

Book Review

Fashion as Creative Economy

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McRobbie, A., Strutt, D. and Bandinelli, C. (2023). *Fashion as Creative Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

In June 2023, on Biggerstaff Road in the East London borough of Newham, a heritage blue plaque was unveiled to commemorate the life of the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen. The youngest of six children of an East End taxi driver, Lee Alexander McQueen spent almost his entire childhood in Stratford attending local state schools before studying tailoring at Newham College. At the unveiling, before a sizeable crowd, Rokhsana Fiaz, the Mayor of Newham, suggested proudly that McQueen ‘exemplifies the brilliance of homegrown talent that has emerged from Newham’. No doubt McQueen was a brilliant talent – as tailor, designer, and artist. But as the Mayor noted, he also came from *somenbere*, a particular place – a milieu of sorts. McQueen was heralded as an ordinary person who became extraordinary in the world of haute couture – but also someone that today’s state educated kids of Newham might reasonably hope to emulate.

But what are the chances of Newham – or anywhere – producing another Alexander McQueen? What combinations of talent and opportunity might now be necessary to allow other kinds of ordinary people to become extraordinary? Or, even, much less ambitiously, what are the options available for ordinary people to now maintain *any* kind of occupation in the career structures of designer fashion? In *Fashion as Creative Economy*, Angela McRobbie, Daniel Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli offer some richly-drawn case studies that focus centrally on three distinct urban milieux and their differing capacities to generate ordinary – or extraordinary – careers in fashion design.

In London – a global capital of couture – we encounter emerging and established designers tangled in the threads of what the authors identify as an increasingly capitalised and competitive ‘milieu of labour’. This term is used vividly to capture the concentrated nexus of institutions, governmental apparatuses and field conditions that serve both to enable and inhibit the construction of a creative career. In London’s milieu of fashion labour – where a fervid mix of urban regeneration, property speculation and cost of living crises meets the hollowing out of the social infrastructures that once enabled an alternative fashion economy to thrive – we find young designers struggling to develop or maintain careers that were hitherto open to a wider population. The authors conclude that ‘London is no longer affordable for young creative people from working-class backgrounds who, in the not so distant past, had been able to make a decisive and significant contribution to the arts and culture’ (p. 44). Strung with debt, stripped of welfare supports, and unable to rent affordably, would-be designers have suffered from the more general unravelling of possibility amidst the ‘degradation of labour’ (p. 67) – the withering of sustainably waged work sufficient to support the development of a creative career. What price a new McQueen now?

However, if the prospects for the ordinary London designer appear bleak, in Berlin a more vibrant milieu of labour is identified. Away from the haute couture spotlight, and the centre of global fashion, an independent design industry thrives. An economy of ‘ethical and sustainable fashion practice’ (p. 92) is supported by a relatively

enabling system of state welfare, a less pressurised housing market, and a more socially integrated cultural infrastructure; all buoyed by a healthy market of local producer-consumers. Yet, while Berlin is used to exemplify a progressive potential that other cities might seek to harness or adopt, the authors identify the threats now being posed by the 'predatory forces' (p. 79) of real estate and financialised capital, ever eager to stitch themselves into the fabric of the city and iron out any stubborn creases of difference.

Milan provides the third case and here we encounter a group of (mostly) young female designers making their way in the traditional and patriarchal confines of what was once termed the 'Third Italy'. The conservative precincts of Italian designer fashion houses are identified as somewhat remotely located from the day-to-day efforts of these resourceful women. Such designers have 'merged a craft ethos with the artisanship and the know-how prised out of male hands and now implanted into these more feminized atelier spaces' (p. 121). The milieu of labour here relies on a complex and sometimes contradictory inheritance of family-owned (and therefore classed) manufacturing, established design traditions, and the energy of an emergent feminist ethos and spirit.

The remaining chapter focuses on the impacts of fast fashion and e-commerce on the different milieux of fashion labour – and the consequences of new 'click and collect' logistical systems of manufacture and delivery. Here waged labour and good jobs - especially for lower skilled workers - are disappearing in the rush to embrace fashion tech and more efficient distribution systems. While the warehouse, transport and retail workers suffer further labour degradation, the consequences for independent designers are hardly more propitious, as corporate power further consolidates.

At the heart of this book is a concern with the ethics of the fashion industry and its dubious legacy of labour exploitations, environmental impacts and ecological damages. The authors therefore turn their final attention to the need for a greater 'moral accountability' (p. 146) for fashion – and the need for urgent reform. But neither are they hairshirt puritans, and don't fail to remind us that fashion – as popular culture, taste and aesthetic – continues to animate and inspire millions of ordinary people, as a vital part of the 'politics and pleasures of everyday life' (p. 152). Alexander McQueen once said that 'fashion should be a form of escapism, not a form of imprisonment' – a means to other possible worlds. In its vital pursuit of a 'new fashion imaginary' (p. 2) *Fashion as Creative Economy* invites us to break with the current confines of an industry that has become more socially exclusive, overcapitalised and ecologically irresponsible, and in perpetual danger of further degrading the lives of those upon whose talents and labours it most evidently depends.