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The September Issue: Queen of the Undead vs. Mother Hubbard

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R.J. Cutler's slick new behind-the-scenes-of-*Vogue* documentary *The September Issue* is alternately depressing and "amusing" — the latter adjective, in this context, loaded, since editor Anna Wintour cites it as her highbrow, politically progressive family's characterization of her superficial specialty. The film presents itself as a fly-on-the-wall look at the most

powerful woman in the fashion industry as she prepares the most titanic magazine issue (September 2007) of her career. But vérité-shmérité, this thing is crafty. It's shaped as a battle between darkness and light.

Almost from the start, Cutler creates a competition for the viewer's affections between the brusque, chill, dictatorial Brit Wintour and the endearingly transparent Wales-born creative director Grace Coddington. It is, of course, no contest. Under her Prince Valiant coiffure and big, omnipresent sunglasses, Wintour resembles the transvestite razor slasher of Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*, while the ex-model Coddington has a face in which the lines of passion and heartbreak are deeply etched. Wintour never enthuses or examines her own aesthetic; she simply accepts or, more frequently, rejects others' work; whereas Coddington's eyes are always open, searching out new colors, patterns, ways of using the space. The case is finally clinched when Coddington, commanded by Wintour to do a last-minute reshoot, has a surge of inspiration and casts the documentary's cameraman, Bob Richman, in a startlingly kinetic shot of a black-clad cinematographer, his face hidden behind the camera, leaping in sync with a young model. Stunning! Later, Wintour, scrutinizing Richman's slight paunch in the photo, turns to the movie camera and suggests that he (standing in for *us*) go the gym, then orders his tum-tum airbrushed out. When she leaves, Coddington tells him (standing in for *us*) not to go the gym ("Nobody's perfect!") and countermands the airbrushing order. Take that, toothpick Ice Queen!

Watching *The September Issue*, I learned less about fashion than about business and office politics. In their studios, celebrity designers fawn over Wintour as they would Queen Elizabeth (the First!), sometimes pleading certain pieces aren't finished while she freezes them with her stare. The average exchange with her employees goes something like this:

Underling: Now this photo ... I think is interesting.

Wintour: No, it's ugly, it's wrong.

Underling: No, that's what I what I was thinking, too, it's ugly.

Fashion naïf that I am (Wintour would tell me to go the gym, get a hair transplant, see a tailor, and leave her office), I was unaware of the ties (or collusion) between *Vogue* and big clothing stores like the Gap, but I guess that's inevitable when many women read the magazine with one foot out the door for Neiman Marcus.

Scary as he shows her to be, Cutler does probe Wintour's hard surface, suggesting her demeanor is rooted in a titanic inferiority complex. (Even her daughter, Bee, planning a career in law, labels her mother's career "amusing" — ooh, the pain.) Still, I found myself wishing the director would go on and make some kind of case for her creative vision (by which I mean have someone else make the case for it) and not just her fearsome authority. There's an unspoken subtext: For years it has been rumored that Wintour is on her way out, and *The September Issue* must have seemed to her a way to cement her celebrity and thereby make her even more difficult to dump. (Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* — inspired by Wintour but as played by Meryl Streep nothing like her — did her more good than harm.) So the movie-camera-shy Wintour is basically there under duress, with those of us who'd quake in her presence invited to feel superior to her. It's an uncomfortable dynamic — but in spite of everything a guilty pleasure.