Traceable

Director: Jennifer Sharpe
Country/Year: Canada, 2014
Production: Clique Pictures
Runtime: 1:10

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Traceable, directed by Jennifer Sharpe, is first and foremost a visual feast. Traceability is a new buzzword in the fashion industry. What could be a rather dry topic is transformed by the movie into a succession of gorgeous images that manage to develop a complex theme of social and environmental relevance without flagging or losing the viewer. The aesthetic aspect is well supported by the original music of DJ Spooky, producing the right mix of emotional notes and cues with an exotic flair without ever being intrusive.

This focus on beauty, innovative for an environmental movie, has its downside: there is little opportunity to grapple with the reality of harsh pollution issues or social inequality problems. The viewer is, at times, left hungry, as if some of the key points were merely glossed over. In particular, the use of the word “traceability” as a sort of short-hand for overlapping but distinct concepts such as transparency, accountability, ethics, and fair trade, risks leaving the viewer with a bit of a conceptual muddle.

Yet, there is no denying its appeal and effectiveness; however, if it is effective, it is because it is calling for an emotional response as opposed to a rational one. This is something that many environmental movies do poorly; those that try often saturate the viewer with depressing and ugly scenes, producing feelings of guilt or disgust, difficult to act upon. By contrast, the emotions generated by Traceable are positive while tracing a roadmap for behavioral change. In that respect it is, to my knowledge, unique.

The Visual Aspects

The camera follows budding fashion designer Laura Siegel through her search for traditional, handmade material (Fig. 1). We travel to several locales in
Thailand and India, as well as wander through the fashion hub of New York. We view landscapes, through still shots and pans, that could grace travel brochures, such as a golden Buddha clad in saffron-coloured cloth in Bangkok or the Palace of the Wind (Hawa Mahal) in Jaipur. We see laughing children and smiling villagers in traditional settings, wearing traditional garb. We see donkey carts and sun-drenched villages, the very images normally used to entice well-heeled travelers looking to experience authenticity. We mostly see glorious, bright colours: the gorgeous reds and yellows of saris, or the deep hues of burgundy and verdigris of embroidered fabrics in India; the pastel rainbows of colours displayed in scarfs on a New York fashion rack; the deep earth colours on the fashion models displaying Siegel’s designs. Outdoor scenes are (almost) all bright and sunny; the darker indoor scenes are done in rich greys, browns, and sepias.

It would be tempting to dismiss the movie as a mere aesthetic essay, a collection of pretty images, especially given a topic such as fashion, a preoccupation with look and appearance. But there is more depth in some of the images, revealing a key to the movie’s message. A close viewing reveals other scenes, where pollution intrudes. But where other documentaries often yield to the temptation of shocking, jarring images of destruction, Traceable leads us on an unexpected path. For instance, in India, the camera lingers on a street scene featuring a donkey and a cow munching their way through plastic garbage strewn about, a common occurrence. But what is striking is the visual quality of the garbage itself. Plastic garbage consists mostly of discarded thin bags, and the thinness that makes them cheap makes them visually drab. A translucent thin plastic film reflects light only partially, and as a result, their appearance is of an interesting hue and saturation. Director Sharpe selects, instead, a scene where the discarded bags happen to be of a heavier gauge; they are bright spots of saturated yellows and reds in an echo of the saris shown in a previous scene. Rather than jarring, the scene is visually compelling. In another scene illustrating water pollution, we see a close-up shot of an overflow weir from a dye vat. The effluent flowing gently from the weir has a strong pink-purple colour. The stone wall above the weir is covered in algal growth: a deep Irish green patch. The stone wall itself is masonry work made of rock, which, as a result of being wetted by the effluent, shimmers in a rich textured grey. The overall effect is rich, brilliant, visually absorbing. Pollution, this?

A common problem with environmental documentaries is a relentless focus on depressing scenes: repellent brown rivers, smokestacks, mining scars, or the sad, stern faces of the victims of environmental injustice. Such images are omnipresent in India, Thailand, even New York, all locations selected by director Sharpe. But their absence from the movie show an obvious editing choice: only beautiful, compelling images are included in the movie. But it is not a case of looking the other way, of refusing to acknowledge reality. Rather, it is a clear attempt at conveying a sobering message in a way that is beautiful, that refuses to be depressing. Far from adopting the dilettante tone of one-percenters discussing poverty at a cocktail party (a potential pitfall avoided by the movie), it is as if the movie is telling the viewer, “Watch till the end, relax. I’ll only show you beautiful things. And I will restore your sense of hope that beauty is the solution.”

