

The September Issue: Anna Wintour unmasked in The 'real' Devil Wear's Prada

Fearsome American Vogue editor, Anna 'Nuclear' Wintour allowed director RJ Cutler unprecedented access to film what really happens at the world's top fashion magazine.

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Truth, it is sometimes said, is stranger than fiction. When it comes to Anna Wintour, the fearsome editor-in-chief of American Vogue, that is most certainly the case. Does anyone remember *The Devil Wears Prada*, the movie adaptation of the novel about life at a New York fashion magazine, in which Meryl Streep played the despotic editor who reduced her staff to jelly, tears and occasionally, nervous breakdowns? Written by Wintour's former assistant Lauren Weisberger, everybody thought it was based on her old boss, who has been at the helm of the magazine since 1988. But nobody *really* believed that it was a true depiction of her. Surely Wintour - or Nuclear Wintour, as she is often referred to - wasn't *that* bad? Surely Streep's character was just a gross Hollywood exaggeration?

It would seem not. For Wintour, 59, has taken the unusual step of letting cameras film a documentary about the magazine the New York Times once described as being "to our era what the idea of God was, in Voltaire's famous parlance, to his: if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it."

The result is *The September Issue*, a riveting and brilliant film that makes *The Devil Wears Prada* look like an episode of *The Care Bears*. The cameras follow British-born Wintour and her army of editors for much of 2007, as they create the biggest edition of the fashion year (the September issue, which that year had 840 pages, an incredible 727 of which were adverts).

Until this week, when it premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, only a handful of fashion insiders had been allowed to watch the 88-minute film. They had all been sworn to secrecy. For months the internet has been awash with speculation about the documentary, which earned director RJ Cutler a grand jury nomination at this year's Sundance festival. The excitement surrounding it was enough for me to travel all the way to Scotland to watch it.

It follows Wintour around the shows - she famously once got Milan fashion week moved to fit into her schedule - and proves that she doesn't just run a magazine: she runs all of fashion. When she meets the head designer at Yves Saint Laurent - a man we must presume to be reasonably powerful - she is disparaging enough of his collection for him to become flustered and rethink it; she has no qualms in asking Prada to "re-interpret" some of their designs. She does all of this in her trademark giant dark sunglasses, precision-bobbed hair and Chanel suit, a look that has not changed for years. Wintour may influence fashion, but she clearly considers herself to be above it.

Anna - or Ahhanna, as her staff refer to her - does not talk very much. There are only a few occasions when she speaks directly to camera; her permanent poker face says more about her than she ever could (tellingly she admits in her transatlantic drawl that she admired her father, Charles, a former editor of the London Evening Standard, because he was "inscrutable").

She throws out a shoot that cost \$50,000 because she doesn't like it. When a stylist asks why the pictures of a model in a rubber outfit have been removed from a story about "texture", the art director replies that for Anna, rubber is not a texture. Another staff member picks out a jacket from a rail and wonders out loud if her boss would like it, before thinking better of it. "No, of course she won't. It's black. I could get fired for that."

Meanwhile, the magazine's publisher, Thomas Florio, when asked about Wintour's steeliness, has this to say: "She's just not accessible to people she doesn't need to be accessible to. She isn't warm, because she's busy."

"It's like belonging to a church," says Candy Pratts Price, who runs the Vogue website.

"And Anna is the High Priestess?" asks the director.

"I would say she is more like the Pope."

Despite Wintour's all dominating presence in the Vogue offices, she is surrounded by a cast of colourful characters. There is Andre Leon Talley, her editor-at-large, a portly man who plays tennis in top-to-toe Louis Vuitton and complains of "a famine of beauty". Then there is Grace Coddington, a former model who also hails from the UK and started at the magazine the same day as Anna and is now her number two. With wild red hair and not a scrap of make-up on her face, Coddington could not be more different to Wintour. Their relationship is intriguing. Coddington is perhaps the only person who stands up to Wintour (staff members really do scatter out of her way, and when one designer meets her, his hands are shaking) and Wintour clearly respects her for that. At the end of the film, the editor-in-chief reluctantly concedes that she could not live without Coddington.

The September Issue must be the only film in which Sienna Miller is reduced to a bit part. As a Hollywood A-lister and the magazine's cover girl, you might think that the staff of Vogue would treat her with the appropriate reverence, but instead Wintour complains that her hair is "lacklustre", that she is too "toothy" and that you can see her fillings in the pictures. Even Mario Testino, one of the world's most famous fashion photographers, is not spared the wrath of Wintour. When his photographs of Miller in Rome arrive, she is not impressed by the selection. "Where are the shots of her outside the Colosseum?" Wintour asks.

"Mario didn't like the Colosseum," says an assistant, and you half expect Wintour to demand that it is rebuilt.

So how on earth did director RJ Cutler get Wintour to agree to be filmed? "This will come as a shock to you," says Cutler, "but all I had to do was ask." Cutler produced *The War Room*, the 1993 documentary about Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. Who was more frightening? Neither, he says. Did she like it? "I think it would be fair to say that she would have made a different film to the one I did." Did she meddle? "Of course she did - she's Anna Wintour. But at Sundance she said 'I made many suggestions to RJ - but let's face it, it's his film.' I respect her for that."

They are still in touch. "She is astounding really," continues Cutler. "She is like an historical figure that walks amongst us. I always explain her this way: you can make a film without Steven Spielberg's blessing, you can produce some software without Bill Gates' blessing, but you can't get into fashion without Anna Wintour's blessing."

Some have suggested that this may be Wintour's last year as Editor-in-Chief at American Vogue; the September Issue would certainly serve as a supreme act of self-commemoration. But, for a documentary about fashion, there is a surprising poignancy to it. On the surface Wintour may seem ice cool, but her demeanour is underpinned by a deep insecurity. She says that "people are frightened of fashion - because it scares them they put it down. They mock it because they are not part of it." Her siblings all have serious jobs - one of her brothers is the political editor of the Guardian - and she thinks that "they are very amused by what I do." She looks pretty grim-faced as she says this.

Wintour has never struck me as the kind of person who would seek acceptance from anyone - she leads, everyone follows - and yet here we see her desperately craving acceptance from her family. It is sad; touching even. At one point we meet her charming daughter Bee, who wants to go into Law, despite her mother's keenness that she should become an editor. "Some of the people in there [the Vogue office] act as if fashion is life," says Bee to the camera at one point. "And I know that it is really fun, and amusing. But there are other things out there."

Deep down, her mother would most probably agree.