cronies are evil. The corporations continue to increase their production and profits for the sake of an "impulse to accumulate capital" like mindless beasts, despite the supposedly undeniably awful effects of their actions. Western consumers are stupid. They are basically brainwashed by advertisements and constantly want more useless "stuff" despite the fact that the "stuff" is doing the exact opposite of what they think it is doing; that is, it's making them less happy instead of more happy. Finally, Third-World workers are all oppressed. They have no control over their lives and are simply swept along by their evil overlords at the behest of the stupid masses on the other side of the world. As Morgan explains, "The whole system begins to feel like a perfectly engineered nightmare for the workers trapped inside of it."

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<sup>5</sup> "Farmers' Suicides in India," accessed online at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmers%27\\_suicides\\_in\\_India#Total\\_number\\_of\\_farmers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmers%27_suicides_in_India#Total_number_of_farmers).

<sup>6</sup> See Kawakami, "Documentary Exposes Hidden Costs of \$8 Jeans."

This is a horrifyingly cynical view of humanity. Morgan's evidence in support of it is confined to a handful of testimonies by select Ph.D.s and activists. I'm sure that some people will naturally latch onto the notion of corporate heads being irrational singularities of evil and the rest of America and Europe being mindless zombies, but anyone not predisposed to those notions will probably not buy into them because of *The True Cost*.

Similarly grand, yet baseless notions are asserted by Morgan on environmental topics. Morgan implicitly adopts the school of thought that all alterations to the natural environment are automatically evil and should be stopped, or at least that's the sense I got from the constant references to the destruction of "pristine" natural habitats. No consideration is ever given to the human benefits of environmental alteration. At one point, an interviewee explains that 11 million tons of textile waste piles up in landfills each year. This metric alone is presented as an argument that the fashion industry is destroying the environment. Is 11 million tons a large amount in the grand scheme of wastelands? Is humanity running out of space to store garbage? Can the average or even sophisticated viewer meaningfully distinguish the environmental impact of 1 million versus 11 million versus 100 million tons? I get that Morgan wants the viewer to see that the addition to landfills is part of the "true cost" of buying clothes, but he provides nothing close to an explanation of what 11 million tons of waste means to the world or how to evaluate that cost.

To *The True Cost's* credit, it does at least present a principled counterargument to its claims regarding the alleged exploitation of foreign workers. Early in the documentary, it shows a few clips of Benjamin Powell of the Free Market Institute presenting the capitalist case for the existence of sweatshops in the Third World. Powell argues that although sweatshops may pay wages and house conditions that are considered untenable in the West, they provide a superior alternative to other economic choices offered to poor workers in the Third World. The single best argument for the existence of sweatshops is that people choose to work in them. If they were really the source of poverty and misery which Morgan and his cohort both imply and explicitly state, they would never exist in the first place. Powell asserts that although sweatshops may not be pleasant by our high standards, they are a crucial component of economic development in countries like India and Bangladesh, which will one day see such places largely lifted out of poverty.

One of the few positive remarks I can make about *The True Cost* is that it actually presents Powell's full argument fairly. I'm guessing that showing one of his soundbites on a Fox News segment will turn off most Morgan sympathizers automatically, but even in that clip, Powell is allowed to speak for himself.

Strangely, *The True Cost* never actually answers Powell's arguments. It never addresses the alternatives faced by poor Third World workers to sweatshops. One interviewee even laments the continued existence of "voluntary contracts" amongst Third World garment workers. The documentary never touches on the widespread enrichment of impoverished

nations over the past fifty years due to international free trade. It's possible that Morgan thinks that Powell's argument is empirically false since interviewee John Hilary asserts that globalization has led "to the mass impoverishment of hundreds of millions of people around the world," but Morgan never explicitly states that this is his belief.

In his *Wall Street Journal* interview, Morgan is explicitly confronted with Powell's argument, and his response is essentially a plea for thoughtless empathy, which does nothing to refute Powell's claims:

*WSJ*: Some of the people you interviewed in the film argue that many of these factory workers have no better options, so that's that. Do you think they really believe this is the answer?