The Designer

Much of the issue of traceability is embodied in the person of Laura Siegel, a young fashion designer; her progress takes up the majority of the movie’s footage as she struggles in her attempts to build a collection that incorporates traditional craft techniques. Traditional crafts serve as a proxy for traceability in the movie, providing the setting for discussion of the topic by others. The persona of Siegel is
also used to develop human interest and to build dramatic tension as the movie progresses.

Siegel enters the movie only after fairly lengthy preliminary discussions (after almost ten minutes in the longer version), and she is introduced almost formally by Simon Collins, Dean at the Parsons School of Design in New York, and one of the numerous interviewees who provide context and depth to the movie. Laura, says Collins, early on showed “a passion for supporting communities that make the product,” standing out among other students. Laura herself explains how she wanted to study fashion but did not know how to draw, until her dad pushed her to study drawing. Laura emerges as someone gifted, but vulnerable, unsure of herself, ordinary and utterly likeable, yet with a vision and a determination to pursue it. Still a student, she learns how to crochet traditional patterns in Chang Mai, but realizes that once her trip is over, she will have no way to contact the person who taught her.

After graduating from Parsons, Laura travels to Bhuj, India, a textile centre where traditional techniques have been revived by an initiative called Qasab Craft. We hear her comment that there are “tons of craft here that are not being utilized enough” and that what interests her is “more than the craft, it’s the culture.” She is trying to assemble a collection for a prestigious 2013 New York show in a few months; whether or not she succeeds will determine her fate as a designer. We follow her as she gets to know the women who make unique tie-dyed fabrics or traditional embroideries, or the men who specialize in traditional block printing. She enquires about the materials used – “What did you use to dye?” – so as to ensure that the dyes are of natural origin and do not compromise the health of the dyers. She develops techniques to minimize material loss during cutting – to lower costs, but also to prevent excess waste of “such beautiful fabric.” But she also battles the delays inherent to artisanal work (block printers cannot work when it rains, for instance) and suppliers who may or may not be able to meet her deadlines. We root for her the whole way and congratulate her as she is finally greeted by applause at her show in New York, glassy-eyed and sleep-deprived.

Ultimately, the dramatic tension contributes little to the actual theme of movie topic – it follows the expected plot arc with success at the end. Success breeds hope, though, and success is there. As of this writing, Laura Siegel, a few short years later, is an established designer with a successful brand. Her work is available from fifty-two retailers in the United States, three in Canada (including Holt Renfrew, profiled in the movie), and one each in Australia and Europe. Her website states that

Our team employs artisans from rural villages all over the world to sustain traditional cultures and crafts. Along with ensuring ethical working conditions and living wages are provided to the skilled artisans, we collaborate with organizations to ensure they receive mentorship and workshops to learn how to maintain practicing their craft, provide for their families, education on wealth management, business practices and more. We firmly believe the hand can produce something beautiful that machines will never be able to, no matter the technology. Thus, we eliminate heavy energy consumption and the resulting pollutants that disperse into the environment of these communities.

So, using hand-crafted techniques matters, even if it affects only a handful of artisan communities. This initiative sits within the broader Fair Trade movement, which does generate positive results both for the environment and for social justice – sustainability in general. But how is this linked to traceability?

**Traceability**

Leonardo Bonanni is the other key voice in the movie, providing the introduction to the concept of traceability and a contextual narrative throughout.
Bonanni is the founder of Sourcemap, a company that provides traceability services. He defines traceability as the knowledge of where a manufactured product comes from, who made it, and when. But traceability has, in practice, disappeared from the mass market. Following Bonanni’s introduction, designer Lynda Grose describes what a “Made in America” label really implies when it comes to clothing: the garment is likely to only have been assembled in the country, while the weaving, the dyeing and printing, the cutting, to say nothing of the fiber itself, takes place elsewhere, usually in numerous countries spread across the continents.

Bonanni explains where traceability originates from: the battlefields of the Second World War, when health concerns with respect to the food carried by soldiers was paramount – codes of origin meant that a defective batch, and only that batch, could be discarded quickly before too many soldiers became sick. The concept was eventually applied to all commodities in the civilian market. While this is true, Bonanni misses an opportunity to make a distinction between commodities, which, by definition, are indistinguishable, and artisanal production, for which traceability largely predates this century. For instance, fabric names such as cashmere, angora, or calicut attest to their geographic origin.

Bonanni claims that “companies are like consumers”: they do not know, any more than an average consumer, where their fabric is made, cut or dyed, so complex and opaque is the array of subcontractors and suppliers – traceability is lost, because of the complexities of markets subdivided into thousands of distinct operations, each performed by different actors. The need for confidentiality in trade secrets, of course, contributes to the situation; retailers and clothes manufacturers have given up on asking for traceability from their suppliers, acknowledging that they cannot ask for transparency up the chain while protecting their own trade secrets.

