

THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE



AMERICAN VOGUE'S EDITOR-IN-CHIEF.

ANNA WINTOUR, HAS LONG HAD A REPUTATION

FOR BEING AN ICE QUEEN. WITH THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA SEEMINGLY

CONFIRMING WHAT EVERYBODY THOUGHT WINTOUR WAS LIKE, DOCUMENTARY

DIRECTOR RJ CUTLER SET OUT TO DISCOVER

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE STEELY EXTERIOR

WORDS MATT MUELLER

In THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE, RJ Cutler's behind-the-scenes film about AMERICAN VOGUE MAGAZINE, the fashion bible's fearsome topper Anna Wintour responds to the scorn that's often heaped on the fashion world by declaring coolly, "People are frightened of fashion so they mock it."

Wintour might as well have been talking about herself: Editor-in-Chief of VOGUE since 1988, she not only acts as chief dominatrix/cheerleader for the \$300 billion industry, holding the power to make or break designers with a single dismissive frown, but carries a reputation for being a withering and disdainful (but impeccably attired) gorgon who became a movie punchline in THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA. She has a long-running nickname, Nuclear Wintour, that's trickled down to the high street (to her eternal shame, it's probably been taken in vain around the H&M bargain bin). Even her own publisher admits that Wintour is "not warm and friendly... She's not accessible to people she doesn't need to be accessible to."

On that count, he's wrong in at least one instance: Wintour did make herself freely accessible to RJ Cutler for his gripping documentary about VOGUE's hernia-inducing bumper September edition, willingly lowering the fashion bible's drawbridge to allow him unfettered access for nine months. "It wasn't hard – I just asked. We were together on a panel at Sundance and she said she was an admirer of my work," shrugs the filmmaker, who started his career in political documentaries. In fact, it was Wintour who suggested the September issue as the film's framing device.

Prowling VOGUE's hallowed corridors with his two-man crew, Cutler went in with no agenda, swimming wherever the current took him. But it swiftly became apparent that, while André Leon Talley might be the only other Vogue name people recognise, it was the dynamic between Wintour and VOGUE's passionate, emotional Creative Director Grace Coddington that was the more compelling storyline. At first, however, Coddington was having none of it. "The first thing she said to me when I met her was, 'Go away,'" says Cutler. "She felt we were nothing but an annoyance, so we spent four months just saying bello and running away so she didn't yell at us."

Eventually, the stylist's resistance crumbled, to the point that she became the film's star, her wry asides and spiky exchanges with Wintour (she's the only Vogue-ite who appears uncowed by her boss) giving her several priceless moments. Other VOGUE satellite players who appear include the

issue's cover star Sienna Miller, famed photographer Mario Testino, and young Thai fashion designer Thakoon. Cutler's method is to hang around for so long that eventually his subjects start to confide in him. Nor does he feel his subjects were on their best behaviour to defy the catty, cutting fashionista stereotype. "It's human nature to want to tell your story," he observes. "We interact with our subjects as human beings first and foremost. But it's not 'fly on the wall'. I object to that term. I'm six-foot-one, weigh well over 200 pounds and have got red hair and a beard – you know when I'm in the room."

As for Wintour, she swans through her realm like the all-powerful diva she is, applying glacial charm or quiet scorn as required and ruling with a tiny iron fist. The fact that THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE reinforces Wintour's icy, imperious reputation isn't exactly big news, though, insists Cutler. "Yes, she's famously demanding and she requires precision, excellence and a strong constitution," he muses. "So what? She's the boss. She's got power and she's got presence but, as you see in the movie, she's not a screamer. When the king wants somebody beheaded, he doesn't jump up and down and scream at them. He just flicks his wrist. Anna is a model of efficient communication: you know if she's not happy. And she has a wicked sense of humour which she is not above employing in an effort to achieve her objectives."

Did she make Cutler laugh? "Oh, she made me laugh," he chuckles wryly. "She made me laugh so hard I could cry."

Cutler shed plenty more tears in the editing suite, boiling down nine months and 300 hours of footage into the 90 fine-tuned minutes he ended up with. THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE made its debut splash at the 2009 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL and Wintour turned up in support, although she reserved her judgment, calling it "his film" (Cutler had final cut). "The first time I screened it for Anna, I think it's accurate to say she had notes," he says, snickering at his own understatement. "She likes to say that she made a host of

suggestions and I ignored all of them." Was one of them to redistribute the balance of screen time away from Grace and back to her? Cutler laughs. "She'll have to answer that question herself," he says. "But look, this was never meant to be a movie about what most people perceive Vogue as. At the end of the day it's a movie about the relationship between two women. It's a film about Anna and Grace."

THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE IS OUT SEPTEMBER 11

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