

Fast Fashion Costs The Earth

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. It was the Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde who said fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months. Today, much of the ugliness remains, but the time span has shrunk from six months to just a few weeks. Fast fashion has boomed, but it's boomed at the expense of garment makers, consumers and the environment.

Ross Dana Thomas, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Dana Thomas Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Ross So, Dana, your story is unique insofar as you had ambitions to go and become a political reporter, but you actually became a fashion assistant at The Washington Post. Just talk us through that journey and how it was a sort of fateful one, really, which led you to do what you're doing now.

Dana Thomas It was. And it was thanks to Nina [Hyde] because she was at The Washington Post, which is not the most sartorially splendid city in the world. You know, it's not known for its fashion. When Nancy Pelosi walked out with her red coat and it made the front page, that's a rarity, right? So she really approached fashion as something more than about hemlines and heel heights or shapes. It was about how it fits in socially and economically into our lives and about clothes. She wrote about clothes, not just "fashion". And that's when I saw it, because in Washington we would go to the White House and cover state dinners, but we would write about what people were wearing to the state dinner and where it came from. We were linking it already to politics in a way that nobody else did because we were, you know, a one horse town with The Washington Post. And it really opened my eyes. And then also she gave me a lot of business stories to do. We had a retail reporter on the business desk, but sometimes it fell on our laps. And I remember there was a story she did that I helped her with that was the most eye opening for me. And that was on the fall of Christian Lacroix's house and how, when he was working at Patou, he had been swiped by Bernard Arnault to start his own house. And then Patou sued him. She did six months deep diving with us and got the legal documents and talked about the lawsuit and like really the ugly side of fashion and pure business. And I said, ah, this I find interesting.

Ross Right. And that really sort of captured your imagination, didn't it? You must have looked at a wardrobe before you started that job in one way. And when you started the job, you must of then looked at a wardrobe, basically, as a political and economic statement?

Dana Thomas Absolutely. And social statement, definitely - a social statement. You know that who we are, we're projecting through our clothes, who we want to be, who we want you to think we are, that we come from this tribe or that tribe, from this economic strata or another one that we're very serious, that we're very casual. All those things fold into how we decide what we're going to wear when we get dressed in the morning.

Ross So we've been through, in the developed West, a period of 40 years of hyper individualism. And what's come with that hyper individualism is the desire to put your stamp

on the world - you'll dress in a certain way, as you just mentioned. But what's also come with that is the desire for escapism. So fast fashion has come in. People have had enough money to go out and buy a ton of fast fashion and then they escape through those garments, through those costumes, bin it and move on to the next thing. Is that a fair depiction of how fast fashion has developed in the UK and the US?

Dana Thomas Absolutely. I mean, we call it the thrill at the till. We call it retail therapy. When you've had a really bad day, what are you going to do? Let's go shopping and buy a new dress in a way that we wouldn't have a generation ago. We buy five times more clothes today than we did half a century ago in the early 60s - five times per person.

Ross Wow!

Dana Thomas And if you think about your closet for a moment, just think about where you keep your clothes. If you own or live in an old apartment, pre-war, as we call them in America, the closet is about this big, right? It's not that big at all. And now we have walk in closets. Like you would move into a new apartment and you'd say, well, that little bedroom that would have been a child's room at some point or an office, you're like, well, we'll just turn this into a walk in closet because we have so many clothes. So, yes, we definitely turned shopping into a national pastime and we aren't thinking about what we're purchasing. We're not investing like the idea of being able to have as great clothes as the red carpet models and actresses that we see that they come out in a new dress every time they go to an awards show. Well, why can't I have a new dress every time I go out on a date? But we're not thinking about the long term impact of these purchases, that the average garment is worn seven times before it's thrown away, that we throw perfectly fine clothes in the bin, which is crazy, or we give it to charity. And charities, even before the pandemic when everybody was sitting at home cleaning out their closets, charities were overwhelmed with our clothes. And then we said, well, we're sending him to Africa and they need our clothes. They don't need our clothes. They actually had their own indigenous fashion industry until we drowned them in H&M and Zara cast-offs to the point that there's a whole consortium of countries in Central Africa who voted to stop importing Western clothes because they're like, you know what, we'd like to keep our dressmakers and tailors in business and our fabric printers and weavers. And we don't need all this stuff. You're killing our industry. You know, six of the top 55 or 50 richest people in the world own fashion companies. So one day recently, I sat down at the kitchen. I did a little piece of paper and started marking those 50 people down and what they were. And the only area that has more multibillionaires, the only sector of business than fashion is tech. So that just shows you how much money they're making. They're making so much money. And Bezos you can sort of say is both because now Amazon Fashion is the world's largest fashion retailer. So then it's about even - of billionaires and fashion billionaires, which is crazy, right, considering that 98 per cent of the people who work, who make our clothes, are not paid enough to support housing, feeding and clothing their own families. They're paid half a living wage. It's colonialism. It's a new fangled form of colonialism.

