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Quick-Change Artists: How Fashion Documentaries Are Reinventing Fashion's Myth

A multi-billion dollar industry that thrives by tapping into our deepest fantasies, insecurities and prejudices, fashion seeps into our subconscious and influences the way in which we see ourselves and those around us. As a result, fashion is widely seen as an ideological mechanism promoting superficiality, anxiety and excessive consumerism by the general public and also within academic circles. In *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky remarks that fashion "turns up everywhere on the street, in industry, and in the media, but it has virtually no place in the theoretical inquiries of our thinkers. Seen as an ontologically and socially inferior domain, it is unproblematic and undeserving of investigation; seen as a superficial issue, it discourages conceptual approaches" (3). Robin Givhan, the first fashion journalist to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism, corroborates this assertion, remarking that fashion is not taken seriously within journalistic circles either. She says: "Fashion, even though it's a billion-dollar industry, is still seen as this kind of women's concern" (Moss). Karen Hanson offers an explanation for this contempt, suggesting that the hostility towards fashion stems from suspicion of change: "Fashion is inherently associated with change, and the instability of the fashionable choice may seem to some a proof of the emptiness and confusion of this kind of discrimination"(108). She further asserts that a general apprehension about fashion remains as many feel that "attention to [clothing] constitute[s] serious mistakes in the conduct of a life worth living" (110).

In recent years, fashion's negative image has been compounded by influential popular culture representations – television shows such as *Ugly Betty* (2006 - 2010), *Sex and the City* (1998 - 2004) and its film counterparts (2008 & 2010), and the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) have not only embedded fashion in the popular consciousness but have portrayed the fashion industry as elitist, with materialistic preoccupations propagated by vacuous denizens. The latter works, labelled "fashion films" by Hilary Radner, self-consciously and "explicitly incorporate a dimension of clothing that is not about character, but about fashion as part of the attractions [they] offer [their] viewers" (136). Indeed, the gratuitous display and consumption of luxury goods in an ostensible

celebration of femininity and empowerment in these shows and the fashion industry's longstanding notoriety in causing body image issues and exploiting women's vulnerabilities have led to sustained criticism against the industry for being un-feminist. The fashion industry's involvement in the disempowerment of women is also apparent in the inequalities it creates amongst different social classes of women – namely the upper and middle class women who consume fashion and the working class women who produce it. Noting the widening gap, Angela McRobbie asserts that the intensification of consumption and the apparent access of ordinary people to wide ranges of consumer goods have been used as "an excuse to ignore the limits of consumption and to dismiss the work and wage needed to be able to participate in consumption" (81).

Much of the criticism towards the fashion industry has been directed towards the fashion press. The primary mouthpiece for design houses, the garment industry and merchandising giants, it is widely seen as promoting a narrative about fashion as utopian in its ability to transform a person into the socially perceived ideal of physical beauty and femininity through garments while operating under the principles of capitalism. As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman posited in their propaganda model, in a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, the "media serve the ends of the dominant elite" (Durham 280), and "money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Durham 280).

However, as criticism continues to mount and disenchantment sets in, the fashion myth that the fashion press has been propagating is now under threat. This is particularly pertinent, because as Roland Barthes noted in *The Fashion System*: "What is remarkable about this image-system constituted with desire as its goal is that its substance is essentially intelligible: it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells" (Foreword xi – xii). Indeed, the selling of clothes is dependent on the meaning that is created about them, and in order to sustain itself and fulfill its primary

function of shifting garments off the racks, fashion needs to propagate a myth that ensures emotional and financial investment from its consumers.

Reinventing Fashion's Myth

Given this backdrop, this paper will argue that the documentary genre is especially apt and timely in reinventing fashion's myth and meaning by highlighting its alignment with artistic endeavour, cultural anthropology and self-liberation alongside its commercial and populist qualities. This will be done through the study of two documentaries – *The September Issue* (2009) by R.J. Cutler and *Bill Cunningham New Yor*k (2010) by Richard Press. Both filmed in cinéma vérité mode, they are enticing in their promise to offer a "real" and "naturalistic" look at a rarefied world few have access to, and I will show how both directors challenge the conventional perception of fashion as frivolous and destructive by championing the work of veteran image-makers and fashion journalists. Indeed, by demonstrating that fashion journalism – and fashion by default – rather than merely trying to sell clothes, is closely aligned with art and is executed by dedicated and talented practitioners who see fashion's socio-cultural importance and value in creativity and self-production, these two documentaries are instrumental in helping to reinvent fashion's myth.

