

The Cost of Fashion

AGNES VILLETTE IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW MORGAN

We all love our clothes: we define ourselves and who we are by wearing distinctive garments. But not many of us know where those beloved pieces are made. This shouldn't be true, as no one could've ignored the Savar building collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on the 24th of April, 2013.

Nor the 2012 Tazreen fashion factory fire, also in Bangladesh, which killed over 100 workers. We all remember the Rana Plaza images that looped on the news endlessly: young women workers being pulled out of the rubble of a massive factory that became their grave.

It was far away, but the brands mentioned were the ones we all wore, major high street brands all of us have brought at some point. Upon learning about the factory conditions, American director Andrew Morgan decided to go behind the scenes and bring forth the story of the workers. His documentary *The True Cost* came out in 2015, and had an instant impact on the fashion industry, quickly becoming a very popular film streamed online as well. This shockwave is perhaps summed up by the first person we hear in the film, who underlines such a simple fact: "The result is striking and very clear, from now on, it is very hard not to know – and even harder to pretend we ignore – how and where our clothes are made..."

AGNES VILLETTE Why did you decide to pick up such a subject connecting fashion, industry, and human rights?

ANDREW MORGAN One morning I picked up the paper and all the photos were on front page. It was about the building that had just collapsed outside of Dhaka, the Rana Plaza. At the time, more than 1,000 people had been declared dead, mostly women. As I read the article, two very simple thoughts struck me. The first one being – why, in our world, would such a catastrophe happen? And after hearing the brands whose clothes were made in that factory – how was it possible that I have never questioned where my clothes really come from? That really led me on a search for some answers. That first week I picked up my phone and called various folks in different parts of the fashion industry: activists, fashion companies, journalists. I knew that, beyond one striking tragedy, there was a bigger story. I found out that 97% of our clothes are made overseas by around 40 million workers worldwide. They happen to be among the lowest paid workers in the world, of which 85% are women. By the end of the week, I was convinced it was a film I wanted to make.

The film is didactic, in a positive sense. Is it a word you accept to describe your film?

Yes, somehow. When I set out I wanted to honor the complexity of the situation. I did not want to oversimplify, and at the same time wanted to give a voice to what I believe is the moral dimension – clearly at the centre of global issues raised by the film. The fashion industry is one of the biggest connection points for millions of people across the world, spanning from agriculture and manufacturing to retail. It has been one of the leading industries to capitalize on the new globalized world of the 21st century. So yes, the film is a picture of my journey, starting on the outside and moving inside a million-dollar business.

Your work is often defined by its storytelling and how stories can have an impact for good. Do you believe in the power of telling stories?

I think its power has to do with the complexity of the subject. I have to put together 12 countries, various experiences, and all the characters and the various ideas you hear in one sitting. And I am also trying to draw a set connections: it's my perspective and my way of trying to highlight the subject. The connecting points for me are the stories themselves. When it comes to clothing I am really fascinated by what it says about ourselves, how we are perceived as people through our clothes and how we want to be seen. I wanted to touch on the role we actually play in the world. And is the story we are told holding together, that the clothing industry is on a one way ticket departing people from poverty in poor countries? Is the miraculous power of the global supply chain supposed to move those countries ahead? It is usually a story being told from a very set-up point, and I think we have never had a chance to hear from the other side of the chain. Rather than hearing from the usual suspects, it would be fascinating to pass the microphone to those unheard voices.

It's a universal story, as we all have to wear clothes. How was the film received by the fashion industry? Did you become a public enemy number one?

No, It was received very well. We were very fortunate. This is also what caught me off guard. The positive element being that the fashion industry is upset, as it has been hijacked by corporations. What started as a very artisanal, craft-inspiring medium is now upheld by massive enterprises. So people like Anna Wintour, Tom Ford, all these different folks who came to various screenings and talked to us and helped us with the film, they all said something has gone wrong. Fashion has become something we actually don't love as it is. So from that side, things went incredibly well. The film started at Cannes, we did a lot of special screenings, and across the board it went very well. The disappointing thing is that, from the industry's side, it felt different. They were fairly silent, and by the end of the film, quite aggressive. Global fashion brands are bigger than ever before; with annual revenues in the billions, they are now part of an industry with a yearly income of almost 3 trillion dollars. These brands are continuing to profit hugely from their use of cheaper labor in foreign countries. I can't say that we did bridge those two worlds.

It is a peculiar film, as once it has been seen, one has to act upon it or not. A choice has to be made. It's the kind of film that asks for a reaction from the public.

True, at the end of the day it is human hands that make what we wear, and I think when you realize that, you have to do something. The film is like peering behind the curtain to witness something we are not supposed to see. It opens up all these beautiful, thoughtful human questions, and this is what is important. We are in an increasingly disconnected world, therefore it is important that we feel connected to the workers who make our clothes. I meet people who tell me, "Your film has made me think about what I wear," and they go looking for answers. In the last two decades, fashion has changed due to fast-fashion, as customers are caught in a circle of micro-trends arriving regularly in stores. Clothes are more and more disposable, all in the name of the democratization of fashion. We now consume about 80 billion new pieces of clothing every year. This is 400% more than the amount two decades ago. The average American generates 37 kilos of textile waste each year. There is also the impact on the environment – cotton being half of the total fiber used to make clothing today, production relies up to 90% on genetically modified, farmed cotton. Consequently, the cotton industry is responsible for 18% of worldwide pesticide use and 25% of insecticide use. It is worrying to know that these chemicals are passed into our bloodstream as we wear those clothes. Regarding leather production, the data is striking, as the industry is increasingly linked to a variety of environmental and human health hazards. The amount of feed, land, water, and fossil fuels used to raise livestock for leather production come at a huge cost to the health of our world. In addition to raising the livestock needed, the tanning process is among the most toxic in all of the fashion supply chain. Workers are exposed to harmful chemicals on the job, while the generated waste pollutes natural water sources, leading to an increase in diseases for surrounding areas. Studies have found that leather tannery workers are at a far greater risk of cancer, between 20 and 50%. I think we could use a lot more of this information.

