


## Mensitieri, G. (ed.) (2020) *The most beautiful job in the world*, London, Bloomsbury, p. 271.

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The fashion industry is one of the sectors with the largest volume of business in the world. Revenue in the Fashion market is projected to reach US\$0.99tn in 2023.<sup>1</sup> This market is also one of the most important springboards for innovation, creativity and cultural production. That attracts, therefore, a lot of investment since the fashion world is also connected to the world of accessories, and lifestyle (travel, food, real estate, etc.). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fashion industry suffered a major slowdown in its growth. Many companies closed down. The Business of Fashion published in 2021 the report “The State of Fashion”<sup>2</sup>. The report argues that the fashion industry has suffered its worst year on record during the pandemic period in 2020. However, it is not only an economic crisis for the fashion industry, COVID-19 has really resulted in a global humanitarian crisis for millions of textile workers whose livelihoods are affected. Moreover, many experts believe the pandemic has highlighted (more prominently) the exploitative nature of the world’s garment supply chains, which have undergone a radical transformation in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> The fashion industry is at root an exploitative system based on the exploitation of a low-paid and undervalued workforce in producing countries, according to Dominique Muller at Labour Behind the Label<sup>4</sup>: “the system is created in order to protect those at the top while allowing workers to take the biggest hit”.<sup>5</sup> The problem of job precariousness in the fashion industry is nothing new. The pandemic has only accentuated an existing critical issue. This and many other contradictions, in particular in the field of luxury fashion, are the central theme of Giulia Mensitieri’s book that I discuss in this review: *The most beautiful job in the world*, published in firstly in French in 2018 and then translated to other languages.

Giulia Mensitieri is a social anthropologist and ethnologist affiliated with the IDHES of Université de Paris-Nanterre. Her field of investigation has been luxury fashion, which she considers a paradigmatic field of contemporary capitalism regarding material and immaterial productions, global circulations, and inequalities.<sup>6</sup> This book, which unfolds through the stories of various people working in

<sup>1</sup> Fashion - Worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/outlook/dmo/ecommerce/fashion/worldwide> [Accessed: May 31, 2023]

<sup>2</sup> Imran, A., Achim, B., (2020). The State of Fashion 2021 (online). <https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2021-industry-report-bof-mckinsey/> [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Tansy, H., (2021). <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/they-left-us-starving-how-fashion-in-dustry-abandoned-its-workers/> [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].

<sup>4</sup> Labour Behind the Label is a campaign that works to improve conditions and empower workers in the global garment industry.

<sup>5</sup> Tansy, H., (2021). <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/they-left-us-starving-how-fashion-in-dustry-abandoned-its-workers/> [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].

<sup>6</sup> From the profile of the book’s author, Geneva Graduate Institute. <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/discover-institute/giulia-mensitieri>

the fashion industry, is the result of ethnographic work that the author does mainly in France. The focus of this work is the world of luxury, an important sphere of the fashion industry. McKinsey's report<sup>7</sup> states that global fashion sales would have grown of 5 percent to 10 percent for luxury, and negative 2 percent to positive 3 percent for the rest of the industry in 2023. The figure on luxury is interesting, as it reveals that it is the fastest growing sector and, despite everything, has not been affected significantly by the pandemic and various crises (the war in Ukraine, the global energy crisis, rapid inflation, and so on). After all, if there are those who buy, there are those who sell.

The book aims to bring to light what goes on behind the scenes, to better understand the gap between the highly idealized image of this dream industry and the daily reality of those who work in it. *The most beautiful job in the world* is structured into three parts: initially, it scrutinizes the interplay between the fashion industry and capitalism, while the second segment delves into the rationale behind assigning economic and symbolic worth within this domain. Lastly, Mensitieri explores the aspects of submission and becoming subjects in the realm of fashion by examining the influence of emotions within professional hierarchies, the imperative to conform to prescribed roles, and the strategies employed by workers to combat inequalities and diverse forms of control.