To begin, *The September Issue* reveals the inner workings of the most influential fashion magazine in the world, and chronicles the intricate and laborious processes behind creating American *Vogue*'s most important issue of the year. Significantly, it was made in the wake of *The Devil Wears Prada* – a fictitious depiction of fashion journalism that nonetheless contained a thinly veiled criticism of Anna Wintour, the Editor-in-Chief of American *Vogue*. Based on Lauren Weisberger's novel of the same name, the film's protagonist, Andy Sachs, played by Anne Hathaway, represents a critical voice against the apparently empty, elitist and sometimes unethical nature of the fashion industry. Indeed, after a short working stint at a fashion magazine – and *Vogue* equivalent – called *Runway*, she abandons it to take up a writing position at a newspaper as a presumably more serious and superior alternative that also functions as the

film's resolution. Grossing US$326,551,094 worldwide according to BoxOffice.com, it – and Meryl Streep's unflattering portrayal of her Wintour-inspired character as a manipulative and icy editrix – quickly became the general public's key point of reference to the fashion world. Therefore, riding on the hype already stirred by the film, *The September Issue* promised to offer the "real" picture at *Vogue* to viewers whose curiosity about Wintour, whose real-life nickname is "Nuclear Wintour," had already been piqued by *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Nonetheless, despite the documentary's emphasis on Wintour and its effectiveness in softening her ice queen image, it is Creative Director Grace Coddington who delivers the core message that equates fashion to art in the film. The artist to Wintour's editrix and businesswoman, Coddington's tussle with Wintour over commercial and aesthetic interests drives the documentary's narrative.

As *Vogue* veterans who joined the magazine on the same day as each other in 1988, the contrast between the women is established from the beginning as they battle over creative decisions arising from the fashion spreads that Coddington produces for the magazine. Feisty and eccentric, the 71-year old Coddington is portrayed as a longstanding romantic and industry icon whose singular vision is instrumental in American *Vogue*'s construction of fantasy and aspiration for its readers. As the magazine's Feature's Director Sally Singer remarks in the film:

> Grace is without question, the greatest living stylist. There's no one better than Grace. There's no one who can make any photographer take more beautiful, more interesting, more romantic…just stunningly realised pictures than Grace. There's no one better, period. She comes from the idea that fashion is this world of play and make-believe. It's as if someone's gone to the dressing up box and found the most wonderful, personal things, and put them together. But it's beautiful (*The September Issue* 24:48).

Coddington verifies the idea of creating fantasy in her work, remarking that "you

have to have that fashion story, you know, spots are in or stripes or full skirts or straight skirts or whatever it is…but I've tried to make that secondary – we build a fantasy around the girl and what she's doing, what she's thinking, who she is" (*The September Issue* 29:22). Indeed, her fashion spreads, which are heavily featured in the documentary, encapsulate what Barthes calls the "theatre of Fashion" (301), a theatre of meaning where ideas, concepts and materials are associated and mixed together in thematic and "poetic" scenes to present fashion in a utopian way. More importantly, he points out that since fashion photography renders its signifiers (garments) all the more real by making its signifieds unreal, fashion spreads are where the artistic potential of a magazine is most likely to reside.

Elaborating further on fashion photography, Barthes outlines four broad themes that are commonly used in fashion journalism to dignify objects or styles – nature, geography, history and art, the last of which he deems "the richest of inspirational themes" (240). Coddington's four fashion spreads – one on textures, another influenced by the work of Twenties photographer George Brassaï, another featuring Renaissance-inspired couture and a last one on colour-blocking that has Pop Art overtones – are distinguished by a heavy reference to art and history. This, combined with Coddington's lengthy explanations about her inspirations and several segments devoted to the processes that go into creating her fashion spreads for the issue, deliver an unmistakable message about fashion's close association with art and culture.

Moreover, this message is also cemented by the engendering of audience support for Coddington. She is set up as an inspiring figure, her feistiness, wry wit and creativity contrasting with Wintour's coldness and brusqueness. Making her entrance in the film with the provocative line, "Well I can't shoot for the rest of my life with Steven Meisel in Alder Mansion, which is an ugly f**king house" (*The September Issue*, 11:03), she is established as an aesthete who knows her own mind. She also exhibits a steely determination as a battle-worn den mother who fights for her pictures to be included in spreads and dares to stand up to Wintour. In a scene where she advises a younger stylist, she says: "You gotta be

tough…you have to demand, because otherwise, you'll be blamed. Don't be too nice, even to me…because you'll lose" (*The September Issue*, 14:59). Her resilience is also shown in a later remark:

> You have to learn your way to beat your path through to make yourself felt and make yourself necessary, and find a way that works for you and for *Vogue*, because a lot of people have come and a lot of people have gone – they just couldn't take the heartbreak – you have to be fairly tough to withstand that" (*The September Issue*, 15:15).

However, what essentially endears Coddington to the audience is her human touch. While Wintour remarks at the beginning of the film that "there is something about fashion that makes people nervous" (*The September Issue* 1:20), Coddington exudes a kinder and more inclusive attitude in contrast. For instance, her actions contravene the common accusation leveled against fashion about body image issues when she expresses admiration for a subject's "fat legs" (*The September Issue* 29:43) in an old photograph from the Twenties. She is also filmed encouraging a model to have something to eat at the end of a fashion shoot, and also steps in to stop *Vogue*'s Art Director from airbrushing away the documentary cameraman's paunch from a spread that he was featured in.

