University of the Arts London

PROFESSORIAL PLATFORMS

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1ST DECEMBER 2009

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FASHIONISTAS AND EVERYONE ELSE

"The magic mirror –
the fashionista's world-view
and the rest of humanity's"

London College of Fashion
Rootstein Hopkins Gallery, East Space
University of the Arts London
Tuesday 1st December 2009

Published in England November 2009
ISBN 978-1-906908-07-2

Fashionistas and Everyone Else

This is a tribute to a passing breed of people. A breed of hard-core martyrs: people who've sacrificed practically everything to follow their dream.

What've they sacrificed? Their sanity for a start. In his brilliant 1988 book on fashion-land, *The Fashion Conspiracy*, Nicholas Coleridge begins his chapter on fashion editors by saying, "There are many theories to explain why fashion editors go mad". My own feeling is that if your life is spent listening for Tomorrow Calling, you might just miss out on Today. The list of sacrifices might include love and sex too (Coleridge quotes a retired American editor saying, "to be really, really good at clothes you are not keen on sex").

Certainly you'd miss out on home life as you trudged round the fashion capitals of the world eight times a year. You could miss out on sensible, warm or dignified outerwear in favour of clothing an uncaring world would see as hideous and idiotic. You could ruin your feet.

You'd certainly miss out on confidence and security. If fashion editors are supposed – in the familiar criticism – to create profitable insecurities amongst their readers they usually start with themselves. And as for **job security**, if you live by the sword of Novelty, you'll die by it.

So being a fashionista (and that's the word the world uses now – not just insiders – for people in the most dedicated roles of fashion worship), over the last forty years has been strangely **brave**.

Image courtesy of *Vogue*

But I'm going to argue that the fashionista role is changing so radically, and so fast, we need to recognise what fashionistas – First Generation Fashionistas – have done, and why they did it. And the fact that we won't see their like again.

Why **did** they do it? I like to think that they did it for **you**, for the world. Like sacrificing parents, so that you'd never have to go through what they'd been through. So you'd have your fashion rights. First Generation Fashionistas believe that fashion is pretty much the highest expression of the human spirit (they don't always say it exactly like that, because that'd be to invite mockery, but it's what they feel). Certainly they think that fashion is Art, and that working in it's temples is a calling. And many of them felt that despite all the sacrifices, it gave meaning to their lives, a sort of personal Redemption.

With sacrifice goes **struggle**, and invocation. First Generation Fashionistas, like saints, invoked initially against a Grey World – in Britain at least – of old post-war drabness, and then later against a Gash one, the naff nastiness of so much of real-world 60s and 70s clothing and design.

What they did, obstinate and obsessional as they were, occasionally downright nutty, was to help make fashion a kind of global birthright and, along the way, a massive global business too. But it's always the next generation that cashes in, that takes a social breakthrough or a new technology – something pioneers have struggled with and proselytised for – for granted, as a no-sweat assumption. The natural state of things.

There's been a lot about fashionistas recently, in films and on TV. Most of it fictional, some of it personality-led documentary. All of it perpetuating

a particular idea of fashion-land. None of it exactly investigative; nothing bringing light in on magic.

In Britain we've been set up for this idea of fashion-land since 1992 with the first series of *Abs Fab*, which ran to 2004 (it was the making of the Harvey Nick's national brand). **This year** there's been *The September Issue*, R. J. Cutler's account of the human drama behind the September 2007 issue of *American Vogue*. And *Bruno*, Sasha Baron-Cohen's case of demonic possession as an Austrian/global, gay, roving fashionista.

And back in 2006, before the crunch, there was *The Devil Wears Prada*, which starred a lot of giant brand-name $2,000 bags. The Meryl Streep Miranda Priestly she-devil character in *TDWP*, the editor of 'Runway' magazine, was allegedly based on *American Vogue*'s Anna Wintour. This completely formulaic Hollywood fiction was hugely successful across the world, (it's grossed £326 million so far). It spread the idea of the fashionista role as being every bit as important and glamorous as, say, investment banking sounded twenty years earlier after *Wall Street*. It set up the cinema exhibition market for *The September Issue*. It made a much larger audience for a frankly borderline-boring documentary about women at work.

