[Lesson 1]
Sifting through the 'Ecofashion Lexicon'

By Mary Hanlon

Introduction

Both consumers and designers alike have been left to fend for themselves when it comes to understanding the social issues and environmental concerns increasingly associated with the fashion industry. Signals of deception, such as greenwashing, as well as unintelligent designs that have created products with hidden ingredients, known as products plus, have seemingly hijacked the potential for any real choice to exist at all.

Consumer Choice

The notion of *consumer choice* implies that individuals have access to choose, amongst a varied selection, products that best reflect who they are as free agents. It further suggests that consumers have access to important information needed to facilitate their choice — understanding the differences amongst products would likely help consumers to manage their product options. Unfortunately, when it comes to socially responsible fashion, consumers are not always given a choice.

Designer Choice

Designer choice implies that designers are completely aware of the social and environmental consequences of the design choices they are making, at every stage of product conception. However, to assume that designers have access to information on all possible social and environmental consequences of the products they have designed only perpetuates the problem.

Ecofashion Lexicon

Alternative consumerism has developed what Sue Thomas refers to as the 'Ecofashion Lexicon.' Certain words, such as 'environmental,' 'green,' and 'eco,' have become synonymous with the term ecofashion (Thomas, 530). Thomas believes the term 'eco' is particularly useful to the industry due to "its non-judgmental and perhaps nonfactual approximation" (531). The term 'ecofashion' is meant to signify "fashion that is specifically benign in its impact on the environment" (531). According to Thomas, although "[t]he practical realization of the *eco* aspect of fashion has usually involved the sourcing of environmentally benevolent fabrics [...], the degree of 'benevolence' varied radically in the past as much as it does contemporarily" (532). Roughly defined, this term only contributes to an absence of coherence, within the industry as it "lacks reference and precision" (532).

As a result, 'sustainable fashion' is often used to reference clothing that has worked to consider the environmental concerns and social impacts of the industry through life-cycle analysis; in general terms, sustainable fashion and design strive to consider both the social and environmental impacts of a garment through every aspect of its life. However, if sustainable fashion, as a fashion system, is perceived to be dominated by both intentional and unintentional signals of greenwashing, products, brands, designers, fashion marketers, fashion journalists, theorists and practitioners working within sustainable fashion will continue to develop new vocabulary to signal social and environmental considerations. In this system, the ecofashion lexicon is never-ending. A lack of industry cohesion has managed to transfer the bulk of the social and environmental responsibility of a garment onto the consumer, through notions of consumer choice.

Greenwashing

In his article "The Branding of Ethical Fashion and the Consumer: A Luxury Niche or Mass Market Reality?" Nathan Dafydd Beard has argued that proper systems of labelling within the fashion industry are ambiguous (Beard, 448). According to Beard, the terminology used within the fashion industry to communicate a responsible understanding of social concerns and environmental issues to consumers can create confusion; "[s]uch terms as 'ethical,' 'fair trade,' 'organic,' 'natural,' 'sweat-shop free,' 'recycled,' and even 'second-hand' or 'vintage' are used in persuading customers to believe that the fashion products they purchase are environmentally friendly and ethically sound" (Beard, 450). The complicated nature of the industry has created a lack of transparency across the entire life-cycle of a garment (448).

When compared to other sectors, Beard believes that fashion as an industry has "been seemingly lackadaisical in its embrace of tackling dilemmas relating to the environmental and human costs of its impact on society." (Beard, 448) Beard credits this behaviour, in part, to a lack of consumer interest and/or concern in such issues, as he views consumers as conflicted between a desire for cheap, fast and disposable fashion and a new found obligation to be seen as responsible when it comes to their ethical footprint (448-450).