Coddington's vulnerability also cements audience support for her. This is shown repeatedly in her visible disappointment when her pictures are successively edited out – or "killed" – by Wintour. She says: "I care very much about what I do, or else I wouldn't still be doing it…but it gets harder and harder to see it just get thrown out. And it's very hard to go on to the next thing" (*The September Issue*, 49:06). Furthermore, her anachronistic wistfulness for the past not only reinforces her stature as a member of fashion's old guard but also depicts her as someone who cares more about beauty and art rather than being caught up in fashion's relentless pace and thirst for the new. This is in stark contrast to Wintour's comment that "fashion's not about looking back, it's always about looking forward" (*The September Issue* 1:20:16). In several instances, Coddington comments on how old-fashioned she is, and in one scene, she says that she finds it a shame that pin-sharp images are preferred in modern fashion

photography over those with the faded effect of old film. In addition, during a climactic, dreamy and moving scene where she is shown exploring the Château de Versailles, she wistfully muses: "I think I got left behind somewhere, because I'm still a romantic…you have to go charging ahead, you can't stay behind" (*The September Issue*, 57:07).

Nonetheless, despite successive disappointments, Coddington emerges the "victor," with pictures that were initially edited out being reinstated in the issue, with her spreads featured heavily in it. Scenes of her shoots are also set up to contrast with other stylists' shoots, with hers coming off more superior and effortless as compared to the stressful and problematic shoots the others experience. Moreover, Wintour's concession to the singularity of Coddington's vision and contribution at the end of the film makes for a powerful denouement:

> I don't believe for one minute that I have a sense of what's going to happen or a sense of real change the way Grace does. I mean, Grace is a genius, and there is no one that can visualise a picture or understand the direction of fashion or produce a great shoot – I mean she's just remarkable. She and I don't always agree but over the years I think we've learned how to deal with each other's points of view (*The September Issue* 1:20:30).

Similarly, *Bill Cunningham New York* also delivers the message of fashion as art by highlighting the work and personality of a fashion visionary. Like Coddington in *The September Issue*, Bill Cunningham, the octogenarian fashion photographer of *The New York Times*, is depicted as an idiosyncratic and much-loved artist who has plied his trade for decades, an inspiring pioneer of street fashion photography who derives great joy from his craft and abides by a strong code of integrity. This portrait is substantiated by the numerous notable fashion figures who offer fond testimonies about him in the documentary, one of whom is Wintour, who confesses that "we all get dressed for Bill" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 7:08). Also included are Harold Koda, chief curator at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and fashion icon Iris Apfel amongst other famous colleagues and subjects.

Furthermore, Cunningham is portrayed as a serious fashion journalist. One of his first lines in the film sees him declaring that "you have to be able to give the reader, in a flash of Sunday news, the excitement about what it was" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 2:17). That is followed by a comment that indicates the dedication he displays consistently throughout the film: "I let the streets speak to me… you have to stay out there, you can't manufacture it in your head…there are no shortcuts, believe me" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 2:55). In fact, Kim Hastreiter, co-editor-in-chief of *Paper* magazine, likens him to a war photographer in one scene, saying, "he'll do anything for a shot" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 8:54*).*

Cunningham's code of integrity is also underscored. One sequence in the film tells the story about how he fell out with the influential fashion publication *Women's Wear Daily* after it ran pictures he took of women on the street and changed his copy to make fun of them instead of seeing them equally as individuals the way he did. As famous socialite and Trustee of Metropolitan Museum of Art Annette de la Renta remarked: "He's incredibly kind. I don't think we've ever seen a cruel picture done by Bill. And certainly, he has had the opportunity to really have done it, and he's chosen never to do it" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 22:56). This generous spirit, and Cunningham's inclusive attitude of photographing everyone from important social figures to the quirkier characters in New York society marks him out, like Coddington, as an important fashion figure who is benign rather than intimidating. Cunningham himself confesses to trying to be as principled as possible under challenging circumstances: "I just try to play the straight game and in New York, that's almost impossible" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 1:21:53).

Moreover, Cunningham, like Coddington, is also often seen at work, whether its scouring the streets and social events for interesting dressers, poring over film negatives or debating the exact placement of his pictures in the *Times*, his meticulous and perfectionist approach often eliciting mock exasperation in his younger colleagues at *The New York Times* Art Desk. As Hastreiter remarks in

one scene: "Bill's fingerprints are all over everything he does, 'cos he has never, ever, ever sold out one inch of anything" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 22:11*).* In both archival and current footage, Cunningham is also shown explaining the process of what inspires him and how he works on his ideas, his knowledge of fashion encyclopedic.

Similarly, Cunningham, like Coddington, has a very singular point of view that he is not afraid to articulate. Admonishing a younger colleague in one scene, he says: "Rubbish bag? She looks like she's in a rose, a black rose…what do you people from South of New Jersey know?" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 23:56). In another scene, he expresses outrage when the same colleague crops a picture excessively: "Keep her hands in! My God John, where's your sensitivity? She's probably one of the most elegant women in New York!" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 54:47). Even Wintour attests to his progressive vision, saying:

> I sometimes will look at his pages in the *Times* or online, and just be so amazed that he, and I, and all my team, and all the rest of the world were all sitting at the same fashion shows, but he sees something on the street or on the runway that completely missed all of us, and in six months' time, that will be a trend (*Bill Cunningham New York* 9:07).