Earlier this century there were *Ugly Betty* and *Zoolander* – Ben Stiller as an idiotic male model. It's all been celebrating a dated idea of high fashion and its commentariat as mad and grippingly bad – and ultimately a bit sad (the Anne Hathaway character in *TDWP*, Andrea Sachs, leaves the glamour of 'Runway' magazine to work on an obscure literary magazine. She goes back to her modest sous-chef boyfriend).

Anna and Grace, front row
Image courtesy of *The September Issue*

The fashionista world these films describe is ragingly, idiotically self-referential. A snobby hermetically sealed circuit of fashion capitals and fashion faces. A world of wicked divas – White Queens and Cruella de Vils – and extravagantly gay men. A world away from the home life of ordinary people (or for that matter from the life of our own dear Queen, who said so memorably that '***taste***' – the elusive essence, the magical skill-set of First Generation Fashionistas (FGFs), the thing that makes life worth living, *The Eye* – '***doesn't really help***'. It's one of the great quotes of all time). But for FGFs, taste really did help. They've devoted their lives to it.

Anyway, that's the way fashion-land, or more particularly fashion-media-land, has been presented recently. So anyone outside *Oz* might reasonably think fashionistas' lives were really like that. The truth is that it's describing a vanishing world. When film and TV seize on a milieu to describe it's usually moved on; they end up re-working a previous generation's clichés.

In *The Devil Wears Prada* things don't even look right either. It's deliberate of course. If you're selling a big Hollywood film across the world from mud huts to igloo country you can't represent the nuanced reality of High Manhattan class and aesthetics. Anyone comparing the Hollywood *TDWP* version with *The September Issue* will have noticed that the *TDWP* cast and sets are conventionally young, pretty and shiny. The real thing, as real high fashion people all know, is always much more 'knocked back', meaning a bit borderline drab for lay taste. It needs insider decoding. The **real** FGF look isn't about prettiness or 'sexiness'. That's banal, even common, for serious FGSs.

The FGF vocabulary is about quite different things. They don't ask first if a dress is 'pretty' or 'sexy' ('sexy' actually means something **quite** different in fashion-land), nor even class-correct or durable. They ask whether it's **directional**. They interrogate its **references** – as in, 'Giles Deacon did that in 2006', where it's come from **as an idea**. Serious fashionista semantics are utterly different. They're much closer, so I'd suggest, to the language of upscale religious experience or to the 'narrative' of contemporary art.

The gods those early fashionistas sacrificed themselves to were the Geniuses, the inspirational Artists/Designers that the top fashionistas discovered, promoted and worshiped. And, like Karl Lagerfeld and the Old Testament prophets, they love the idea of being able to **read** the future from fashion (as Bevis Hillier said in his obituary of the fashion historian James Laver, 'he saw sermons in stoles').

You can see that I'm working up to the idea of a **sisterhood** here – one that includes some men of course – which is wildly different from the rest of humanity. In the opening frames of *The September Issue*, Anna Wintour says, "there's something about fashion that can make people very nervous". And how right she was. Fashion makes all sorts of people nervous and critical, or dismissive. And nowhere more than in this country, which has only recently moved from a verbal culture to a visual one.

We all know what people say about fashion-land – and the 'higher' the fashion the more they say it – about it being silly and extravagant, a Marie Antoinette affair. It's either the extravagance of people with more money than sense, or it's a way of exploiting ordinary people's

Anna Wintour in R. J. Cutler's *The September Issue*
(Photo Credit *A & E Indie Films*)

insecurities for supernormal profits. What they don't say – the big unacknowledged theme – is the idea that fashion – like, say, interior decoration – can't be quite first division for them because it's the province of women and gay men. So not a patch on banking.

It's changing now, of course. The social status of fashion, like cooking, has been on the move for twenty-five years, since designers started to make serious money. But FGF's grew up in a world where fashion and visual culture generally was still more of a **cause**.

For some little babyboomer girls, fashion was a bit like the earlier appeals of the ballet. "Everything was beautiful in the ballet". And as for the boys, those brave Billy Elliot boys, the statuary gay character in *TDWP*, Nigel, the art director of 'Runway' magazine, speaks for them. "Magazines like 'Runway'", he says, "were a beacon for the boys who were reading it under the covers when they should've been at football practice". So we have this idea of early fashion-land as a cult and a cause, and a sort of refuge for talented misfits … A sort of church.

