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Wake up and smell the coffee, or find the technoserf dead

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Are you sitting comfortably on a sofa that has helped destroy the rainforest? Wearing jeans that caused silicosis in those producing them? Find out what lies behind many of the objects found in modern homes.

Cellphones

It is a vision from hell. Deep in the Congolese jungle, in an illegal mine that is little more than a hole in the ground, men and young boys are standing on top of one another, scraping earth from the walls. At 45 °C it is unbearably hot.

Danish film director Frank Poulsen describes being down these holes as "pretty testing". At points, the size of the space means he is unable to move forward and Chance, a 16-year-old who sometimes works in these conditions for up to a week at a time, takes over the filming.


The footage forms one of the most haunting sections of Poulsen's new documentary, *Blood in the Mobile*, which examines the relationship between the minerals used to make cellphones and the civil war that continues to rage in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. In the past 15 years the conflict has cost the lives of more than five million people and 300 000 women have been raped. Armed groups are financed through the sale of these minerals.

The gold rush began in the 1990s with coltan, a mineral that becomes tantalum. Its supreme heat resistance and reliability have allowed the miniaturisation of our gadgets. Essentially, tantalum allows a device to be hand-held. But in this particular hole in Bisie, North Kivu, they are scraping for cassiterite (tin ore), which now replaces lead in consumer electronics. It might equally have been cobalt for batteries, or the tungsten needed for a phone's vibrating function.

It is debatable whether war-torn Bisie is more dangerous above or below ground. The holes periodically collapse and the "miners", some of whom are children, die beneath the earth. They risk all this for little or no financial benefit.

Once the minerals have changed hands for a few dirty notes -- the miners are paid a fraction of the minerals' worth -- they are usually flown to the city of Goma in the eastern part of the country, trucked to Uganda and then to Mombasa in Kenya, where they are smelted with minerals from other parts of the globe. In effect they become untraceable.

The provider of Poulsen's phone is Nokia, the largest manufacturer of cellphones in the world and the self-proclaimed market leader in corporate social responsibility. By its own admission, it has been aware of the link between the minerals it uses and the war in the Congo for the past decade, but it is still unable to sell a phone that is guaranteed to be free of conflict minerals. No cellphone company can. Nokia claims that Congolese minerals are a tiny part of the picture: it says most of its supplies are from legal mines in southern Congo and in Australia and Brazil, but that still does not rule out the use of Congolese minerals from illegal mines.

The alternative: Scientists are working on fingerprinting minerals used in cellphones, but at the moment there are no conflict-mineral-free phones available. Keep yours for as long as possible and recycle it when you get a new one. Hassle the politicians for greater transparency from manufacturers. Further information and template emails can be found at bloodinthemobile.org/ukaction/ 

Coffee

The gross inequalities exposed in *Black Gold*, the 2006 documentary about the coffee industry, are not a thing of the past. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest the lot of most farmers has barely improved or even become worse. Climate problems are causing weather patterns to change, making it difficult to plan seasons.

Ian Agnew, who runs the Black Gold Foundation that is trying to keep the coffee debate alive, is disappointed by the lack of improvement.

"The producers still don't understand the markets," he said. "They don't understand how valuable is the cherry they've grown. They are being robbed. In Kenya prices hit a high but are already dropping. When farmers see that high, they spend more money producing the

crop. But the prices paid to them are on a constant roller coaster."

It is no longer a simple supply-and-demand equation, thanks to the entrance of speculators buying through the New York commodity markets. In effect they take advantage of quirks in the coffee chain to gamble with price and demand, driving up the price -- the farmers do not see a piece of this -- and distorting the market. To reform things truly coffee needs to be producercentric, but instead the producers end up at the bottom of the chain, well below speculators, coffee retailers and roasters.

"We need a deeper look at the supply chain," Agnew said. "The shorter it is, the more of the value goes to the producers." Five years ago Black Gold stated that, from a £2 cup of coffee, the producers would scrape about £0.02. How does that figure compare today? "It's really about the same."

The alternative: Fairtrade is a good way in. It is trying to get a better price for producers, but it cannot revolutionise the entire system and some activists argue that it has now been hijacked by multinationals. Marc Francis, the director of Black Gold, said Cafédirect is a functioning co-operative model that puts producers in charge of more of the supply chain and the profits. Illy, although not perfect, is a family company with strong links to coffee producers.

Sofas

The leather industry was certainly sitting a lot more comfortably before activists, notably Greenpeace, harnessed Nasa satellite imagery of the Brazilian Amazon biome. In recent years half of the world's tropical forest loss has occurred in Brazil. Three-quarters of this forest clearing is believed to be driven by cattle ranching -- Brazil has the world's largest commercial cattle herd.