Ross So when you start thinking about solutions and you sit down to write Fashionopolis, what do you think man woman on the street can begin to start reasoning with to try and stop this cycle of hell?

Dana Thomas Well, I think we have to break our addiction because that's what it is, this addiction to shopping. And we've become addicted because the price of clothes dropped to a point that they've never been cheaper than they are today. When I was working on the book, I kept hearing this and I was like, what does this mean? And then two sort of things zinged in my head. First, I read a piece from The New Yorker in 1940-ish about the retailer, Hattie Carnegie in New York City, who was the retailer, and she was selling Paris originals, the equivalent of having something from Chanel or Christian Dior today, for the same price as we pay today. And this was during the Depression, the worst economic situation, ever. Then she started a line of sort of fun, easy, easier to wear, ready to wear, Raymond Chandler called it the Secretary Special, in the Long Goodbye, that ranged from sort of 19.95 to 25.99 somewhere in there - the same price you would pay at H&M and Zara today. And I thought, and again, during the Depression. And we're earning so much more, we have so much more purchasing power today than we did in the Depression and yet our clothes are the same price. And then I thought about when I was a teenager and how much clothes cost for me when I was a teenager. And then we went shopping in the mall. We were malli's. I lived ten minutes away from the largest mall in the United States, King of Prussia. So we spent our Saturday going around the mall. We get some slice of pizza. We'd get an ice cream cone. We go to the Gap and we'd save our money for our blue jeans. We didn't just buy them all the time. Today, the average American owns seven pairs of jeans. I think back then, if I had two it was a lot. And, you know, when I come home with a bag, with one shirt or two shirts, but my teenage daughter, she's 20 now, we'd come home after going out shopping with her friends, with a bag full of clothes, and she would say, you know, this shirt costs me 25 euros. I'm like, well, that's about what I was paying in 1980. But I was earning one dollar an hour babysitting and you earn ten dollars an hour babysitting. So you've got ten times the purchasing power and the clothes are the same price. So I said, right, there's our problem right there. Now, why are the clothes so cheap? Because we shipped all those jobs offshore to factories where they're paying people pennies. In Bangladesh, when I went there, they were earning 68 dollars a month. They have no health insurance, no benefits, no paid vacation, no maternity or paternity leave, no nothing. They don't even get paid overtime. They have forced overtime. They just go to work. They work their tails off and they bring home 68 dollars a month. That's why our clothes cost nothing. So there are people who are starting what we call slow fashion. And slow fashion is exactly as it sounds. It's the antithesis of fast fashion. They're not putting out new collections every week or every two weeks. They have a core thing and then they update it a little bit here and there. But you can go back to them and buy something that you love over and over again. They're made with organic materials or properly produced materials, things like what they call cruelty free silk or organic cotton or wool from sheep that have been raised on a beautiful free range ranch. And that quality you just feel it. You see it right away. As soon as you put on that shirt, you're like, this is a different kind of shirt. But that organic cotton shirt will cost you 120 dollars or euros as opposed to 15 or 20. It will last much, much longer. It will last ten times longer. It'll last you a lifetime if you want it to.

Ross What can we start to do as individuals? What's the fundamental question we can ask ourselves? I know you said we've got to get rid of our addiction to shopping, but what are the other things that we can think about to start turning this horrendous industry and scene around?

Dana Thomas Well, there's some really basic things that we can do as consumers just to give our clothes a longer life so we aren't wearing them only seven times before throwing

them away. Wash them less. We wash our clothes way too much and we really wash our blue jeans too much. And so then they fall apart faster. So wash them less. You don't have to wear it once and throw it in the hamper and then throw it in the washing machine. It can go two or three times or more. When you wash them, wash them all cold and wash them on the short cycle. They will get clean. And you're not using the energy to heat the water. You're not running it a super long time in the washing machine. So you're saving energy. You're lowering all your utility rates, but you're also just saving left and right for the environment and you're giving your clothes a longer life. Repair your clothes. You know, you split your jeans, get out some cool yarn and do an interesting patch up that's really pretty. Thanks to YouTube, you can learn how to sew without leaving your room. And it's kind of fun. So have your things repaired. If the buttons fall off, you know, put them back on. And if you don't know how to put them on, hire somebody so then you're contributing to a local economy and it's still cheaper to do that rather than to throw them away and buy something new. Look at the labels. If it says that it's 60 percent or 70 percent polyester, that's a junky piece of clothing, OK? It's basically plastic. It emits micro fibres when you wash it. It doesn't ever, ever, biodegrade. It's plastic. And it and it doesn't hold up. Buy beautiful cotton. Buy organic. Read the labels just like you do with food. Just think about it like the food business, farm to table food restaurants. Go to farm to store - what we call, dirt to dress - retailers. And invest in really beautiful products. And then also rent if you need something for a special occasion. You don't have to go out and buy a brand new thing every time you want it. If you're going to wear that thing once or twice - I mean, guys rent their morning suits for their weddings - why don't you rent your wedding dress? And, plus, it's got good juju because the last person who wore it was happy too. So, you know, one out of six people on the planet somehow work in the fashion industry. It's a much bigger piece of the puzzle than we imagine it to be. And we need to respect it and respect what it produces. As Aretha Franklin said, think. We need to think about fashion in a more serious manner.