Once you pick up on this church theme, you find it absolutely everywhere. In *The September Issue*, a character – I mean a real person of course, it's confusing – says, "you belong to the church and Anna is its High Priestess". In the 2007 documentary *Lagerfeld Confidential*, Karl Lagerfeld says, "your film-maker says I look like a priest", meaning his current extraordinary high white collar look. He obviously likes the idea.

Lagerfeld does a fair bit of myth-making about fashion exceptionalism in the film. His best ideas, so he says, "come from dreams". And he pushes back against the familiar criticisms. "To do the job", he says, "you must

be able to accept social injustice. Fashion is ephemeral , dangerous and unfair". He's setting up for a fight, positively daring the audience to whinge about privilege and elitism.

And then he goes on to set out two of the key beliefs of hard-core FGFs everywhere. "I was prepared to make any sacrifice – but never any compromise", and, "I love the Futurism aspect of it". Real FGFs are neophiliacs of course. Purists. They see pastiches and polite re-workings as compromise. And they always used to believe that responding to the market, trimming to mass taste and, worst of all, doing market research was … **fatal**. Listening to people 'Out There' meant stifling creativity.

Did Monsieur Worth say things like this? Charles Frederick Worth was the Lincolnshire draper's clerk who became the 19th Century Paris 'father of haute couture'. He established the **business model** of the international couture house with a brand that attracted English toffs, American plutocrats and celebrities. Worth was in the business of reflecting wealth and status, making flattering clothes that made actresses look grander and duchesses prettier. When he looked for inspiration in Art he looked – like so many nineteenth century applied artists – to the past. A flourish from a Gainsborough stunner's outfit here, or something from an Art Pompier historic recreation there.

Worth was certainly in the branding business, but the Worth brand didn't have the High Concept Artist-designer overtones top designers have now. Like High Victorian painting, what mattered was material and detailed execution, the **comme il faut** and **savoir faire** side of things, flattery and class correctness, and the idea of Second Empire Paris as the world capital of luxury.

The idea of high fashion as high art and even agent for social change rather than just the reflection of it – meaning a corps of commentators who could feel their job was as important as, say, editing *Encounter*, had to wait until the 20s and 30s. For the high profile ideas of Elsa Schiaparelli, collaborator and peer of the Shocking Surrealists with her shoe hats and lobster dresses, and Coco Chanel and the idea of liberation for 1920s New Women achieved with versatile unstructured clothes (the familiar 'Chanel Suit' archetype is, of course, just about the most bourgeois uptight 80s symbol you could imagine now. It's the maddening mother-in-law outfit).

But it was in the 60s, the crucial formative years for the FGFs, that the whole thing really hit a rolling boil with the idea of a great demotic alliance of music, fashion, drugs and politics. David Bailey famously said that the 60s really only happened for a few hundred people in London. But there were a lot more looking and learning, cooking up their particular kind of liberation theology with the idea that the more youthful and **anti-bourgeois** a fashion idea the more glorious, the more utterly NOW it could be. **My Generation**.

A lot of this, of course, was wonderfully unfocussed, it wasn't exactly about wealth redistribution, which was hard-fought dangerous stuff, but about the politics of the personal, which was much more inclusive. In particular, it was about the idea of the Generation Gap, which meant baby-boomers of all classes *seemed* – it was always illusory – to have something in common. Their common cause was their difference from their war-depressed parents and their role as pioneers of new kinds of consumption and self-expression. Fashion was important because it was

part of that big idea, it expressed the sacred roles of 'teenagers' (© 1947) or the later blander phrase 'young people'.

So commenting on 'high' or 'fast' fashion could become something massively more important than 'trade' reporting or social puffs. It could be Creative, it could be a kind of curating, and it could be a kind of social analysis. In the late 60s and through the 70s it became all these things as the great London Art Schools developed departments of fashion with full Professors, places which built amazing reputations for producing British Genius Artist Designers. At the same time, departments of sociology and related disciplines were starting to churn out dissertations on popular culture and consumption, analyses which saw important social statements in the choice of a skirt or a shirt. Analyses which said that consuming fashion was a massive generational and tribal marker. Buying clothes wasn't necessarily passive or 'conformist', it could be the opposite. The young buyer could buy and combine and wear clothes in a knowing, expressive way that was 'subversive' (a key word in this kind of writing). It meant they ran rings around any exploitative intentions the 'fashion conspiracy' had on them. They re-worked or re-combined styles and symbols that were meant to be taken as read. Girls in Ra-Ra skirts with Doc Martens. Oh Bondage up yours.