Moreover, to underscore the idea of an artist devoted to his craft, Cunningham is portrayed as an ascetic who rides his humble Schwinn bicycle everyday, favours cheap meals and takes pride in fixing his cheap ripped poncho instead of spending on a new one. He also lives among file cabinets containing his photographic archives in a tiny flat in Carnegie Hall, which until 2009 contained working spaces for artists in the performing and graphic arts. In one scene, he also reveals that he has very modest tastes: "I like very simple, down to earth, basic things. You know, I don't like fancy things – I suppose that's such a contradiction but…what other people do doesn't concern me, it's just not my interest" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 1:05:19).

To further emphasise the image of the resolute and enigmatic artist, the documentary also shows that while his work is widely known, Cunningham is

essentially a mystery to the rest of the world, with nobody knowing very much about his private life. As Apfel remarks in one scene: "I don't think anybody gets to know him very well, do they? I get the feeling that he doesn't sit down and talk to people too much" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 11:40).

Cunningham's artistic temperament and insistence on artistic freedom are also revealed in his staunch refusal to accept money for his work. In one scene, an editor he once worked with recounted how he ripped up the cheques that she sent him for his work. It is followed by Cunningham remarking, "See, if you don't take money, they can't tell you what to do, kid. That's the key to the whole thing. Don't touch money, it's the worst thing you can do" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 18:12).

Nonetheless, the documentary's message about fashion as something elevated and artistic is perhaps clearest at the climax of the film, which sees Cunningham being honoured in France as a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters for his contribution to the arts. In his acceptance speech, the typically humble Cunningham concludes a self-effacing account of himself by summing up his raison d'être:

> I don't work, I only know how to have fun everyday…many people think "He's crazy, he only photographs the clothes," but that's what we're here for…look at the clothes, the cut, the new cut, the lines, the colours, that's everything. It's the clothes, not the celebrity or the spectacle. It's as true today as it ever was – "He who seeks beauty, will find it" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 1:08:36).

Thus, like *The September Issue*, fashion's status is elevated in *Bill Cunningham New York* because of its portrayal of the artist's single-minded pursuit of beauty. However, other than showcasing Cunningham's creative personality and how he upholds fashion's artistic value through his photography, *Bill Cunningham New York* is also important in championing the daily creativity, individuality and self-production of ordinary people who view fashion as an artistic outlet and source of empowerment in a world of cookie-cutter dressing.

The notion of fashion as a platform for personal creativity is confirmed by Patrick McDonald, one of the talking heads in the documentary who is also a Cunningham subject. He says: "We are all canvases, blank canvases when we get up in the morning, and we all paint ourselves. Sometimes we are surreal, sometimes we are impressionistic, sometimes we are modern – it just depends on the day" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 24:52).

Furthermore, the idea of self-production in fashion through personal agency and creativity is especially pertinent when one considers it in relation to Erving Goffman's notion of the performance of the self. Goffman posited that "when an individual appears before others he will have many motives to control the impression they receive of the situation" (Henslin 115), and his control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate. He can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan, and fashion is instrumental in how we put together this performance of the self to enable others to know in advance what we will expect of them and they of us.

Efrat Tseëlon gives Goffman's theory a gender-based slant, highlighting that women have an emotional relationship with clothes and tend to see them as "representative of the self" (60). This creates an intricate relationship that exists between one's appearance and one's sense of well-being, and shows that dressing well, other than conveying messages about ourselves to others, also enhances a sense of self. Indeed, Tseëlon asserts that "clothes both confer a sense of self-worth and help in creating it…and wearing the right things, things that fit and look well and enhance the woman's best features seem to be a confidence booster" (61). She also points out that "clothes are used as armour against an uncomfortable situation, when feeling vulnerable, uncertain…in a new or strange environment, with familiar critical, powerful or trendy people – where one might feel put down and inferior, or pale by comparison" (61).

Indeed, Cunningham himself uses the same metaphor of fashion as armour in the documentary, using it to underscore its fundamental importance to society:

> The wider world that perceives fashion as a frivolity that should be done away in the face of social upheavals and problems that are enormous… the point is, in fact, that fashion…is the armour to survive the reality of everyday life. I don't think you can do away with it – it would be like doing away with civilisation (*Bill Cunningham New York*, 1:00:06).

Moreover, the emphasis on craft and references to haute couture in both films also attempt to establish fashion's status as art. Haute couture has traditionally, as Rémy G. Saisselin points out, been linked closely with art and poetry through its emphasis on high levels of workmanship, classicism in form and aesthetic beauty. He asserts that in haute couture, a dress is akin to "a poem of form, colour, and motion, and that at such a privileged instant the dress may transform the wearer into a poetic apparition" (115). He also describes couture as "a feat of dressmaking that was evaluated, judged, appreciated, not in terms of its general line, but rather its finish, material, workmanship, ruffles, lace, embroidery, frous-frous and chichi's" (112).

