

[Review] Andrew Morton (2015) The True Cost

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***The True Cost*. Andrew Morton, director. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2015**

Rebecca Prentice, University of Sussex

R.J.Prentice@sussex.ac.uk

The global fashion industry is worth more than two trillion dollars, creating jobs, economic growth, tax earnings, and the products we wear every day. For consumers in the global North, the price of clothing has dropped steadily for two decades. But what does the industry really *cost* us? What impact does it have on the health and wellbeing of workers, consumers, and communities around the world? Andrew Morton's 2015 documentary film endeavors to answer this question with a wide-ranging exploration of the industry in several sites, including the shop floors of Bangladesh factories, cotton farms in Texas, labor protests on Cambodian streets, and a social responsibility summit in Copenhagen.

Like the best muckraking documentaries about the global economy in recent years – such as Charles Ferguson's *Inside Job* (2012) – *The True Cost* has a forceful message. It argues that the fashion industry has become unsustainably harmful to people and the planet, particularly in the noxious form of “fast fashion.” Consumers are presented with an ever-changing array of cheap clothing made in low-wage countries with poor labor rights and working conditions. Consumers in the global North delight in their abilities to purchase these fashion clothes, particularly given that middle-class wage stagnation has placed beyond reach many other types of goods: homes, retirement, a college education. Meanwhile, producers in the global South must respond to ever-tightening demands for speed and adaptation to fashion trends at lower and lower prices. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with ethnographies of labor in the global

economy will find the implications unsurprising: workers become the breaking point as their wages are squeezed, they face unsafe working conditions, and their labor activism may be unceremoniously quashed to mollify foreign investors. But the documentary goes one further, adding up the environmental costs too: not only the impact of intense cotton cultivation, pesticides, and pollution from textile and leather production, but also the neglected environmental hazards of the 11 million tons of textile waste that the United States produces each year.

The True Cost is an ambitious film, covering each segment of the garment supply chain, from cotton farming to marketing and retail. It gives us glimpses into the lives of different people either caught up in fast fashion's trap, or trying to change the system (Safia Minney, founder and CEO of the fair trade fashion brand People Tree, is a bright light in this regard). But in order to encompass so many points of view, the film moves with such speed that it is unable to linger very long on any one case. As a result, viewers expecting a thorough analysis may find this a shallow and unsatisfying account. Other documentary videos not attempting such a wide scope expose the social impacts of the industry better by examining a single place in depth; Stephanie Black's about neoliberal Jamaica, *Life and Debt* (2001), and the BBC's about Bangladesh, *Clothes to Die For* (2014), are two that do this very well.

The tone of *The True Cost* quickly turns conspiratorial, and we get a familiar – and not particularly nuanced – story about greedy corporations putting profit above all else and endangering communities in the process. Even viewers who accept these arguments will be let down by the lack of evidence marshaled to support them. When free-market economist Benjamin Powell states that garment manufacturing is a force for good in poor countries because it provides much-needed foreign exchange earnings and gives countries a foot on the ladder to

industrial development, these points are treated as so outlandish as not to require interrogation. Given that many viewers will find Powell's points quite reasonable, the filmmaker missed a chance to question the accuracy of the industrial development narrative and the ethics of profiting from economic desperation.

Despite having a clear central argument, the point of view is not well developed. We are left to figure out for ourselves that the documentary maker is the narrator. Andrew Morton's voice conveys neither an idiosyncratic personal odyssey, as in Michael Moore's iconic 1989 documentary *Roger & Me*, nor an attempt at judicious and well-informed remove. Two of the three executive directors, Guardian columnist Lucy Siegel and activist-consultant Livia Firth, appear in the documentary to explain the industry's environmental and labor hazards. We also watch Firth publicly upbraid the sustainability director of H&M (a major global clothing retailer) on the living wage issue. A rare moment of human conflict in a film that otherwise focuses on the need to change "the system," this segment is gripping but undermines the documentary's credibility by becoming a showcase for Firth's activism.

I had hoped that this would be a good documentary to show in my introductory-level Economic Anthropology class, but two things will make it difficult to show to students with confidence. First is that the film displays a form of argumentation that I would not allow my own students to get away with. It is not that the central thesis is wrong – to me, it seems very much correct – but rather that contrary perspectives are not properly articulated, evaluated, or addressed. Second are the issues of voice, authorship, and positionality mentioned above. While it is true that students should be encouraged to think as critically about authorial voice in documentary films as they do with written ethnographies, I'd be afraid that discussion of the shortcomings might override substantive discussion of the topic.

In a year when Zara founder and fast fashion innovator Amancio Ortega became the second-richest man in the world, the social inequalities created by and through the fashion industry appear maddeningly intractable. The moral force of *The True Cost* is correct, but on solutions it is desperately weak. We learn that today's structure of corporate self-governance is inadequate to protect workers, and that consumer capitalism itself must be rethought. But as if to lighten such a heavy onus, viewers are assured that if consumers would only "care" a bit more, we have the power to change the entire system with our shopping habits. Do we really? It is this incoherency at the heart of neoliberal capitalism that this presentation fails to grapple with: that market-based problems are only ever answered with market-based solutions. Unless we figure out a better way to regulate global labor standards, the true cost of the garment industry will continue to be borne by workers and their communities.

Reference

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