Ross Dr. Patsy Perry, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Patsy Perry Thank you.

Ross Patsy, you've thought a lot about fast fashion, but you're not one of those people who wants to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. You think that revolution is futile, really, because so many people depend on this industry. So what's your sort of version of evolution? How do we begin to migrate away from something that is so sort of environmentally disastrous to something which is a bit more sustainable?

Patsy Perry I mean, yeah, you're right that it is a really complex issue. And actually the whole point of fast fashion, originally, it was about democratising fashion. So that fashion was not something just for wealthy people, but that all people, no matter what their disposable income was, could engage with trying out new trends, updating their wardrobes and wearing new things rather than cast-offs and hand me downs. It is also a really big and creative industry sector and so important for many entrepreneurs, for fashion design students and graduates and so on. And it brings us a lot of joy. You know, who can deny the fact that if you do put a new outfit on, some cool new threads, you just feel amazing, don't you? So it can bring, you know, self-confidence, depending on what situation you're walking into, whether you're going for a job interview, night out or whatever. And it brings us a lot of fun and happiness. So it's difficult to say, you know, ban it outright. And then, of course, since

we've created these gargantuan global supply chains to service that fast fashion monster and serve in terms of cheap manufacturing and frequent launches of new collections. And we have a responsibility to all of those people that are now part of those global supply chains and really rely on that work for their livelihood, especially in developing countries who are predominantly women, who don't have other employment opportunities. So what happens to them if we suddenly turn the tap off and say no more fast fashion?

Ross So when it comes to evolution, how do you begin to keep the old, bring in the new and then let the old drop away so you can replace what is exploitative practice a lot of the time with something that means that whoever's wearing the threads at the other end are happy and the garment maker is also happy?

Patsy Perry I mean, I think that essentially we need to be being more selective in our consumption and retailers need to be offering us fewer, better things. So, you know, fast fashion companies will say our products are not meant to be just worn once, you know, you meant to keep them. But then what the marketing messages are and the prices of the things, it doesn't actually support that, does it? So often it's cheaper to just order something new. It might even arrive tomorrow rather than bother washing something, having it dry cleaned and fixing something that might, you know, might have fallen off or whatever. So the very low prices and the really high convenience of fast fashion, it doesn't actually support, you know, people keep hold of that and wearing it over and over again, looking after it and so on. But I think essentially we need to slow down the system, which is really speeded up beyond all comprehension. And things need to be more valued, not just single use plastic item, which they have essentially become haven't they?. And I think people know it's bad for you, but it's just so tempting, isn't it? It's difficult to resist with all the marketing messages, the social media marketing and so on, the very low prices and the quick delivery and payment options, you can lay way your payments. So you don't even have to pay for anything, all of it upfront. So then expect consumers to kind of really change their behaviour. We need to sort of meet in the middle somewhere between the retailers and who are going to then support our shift in consumer behaviour.

Ross Food labelling was in the Dark Age about a decade ago and it's evolved beautifully. Is it that a clothing manufacturer would steal a march on the competition if they actually labelled where these garments were made so you could make the conscious choice to consume in that way? Or do producers deliberately keep that process nebulous and cloudy because ultimately that exploitation ends up on their bottom line?

Patsy Perry So with labelling, you know, we have been discussing this for a number of years and in fact, there are over 100 different types of eco labels to certify environmental and performance. We don't have so many around them social responsibility. But I think the main difference between food and fashion is that fashion manufacturing is so complex and often the brand or the retailer, they won't know the full extent of the supply chain. And then there's a decision to be made about how much information to provide to consumers that might overwhelm them. So various retailers are experimenting with different ways of doing this. For example, using symbols showing that perhaps, you know, an item has got less water usage or that something's made out of partly recycled materials. But then the problem with that is that it does become quite vague and nebulous, as you say. So you don't have the full information to base your decision on to. So I think it's going to be impossible, really, to come

up with a holistic, comprehensive, label that would give the information to consumers on both the social and the environmental issues there. And often there's a trade off and you'd need to really be an expert to sort of understand some of those trade offs. You know, you could find that something that's locally made, people might think that's better because a carbon footprint is lower. But then on the other hand, it might be that something that's made in a very distant country is providing skills training, employment opportunities to disadvantaged female workers and sort of promoting gender equality and all of that really good stuff. So there could be an argument to have a longer supply chain. But certainly we don't always know where the materials have come from, what processes have happened to them, which chemicals have been used in the textile processing, because all of that is so disjointed now since we've gone to this global supply chain with lots of different independent companies involved in producing one part of that transformative process of getting from, you know, your fibre through to your fabric, through to sewing the garments and getting it through to the retail store.

