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Viscose: From Artsilk to Strategic Materiel to “Green” Product to Cultural Icon

This presentation details a case history highlighting hazardous manufacturing, poisonous materials, environmental abuses, political machinations, and economics trumping safety concerns with a single industry. It does so by exploring the century-long history of cellulose viscose, used to produce such products as rayon textiles and tires, cellophane, and everyday kitchen sponges. Viscose manufacturing is a process that crippled and even served a death sentence to many industry workers while also releasing toxic carbon disulfide into the environment. Viscose, an innovative and lucrative product first introduced in the early twentieth century, quickly became a multinational corporate enterprise. The industry continued through two highly profitable World Wars, went on to the mid-century export of hazardous manufacturing to developing countries, and has now arrived at a current stage of “green-washing” viscose as an eco-friendly product.