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"The September Issue"

Behind the gloss of Vogue, a revealing look at work, creativity and two strong women

By Stephanie Zacharek

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R.J. Cutler's vibrant and mischievous documentary "The September Issue" is only partly a movie about fashion. At its heart, it's really a movie about work, about the ways individuals compete with, grate against and inspire one another in the workplace. The movie documents the creation of the largest and most anticipated issue of Vogue magazine's yearly cycle -- in this case, specifically, the September 2007 issue, the fattest in Vogue's history -- by tracking the frustrations, confrontations and backstage machinations of the players who put it together, from the fashion editors to the art director to the guy who mans the office's color copier. Presiding over this aesthetically attuned circus is editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, who, as Candy Pratts Price, the executive fashion director of Vogue's online adjunct, Style.com, says in the movie, is not just the high priestess of the whole enterprise but the pope.

Wintour is considered the most formidable figure in the fashion world (she's the tiny titan guarding the gateway to the pages of the most influential fashion magazine in the world) and also has a reputation for being an arrogant, sometimes unreasonable boss (as detailed by Lauren Weisberger, one of Wintour's former assistants, in her gossipy novel "The Devil Wears Prada," which in turn inspired [Meryl Streep's](#) icy, campy performance in the [movie version](#)). "The September Issue" doesn't fully dispel either of those notions, though it does fill them in with additional shades of color. What really drives Cutler's picture is the dynamic between Wintour and her right-hand woman, creative director Grace Coddington, who has, for more than 20 years (she started at American Vogue at the same time Wintour did, in 1988), been the mastermind behind the magazine's most imaginative fashion spreads. Wintour may be the elusive minx who first captured Cutler's interest. But with Coddington as the other half of this highly mismatched tag team, Cutler has struck documentary gold. Coddington -- a former model and flame-haired Welsh giantess who pads around the Vogue office in billowy black trousers and sturdy flat sandals, a chic but earthbound contrast to Wintour in her tiny, fur-trimmed jackets and spiky heels -- is the not-so-secret star of "The September Issue." Radiating equal parts flamboyance and good common sense, Coddington needles Wintour in a way no one else on staff dares. Their working relationship is an uneasy chemistry of mutual regard and know-it-all stubbornness, a fascinating model -- not easily described, nor, alas, readily reproducible -- of the way creativity and friction can coexist in the workplace.

But first, the dirt. The fashion blogs have been buzzing for months in anticipation of Cutler's film; some of them have been doling out bonbon-like snippets, including footage of Wintour making a funny little frown -- she looks as if she's just gotten a whiff of rotten egg -- as the issue's cover girl, Sienna Miller, twirls around in a strange feathery dress that curls around her like a malevolent nautilus. Fashion people are fascinated by Wintour,

and the bloggers' clips have been intended to foster a view of the film as gossipy and bitchy, an inside look at how nasty Wintour can be. But in the context of the movie, Wintour's disapproving frown means something else: She isn't cutting Miller down; it's simply that the dress some editor has put Miller in is just *weird*. It doesn't look good.

In "The September Issue," Wintour comes off as a demanding boss but also a forthright one. Late in the movie, Cutler asks her what she thinks are among her strongest qualities and she answers, "Decisiveness." Over the years, plenty of horror stories have attached themselves to Wintour like stubborn barnacles: Among her sins (chronicled by Weisberger and others) are failing to learn the names of her assistants and dropping her furs around the Vogue offices for her underlings to pick up. The fact that such abuses aren't shown in Cutler's film isn't evidence that they've never happened: Wintour is nothing if not a shrewd protector of her own image, so you can bet she'll be on her best behavior when the cameras are turned on.

But when you're talking about bosses, one person's decisiveness is another person's bitchiness -- and if you've ever worked for an indecisive boss, the clarity and directness of Wintour's approach probably won't seem villainous to you. In one scene she tries, mustering as much tact as she's capable of, to explain to one of her editors that all of her spreads look the same. She wants the editor to try to branch out, and she ends the discussion with a cold, clipped "Thanks" -- which could be read as "I don't really care about you as a human being" or as "well, that's done, let's move on," depending on your sensitivity as an employee. At least, though, she's expressed her desires as clearly as possible. And her tone makes it clear that she thinks this editor is capable of better, hardly a tone she'd take if she thought she were dealing with a hopeless case.