*Morgan*: Sometimes when you talk about this stuff in very cold, measured, statistical sentences, you lose track of humanity. And I think somewhere in the conversations with some of those people, it was like I just have to believe that you're a really decent person, and I have to believe that at some point, you've been told and you've come to believe in a story about the world that I fundamentally don't believe is true. And that idea honestly speaks to the complexity here.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of *The True Cost*, Morgan and multiple interviewees ask the viewers to stop the West's rampant consumption and reform the global economy. Capitalism and the pursuit of profit is explicitly stated to be the systematic cause of the fashion industry's crimes. The filmmakers want everyone to change the system in order to save Third-World workers from exploitation and to save our planet from environmental destruction. However, how actually to accomplish this goal is another story. *The True Cost* is much lighter on solutions than criticisms.

In order to reform the process of garment production, Morgan calls for "fair trade."<sup>8</sup> The documentary holds up People Tree Ltd. as a paragon of what the major fashion companies could be. People Tree is a Japanese clothing company which produces clothing in the same Third-World countries

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Fair trade is a social movement whose stated goal is to help producers in developing countries achieve better trading conditions and to promote sustainability. Members of the movement advocate the payment of higher prices to exporters, as well as higher social and environmental standards. The movement focuses in particular on commodities, or products which are typically exported from developing countries to developed countries, but also consumed in domestic markets (e.g. Brazil and India) most notably handicrafts, coffee, cocoa, sugar, tea, bananas, honey, cotton, wine, fresh fruit, chocolate, flowers, gold, and 3D printer filament. The movement seeks to promote greater equity in international trading partnerships through dialogue, transparency, and respect. It promotes sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers in developing countries"; accessed online at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair\\_trade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_trade).



as the big corporations, but does so in a supposedly more cooperative and sustainable manner by integrating their manufacturing bases into local villages. Not only do they pay their workers higher wages, but they also help with education and direct economic development in their local communities.

If People Tree works, that's great, but the big question is whether or not a People Tree model can scale upward. Can the multi-trillion dollar fashion industry afford to set up their own factories in rural Bangladeshi communities and expend capital building schools and wells? What effect will those higher production costs have on product pricing? *The True Cost* does not address these vital considerations. In the *Wall Street Journal* interview, Morgan is equally non-committal about the large-scale efficacy of People Tree's model and fair trade.<sup>9</sup>

On the consumer end, *The True Cost* simply wants everyone to buy less "stuff," especially clothing. If Westerners didn't mindlessly buy and dispose of their clothes so rapidly, the global garment industry would contract and Third-World workers would stop being squeezed for margins. Morgan doesn't really lay a road map for how he expects to convince people to do this other than by showing everyone sad montages of poor Bangladeshis.

The sad thing about *The True Cost* is that there are kernels of legitimately concerning issues folded into its sloppy narrative and paper-thin arguments. I have no doubt that plenty of Third-World factory workers *are* abused by their employers. I'm sure that the local environmental impact of industrial production has produced negative health effects on particular communities. There are interesting and relevant ethical questions to ask about the responsibility that individuals and companies have to monitor and regulate other entities further up or down particular supply chains. But Morgan's *The True Cost* either bypasses these issues or loads them down with enough bad narrative and weaves in weak arguments to obscure them from view.

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<sup>9</sup> "I am not naive enough to think it's that simple. One of the things that I wanted to put forth was the idea that there is a way of doing this that's mindful of all the hearts and hands involved in making these clothes, and still turns a profit. One of the companies that you mentioned, People Tree, they've been in business almost 20 years, and they have a really incredible supply chain. I wouldn't call it to scale, but I would say their numbers are quite larger than a lot of the other upstarts that we see a lot about. And they've been making a profit. They've been doing something right, and investing in long-term relationships with these folks. Do I think the fair-trade model is the only model? No. And do I think it would work in every situation? No. But I think what they have demonstrated is a commitment to actually measuring the true cost in terms of resources, environmental impact and human labor. And that idea of long-term committed relationships to partners in your supply chain, I not only think that could scale, I actually think that's really smart business"; see Kawakami, "Documentary Exposes Hidden Costs of \$8 Jeans."

Ultimately, the film does a disservice to its viewers and to its supposed beneficiaries.

