



The September Issue Discussion Guide

Director: R.J. Cutler

Year: 2009

Time: 90 min

You might know this director from:

The World According to Dick Cheney (2013)

A Perfect Candidate (1996)

Black. White. (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

Follow in the footsteps of fashion's first lady, Anna Wintour, whose signature bob cut and dark sunglasses have accompanied the editor-in-chief since taking over the production of American Vogue in 1988. *THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE* takes us into the glamorous world of Vogue's head office in Manhattan as the 2007 September issue of Vogue is being prepared for press. Containing 840 pages, and weighing in at 5 pounds, Vogue's September issue is touted as the fashion industry's bible.

Wintour slashes through the work of designers, photographers, assistants, and anyone else who enters her path, elucidating her nicknames such as "Nuclear Wintour" and "Wintour of our Discontent." Through trips down the editorial corridors, visits to the photo editing room, meetings with top-level staff, and a few candid conversations with her daughter, Bee Shaffer, the world of Wintour is exposed with incredible intimacy. And as the myth behind her icy reign of power is disrobed, another star begins to shine.

Grace Coddington's career at American Vogue began in 1988, on the very same morning that Wintour's began. With fiery red hair and a tendency towards the romantic in her photographic storytelling, Coddington offers some of the most raw perspective on Wintour available. Having worked together for 20 years, creating the look and strength of the modern fashion industry, the two women's sensibilities could not be any more different, but together they have managed to rewrite the history of fashion in the first world.

FILM THEMES

In a world where character is quite often judged by the clothes one wears, this film offers an entertaining yet intimate peek into the much-coveted fashion industry. But beneath the silvery screen of its couture cover, certain issues lurk.

THIN IS IN

The fashion industry is obsessed with skinny. On billboards, in magazines, flashing inside of our computer screens are bone-thin women and girls. Food, the very thing that nourishes us, is shunned in the quest for gorgeous. In one scene, Wintour demands that an image be photoshopped to remove an imperfect belly. “Time for the gym,” she hastily adds. Another image is cut from a spread because the model “looks pregnant.” An unhealthy obsession with thinness drives models to restrict, and sometimes starve, themselves, even at the cost of fainting on stage. The fashion industry, with all the power it possesses, could point its lens towards promoting health instead of thinness.

A WOMAN’S WORLD

The power struggle between two women – Wintour and Coddington – spurs the film’s plot. Women in high-ranking roles are often accused of being cruel and cold, wielding their clout with an insensitive touch. Critics argue that women turn icy cold in order to compete with men and prove their worth as true leaders. Could it be that Coddington’s earthiness and warmth, which we never witness in Wintour, hinders her from getting her way? Would her ideas be slashed less often if she were colder and harder, characteristics typically associated with men? This raises questions about the place and role of sensitivity in our world, and whether warmth and compassion can ever outplay the cold and controlling.

THE DETRIMENT OF BEAUTY

The ever-changing fashion industry encourages a quick turnover of garments. The fashionista must consume constantly. Thus, large-scale chain stores bulge with cheap mass-produced items, promoting a throwaway, wear-it-once mentality. But there is a cost – and it’s not included in the price tag. Entire towns are built around sweatshops and communities are enslaved into very below-minimum-wage employment, with children working alongside grandparents from dawn to dusk, while the fashion industry profits by the billions.

FASHION AS A BRAND

Fashion empowers the individual, allowing for expression of personal identity and cultural belonging. Some say it is an economic force that creates jobs and pushes innovation. But as you watch the film, you don’t hear much about fashion. You hear about brands and a publishing empire that acts as a medium between corporate profit and consumers. It is a multi-billion dollar industry with enormous power to ignite desire, turn wants into needs, and cultivate an image-obsessed society constantly in need of something new to wear.

“Fashion is not about looking back. It’s always about looking forward.”

Anna Wintour

“I think I got left behind somewhere because I’m still, you know, a romantic...”

