



Image: Presentation of the collection of Christian Dior in Paris, 1954

THE LUXURY OF TRUTH

With luxury brands enlisting documentaries to engage audiences tuning out of traditional advertising, how do filmmakers and brands successfully balance creativity with commerce? **Georgina Wilson-Powell** reports

Since 2009's *The September Issue*, the behind-the-scenes documentary on *Vogue*, there has been a raft of luxury fashion, jewellery and retail brands jumping on the 'heritage' bandwagon. One of the latest is Frederic Tcheng's *Dior and I*, a lovingly crafted low-key look at Raf Simon's first couture collection as Creative Director at Dior in 2012. Simon had just eight weeks to make his impression on not only the front row but also a team of over 100 seamstresses working for the Parisian atelier, some of whom had worked at Dior for four decades.

Variety reviewed it favourably, noting: "As carefully crafted as the clothes is Tcheng's well-considered direction, privileging the creative process over stereotyped glamour or backstabbing." As did *The Times*: "The most interesting element about the documentary *Dior and I*... is the insight we get into the process and the skilled artists in the atelier that elevates this above the standard fashion hagiography."

Compare this to the many scathing reviews of Matthew Miele's *Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's*, a 2013 documentary showcasing the famous New York luxury department store. "A fawning, attention-deficit infomercial of a documentary," said *The Guardian*. "The whole thing feels like a dreary 94-minute advert," laments *Time Out*.

Arguably, hiring a director and a film crew can be a gamble for a brand's reputation. Watching *Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's* is a dizzying experience. The focus is on the brand and what it means to people (with an implication that

you should care about what they think, as they are socialites and celebrities), rather than Tcheng's open, honest recording of the ups and down, fights, frowns and camaraderie at one of the last ateliers in the world.

Tcheng cut his fashion teeth on Matt Tyrnauer's *Valentino: The Last Emperor* as a co-editor. While *Dior and I* and *Valentino: The Last Emperor* couldn't be more different, (*Valentino* is a flashy, gossipy rollercoaster ride, with a designer happy to perform for the cameras), both documentaries lead with the personal rather than the brand.

"On *Valentino*, that was a big discussion, how do we make this a universal story? How do we make people relate to this personally, not just as fashion entertainment?" Says Tcheng.

In *Dior and I*, the only talking heads come from within Dior. There is no outside opinion of the brand and very little context. It is what's going on inside the atelier that is the story, not the atelier itself.

"Keep brand screen time to an absolute minimum, otherwise the audience feels it has been tricked and switches off," says Christian Gill, a film producer who has worked on a range of documentaries for brands such as Bulgari, Swarovski, Louis Vuitton and Dolce & Gabbana.

What one gets from Tcheng in *Dior and I* is subtly observant empathy. He spent nine months editing scenes that balance an echo of Christian Dior's

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legacy under a new modern director, the seamstresses' *joi de vivre*, and the shy protagonist's last-minute terror of facing his first Dior front row. For the latter, there are tears. The result is an insight into the world of fashion wrapped with human stories.

“From the beginning I was interested in putting the seamstresses on equal footing with the designers. It's an ensemble cast and an encounter between the forward looking designer and the traditional based artisans,” explains Tcheng.

Making the audience care

This crafting of a story is integral to a successful brand-focused documentary, says Gill. “All brands think audiences are desperate to know about their product. In reality audiences rarely care. That's why making interesting, beautiful documentary films help brands come across as authentic and with integrity. Once you have the interest of the viewers, they remember your brands in a better light.”

Equally important is determining in pre-production what the expectations are on both the brand and director's side. “The best way for brands to get involved is to allow the director to have a research period before a job in which they can look for a story,” says Gill. “Too many brands, and even creative directors at agencies feel the need to participate in the direction of the film, but they should have already had their discussion over how the product works. They should then be as hands-off as possible to allow the director (whom they have chosen, and like the style of) to do their work.”

Tcheng was partially protected by a French law that gives creative authority to the filmmaker. He also clarified what Dior expected from the film prior to the shoot. “I was very conscious of that in the beginning and I worked extra hard to make sure the film was a personal and human story. It wasn't a brand story because I don't know how to make those films. I make films about real people because that what interests me.”

The fact that films like *The September Issue* and *Dior and I* have been released at the cinema indicates how our engagement with brands has changed.

“As the media landscape has changed with the decreasing power of TV in the face of multiple platform online, so the audience's relationship with advertising has evolved,” explains Gill. “Documentary-style films will suggest a brand has more integrity and authenticity than aspirational or hard-product-sale driven advertising. This approach allows the brand to borrow some of the authenticity that is associated with this style of filmmaking.”

The popularity for brand-related documentaries ties to how individuals interact with films and fashion. In general, people want to be seen as knowledgeable, authentic and of interest to social media peers. Sharing content allows the leveraging all of those things – but it also contributes to a brand's success.

“You can see why the documentary – historically a vehicle to deliver information in a non-partisan way – is becoming so interesting to brands,” says Gill. ♦