Now I'm not saying First Generation Fashionistas spent these formative years reading quadruple-footnoted socio-bongo dissertations written by people who wouldn't know a Gucci loafer if you'd hit them around the chops with it. Many weren't that verbal. I simply mean that the 60s climate of opinion could make a generation re-evaluate the importance of *The Eye* and turn it, in combination with the expanding job of fashion commentary, into the altogether magical idea of *The Stylist*.

The business of styling a fashion photograph, at a time when a new generation of fashion photographers were more ambitious and less studio bound, was what you made it. And the FGFs were often their own stylists. They made a lot of it. The editor-stylists obviously chose the clothes and accessories. (Not necessarily the location – the photographic big idea might be about the setting). They directed the make-up and hair people to see they got the idea. And they fiddled and twiddled the clothes – the way they were pinned and clipped, worn and accessorised – and made those increasingly original juxtapositions to give everyone something new, something they hadn't expected. And that something new could be a Big Idea, accessed through a little story.

The House Mother of FGF stylists, Caroline Baker, the legendary fashion editor of *Nova* in the late 60s, described her approach to a fashion blogger (more about them below) this year. Her emphasis was on the young and demotic, "my style became known as STREET STYLE, reflecting the fashion on the people rather than from the Paris Couturiers", and on the campaigning. "I was a little feminist in my beliefs and wanted to change the way women dressed – to dress for themselves and not just as female dolls for men".

And then she talked about taking ideas from technology and unfashiony kinds of clothes, "sports and outdoor clothing was another source of ideas – and then underwear as outerwear". Baker was hugely influential, the girls in *Vogue* and the boys in the band all noticed and internalised this idea of an altogether bigger role and a bigger impact. You could do a **lovely** job – lovely in the sense of dealing with exciting, famous Beautiful People, being at the centre of things – and still be in the vanguard of progress. You were moving the world on, no question. But

in the Sixties and well into the Seventies regular fashion styling was overwhelmingly print based. It was either 'Alternative' – meaning hand-to-mouth – or it was what the fashion-editors did themselves, all part of the job. It wasn't that well paid, either. At the time.

In *The September Issue*, Grace Coddington, Creative Director at *US Vogue*, someone who **everyone** in fashion-land acknowledges happily as a 'visionary' fashion editor/stylist, is seen on her knees, pinning. She tells the camera that she's probably the last fashion editor left who pins and tucks herself but then, so she says, she's old-fashioned. For the FGFs, *styling* – which could, of course, have been the biggest job on the shoot – used to be all in a day's work. The zealous business of Intellectual Property, credits and buyouts barely existed then.

There were compensations. If FGFs didn't always get the acknowledgement or the money they deserved, they did get to develop what Marilyn Bender, in her pioneering book on the 60s glamour trades *The Beautiful People*, (1967), described as 'the taste of duchesses'. And while they were in the job they could indulge it. Designers gave them things or allowed them to borrow them. So they could develop fantastic wardrobes in their tiny flats. And they **travelled** like mad. To collections and on the shoots to exotic places (half the work was finding airlines and hotels who'd discount heavily for a big credit).

And **they were there**, in the post *Blow-Up* world of photographers, models, designers and the occasional celebrity. It was enviable work even if it didn't make them famous and even if you needed a supplementary Trust Fund to live at all comfortably (some smart fashion girls did have some money of their own, or at least a family house or flat

in a smart central London area. It meant the employers could pay them even less!).

But chief amongst life's compensations for **serious** fashionistas was going to the collections, with the prospect of one day sitting in the front row with the line-up of FGF icons. With Anna and Grace, Suzy and André, Hamish and the other front row queens. Following on from Diana (Vreeland) and Carmel (Snow), the great lady survivors of a pre-war world (in the 70s and 80s fashion started to recognise its past, the dissertation divas moved on to high fashion).