Grace Coddington

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How did your views of the fashion industry change after seeing this film? Does it interest you more? Interest you less?
2. Anna Wintour started the trend of using celebrities as models, placing them on magazine covers before anyone else had. Do you think this has changed the relationship between celebrities and the public? How so?
3. Wintour’s power and influence throughout the global fashion world is nearly unchecked. How do you feel about one person having so much authority over popular culture?
4. Wintour is often criticized for being cold and aloof. Do you think this is because she is a woman? Do you think anyone would be talking about this if she were a man?
5. Did you feel that Grace Coddington was too passive in the face of Anna Wintour, or did you appreciate her warmer, more patient and flexible sensibilities?
6. Does the fashion world, as promoted by Vogue and other such magazines, promote an unhealthy, unrealistic body image? What can we do to empower ourselves and our children - girls and boys - to celebrate healthy and realistic body types?
7. Anna Wintour has promoted fur and leather garments, bringing them back into fashion despite animal rights campaigns of the 1980s. The fur industry has re-branded itself as sustainable and natural and grosses billions of dollars each year. Most young fashionistas have no moral qualms with it. Does this new enthusiasm for animal fur indicate anything about the current generation?
8. Every individual arguably has their own personal sense of fashion, the manner in which they present themselves to the world. How much can you know about a person from what they are wearing?
9. Sweatshops, illegal factories, human trafficking, abuse - foreign labor recruitment has only gotten worse. Is this a fair price to pay for fashion? What are socially responsible ways to stay chic?
10. Does the “ethical” have a place or role in the judgment of the “aesthetical?”

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The Vogue 2007 September issue contained 840 glossy pages, weighed 5 pounds, and was known throughout the fashion industry as the bible. The September 2012 issue is the lengthiest issue to date, thumbing in at 916 pages.
- In 2014, The Metropolitan Museum of Art renamed its halls of fashion to The Anna Wintour Costume Center. Hours after the ribbon-cutting, Wintour hosted her 16th Met Gala, which raised \$12 million for the museum in one night. She's raised \$137 million for the museum in total.
- As editor of Vogue, Anna Wintour has an annual salary of \$2 million. Since being hired as artistic director of the entire Conde Nast empire, that number has undoubtedly risen. Her assistant makes \$40,000 annually.
- As of March 2014, only five men had been featured on the cover of Vogue, each time accompanied by a woman. They include Richard Gere, George Clooney, LeBron James, Ryan Lochte, and Kanye West.
- The Vogue Health Initiative, launched in May 2012, was an attempt to encourage healthier body imagery in the fashion industry. The six-point agreement was signed by all 19 of Vogue's international editors. It sets out guidelines on not working with models under 16 or those who appear to have eating disorders, encouraging healthy food backstage, and pushing designers to send realistic sample sizes to fashion shoot.
- R.J. Cutler enlisted director of photography Bob Richman to bring Grace Coddington around to being filmed, as she was initially hesitant. By the end of filming, she had come around so entirely that she put Richman himself in a Vogue shoot.
- THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and grossed more than \$8 million in theatres worldwide, with nearly \$4 million in the U.S. alone.
- Sweatshops still produce the majority of clothing worn in the U.S., despite increasing efforts to make apparel responsibly. Sweatshops often have poor working conditions, unfair wages, unreasonable hours, child labor, and a lack of benefits for workers. An estimated 250 million children ages 5 to 14 are forced to work in sweatshops in the developing world. Products that commonly come from sweatshops are shoes, clothing, rugs, coffee, and toys.
- In April 2012, over 100 workers fainted in a Cambodian factory that produces Nike apparel. The cause was linked to toxicity, overexposure to chemicals, and poor ventilation. Several months earlier, Cambodian women were beaten after protesting against their working conditions.
- 64% of models have been asked to lose weight by their agencies. 49% of models fast, do cleanses, or reduce their food intake over short periods. 31% have or have had eating disorders. 68% suffer from anxiety or depression.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to get behind the scenes of the fashion industry.
2. Choose substance over style. Remember that magazine images are highly produced, touched up, and act as superficial covers to many dark realities. Cultivate a beauty that is real and powerful.
3. Learn more about Wintour, Coddington, Bowles, and others from THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE on [Voguepedia](#).
4. Seek out clothes that are sweatshop free. [Sweat Free Shop](#) offers a comprehensive guide.
5. Choose quality over quantity. Fashion can be sustainable when choosing locally sourced, cruelty free garments that last a long time—rather than constantly buying cheap mass-produced items.

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In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.