

Giulia Mensitieri, *The Most Beautiful Job in the World*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2020, pp. 271; RRP \$34.99 paperback

Literary and cinematic representations of the fashion industry – such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) – depict it as a glamorous realm, chock-full of opportunities and rewards for those willing to work hard. But this new study by French anthropologist Giulia Mensitieri acts as a necessary corrective, exploring the prevalence of exploitation and insecure work within the industry, and also asking why people stay.

The author's approach combines macro summaries of how the industry has developed – from a specialised field based around Paris to a tentacular system servicing global fashion empires – together with close observations of people working within it at all levels. From the latter, a cast of characters emerge: stylist Mia, who wears only designer labels but who cannot afford the rent on her tiny apartment; Marie-Sophie, a skilled seamstress who is paid two euros an hour for work on a dress which costs thirty thousand; Gilbert, who left a sales job at a department store for work with a luxury label, but was paid the same and denied a permanent contract. (It is noted that he matches the description put forth of a 'perfect' luxury sales employee: stylish and well-educated, but not wealthy enough to afford the merchandise.)

Mensitieri spent months in the field, attending magazine shoots and private fashion shows. This enables her to look beyond the glamorous images projected by the industry, seeing instead the gritty reality of how the industry is constructed and marketed. At a shoot with Mia, she observes the unhealthy appearance of some of the models, but of their final image in photographs she says

Under the lights they gave out a sense of being almost supernatural, unattainable, superhuman. Utterly hypnotic...The physiological fact of these bodies, with their tampons, compression socks and yellowing teeth, had been transformed into aesthetically pleasing bodies, dressed up and optimized under the lights, to be frozen forever on glossy paper or screens. This is how the dream is confected.

This 'dream' is a crucial concept for the author. She describes it as:

this fantasy world of luxury and beauty, which circulates globally on television and cinema screens, on the pages of glossy magazines and via the Internet...kindling desire and encouraging consumption... a place where all these fantasy elements exist alongside financial and job instability, exploitation, dominance and the quest for power.

Through the 'dream', a simple cardigan can transform into a desirable item, because of the images of luxury and elitism attached to its branding. In a similar way, workers in the fashion industry can be seduced into accepting lower pay and uncertain futures

in exchange for their proximity to this dream, and the prestige and symbolic value attached to their roles.

One fascinating aspect of Mensitieri's work is her exploration of how globalization has changed the industry. Although much of her research is based in Paris, she also follows Mia to private fashion shows in Hong Kong, and to shoots for Dubai-based magazines, noting how the industry operates across many different frontiers, with many of its greatest consumers (particularly of haute couture) coming from developing countries, as well as Russia, China and the Arab world. Despite the challenge this poses to European capitals in terms of hegemony, the latter still retain significant symbolic capital: she explores this through the meanings attached to labels ('made in China' versus 'Made in Italy'), but also through the conditions of work in different cities (noting that Paris holds the most symbolic value and recognition for those working in fashion, but it is also where they earn the least).

The territory covered in *The Most Beautiful Job in the World* is vast: the author not only offers a comprehensive assessment of exploitation within the fashion industry and how it is justified, but also uses it as a case study for the failings of neoliberalism itself (much space is dedicated to exploring how the 'flexible' employment model has been promoted over traditional salaried work since the 1990s). As a book, it is never taxing to read: peppered with vignettes from the lives of people working at the heart of the fashion industry, it is difficult not to be drawn closer and feel empathetic to their plight. Particularly striking is Mia, who 'moves in a world of luxury without being part of it in a material sense'. She stays in five-star hotels while on a shoot for which she is rarely (or else badly) paid, but eats McDonalds in her room because she can afford little else. Mensitieri coolly notes these frustrations, while also appraising the continued attraction which outsiders have to working in fashion, combining both into a searing criticism of this billion-dollar industry.

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