This reverential attitude towards haute couture is reflected in both Coddington and Cunningham, who refer to it as the pinnacle of fashion in their respective films. In *The September Issue*, Coddington reveals that she has never missed a single haute couture show in her forty-odd years in fashion, and that she inadvertently ends up marking too many items that she'd like to shoot for her spreads when she attends them. There is also a protracted sequence where she is shown furiously taking notes in a couture show front row long after the other guests have departed, and this is soon followed by a scene of a stunning shoot featuring couture pieces. Similarly, Cunningham not only expresses that "fashion [in Paris] educates the eye" (*Bill Cunningham New York* 1:01:19), but also underscores its significance in a sequence where he speaks about couture over historical footage of Christian Dior's first couture shows in the Forties.

Thus, by locating fashion within its longstanding tradition of art and craftsmanship, the documentaries appear to imbue – or rather, reinstate – the "aura" or sense of authenticity that Walter Benjamin asserted has disappeared from art through its reproducibility. Indeed, in its evolution into the mass production of ready-to-wear garments since its origin in couture houses, fashion has arguably lost the "aura" it embodies through its creation via craftsmanship, or what Benjamin describes as "its unique existence in a particular place" (Eiland, 253), or in the here and now. Benjamin argues that the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition, and that its aura "is never entirely severed from its ritual function" (Eiland, 256). Therefore, by restoring this aura to fashion through an emphasis on haute couture, the films convey the message of fashion as art.

Moreover, the message of fashion as art is also very effectively conveyed to multiple audiences as the genre of the documentary imbues fashion with a more serious register that establishes its gravitas as a serious form. Indeed, they offer chronicles based on real people in the industry that contrast with the frivolous fashion films that have previously been the main channels through which the film-going masses encountered fashion. In doing so, the documentaries perform the double function of giving the impression that fashion is a respectable, artistic genre that deserves to be taken seriously to mainstream audience members who may not know fashion well, while reinforcing positive views of fashion to its existing fans and connoisseurs. There is a strong sense that the latter, who constitute fashion fans, trendsetters and practitioners – and who, as John O. Summers outlines in "The Identity of Women's Clothing Fashion Opinion Leaders," tend to exhibit qualities of assertion and creativity – would arguably be gratified by the way the documentaries reinforce these positive character traits in themselves and also the sense of being a fashion insider. There is also a strong indication that this community of fashion fans is likely to be cognizant to the documentaries' emphasis on the authority of veterans in fashion journalism and be reassured by it, given the increasing questions over the journalistic credibility and integrity of amateur and semi-professional fashion bloggers who are gaining fame and influence by using their sites to "praise the

sartorial contributions of their favourite designers while their presumed unbiased content is often being tainted by free clothes, trips and even the possibility of landing a big campaign deal" (Wilson).

Meanwhile, the average filmgoer may be convinced that there is something more to fashion through the demonstration of qualities such as heroism and dedication through these charismatic figures in the documentaries. This can be inferred by analysing how established film critics crafted and angled their reviews to their readers. Damon Wise, a journalist of *Empire* magazine's website, wrote a glowing assessment of *The September Issue*, albeit prefacing it with the widely-held view of fashion as flippant, as if to disarm sceptics:

> Fashion is traditionally a subject for scorn, and anyone who takes it seriously is mostly deemed to be pretentious, superficial or both. *The September Issue*, however, throws such preconceptions out of the window. Ostensibly a fly-on-the-wall study of the making of the biggest annual issue of the famous fashion bible, it doesn't have so much to say about magazine production as it does about the passion that feeds into it, and it will be a rare individual who doesn't emerge from this film with newfound respect for *Vogue*'s editorial staff ("The September Issue").

The greatly respected and renowned film critic Roger Ebert also takes the similar tack of underscoring fashion's seeming insignificance before praising *Bill Cunningham New York*:

> It doesn't matter if you care nothing at all about clothing, fashion or photography. You might still enjoy *Bill Cunningham New York*, because here is a good and joyous man who leads a life that is perfect for him, and how many people do we meet like that? This movie made me happy every moment I was watching it ("Bill Cunningham New York").

Philip French from *The Observer* was more circumspect, remarking: "Genuinely in love with clothes, Cunningham makes you think of fashion in a more positive and enlightened way" ("Bill Cunningham New York – Review").

Indeed, the films have chalked up considerable success, as can be seen

from the fact that *The September Issue* chalked up the status of becoming the "fifth best documentary debut" (Knegt), and according to Boxoffice Media, it grossed US$4,517,937 worldwide, while *Bill Cunningham New York* grossed US$1,510,026 domestically. Thus, it would seem that by depicting strong and candid artists who possess an uncompromising approach towards their craft and chronicling the intricate processes involved in their work, both documentaries are effective in highlighting the fact that fashion is empowering and artistic.