Questionably, Bonanni traces this situation to the emergence of the middle class in the nineteenth century; disposable income made it possible to focus on the wants rather than the needs, creating a vast market where “everyone lost out; there was no traceability.” But while the purchasing power of the middle-class has indeed exploded in the nineteenth century, the demand for luxury goods has always existed, whether or not traceability was present. To take an example from antiquity, silk’s origin was purposefully obscured from the Roman purchasers by the silk road merchants. The fabric was purchased in large quantities by the better-off citizens of the Roman Empire, a nascent middle-class brought about by the years of peace that followed Augustus’ reign (Thorley 71). The phenomenon was sufficiently common for contemporary writers to castigate women for wearing costly silk. While not directly comparable, it is difficult to see how Bonanni’s “all was lost” quip would apply to this early fashion market where silk was not only untraceable but completely mysterious. The movie presents lack of traceability as an a priori bad situation, unfortunately without stating the case directly; the above example of using a quote by Bonanni without support is one of several instances.

In the only instance of disturbing footage in the whole movie, traceability is mentioned in the context of the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013 in Dhaka. The catastrophe killed 1,134 people, most of them textile workers, who were assembling pieces for brands such as The Gap or H&M (Westervelt). This accident, where casualties were preventable, has led to initiatives to reform industry practices, including improving traceability. Nonetheless, the footage begs the question: would better traceability have prevented this disaster? With experts such as Bonanni available to comment, it is regrettable that director Sharpe did not grab that opportunity.
Or it may be that Bonannini would have mentioned that traceability, while similar, is not the same thing as accountability. That distinction is vital, but is missing from the movie. Accountability, as expressed by progressive retailers such as Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), for instance, consists of the ability to ensure that material quality, working conditions, and environmental impact can be measured and held to account through the supply chain; that is, the provenance of a particular item is part of a much broader set of concerns. Traceability, by contrast, originated with the agricultural industry as a means to detect which particular farm may have produced a batch contaminated by weed seeds or disease. It also evolved as a tool for detecting forgeries and fakes; it is in this context that it was first applied to the fashion industry.

This leads to a confusing situation. For instance, why is Laura Siegel using traditionally crafted materials in her collection? Is it because of concerns about authenticity? Or the environmental impact of her work? Or social justice? The role of traceability is not made clear; much of what we see is rather reminiscent of fair trade practices, where certification is key and traceability, if mentioned, simply a way to ensure this. We know that traceability is important for Siegel (advertising for her collections emphasizes this), and we hear her say that she wants to “feel a sense of history in each piece.” Siegel appears to have a fairly romanticized notion of the process, claiming that machines cannot replicate the delicate operations that the human hand can do.

Cultural appropriation is another sensitive topic for fashion that is ignored in the movie, and that is unfortunate, as cultural sensitivity and traceability have been strongly linked. For instance, fashion writer Dario Calmese recently wrote that “calling out cultural appropriation does not kill creative license, it simply forces those who control the narrative and means of distribution to cite their sources” (par. 6)

The movie, and possibly designer Siegel, conflates two other related but distinct terms, traceability and ethical sourcing. Ethics (and a search for authenticity) is what drives the young designer. But a look at her catalogue reveals only vague attributions, such as “handcrafted in rural India.” The buyer has to believe that the garment indeed comes from one of these progressive communities such as the ones in Bluj or Jaipur prominently featured in the movie, but true traceability to the ultimate producer does not exist, at least not for the consumer.

Despite this, because of the evident personal relations developed between Siegel and her suppliers, it is clear that the product is ethically sourced, but it is these relationships, and not traceability as such, that allow Siegel to be transparent about her approach and claim that, despite the fact that “fashion is very competitive …[,] people are worried about others copying them.” It is “detrimental to be hiding; the more info you share, the more you’re gonna learn, the more you’re gonna grow.”

One should not blame Siegel or Sharpe for conflating the term “traceability” with accountability or fair trade; however, the whole industry has now adopted the term (see, for instance, the websites fashionrevolution.org or clothingtraceability.com), and this approach is clearly improving sustainability across the whole supply chain (Turker and Altuntas 837; Ditty par. 12).

It may be that the reason that “traceability” has succeeded as an industry buzzword is that it enables consumers to build an interesting personal story, a mental image of a purported authentic connection with the garment maker. This may be dismissed as mere romanticizing a search for meaning and identity; yet it may also hold the for future sustainable practices. Towards the end of the movie, Leonardo Bonannini tantalizingly comments

When you know who makes the things you buy, you care more about it; they have more
value. Where things come from is one of the most important things about them, more so even than what they are. When you buy a product, you buy into a society that you want to create ... My dream is to build a social network so vast that you know the people who have made it [your garment], all the way down to the farm.

