

Orsola de Castro. *Loved Clothes Last*. Penguin Random House UK, 2021

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In February 2020, a week after Orsola de Castro delivered the first draft of the below-presented book, the Italian fashion capital went into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A year later, on February 11th, 2021, *Loved Clothes Last* was published. As of July 2021, Europe is gradually making steps back towards *normality*, our pre-pandemic social condition, which was wrong on many levels, bulimic consumption included. For this, among other reasons, many of the topics discussed in de Castro's book "are now more relevant than ever."¹

The co-founder of *Fashion Revolution*, a decennial practitioner in the field of ethical and responsible fashion, "The Queen of Upcycling" — Orsola de Castro — with a very personal touch, presents her first book as a story of affection, deep care, and willingness to change the world for good. After the brief introduction on how "our ready-to-wear has turned into ready-to-waste,"² we embark on a journey to understand why there is a need to change the fashion industry, the system, but above all, our state of mind. In a system designed to make us dispose of material goods (under the pressure of planned obsolescence, "increasing legal and logistical loopholes that actively prevent us from independently repairing the stuff we buy,"³ the devaluation and consequential loss of manual skills), the willingness to understand and act against the drivers behind it may be the first and most challenging step. Once we acknowledge the fact that our obsession with the *newness* is a relatively new cultural construct and has nothing to do with our traditions, although residing on the age-old stigma around poverty and need (which are again social constructions that have no connection with the dynamics of nature), we can start dusting off the negative associations of the repairing practices and embrace mending as a revolutionary act.

The first two chapters of the book are dedicated to questioning and reshaping our current state of mind. From the story of our oral wisdom showing the silver lining that connects the cultures separated by

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1. Orsola de Castro, *Loved Clothes Last* (Penguin Random House UK, 2021), preface, XI.
2. de Castro, preface, XIV.
3. de Castro, 3.

miles of unpassable geographies, and the secular mending practices from all around the world, we get to the discussion on the socio-cultural dynamics behind the changed production practices and the gradual loss of repair culture (strictly linked to the 20th-century women empowerment movements and the fight against the domestic enslavement); a discussion not limited to the mere observation of the historical unfolding but directed towards uplifting and surpassing the stigmas. I found it essential that at this initial stage of the book, another stigma is dismantled — the one connected to the cost of the fashion product. As Orsola de Castro explains, expensive does not imply ethical or responsibly-made; unfortunately, even the expensive products are often of mediocre quality and are made in poor, unsafe conditions. Thus “we should not measure a garment’s value by its price tag, but by the purpose it has in our life.”⁴ Strictly related to the price stigma is the false democratisation allure associated with the cheap, poorly made clothing (and here poorly does not only mean the clothes lack quality, sadly but more importantly, it means they are made of questionable materials, in unsafe, unregulated working conditions). And while the cheap clothing comes with no implication on the fact that someone elsewhere is paying the price, we also do not discuss the fact that we do need “fashionable clothes (to be) affordable (for) the majority of the world’s population. ... we want cheap clothing that is made with dignity, and which does not cost the earth.”⁵ Easily said than done? I would not say so. On the contrary, the solution is quite simple actually.

We need a system where profits, and quality of life, are more equally distributed throughout the supply chain, as opposed to making a very few people very rich.⁶

And if this seems hugely utopic, we cannot say the same thing for our consumeristic attitudes. It takes only a look generation or two back to understand that what is required today is just what was normality half a century ago. The positive thing is that today we have technology at our disposal, and educating ourselves has never been so facilitated. We can learn the reasons behind the loss of the world’s crafts, but more importantly, we can collectively act to safeguard the traditional heritage since cultural sustainability is as important as protecting our environment.

When discussing sustainability in relation to fashion, the consumers’ role almost always comes under the spotlight. And it is correct; we do vote with our wallets. Plus, during the consumer phase of the product lifecycle, individual actions contribute largely to the negative impact that our clothes have on the environment. What is exceptional about the *Loved Clothes Last* is that it is a book that takes us a step further. Orsola de Castro dedicates Chapter 4 of the book to the consumers; it is a tips and tricks journey into how we can be fashionable and caring at the same time. She is not focused on the negativities, and although she puts them down clearly, the emphasis is on how to diminish our impact, on how to better our everyday practices. With the same approach, aiming to explain the need to change, the author dives into the *Fabrics of Our Life*. It is not the already seen approach of fibres, fabrics and textiles mere description. Differently, the chapter is dedicated to our relationships with some of the most widely used threads. De Castro usually provides a brief historical overview, a backstory to understand the contemporary implications of the fabric in question. Thus we have the chance to learn why cotton, even though preferred, is so problematic; how it “has been fraught with pain, ignorance and exploitation,”⁷ why colonialism is not exclusive to the past and which are the contemporary issues of the industry responsible for the drainage of Uzbekistan’s Aral Sea.

Furthermore, we learn that the effect the synthetic fibres such as polyester, nylon and acrylic have on our environment “is 100 per cent negative from extraction to aftercare.”⁸ Moreover, sustainable fibres like linen and hemp are rendered near-obsolete because “rich individuals and corporations with interests in paper and pesticides ... monopolise the system”⁹ (in the case of hemp), whereas linen’s “labour-intensive

4. de Castro, 2.

5. de Castro, 38.

6. de Castro, 38.

7. de Castro, 90.