More Than Meets The Eye

Nonetheless, while taking up the challenge of portraying fashion as artistic and revealing the "real" picture behind it is a laudable endeavour, it is worth exploring why Cutler and Press wanted to do so. In "Why I Write," George Orwell admitted that "writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand" (O. Dag). Indeed, it would seem implausible for the directors to go to such great lengths – Press took eight years to convince Cunningham to be filmed – without some compelling purpose that drove them to portray fashion the way they did in their respective documentaries.

To begin, it is probably accurate to infer that historical impulse, or the "desire to see things as they are" (O. Dag), to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity" (O. Dag) was a key reason why the films were made. Both Cutler and Press explained that the compelling personalities and achievements of Wintour, Coddington and Cunningham were what drew them to their subjects. In an interview with *Indiewire*, Cutler explained: "I'm always looking for subjects who care a tremendous amount about what they're doing and are doing it as well as they possibly can under high stakes circumstances. Certainly, this was the case with Anna Wintour" ("Vogue, A Queen and Good Films"). Moreover, the depiction of the "real" picture at *Vogue*, the desire to find out more about Wintour and to record the arduous process of putting together the biggest-ever September issue of *Vogue* were the documentary's key selling

points, seeing that it came on the heels of the unflattering portrayal of the fashion industry in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Similarly, Press revealed that the impetus behind *Bill Cunningham New York* was to capture "a rare bird and kind of a dying breed. [Cunningham's] such a bohemian in the way he lives his life, his values, I thought it just needed to be documented. People need to know who Bill is as a person and who the man is beyond his work" (Bosch). That both directors decided on the naturalistic feel of the cinéma vérité mode to document their subjects also underscores their intention to be faithful to reality as much as possible.

Nevertheless, while showing a realistic picture of the fashion world was clearly a priority, aesthetic enthusiasm also played a role in the creation of the documentaries. Defined by Orwell as "perception of beauty in the external world, or… pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story and the desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed" (O. Dag), the documentaries, other than celebrating fashion's beauty, exhibit aesthetic flourishes and high production values in telling their respective stories.

This was especially apparent in *The September Issue*. Cutler, who has extensive experience as a reality television producer, combined sensational reality show elements, a quick-paced narrative, glamorous shots of fashion runways and catchy pop music with documentary conventions such as interviews and archival footage to deliver a highly entertaining and trendy product through its focus on pageantry (much like fashion itself). In particular, Cutler relied on contributing editor André Leon Talley to deliver plenty of self-aware fashion clichés and bon mots to increase the film's incidences of camp and humour. For example, Talley makes his first appearance in the film with his famous "famine of beauty" (*The September Issue* 3:39) rant, where he bemoans, diva-style, the lack of glamour on recent runway shows. Later in the film, he is shown playing tennis bedecked in diamonds and a Louis Vuitton scarf while declaring that he needs to "get up and approach life with [his] own aesthetics about style" (*The September Issue* 1:01:06). Similarly, the gossiping that takes

place among *Vogue* employees – usually after Wintour has criticised somebody's work – resembles the common reality television trope where subjects are filmed saying negative things behind each others' backs. It also elicits the reality television-specific schadenfreude that is derived from watching subjects squirm in uncomfortable situations, and this is reflected when the camera zooms in on Wintour's stricken expression after she is told that a famous photographer neglected to take a key shot featuring the Colosseum during a big fashion shoot in Rome.

Moreover, in a strategy that seems designed to underscore that its creation is a response to *The Devil Wears Prada*, scenes that parallel those from the film turn up in *The September Issue*, almost as a challenge to the audience to spot the similarities and differences between the films. These include similar opening sequences of Streep as *Runway* editor-in chief Miranda Priestly and Wintour on their way to their respective offices, meetings where both women deliver withering barbs to underlings and assorted fashion designers for their uninspired ideas, mentions of the magazines' September issues, as well as scenes that involve both women poring over the mock-up of their magazines in their homes.

Therefore, while Cutler claims that he subscribes to the idea of "following the puck" ("Production Information") in editing the film and going where the story takes him, he also admitted in an interview with *Indiewire* that his aim is to "…tell engaging stories, and in [his] own way capture some truth. [He] wants to entertain. [He] wants to spin a good yarn" ("Vogue, A Queen and Good Films"). He also once mentioned that he sees "observational shows without a formula at odds with the nature of the beast today," which Cutler describes as a "shark that feeds on eyeballs" (Blozan). In an interview with *Variety,* he revealed that "[he's] always approached [his] nonfiction storytelling with the same principles that anyone takes to [the] scripted. It's all about telling big stories and capturing big drama" (Schneider). In fact, Fox TV Studios executive vice president David Madden is quoted in the same interview saying that he was eager to work with Cutler after seeing *The September Issue* as "in a lot of ways, that movie felt like a

scripted show or a scripted film – Anna Wintour is quite a fascinating character, and a number of supporting characters at the magazine came off as really well-constructed, well-built characters" (Schneider).