In his view, the technology behind social networking is on the verge of making this not only possible but also realistic. To reinforce the point, the viewer is treated to footage of a small village in Zambia, where a solar panel is clearly visible; the narrator mentions that its function is charging cell phones so that artisans can stay in contact with buyers.

The Environmental Impacts

For an environmentalist, fashion is a quandary. There is an enormous environmental impact that arises from concerns with fashionability; it is what drives a large part of consumerism and the discarding of still fine products, be they last year’s car model or outdated clothes. That enormous amounts of waste and pollution are generated, and energy is consumed in the process of discarding garments and producing new ones, simply for the sake of wider lapels, strikes one as the height of absurdity.

That the clothing industry is responsible for enormous amounts of pollution – it is now the second largest source of pollution after oil (Sweeny) – is no longer controversial, even if this is not yet known by the general public. Numerous research reviews are available (see, for instance, Muthu), and their findings have started to trickle through the general media (for instance, Sweeny or Breyer). Garments affect the environment throughout their life cycle: they are difficult to recycle and often end up in landfills or incinerators when not littering; clothes washing or dry-cleaning pollutes; and, most importantly, their production has an enormous impact, both environmental and social. Parsons fashion professor Timo Rissanen, interviewed for the movie, mentions that “fashion is not sustainable ... the system is such that it can’t be fixed ... we need something completely new.” Rissanen, a co-author of Zero Waste Fashion Design, cites Uzbekistan as an example of a situation that “doesn’t work: children are taken out of school, nurses out of hospitals” when it is cotton harvest time.

The world clothing and textile industry was worth over $2,500 trillion in 2010. That year, the Chinese textile industry alone processed nearly 37.5 metric tonnes of fiber, over half of the world’s total. This created over 2.5 billion tonnes of air-polluting soot, and 2.25 billion tonnes of discharged wastewater (textile processing is ranked third among water polluting industries by effluent volume). A Chinese textile mill will use up to 200,000 litres of water for every tonne of fabric dyed, and millions of tonnes of unused fabric end up as waste, each year, because of faulty dyeing. These statistics, compiled by Breyer, give an insight to the sheer magnitude of the waste and pollution problem.

Facts like these often take centre stage in movies with an environmental theme. For instance, RiverBlue devotes abundant footage to dead rivers in India polluted with dyes, foam and other wastes from the textile industry in India when not lambasting the use of harsh chemicals to produce a “distressed” effect in jeans. Likewise, the movie The True Cost shows instances of the waste generated by so-called fast fashion.

Both of these excellent Canadian documentaries intend to raise awareness of the polluting nature of the fashion industry and alert the general public to the necessity of making better purchasing choices when it comes to clothes. This is also the general aim of Traceable.

When asked in Jamadagni’s interview what viewers should take away from the movie, designer Laura Siegel replied, “I just hope that more people will
think more before they make each purchase.” Director Jennifer Sharpe, interviewed by Chua for the environmental organization Ecouterre, states that “transparency, to me, means providing consumers a spectrum of information needed to make a purchasing decision” (par. 10). The movie reinforces the point by featuring designers Maxine Bédat and Lynda Grose stressing the importance of consumers choosing well-made, long lasting garments, and quoting Bonanni impressing on consumers (us, the viewers) to “vote with your dollars.”

But where Traceable really differs from The True Cost or RiverBlue (2016) is in its tone. There is almost no harsh footage, as noted earlier; the focus is on beauty, creativity, well-being, and other positive values. Exploiting feelings of guilt is often a temptation of environmental movies, and this is often a pitfall that makes a movie ultimately ineffective. This is particularly the case when dealing with a behaviour as irrational as choosing fashion. Laura Siegel, while assessing supplies in India, mentions that the chosen fabric must be soft and feel good to the touch, since clothing is a “home for the body” – it has to be comfortable. What is striking about her remark is that it appears almost as an afterthought. What Siegel first and foremost seeks are fabrics that are beautiful, distinctive, and authentic.

Indeed, scientists that study the psychology of clothing find that the utilitarian value of clothes is almost irrelevant; clothes are used to create a persona (Solomon and Schopler 508), truthful or not (Benz et al. 305). In that context, then, it is hardly surprising a rational approach to changing environmental behaviour, appealing to reason through an expose of facts and figures, is bound to fail. But Jennifer Sharpe’s approach follows a better strategy: by emphasizing the values that motivate fashion buyers (beauty, distinctiveness, authenticity) and populating her movie with vibrant images of undeniable appeal, she is more likely to reach an audience that would otherwise tune out an environmental message.

Works Cited


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