Satellite pictures of Brazilian cattle ranches were compared with maps with the legally agreed boundaries -- by law it is supposed to be 20% grazing, 80% forest -- and massive infringements were found. The results were compiled in a devastating report, "Slaughtering the Amazon", which also revealed that the Brazilian government had shares in the beef and leather processing companies that were implicated in the deforestation.

A flurry of activism following the report centred on the top trainer manufacturers, but there is also evidence that traces a proportion of those 35-million to 45-million hides produced each year to the leather in furniture. These cheaper, imperfect hides are ideal for the "affordable" leather sofas offered by most furniture chains.

The classic leather defence, the "Made in Italy" tag, is misleading. The clue is in the lack of Italian cattle ranches. Leather is almost always imported, then finished in Italy.


The alternative: The National Wildlife Federation in the United States works with ranchers in Brazil to raise higher-quality cattle on less land. The goal is certified deforestation-free leather. Until then, it is a return to loose covers.

Cashmere jerseys

Despite its luxury sobriquet, "the diamond fibre", you can now buy a cashmere twin set on a trip to the supermarket. In Britain the lifting of trade barriers in 2004 allowed the United Kingdom market to be flooded with Chinese cashmere and helped seal the fate of the Scottish cashmere industry.

At the last count about 2 000 cashmere companies in China controlled 93% of the global market, producing cashmere at unprecedented low prices and high volume. This is exerting extraordinary pressure on the fragile ecosystem of the Alashan plains of Mongolia in the Gobi desert, one of the few regions on Earth with the right climatic conditions to produce cashmere goats.

Between the 1990s and the mid-2000s the herd here increased from 2.4-million to 24-million. The sparse vegetation and vulnerable landscape could maintain 2.4-million goats, but 24-million of them chopping up the ground, and the retinue of water-consuming industrial processes that followed, has contributed to huge desertification. Without grass and shrubs to hold the dunes in place, the deserts are growing by an estimated 1 000km² every year.

The alternative: Go higher up the chain to producers who know their suppliers. Purecollectioncashmere.com  promotes ethical cashmere and gives a fair price to herdsmen committed to sustainable strategies.

Cotton curtains

Uzbekistan is the second-biggest cotton exporter in the world after the US, sending out 800 000 tonnes every year, mainly to Europe. Reports from the Environmental Justice Foundation confirm that the harvest that is about to end there has been picked courtesy of state-enforced child labour. Just as in previous years, children as young as 12 have been transported kilometres from home and, after long days in the field meeting increasingly unrealistic cotton quotas, have been made to sleep in makeshift accommodation. There have also been reports of physical and sexual abuse.

Only once the harvest is finished are they allowed to go home. Eyewitnesses report that pregnant women have also been working. About 40% of all cotton from Uzbekistan is made into clothes and products in Bangladesh.

The alternative: Finding ethical furnishings can be tricky. Try Fairtrade cotton -- Uzbek cotton is not certified by the Fairtrade Foundation. Many retailers, including Walmart, have pledged to boycott Uzbek cotton while enforced child labour persists. For a list of retailer responses to the issue, visit antislavery.org. You can also join ejfoundation.org s campaign for country-of-origin labels to be

made mandatory on cotton products.

Laptops

We tend to think state-of-the-art robots must do the intense, detailed work needed to make laptops work. That can mean completing the same action every three seconds for hours on end. But why would you bother when human labour is so cheap? Although the material and distribution costs are pinned down, the wages of the millions of Chinese workers on the global electronics assembly line are seen as the elastic part of the supply chain where the contractor can make some margin. These workers have been dubbed technoserfs.

They live and work in mammoth electronics factories -- Foxconn, the giant that manufactures for Apple, houses 400 000 workers in dormitories at its Longhua plant -- earning a basic wage that cannot sustain them, in part because they are charged for countless expenses including bedding and rent. A report by China Labour Watch, a non-governmental organisation, assessed 10 major manufacturers producing for blue-chip giants, including Dell, Sony, Apple and HP, between October 2010 and May 2011. It found that there were multiple violations of basic Chinese labour laws.

Technoserfs stood for 10 consecutive hours, worked at high intensity on assembly lines and that did not include overtime, which many were forced to work. Conditions were degrading -- in one instance factory workers were permitted one 10-minute loo break in the middle of the day, which sparked a virtual stampede to just a few toilets so that many did not make it in time.

A spate of suicides at Foxconn earlier this year cast further light on the life of a technoserf.

"Twelve hours of work = standard" and "One year and I'm dead" were found in the notebook of one young man who took his own life. Suicide nets were put up to catch any would-be victims, which is as far away from addressing the root cause as it is possible to get.