Similarly, Press also took his cue from characterisation when it came to shaping *Bill Cunningham New York*. He shed light on his editing process in an interview with Australia's Special Broadcasting Service, saying that he "thought of this film as a narrative and Bill as a fascinating character... and I compared him to other great fictional characters in film" (Boltin). He also mentioned on the film's official website that he tried to shape the documentary to reflect Cunningham's own approach to his *New York Times* column:

> I approached the movie's structure less like a documentary and more like a narrative with a strong protagonist surrounded by a menagerie of characters… but with narrative threads that slowly build, so that when taken together – a portrait emerges and comes into focus, like one of Bill's pages – a collage adding up to something larger than its parts ("The Filmmakers").

Nonetheless, historical purpose and aesthetic enthusiasm do not make up all the motivations in these two documentaries. As Orwell himself admitted, "it [was] invariably where [he] lacked a political purpose that [he] wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally" (O. Dag). Indeed, as literary academics Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle suggest, literary texts are places where the structures and fractures of ideology are both produced and reproduced, they do not simply or passively express or reflect the ideology of their particular time and place. Rather, "they are sites of conflict and difference, places where values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are presented and, in the process, opened to transformation" (177). Therefore, the "desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after" (O. Dag), as defined by Orwell, is more than likely to be present in the two documentaries.

As already established earlier, both films attempt to elevate fashion to the status of art through their depiction of artists at work and also by showcasing fashion's beauty. Cutler accomplished this In *The September Issue* via his foregrounding of Coddington and her artistic tendencies, while Press did so through his depiction of the ascetic artist in Bill Cunningham. In particular, it is worth noting that Cutler revealed his director's commentary in the film's DVD extras that while he was fond of the flamboyant Talley and that he provided plenty of levity in the film, he ultimately had to leave out many of Talley's scenes as he felt that "*The September Issue* didn't feel finished until more of the man was left on the editing floor" (Gonzalez and Schrodt). Indeed, Talley's deleted scenes see him offering comic relief via his demonstration of fashion's camp and facetious sides, but his comments on expensive shirts and having parties with fashion designers – and Cutler's decision to leave them out – reveals that the director was ultimately looking to convey a more serious elevated image of fashion through the film. Similarly, another scene featuring Wintour with a famous designer in the process of naming a bag was also omitted because it betrays a more frivolous side to fashion that does not align with the film's key message of fashion as art.

Moreover, both directors' aesthetic and socio-political leanings – as revealed by their film oeuvres – lead to the inference that there is definitely an interest in changing the way people see things through their work. This is especially so in Cutler's case. His film oeuvre reveals a strong taste for chronicling hot-button topics. His first documentary, *The War Room*, featured a behind-the-scenes look at the Clinton presidential campaign, and he has since taken on coming-of-age tales, the fashion world and the military realm – covering a wide cross-section of American society in his television and film works. Moreover, given his humanising portrayal of Wintour and his foregrounding of Coddington's artistic inclinations in *The September Issue*, it seems plausible to infer that he has a vested interest in stories culled from issues of the day and revealing exciting and unexpected aspects about them that may change people's perceptions.

Press, meanwhile, reveals a desire to actively promote artistic endeavour through a sustained interest in the stories about artists. One of his early projects is *Virtual Love*, based on an unlikely friendship between National Book Award winner Paul Monette's and Tony Johnson, a charismatic 15-year-old fan, which led to the creation of a bestselling memoir of the latter ("Virtual Love"). According to a *Wall Street Journal* report by Mark Myers, Press is also currently working on a film that tells the story about how the owner's obsession with the architect complicated the making of Farnsworth House, an iconic American piece of architecture. Also, despite his repeated claims that he is merely interested in capturing an amazing individual in Cunningham, his continual emphasis on Cunningham's unstinting commitment to creating art for non-material gain, alongside his chronicling of the tenants from Carnegie Hall in the film, suggest a strong alignment with these values, an affinity for artists and a desire to promote them.

Indeed, this attempt to change people's feelings about fashion by aligning it with art is closely linked to the last motivation that Orwell outlined, sheer egoism, or the "desire to seem clever, talked about, to be remembered after death" (O. Dag). Indeed, while Cutler and Press have been largely self-effacing in their remarks about why they created the films, claiming that creating the films had to do with nothing more than the desire to capture compelling individuals, the assumption of the responsibility of adding gravitas and revealing the "true" picture of a previously scorned creative industry denotes a confidence in their ability to change perceptions on some basic level. In fact, in an indirect manner, the way the directors have portrayed and championed fellow creatives and chroniclers as inspiring figures ultimately affirms their work as creators of cultural and aesthetic products, which aligns with the notion that the documentaries were produced as a manifestation of the "sheer egoism" that Orwell refers to.

With these revelations about the directors' multiple motivations, it is pertinent then to reconsider the apparent naturalism and lack of intervention of

the cinéma vérité mode, which both documentaries were filmed in. French for "film truth," it is more often known as the fly-on-the-wall documentary, and is distinguished by its emphasis on minimal intervention from the director, promising an increase in "reality" with its directness, immediacy and impression of capturing untampered events in the everyday lives of people. Some of the pioneers of the cinema verité movement include Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies, High School*), Robert Drew (*Primary, The Chair*) and brothers Albert and David Maylses (*Salesman, Grey Gardens*). The mode also emphasises the use of lightweight camera and sound equipment that make it possible to take them anywhere. Indeed, Carl Plantinga likens the filmmaker of the cinéma vérité mode to "a facilitator, one who self-effacingly records the pro-filmic event in order to re-present it, as is, to the spectator" (112). This lack of interference also lends it authority as an ethnographic tool, allowing for, as Bill Nichols describes in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, "empathetic identification, poetic immersion or voyeuristic pleasure" (43-44).

