

fashion. conscious

As the NEW SEASON collections land, Grace Cain looks at the INNOVATIVE BRANDS upping their ETHICAL GAME

Utility Boilersuit
in Olive, £130,
ninetypercent.com

It's September, and every magazine on the shelf and every blogger on Instagram is about to tell you what you need to buy *right now*. From listicles proclaiming 'the biggest trends for autumn' to headlines that swear 'this is the [insert item of clothing] everyone will be wearing this season', a whole lot of people are going to try to tell you how you should be spending your cash. You'll buy a selection of the most on-trend pieces, you'll wear them for a few weeks, and then they will be relegated to the back of a drawer. And then the cycle will repeat, endlessly.

When it comes to fast, disposable fashion, we live in a golden age. However, we are at the beginning of a shift in the way people think about clothes. Not only are consumers starting to wise up to the unethical practices of many brands caught in the fast fashion cycle, but the environmental cost of cheap clothing is also becoming impossible to ignore.

In a report published late last year, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation found that the total annual greenhouse gas emissions from textile production are more than those of all international flights and maritime shipping combined. What's more, less than 1% of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothes, which begs the question – what happens to the rest?

In the wake of recent reports that Burberry has in the past year alone destroyed more than £28 million worth of unwanted products – the equivalent of 20,000 of the

brand's signature trench coats – the fashion industry has found itself at the centre of an ethical maelstrom. The condemnation of their method of burning stock to prevent it from being sold at knockdown prices (and therefore worn by the so-called 'wrong' customer) has been widespread – but if you believe Burberry's claims that this is common practice among high-end brands, it means their indiscretions are only the tip of the iceberg.

But are we as consumers any less at fault? According to the same Ellen MacArthur report, clothing utilisation – the average number of times we wear something – has decreased by 36% in the past 15 years. We've become accustomed to a cycle of buying cheap, wearing briefly, and discarding without a thought. In Britain alone, we sent over £12.5 billion worth of clothes to landfill last year.

If all this has left you feeling guilty about that once-worn 'it was in the sale' dress stuffed in a drawer, don't despair. Long gone are the days where 'eco-fashion' meant questionable knitted ponchos and earthy tones, and there is a whole new breed of designer hoping that they can play a small part

in changing the world by changing the way we shop.

Platforms such as Instagram have played a huge role in facilitating the rise of stylish ethically-conscious brands that might otherwise have never flown above the radar. A prime example of this is VEJA, whose classically cool sneakers are becoming a familiar sight on the feeds of many a style blogger. For VEJA, social media hype is particularly important because they have eliminated the usual big-budget marketing campaigns, brand ambassadors and billboards. This enables them to spend five and seven times more than the average brand on ensuring the use of ethical materials and production methods, but still be able to sell their sneakers at the same price as their competitors.

Then there are the companies for whom being ethical is not only a prerequisite of their production, but an integral part of their brand identity. London-based concept store Ninety Percent launched this year on the back of a very simple idea; that 90% of its distributed profits from the sale of its relaxed, elevated basics would be shared between the people working to produce the collection and charitable causes chosen by the consumer.

Hand-embroidered accessory brand SEP Jordan is based on a similar philosophy. Blending Middle Eastern craftsmanship with Italian style, each SEP creation is embroidered by a single artist using traditional techniques. The business model has been designed to empower the makers, who are primarily female refugees, by offering them professional, personal and economic autonomy. The powerless become

Burberry has in the past year alone destroyed more than £28 million worth of unwanted products



Mother of Pearl
Blouse, £275,
reve-en-vert.com

Track Jacket, £160,
ninetypercent.com

V-10 Extra
White, £130,
veja-store.com

the empowered in what the brand calls ‘the SEP disruption’, where they say ‘pity’ becomes ‘aspiration’... ‘refugee’ becomes ‘artist’.

But as everyone from the largest corporation to the smallest independent boutique clings to the ‘sustainable’ bandwagon, what does the future look like for fashion with a cause?

Cora Hilts, co-founder of online conscious-fashion retailer Rêve En Vert, believes the term ‘sustainable’ has become increasingly confused as more and more retailers claim it as a buzzword. Rêve En Vert will now refer to its curated selection of socially and environmentally-aware designer pieces as ‘honest luxury’, a phrase that Cora feels better reflects the company’s ethos of transparent, future-proof fashion.

‘We want to empower consumers to think differently about the products they buy and why they buy them,’ she writes in Rêve En Vert’s new manifesto. ‘We hope to shape a future of more conscious consumerism.’

Perhaps being more thoughtful with what we buy – even if that means spending a little more but buying a little less – is the path to a fashion industry that is more sustainable, less environmentally damaging, and more just for the people involved in the production process. After all, a low monetary value and industry-wide throwaway attitude prompts us to devalue the clothes we buy, and in turn, the time and human energy that went into creating them.

The Fashion Revolution movement (*fashionrevolution.org*) is tackling this tendency towards undervaluing – or even just outright ignoring – the work behind the clothes. In a bid to encourage consumers to feel more responsible for their own wardrobes, they’ve taken to social media to ask #whomademyclothes, in turn calling on anyone within the production chain to respond with #imadeyourclothes. The ultimate aim is for brands to be more transparent about who is making the clothes we wear, and to ensure that the work of people around the world is truly valued (and appropriately remunerated).

As for environmentally-friendly clothing, ever-evolving technologies render the possibilities limitless. Fashion designer Pauline van Dongen specialises in creating innovative wearable technology with the potential to actively make a difference to the way we use energy sources. Her Solar Shirt is a functional piece of clothing that is also able to produce electricity via the 120 thin film solar panels integrated within the fabric. Under bright sunlight, the initial prototype is currently able to charge a typical smartphone in a few hours.

So, the next time a stranger on the internet tries to persuade you into purchasing this season’s ‘It’ dress, pause before you hit the ‘buy now’ button. Trends are ephemeral; conscious consumerism is the future.



The Roraima, £155, veja-store.com



Tri Colour Shirt, £45, ninetypercent.com

Track Skirt, £95, ninetypercent.com



V-10 Suede Steel Pierre, £115, veja-store.com