The film is underlined by solid research, and offers a great amount of data. I was interested to know how you conducted the research.

From the beginning, we knew it was to be a global story and thus presented us with a series of logistical challenges. Once we had chosen a few countries, we had to rely on a set of journalists, fixers, and people who had

worked on and around the subject before. They became the heroes of the film. Like in Dhaka, Bangladesh, we arrived and met these people who had been working on these issues for a while. Not only were they able to sneak us in to some of the factories, but they got us in front of a whole bunch of workers and people we could take testimonies from. The other thing was that we had to find people who represented millions of others. So for example, the garment worker Shima has a great brave bold beautiful voice that I think, based on my experience, speaks well on behalf of millions of other women. It was kind of a way of finding the countries, then the areas, and then in those areas, the characters to which an audience could have an emotional connection (also so they would not get bored to death with the facts and the research). So the film took two years to make. We have a very small production team; I travel with a few guys I work with regularly. It has a very first-person experiential feel, and what the film captures is a lot of us just walking in these situations and being in these moments. In a way you take the weight of those experiences and it makes a film special.

What is interesting is that the film and the issues it raises met a parallel dynamic of industry individuals who are trying to bring change. I mean all the small companies that are fair trade and work with recycled fabrics.

They did merge. Our whole world is merging right now around this idea that we have been living in a kind of suicidal machine. When you look at the clothing industry, and if you set aside climate change and human beings – yes, let's set them both aside. You look at the industry just from the need of and race for natural resources, combined with the unprecedented output of waste and disposal; you put those numbers on paper and really do not need much time to understand that the whole system is collapsing. I think there is a growing awareness in the fashion world, including industry CEOs, that, beyond doing what is morally right, if we want to be in business for the long term we have to look at alternatives. This thing that we have been doing is not going to work. Fashion being the world's second most polluting industry after oil – notably with azo dyes, which are the most widely used synthetic dyes, despite their toxicity. Ten percent of the world's biggest fashion brands have now committed to phasing out toxic substances through Greenpeace's Detox Program. I would just add too – the larger economic system that just counts on profit does not speak up for people, and does not account for this one world that we have to share. The word "unsustainable" gets used and reused, and represents a path leading to a future that we do not want. I think a lot of people are starting to come to realize it. Among them, the people behind the Fashionrevolution.org website – they have launched several actions, such as the Fashion Transparency Index, which approaches big brands and investigates how transparency in supply chains is being publicly communicated.

Though out of 40 brands they asked, only 10 initially replied. They link with several projects such as Oxfam Australia's new research *Still in the Dark, Ethical Consumer* in the UK (which has been benchmarking the practices of companies for 25 years), or the *Truth Behind the Barcode*. One of the main issues is transparency. It's a long journey to transparent supply chains, but it has started with projects like #whomademyclothes. The information is now starting to come out. Ultimately, when brands publish information about their supply chain activities, NGOs, the media, and civil society can better hold them to account for the good and bad.

Do you know what happened to the places, the workers, and the fabric production where *The True Cost* was shot? Did it have an impact over there?

No. I would say, very definitively in my opinion, it has not. There was a lot of emphasis put on bringing about safety measures and, without getting into too many details, after Rana Plaza there were a bunch of things companies were signing to. Recently, there has been excellent journalistic work saying that those have been failed initiatives. One of the most haunting things about the whole process – it's a film, it's not going to change everything – is that we can go through numbers in factories' files, and years later they are still operating under the same system. No, I think the film is like the tip of the iceberg. It has brought up and renewed the type of conversation on the subject, and I think it is just the beginning. So for anyone who is interested in human rights – this is and will be one of the most defining, concrete ways to pull up our sleeves and change our world in the next decade.

As a lot of films screened at the moment, your movie addresses globalization. It seems that, to understand the complexities of the world we live in, documentary films are particularly efficient. Do documentaries, as a medium, have an elemental role to play in our future?

One of the things film can do uniquely is not only to give voice to voiceless groups of people, but as a medium, it can handle complexity. I think it invites viewers to look at versions of the world that are counter to what they have been told. Or it might just provide a fuller experience than a headline. So I think we need it more than ever. And in a world where our choices can be measured in real time, where increasingly, we are seeing vivid effects of our actions on people around the world, it does open the moral opportunity we have to live more informed lives. To some extent, a film can make a person more engaged in the world, and this is phenomenal.

AGNÈS VILLETTE IS A FRENCH JOURNALIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER BASED IN LONDON. HER LATEST PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS ARE INSPIRED BY HER ENCOUNTER WITH ECOLOGY CONCEPTS.