The term greenwash is "[p]araphrased from whitewash, or the cover-up of unpleasant environmental facts or action." (Thomas, 533) According to Thomas, the issue of corporate greenwashing, through strategic marketing, "brings to the forefront the tension within the discourse; the wish for a positive and occasional cynicism, when presented with industry indifference." (533) The 2009 TerraChoice report on greenwashing, titled "The Seven Sins of Greenwashing™: Environmental Claims in Consumer Markets," (see Appendix 1) found that "over 98% of the 2,219 products surveyed in North America committed at least one of the Sins of Greenwashing." (TerraChoice, 2) The TerraChoice research has claimed that despite a 79% increase in products claiming to be 'green,' greenwashing exists endemically within North American products (4). Unfortunately, TerraChoice excluded fashion and apparel products from its research. This oversight, or lack of inclusion, only reinforces the arguments made by both Beard and Thomas of the need for global industry standards surrounding the social and environmental implications of a garment.

Unintelligent Design

According to Jonathan Chapman and Nick Grant, the environmental challenges facing the planet will not be solved through 'green' products or consumer behaviour (Chapman and Grant, Ed., xvi). Rather, in their book *Designers, Visionaries and Other Stories: A Collection of Sustainable Design Stories*, they claim that the solutions lie in the hands of the designers themselves, arguing that "[m]ost of the environmental impact of the products, services and infrastructures that surround us is determined at the design stage" (xvi-xvii). For this reason, they believe that "[p]osters and ad campaigns that tell people to behave sustainably are a pointless diversion" (xvii). Chapman and Grant argue that sustainable design cannot be taken on as an industry side-project: "[t]ransformation on the scale we are now embarked on won't happen if we approach it top-down or outside in." (xvii) William McDonough and Michael Braungart support this argument through their development of *cradle to cradle* design theory.

Cradle to Cradle

According to McDonough and Braungart, in cradle to grave design scenarios, neither consumer nor corporation are to blame for the social and environmental crises facing humanity today; rather, "[t]hey are the consequence of outdated and unintelligent design" (McDonough and Braungart, 43). In the context of the fashion industry, the authors refer to what they call 'products plus' to illustrate misconceptions surrounding notions of consumer choice (38). Using the example of a polyester shirt, the authors explain how the shirt may have come with harmful additives, hidden ingredients, which the consumer is completely unaware of (38). They suggest that the shirt should come with a label stating: "*Product contains toxic dyes and catalysts. Don't work up a sweat or they will leach onto your skin.*" (38)

Conclusion

In the context of socially responsible fashion design, fashion designers have a responsibility to create innovative products that not only strive to eliminate the social issues and environmental concerns associated with the industry, but also help to decrease consumer confusion in the process. Education has a transformative role to play in the creation of a socially responsible fashion industry.

Why must the fashion designer learn to stomach the weight of this responsibility? Consider this: **80% of the environmental consequence of a product, in this case a garment, can be determined at the design stage** (Chapman and Grant, Ed., xvi).

Appendix 1

TerraChoice: The Seven Sins of Greenwashing™

1. Hidden Trade-off: A product has committed this sin if it has claimed to be 'green' by acknowledging environmental benefits within one aspect of its lifecycle and ignored damages done in another. (TerraChoice, 3)

2. No Proof: A product has committed this sin if it has made environmental claims that cannot easily be proven by customers. In this case, the customer has no way of accessing evidence to support this claim. (3)

3. Vagueness: A product has committed this sin is it has 'intentionally' used vague vocabulary. For example, "'[a]ll-natural' is an example. Arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and poisonous. 'All natural' isn't necessarily 'green'." (3)

4. Irrelevance: A product has committed this sin if it has claimed an irrelevant truth. For example, "'CFC-free' is a common example, since it is a frequent claim despite the fact that CFCs are banned by law." (3)

5. Lesser of Two Evils: A product has committed this sin if it has claimed contradictory messages (i.e. the fuel efficient sport-utility vehicles and organic cigarettes) (3)

6. Fibbing: A product has committed this sin if it has falsely claimed to be 'environmental.' The report claims this sin to be the least frequent. (3)

7. Worshiping False Labels: A product has committed this sin if it has falsely, or inaccurately, suggested, through words or images, that it has been endorsed by a third-party (3-5).

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