However, while its minimal intrusion and the emphasis on capturing things "as is" appeals with its seeming naturalism and neutrality, it appears that its realism proves deceptive in light of the directors' multiple motivations, and ultimately serves as a vehicle for these agendas. Certainly, the directors in both films conform largely to the observational documentary's convention of indirect address and the absence of commentary. Similarly, the repeated image of Cunningham in his blue smock exploring the streets for creative dressers reinforces his dedication to his art, while the capturing of exchanges between characters in *The September Issue* appear to show that these are natural and largely unedited occurrences. Nonetheless, this appearance of naturalism is deceptive because as Nichols explains in "History, Myth, and Narrative in Documentary," the cinéma vérité documentary has "traditionally taken an ambivalent position regarding interior states…where the outer surface of the body, including utterances, takes on the charged importance of naturalism" (16). Therefore, this only underscores that documentaries are ultimately close approximations of reality based on images but may not necessarily divulge what the subjects really think, and should thus not be considered definitive portrayals.

In fact, the cinéma vérite's creation of a "reality effect" through recurring images or situations to anchor the film to historical facticity and the continuing centrality of specific locations ultimately masks agendas at hand. This is corroborated by filmmaker and academic Jill Godmilow, who asserts in "Kill the Documentary As We Know It" that all documentaries are by their very nature political in that they describe the real world in a particular way. She explains that while the documentary film implicitly speaks of the world as knowable because it is observable, it is a problematic notion:

> The particular problem with the world-as-knowable idea is that as you're seeing (and theoretically able to be knowing something) about the real world, the film is spinning you into a complicated and subtle relationship with that "knowable" thing, which is informed by specific political, social, and cultural conceits. This relationship to "what you know" is not innocent: it is caught up in a web of ideology, i.e., relationships, attitudes, received ideas about the thing represented (6).

Moreover, other than the filmmaker's own agenda in terms of telling a story, the subjects themselves may very well manipulate the presence of the camera in a way that affects the level of truth and realism in what is chronicled. In *The September Issue*, this is displayed when Coddington reveals that she brings up certain topics in the presence of the camera in order to get her way. In one scene, she says: "I love to talk about money in front of you guys with Anna because it drives her crazy – sure way to get the budget up!" (*The September Issue* 46:45). What's more, the fact that Cutler included reality television elements in his films makes the authenticity of the film even more debatable. As Rose L. Randall and Stacy L. Wood assert in "Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television," while the perceived authenticity in reality television can be seen as simply the lack of production, "such a position ignores the more complex processes of signification as it relates to the construction of authenticity" (10).

Lastly, Godmilow points out in "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?" that documentaries, despite their apparent objectivity, "knit audiences into a community of 'we' – a special community by dint of [their] new knowledge

and compassion" (83), and that they do "seek and expect closure even from documentary films," which goes some way in explaining that there are not only ideological forces at work in documentaries, there may also in fact be audience expectations on how the stories are told, which Godmilow claims "is a difficult thing to deny an audience" (84). This construction of a closure can definitely be seen in *The September Issue*, when Coddington claims her artistic victory, and also in *Bill Cunningham New York*, where after we take a close look at his life, Cunningham is shown going about his work to the film's closing song "I'll Be Your Mirror" by Velvet Underground, reinforcing the image of the tireless artist who continues to be dedicated to his craft.

Thus, as the seeming reliability of the cinema cinéma vérité mode unravels, it is apparent that *The September Issue* and *Bill Cunningham New York*, rather than simply capturing "reality" actually shapes and constructs it according to a set of director-specific agendas. In this case, they both deliver the message that fashion is an artistic form that is worth taking seriously.

A New Myth for Sale

In conclusion, both *The September Issue* and *Bill Cunningham New York* are instrumental in creating a more enlightened and balanced viewpoint by rewriting its myth at a time where the fashion's overarching myth is under threat. However, I would like to suggest that while both films promote a more holistic understanding of fashion, the elevated status it acquires through the documentaries reinforces its mystique and helps it to achieve its primary purpose of selling clothes. This is because its viability as an industry ultimately thrives on hype and the promise of aspiration and exclusivity. As Barthes' puts it:

> Calculating, industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation; Fashion, like all fashions, depends on a disparity of two consciousnesses, each foreign to the other. In order to blunt the buyer's calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object – a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings, a mediate substance

of an aperitive order must be elaborated" (Foreword xi –xii).

In this case, by imbuing the viewer with the impression that they are enlightened consumers of high culture rather than slaves to the accumulation of material goods, what will sell clothes now is the idea of fashion as art.

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