Cutler -- who produced Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker's "The War Room," and whose directing credits include the 2000 television documentary series "American High" -- is an honest documentarian, which means that he knows he's not just turning on the camera and allowing the truth to reveal itself. "The September Issue" is revelatory, but it's also shaped, sometimes in subtle ways. The "drama" of a young editor being dressed down in Wintour's office isn't inherently dramatic; what makes it work is the way he expresses his frustration to Coddington in the hallway afterward. Coddington, who is in her late 60s, speaks to him sternly: "You have to be tougher," she tells him. "You have to demand . . . Don't be too nice -- even to me." Other sequences involve Wintour and Vogue's art director, Stephen Male, hovering over potential spreads, with Wintour seemingly rejecting a greater percentage of pictures than she praises, sometimes throwing out as much as \$50,000 worth of work with the sweep of a hand. Later, we see Coddington -- whose job is to produce many of those spreads -- sitting quietly in her office, wondering aloud whether it's worth her while to care as much as she does.

"The September Issue" exists, ostensibly, to shed some light on the notoriously frosty Wintour as a human being, and Cutler pulls it off. In one sequence, he gets Wintour talking about her "private and inscrutable" father (who was an editor at the Evening Standard) and his "Edwardian" upbringing: "I'm not sure his mother ever spoke to him," Wintour says plainly, which seems to be a daughter's way of explaining a father's distant behavior in a humane and sympathetic way.

But -- and perhaps this is part of Wintour's design, maybe even an inadvertent design -- it's Coddington who emerges as the movie's most intriguing presence, the one you find yourself wanting to learn more about. Early in the picture, we see her kneeling at the feet of a model to fasten the strap of a shoe. She wisecracks that she's the only stylist who dresses the models herself (which, in the world of high fashion, is probably true). Coddington, who grew up on an island off the coast of Wales, talks about loving Vogue since she was a teenager (she had to special-order the magazine at a local shop), and about her career as a model from the late '50s to the mid '60s (her run was curtailed by an auto accident). Cutler's camera follows Coddington into her home, where she points out the modeling photographs of her younger self -- a striking, alert beauty -- that adorn her walls. She assesses these images affectionately but without vanity, as if she were musing on the fate of long-gone ancestors, people who lived long ago.

"The September Issue" shows Coddington as both a creative force and a problem solver. She speaks of the advice her long-ago mentor, the great photographer Norman Parkinson, once gave her: "Keep watching," he told her. Don't go to sleep when you're riding in a car. "Whatever you see out the window -- it can inspire you." And late in the movie, we see that resourcefulness put to use, brilliantly, to solve a last-minute crisis.

Coddington adds a conspiratorial frisson to the action of "The September Issue," cajoling Cutler's crew (whom she at first refused to cooperate with, relenting only grudgingly) into spilling information they've gotten from filming Wintour. And the movie captures several sandpapery confrontations between the two women, in which they stubbornly butt heads and miraculously reach some kind of consensus.

But if Coddington is the kind of tough cookie who can stand up to Wintour (and win), it's clear there's an essential kindness inside her, too. There are plenty of people who believe that models are not real human beings, but stupid, spoiled, vapid creatures who deserve nothing but our derision. Coddington, obviously, isn't one of them. In one scene, she oversees a shoot in which a seemingly 10-foot-tall but twiggishly thin model has been corseted and squeezed into a couture dress that probably costs more than your salary and mine combined. The girl peers into a pastry box that Coddington has brought to the shoot, thanking her for bringing treats. She then says, wistfully, that she shouldn't eat any, because then her corset won't fit.

Coddington unfussily tells her that it shouldn't make any difference, and if she wants some pie, she should have it. Later we see the model during a break, gingerly holding a large slice of the pastry to her couture-crimson mouth -- keeping a safe distance from that very costly confection of a dress -- and taking a good, healthy bite. If management consultants (perhaps the very ones poring over Vogue's [books right now](#)) were smart, which they usually aren't, they'd study "The September Issue" as a text on how to get the best work out of people by treating them with kindness and respect. And, as Coddington shows, a little pie doesn't hurt.

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