8. de Castro, 98.

9. de Castro, 107.

manufacturing process makes it more expensive than other alternatives.”¹⁰ There is no fatalism in the fibre descriptions. De Castro exposes the pros but also the cons of all of the discussed fibres, silk, wool, leather, and fur included. There are no particular preferences of one thread over another, although the personal go-to’s for different product categories are evident. And this is what I found insightful — the fact that through lifelong investigation, we should all come to know what works best for us, on which occasions; we should all learn how to take care of the materials that we love (and on this de Castro shares a myriad of advice). The next chapter is entirely dedicated to *Denim* — the material “that (has) managed to cross all cultural barriers from workwear to everywhere;”¹¹ a material that through the destressing practices marked the unimaginable passage — from a symbol of workers’ rights movement to be considered “a driving force of workers’ rights abuse and workers’ safety hazards.”¹²

It is already all very known fact that fashion’s biggest problem is waste accumulation. According to Ellen MacArthur Foundation, roughly 35 million tonnes of post-use textile waste is sent to landfills or incinerated,¹³ and this is only the post-use textile. De Castro enriches the *My Trash* chapter with complex to digest facts and sad truths about our irresponsible ways of consuming. There is a clear-cut, visual representation of what happens when we throw our clothes and how much time it takes for a garment of a particular material to biodegrade in a landfill. Previously, I mentioned the pre-used textile waste. Unfortunately, it is only a part of the problem; many textile goods are destined to destruction even before they reach the first consumer, the main reason being the fact that we overproduce as a society.

we produce approximately 150 billion garments of clothing (not counting shoes and accessories) every year, and there are 7.7 billion of us; inevitably, a huge proportion of clothes won’t ever reach their customers, being nonsensically designed to be disposed of.¹⁴

Again, also regarding the trash problem, Orsola de Castro offers options to choose from; what to do to lower the personal impact, how to research and decide on what suits us best. It is crucial to understand that the individual and the collective practices are interrelated. We can require institutional solutions based on our individual actions. Still, we should not present things for what they are not. I recall a project made with my colleague in which we analysed around 60 Italian brands — circularity was so often called in, although only a few brands were actually involved in regenerative, circular practices. As de Castro explains:

circular means full-circle, from fibre back to fibre, and the capability of repeating this process ad infinitum. Wearing vintage, buying second hand, swapping, renting, upcycling — none of that is circular.¹⁵

Those are all positive individual practices, our choices and ways to say no to the broken system. In the book, de Castro writes extensively on how to prevent our clothes from finishing on a landfill; upcycling, choosing to keep and care for, and above all, as initially discussed — changing the mindset. However, all of those positive practices should not be confused for circularity, particularly not on a company level. One can and should not state they are circular as a company only because they resell second-hand vintage pieces.

Dedicated to the possibilities offered nowadays by technology, the *Tech Before You Buy* chapter explores the ways that are and will facilitate the transition towards more responsible and respectful living practices. From rental and reselling mobile applications to broadening familiar traditions like passing on and circulating clothes within the family, there are plenty of possibilities waiting ahead only if we open up

10. de Castro, 106.

11. de Castro, 136.

12. de Castro, 137.

13. “A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion’s Future,” *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/a-new-textiles-economy-redesigning-fashion-future>.

14. de Castro, 166.

15. de Castro, 170.

to them. Still, we should not fall into technological determinism,¹⁶ but stay aware of the issues that can arise. Cultural appropriation, as opposed to the act of cultural appreciation, is also addressed, opening for the much-needed discussion on cultural sustainability.

And if all of the facts, sad truths and advice were not enough to make us stop and reflect, Chapter 9 comes into play and gives the final strike. I do not (or at least I do not want to) believe we are immune to other human beings suffering, and the fashion system today is full of tragedies. The chapter recounts how *Fashion Revolution* was born; it clarifies why we should all start (or continue) to act and question. Unfortunately, we cannot fix what we cannot see, and the fashion industry today is all about hiding, elitism, exclusivity. Thus transparency's immense importance.

transparency is one of the most disruptive agents when it comes to moving forward, because it challenges just about everything this industry stands for.¹⁷

Hence the need for collective effort to make transparency and traceability a norm in the fashion industry. And here, transparency and traceability should be understood not as a point of arrival but as the first indispensable step towards a just, respectful and sustainable future.

As its title *All Together Now* says, the last chapter is a creative summary of everything discussed in the form of a year-long guide towards personal fashion transformation. It is a provocation to try and question our being creative, which "is not only about how (we) construct (our) look; it is also about constructing (our) beliefs."¹⁸

I found this book of immense importance, up to date and indispensable for everyone involved with fashion (which will be about every human being since we all engage with fashion daily). The connection to the natural flows, the traditions, the deep care for the self and the world (in all of its forms and ways) speaks of the very needed shift towards the Earth Logic.¹⁹ And fashion, since it touches us all every day, has an undoubtful role to play. We all have a role to play. First be, changing our state of mind! The book of Orsola de Castro is an invitation, a provocation to imagine a world with more "trees and whales and birds and bees – not clothes!"²⁰

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16. As explained by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2019 [2021]), 35.

17. de Castro, 204.

18. de Castro, 196.

19. As presented by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2019 [2021])

20. de Castro, 241.



Figure 1: *Loved Clothes Last* book. ©Nadica Maksimova