Whereas Apple attracted the lion's share of attention for outsourcing to Foxconn, the NGO concluded that "the failings of Foxconn exist in the majority of electronics factories and are representative of the policies and behavioural norms found throughout the electronics industry".

The alternative: Part of the pressure put on workers has been traced to the way global brands dictate ferocious production schedules after whipping up consumer frenzy for new devices. Stop buying trend-driven electronics, keep using your old ones for as long as possible and buy second-hand goods if you need to upgrade. Cheap, fast fashion is becoming less palatable as consumers are increasingly becoming aware of how it is made; it is time we put the same thought into our electronic purchases.

Denim

The allure of sandblasted jeans is in the faded or worn patina. We do some odd things to jeans to get these different effects, including heat-blasting them in a denim solarium to get whiskers (stripes) around the crotch area. Labour Behind the Label has looked into the horrific impact for those who apply this treatment. Workers blast the denim with natural sand containing silica, often operating within sealed cabinets. As a result, they inhale crystalline silica dust particles that cause serious damage to the respiratory passages and, in some cases, silicosis.

Sandblasting of this type has been banned in other industries in the European Union since 1966 and in the UK since the 1950s. But in the garment industry it seems brands have been relatively happy to outsource production to less regulated zones, starting with Turkey. It was eventually banned there in 2009, but not before 47 former sandblasting operators were known to have died as a result of their work. There are 5 000 suspected cases of silicosis among former Turkish sandblasters, according to Labour Behind the Label. Sand-blasting moved to Syria, Bangladesh, Mexico, India and Indonesia following the ban in Turkey, but in recent months pressure from activists has meant it has gone even further afield to Southeast Asia and Africa.

The alternative: Go to killerjeans.org to see which brands have phased out sandblasting—Levi's is one of the big ones to have stopped—and sign up to Labour Behind the Label's campaign for a worldwide ban.

Flatscreen TVs


Many marine biologists will tell you that when they first heard companies intended to mine hydrothermal vents (geysers on the sea floor) for rare-earth minerals, they thought it was a ridiculous plan and that, if it ever came to anything, it was decades away. Possibly they had underestimated the voracious appetite for these minerals and the geopolitics caused by China's grip on supplies -- 97% of rare earths are from China. At least two, indium and gallium, are integral to flatscreen TV production. From time to time China exerts an illegal production block on rare earths, keeping them all for domestic use.

This triggers an international panic. The last big one was in 2008 and plans to mine the ocean floor were hastily dusted off.

Exploratory licences were granted for the largely unregulated waters off Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. Conservationists and biologists called for a moratorium while proper impact studies were carried out; there is a suggestion that assessments made by mining companies keen to start extracting are on the flimsy side. In effect the moratorium achieved was accidental -- China opened its rare earth shop again.

But in the past six months further sporadic Chinese production blocks have left electronics companies twitchy. Now they want their own supply chain and it looks as if seabed mining is back on the agenda. Japanese scientists have mapped hot spots of "wet wealth" on the Pacific floor. Now they just need to find ways of dredging it up. At stake is a unique ecosystem on the ocean bed. Biologists are only just beginning to explore it; who knows what will be lost if it is ploughed and plundered for materials for transient consumer electronics?

The alternative: Hang on to your flatscreen TV for as long as you can. If you buy new, buy for longevity. Scientists from French recycling company Rhodia are starting to recover rare-earth minerals from flatscreen TVs and hope to have dedicated plants running by 2012.

Meanwhile, remain alert to stories of seabed trashing and the revocation of moratoriums, particularly in the Pacific. Revisit the 2008 campaign to protect Pacific communities and seabed habitats at oceansandcommunities.org .

Toy packaging

NGOs have begun analysing the packaging of children's toys. Greenpeace found that Mattel, the makers of Barbie, as well as Lego, Disney and Hasbro, used boxes containing mixed tropical hardwood fibres, identified as virgin wood pulp from Indonesian forests. This packaging was connected to the Asia Pulp & Paper company, which has been accused by Greenpeace of continuing to clear some of Sumatra's most ecologically significant forests, including those that are home to hundreds of Sumatran tigers.

Two months of Greenpeace activists dressing as Barbie and Ken in a viral campaign against Mattel evidently did the trick. At the time of writing, Mattel had told its printers to stop contracting with the company and pledged to increase the amount of recycled and sustainable fibre used in its packaging. Lego told activists it was advising its suppliers to avoid the company, Hasbro said it was working on a more sustainable packaging policy, but Disney still needed to respond to Greenpeace.

The alternative: Main brand toys are consistently overpackaged. Holz toys are one of the most ethical brands available.

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