Ross How can the consumer who's watching this, who doesn't want labour exploited in the way that it is at the moment, doesn't want environmental degradation that goes with all this, doesn't also want huge amounts of debt? So credit card or store cards, you know, signing up to store cards, just wants a really decent item, is probably not rich enough to buy cheap stuff because you have to keep going back and buying more. So how does that punter begin to affect any change? I mean, can they vote with their feet? Can that happen at the till or is a more political organisation to bring in laws to stop this?

Patsy Perry I think it's a bit of both. And we have seen that consumer pressure and consumer activism, especially when it's enabled by social media, can be really powerful in getting some of the world's biggest companies to actually go back on what they initially planned and do the right thing. So we saw that over the summer with the pay up campaign. So when lockdown first hit and a lot of retailers tried to wriggle out of their orders that they'd already committed to in places like Bangladesh and then refused to pay the factory and use contractual terms to wriggle out of it. And there's a big social media pay up campaign which was successful in actually reversing the decisions of some of those huge global corporations. And then they did go back and pay the manufacturers, more or less. So the power of consumers holding brands accountable on social media is not to be underestimated. And of course, we can also vote with our wallets. Where do you want to buy stuff from? However, there's not always an alternative that's as affordable or as convenient. So it is really difficult for consumers. And I think there is that kind of idea that sustainable fashion is more expensive and it's not for everybody. But I would counter that and say, you know, what we all know is that the longer you keep your existing garments in use for, the better it is for the people and planet, because then we're not having to produce so much more new stuff. So if you can keep wearing what you've already got in your wardrobe, that's the best thing you can do and that's the most sustainable thing. We can't shop our way to sustainability. So simply buying into what you might think to be a sustainable brand is not necessarily going to solve the problem because it's still more production and buying more stuff, isn't it? And recent reports have suggested that there's something like 30 billion pounds worth of unworn clothing in UK wardrobes alone. And in the UK we actually buy more clothing per person than anyone else in Europe. So I think we might say that the French and the Italians have more of a kind of stylish reputation and a more sustainable isn't it in terms of not spending as much, but always looking good? So I think that's what we need to work to here. You know, there's talk now

about building back better and coming back with a smaller, more sustainable fashion industry. And we all have a role to play in that in terms of not overconsuming and not supporting that wasteful overproduction. That seems to be the status quo for many retailers now. But in order to do that, then retailers need to support consumers with that in terms of offering them more durable items that are going to last the test of time, that can be washed and worn again, retain their shape as they want and not constantly pushing us with marketing messages about new trends and having to update your wardrobe. So on the one hand, they've got all this sustainability information on the website, perhaps, but on the other hand, the email marketing, the social media marketing, is all about buying new stuff, isn't it? And we might even think, you know, whether we need to own every piece of clothing that we wear.

Ross So what are the three points that you give to us to try and change the direction of this, let's face it, environmentally disastrous and socially really pernicious juggernaut?

Patsy Perry I'd say what we can all do is hold brands accountable. Try and vote with your wallet if you can and keep your existing clothing in use for longer in whichever way you can, really. And that's about the only thing we can do. But it is hard to do those things.

Ross But you are also highlighting aren't you in a lot of your writing that it isn't about banishing fashion because fashion has so many good aspects to it? It's just the last 15, 20 years, the way we've gone down this incredibly exploitative route, that's the problem and actually keeping hold of fashion and the value that it brings, that must be maintained. But we just have to evolve so everybody, certainly the garment makers, aren't exploited in the way that they are now?

Patsy Perry Yes, absolutely. It's a really important part to think about our culture. And here in the UK, we have a global reputation for fashion design. It's a really important creative industry sector and it does bring a lot of joy, fun and happiness to all sorts of people. But I think we need to think more about style rather than fashion and the fact that you don't need to be buying something new every week. But it's about sort of developing your own sense of style about what suits you and then just being more selective about what you buy into. And you may even find that you can save yourself a whole load of money doing it that way.

Ross Dr. Patsy Perry, thank you very much for your time.

Patsy Perry Thank you.