

COMMERCE

## Documentary indicts fashion industry, points to a way forward

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*Screenshot from True Cost*

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By JOE MCCARTHY

The documentary "True Cost" deftly combines first-hand accounts and broad supply chain analysis to expose a fashion industry gone awry.

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**Luxury Daily**

The fashion industry has undergone a dramatic evolution in the past several decades as production across price points has been outsourced to developing countries that permit unethical and environmentally corrosive working conditions. While mass market fashion consumption dwarfs luxury consumption, the luxury industry, housing the most coveted brands in the world, has the potential to lead a global reform.

"For too long now, conversation around this topic has suffered from over-simplified blame games," said Andrew Morgan, director of [True Cost](#), Los Angeles.

"Political and economic complexities have allowed us to miss what is unavoidably clear," he said. "That this is first and foremost a moral issue.

"There is consistent irresponsible care of the environment and clear violations of the most basic human rights. But this is something we can and must change."

The world we create

Much as "Food Inc." sought to raise awareness of the brutally unethical meat industry, True Cost aims to illuminate the chasm between production and consumption in the fashion industry.

In 1960, the United States produced 95 percent of its clothing. Now, it outsources 97 percent of production.

Today, the fashion industry's pollution is surpassed only by the oil industry, the world consumes 500 percent more clothing that it did two decades ago and roughly one in six people are working somewhere in fashion.



*Screen shot of factory garment workers*

Consumers in developed countries are used to shopping on a whim in vast halls of products, amassing immense wardrobes and churning through clothes on a regular basis. Meanwhile, in countries such as Bangladesh, garment workers toil in grim factories for up to 12 hour shifts, sometimes making no more than \$2 a day and are harshly censured if they demand better conditions.

To anyone who stops to consider this arrangement, the disconnect becomes bridged with horror.

Mr. Morgan's documentary collapses this disconnect immediately, calling viewers to consider the full scope of the problem for 92 brisk, bracing minutes.

True Cost covers a lot of ground, condensing disturbing subjects into compelling scenes.

Crumbling factories in Bangladesh, chemical-soaked farms in India, violent protests in Cambodia, paradoxes of charity in Haiti, corporate talking points, stores on Fifth Avenue and ethical initiatives in the West are explored.

As John Hilary of "The War of Want" says in the film, "When everything is concentrated on making profits, what you see is that human rights, the environment, workers rights get lost."



### *Pollution from leather tannery in India*

A deep compassion suffuses the film and the viewer can sense Mr. Morgan's optimism that the status quo can change.

True Cost opens worldwide May 29. The film will be screened in the IFC Center in New York and Laemmle Music Hall in Los Angeles. Those interested can also purchase the film via iTunes, video-on-demand platforms and Blu-ray.

The contradiction between ostentatious consumption and hidden production, glamorous wealth and dire poverty may jolt some viewers to action.

However, a big part of the change will have to come from the companies exploiting this lopsided system, and consumers exerting upward pressure, demanding reform.

Embedded Video: [https://www.youtube.com/embed/OaGp5\\_Sfbss](https://www.youtube.com/embed/OaGp5_Sfbss)

### *True Cost trailer*

#### Changing the equation

Luxury fashion brands are uniquely positioned to spearhead change. Many luxury brands, to some degree, already have sustainable and ethical supply chains, simply because these qualities are integral to what it means to be a luxury brand.

Luxury is partly about craftsmanship and high-quality materials, two things that ought to be done in an ethical and sustainable manner, because otherwise a brand's integrity is stained.

Also, luxury brands routinely celebrate the men and women that develop their products and how materials are sourced because this transparency appeals to consumers.

Public transparency is critical for brands looking to inspire customers, said the CEO of Tiffany & Co. at the Condé Nast International Luxury Conference.

The executive explored the three core dimensions of a luxury brand during his talk: authenticity, integrity and inspiration. Without harmony between the three sides, consumers will have a hard time imbuing a brand's products with the meaning needed to justify a luxury good ([see story](#)).

For instance, Loro Piana shares with its consumers the delicate cultivation of its baby cashmere in animations and videos ([see story](#)).

The conglomerate Kering also takes its environmental initiatives seriously.

For instance, Kering-owned British fashion designer Stella McCartney, featured in True Cost, approaches her business with an innate sustainability mindset.

From using wind power for a store to foregoing leather and PVC, Ms. McCartney considers environmentally friendly actions so automatically that she forgets she is doing it. This has become part of her namesake label's story, even if it is one that it does not overtly promote ([see story](#)).

Luxury fashion brands have huge audiences. They set the tone for seasonal collections, shape the aspirations of consumers and draw the best talent in the world.

Although luxury brands are not the targets of Mr. Morgan's documentary, they can certainly lead the conversation and raise awareness.

"The eyes of the world are opening, and I believe history is giving us this moment to choose a better path," Mr. Morgan said. "Human progress moves forward when those who have a voice use it on behalf of those who do not.

"It moves forward when a moment is seized rather than ignored," he said. "And it most certainly moves when we decide that the profit if some must never come from the exploitation of others.

"I hope with all my heart that this film serves as a much needed step in the right direction."

Final Take

*Joe McCarthy, staff reporter on Luxury Daily, New York*

Embedded Video: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/uiPws6MO-LY>

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