In her research, Mensitieri made a deliberate decision to exclude a significant portion of the industry, namely factory workers, and instead concentrate solely on individuals engaged in the intangible production aspects of fashion. This deliberate choice allows for a broader examination of the category commonly referred to as "cultural and creative"<sup>8</sup> within the industry. The author gives voice to those in this category like stylists, photographers and designers. She gives them the opportunity to tell their stories, highlighting their daily struggles, low wages, long working hours, and constant pressures they face. Through these testimonies, a striking image emerges of one of the world's most iconic and celebrated sectors, which often relies on exploitation and inequalities. Mensitieri also explores aspects that highlight how the industry system impact on these people: the pursuit of perfection, fierce competition, and constant uncertainty about the future create a toxic environment that often leads to eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. One of the main characters in the book is Mia, Italian stylist who gave the author access to the field and serves as the narrative thread. Mia cabins in a small, shared apartment in a less-than-luxurious neighborhood of Paris, dresses in Gucci and other luxury goods but cannot pay her phone bill or rent. She often works for free or gets "paid" through discounts on luxury goods. This is the paradox that the book is based on to show how this industry works. Through the narration of Mia and other protagonists, the author dismantles the romantic idea of visionary artists creating masterpieces, showing instead how the industry is governed by economic and commercial logic that often stifles creativity and promotes the repetition of predefined patterns.

Reading the text, we can find four main concepts that form the framework of the storytelling: the first one is Capitalism. Despite it is a macro theme, the author does not talk about it in classical economic terms but she look at it through two micro dimensions: first, the working conditions, characterized by the precariousness faced by a significant number of workers (in France but also around the world), and the associated malaise, both subjective and objective; second, the image of fashion, in the sense of the construction of specific images, but also of the hold these images have on those they attract. So, the notion of dream became the second central concept in the book, it is the thought that "dream is the engine of fashion" (p. 93)<sup>9</sup>, a compelling idea shared also by its most distinguished leaders. Bernard Arnault himself, founder and CEO of LVMH, has stated on several occasions that the exceptional profits of these industries are linked to their ability to continuously create dreams<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Imran, A., Achim, B., (2020). The State of Fashion 2021 (online). <https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2021-industry-report-bof-mckinsey/> [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Mensitieri G., (2020) *The most beautiful job in the world*. London, Bloomsbury, (8).

<sup>9</sup> Mensitieri G., (2020) *The most beautiful job in the world*. London, Bloomsbury, (93).

<sup>10</sup> Wetlaufer, S., (2001). <https://hbr.org/2001/10/the-perfect-paradox-of-star-brands-an-interview-with-bernd-arnault-of-lvmh>. [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].

The luxury industry is based also on oxymorons (the third concept that we can find) like over-exposure and opacities, prestige and precariousness, and self-fulfillment and self-exploitation that coexist. All this is seen by the author in a “heterotopic space”, the last concept but not least, among the earliest quotes inspired by Foucault’s concept. For the author the coexistence of the dream perception and the material reality of the fashion industry raises a compelling question: how can we reconcile the idea of fashion as a utopia with the tangible aspects of skilled workers, factories, ateliers, bodies, fabrics, spaces, and objects? This quandary can be addressed through the concept of a ‘heterotopia’, which allows for the integration of fashion’s immaterial, dreamlike nature with its concrete, palpable dimension. Heterotopias are distinct spaces that exist beyond conventional realms, even though they can be localized. These ‘other spaces’ can manifest as imaginary places or parallel worlds, yet they do have a tangible existence somewhere. Consequently, if fashion is perceived as a dream, it can be understood as a heterotopia that extends over the very domains in which it is created and presented.<sup>11</sup> Giulia Mensitieri’s “The Most Beautiful Work in the World” is a book that challenges our preconceptions about the fashion industry. Through in-depth investigation and poignant testimonies, the author urges us to consider the importance of an ethical and sustainable approach to the world of fashion. This book is a call to awareness and action, offering a needed perspective for those who truly want to understand the industry behind the clothes we wear. Despite acknowledging the need for radical change, the book lacks a detailed analysis of how this change can take place and what actors can be involved in promoting it but provides a platform to open a dialogue on the need for change in the fashion industry and consumer responsibility. Predictably, the book received considerable criticism from the French fashion world because she speaks of fashion as a place where a form of exploitation is consummated<sup>12</sup>. It would be interesting to have a new version of the book or a new in-depth study reflecting on the post-pandemic effects, also looking at cities such as Milan and New York. Important and central cities for fashion.

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<sup>11</sup> Mensitieri G., (2020) *The most beautiful job in the world*. London, Bloomsbury, (xiv).

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, S., (2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/sep/02/academic-exposing-ugly-reality-high-fashion-giulia-mensitieri>. [Accessed: June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023].