Even then the FGFs didn't have the front row completely to themselves. The odd real A-list film star, Princess, aristocratic muse or super-plutocrat big customer was always there too. But they weren't dominant as they became later, where the celebrity claque was all that mattered, the focus for the publicity, tied in to the Oscars and the Golden Globes and every lookalike event around the world (events where the stars were interviewed about who they were wearing before anything else). Star endorsements have a long history, particularly in America, but the older designers were snobby about them and didn't want to be swamped (or to upstage their loyal supporters for a promoted soap star).

There are two other things people have noticed about those classic FGFs. First, like nuns and widows, they wore an awful lot of black. Even when they were exhorting the world to do that year's version of Think Pink, those ladies were in black. And like Dame Edna Everage, they seemed genetically blessed with an extraordinary collective hair colour. Was there ever such a group of red-lipped (the Paloma Picasso cohort) flame-haired temptresses. It's in this group, this generation, that you get the

Image courtesy of *Vogue*

first pioneer FGF Boys too, the first group of men to sign up for the full-time, full-on fashion commentariat. André Leon Tally and Hamish Bowles of *Vogue*, Michael Roberts (now on *Vanity Fair*). The scholarly Colin McDowall. The first boy fashionistas were often epically OTT, making a point. In *The September Issue*, André Leon Tally – a very big man, who used to occupy two little gilt chairs by himself – is seen dragging his fur tippet round his shoulders and moaning about the modern world, "It's a famine of beauty, honey".

So here we've got a line-up, a generation, 'our crowd'. People who still believe in the new, but aren't one hundred percent new themselves now. People who believed – sort of – in the demotic youth quake idea but are forced to keep rather smart company. People who believe, like Karl, you shouldn't compromise. People whose role has been to discover and foster Genius, to help make pictures so original and compelling they'll be collected in ten years. All completely wonderful.

So why am I saying we won't see their like again? The Great magazine brands will always be there, no matter what the platform (on-line and on film as well). And fashion is everywhere now. It's practically taken over the world. In those mud huts and igloos, people can recognise a raft of designer names and logos. 'Luxury brands' have been democratised, hugely scaled-up, sold in shopping centres across Asia and Eastern Europe. And cheap fast fashion – *Top Shop*, *Zara* and *H&M* – is amazingly un-naff now; well-made, really fast and absolutely accessible. Practically everyone above the breadline has their Fashion Rights now. There's good stuff at every level. Fashion has moved from specialist to generalist, from dedicated pages to every page. It's on TV and on-line. Women buy

expensive brands on-line, and they read about fashion on-line. The TV coverage remains mostly awful, (the British TV values of 'balance' and 'inclusiveness' don't serve fashion well, so there's a lot about finding cheap things for plain people).

And fashion has cross-bred with celebrity culture. Tom Ford may have worried about how to stop Victoria Beckham wearing his clothes when he was at *Gucci*, but now they're all tremendously matey now. And look at Lindsay Lohan's new role at *Ungaro*.

There are more fashionistas around, and they're different. They're Thatcher's children of course, working in a different, more careerist way, wise to the ideas of global markets and Intellectual Property. A stylist isn't just a nice girl with an eye who's happy to start on less than £20,000 a year, or work as a freelance for a few hundred a day. She's a businesswoman with an office near Old Street, with a gang of assistants and a global practice – advertising, music promos, events, awards; there's a lot more to be styled – who'll be on £5-10 thousand a day.

Not exactly back room boys and girls either. They're Gok Wan, Trinny and Susannah, screen-based creatures, self-branded to high heaven.

And out there, squeaking and bleeping away, there's a new generation of fashionistas – the Fashion Bloggers. Part fan-mag, part confessional, celebrity-driven from the start, their world isn't so much the art school or the couture atelier or even those imaginery 'streets', it's the world of Gossip Girl and Lipstick Jungle. There's Tavi from Chicago who describes herself as, "a tiny 13-year old dork that sits inside all day wearing

awkward jackets and pretty hats". And Bryanboy from Manilla. And you know they've both been adopted by the brands, taken up already with these front row seats the FGFs waited so long for.

We are where we are. And a whole generation of FGFs worked **tirelessly** to help get us there. I'm not sure it's **exactly** what they intended. But as we begin to see them clearly, they emerge as a positive Mount Rushmore of achievement, the people who've helped fashion get recognition as art, and as a massively important business. Driven by a weird vocation rather than planned on a critical path, they don't quite compute, but practically everyone here – and out there, in Shanghai and Moscow – owes them an awful lot.