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 It shows a peculiar kind of confidence, a certainty borne of something other than the stature of her business, that Miuccia Prada appears so emphatic about the things she does not do. ‘I never touch the clothes,’ she says. ‘I never drape anything. I am not able to draw.’ We haven’t been talking long when this happens, this stream of denial, which at first makes little sense – Miuccia being the designer who turned her family firm from a parochial manufacturing concern into arguably the most famous name in fashion.

Hearing all this in Prada’s HQ is a little like a detective story, a Noir in which you, the investigator, will come to realise that nothing here happens quite as you suspect, and none of your previous assumptions will assist you. Things are different on the other side of the mirror.

Stepping off Milan’s Via Bergamo and into what – depending on your point of view – is either fashion’s Death Star or Emerald City is a journey not just of physical space but also a leap of the imagination. What unfolds requires that you must open your mind, but also keep your wits about you. When it comes to telling the story of how all this came and continues to be, the woman at its centre, known to most as Mrs Prada, is nothing if not an expert witness.

‘You know I never look at how people is dressed?’ says Mrs Prada. I had ventured that this was not an easy meeting to dress for – and this is how she counters. ‘I’m interested in people. So how they dress? I don’t care... Out of respect to the person, to check the clothing is a kind of violence.’ Checking the models for her shows? ‘One of my worst moments... I am completely ashamed in looking too carefully at people.’ Ashamed? ‘Yes – ashamed.’

It is with a mixture of emotions then that one notes what she is wearing: a denim coat and headband that are a simultaneously understated but tangibly authoritative combination, and a pair of black sandals adorned with clusters of what looks like clear costume jewellery but which might, for all I know, be the crown jewels of some vanished empire.

She is slight in stature but the energy she transmits, the pace of her speech, the range and connection of the concepts she conveys – to say she was smart wouldn’t begin to cover it. As the conversation continues there are times when I feel like someone who thought they were an accomplished chess player being gradually undone by a microprocessor that’s always several thousand moves ahead.

It’s said that the fashion industry is low on humour, but that is not the feeling here. The lift that leads to Mrs Prada’s floor is one of the smallest you could imagine. ‘For sure,’ says the Prada executive crammed in there alongside me, using air that might prove vital were it to get jammed. ‘Even the lifts are size zero.’

We meet in a room largely unadorned. The office where she designs, where she says ‘I have stuff around, materials, pictures’, remains unseen. At times she goes into great detail about her process, how past collections and a future one came into being – but then asks that these things not be mentioned. Again, it is only later that you come to see how even her arguments, like her products, are things of quite precise construction. You feel good about what you’ve heard not simply for its own sake but also because it is implicitly not for everyone.

So when one of the defining visionaries of contemporary style says she’d prefer not to look at people’s appearances too closely, how, one wonders, does she go about designing for them? ‘The CONCEPT,’ she answers, ‘the IDEA!’ These, she explains, are at the crux of things. To imagine that she sits down to consider the nature of a specific item is, she says, a categorical misunderstanding of the whole affair. ‘First is the idea. After, I do the design according to the idea – and of course the piece has to express the process I have in mind. But if it’s appealing or not on a body actually doesn’t interest me very much.’

Aesthetic value, beauty, style – these are a kind of afterthought then? ‘I know everybody wants to be beautiful, so sometimes I try to make it slightly more appealing,’ she concedes. It’s as if

the immense commercial success of the company were simply a billion-dollar side effect of her own imaginative rigour.

If she sees somebody in the street wearing Prada? ‘I tend not to look, because it embarrasses me. If it was beautiful I’m afraid that I see it was not beautiful *enough*. One of the reasons I don’t go into my shops is because I am scared what I see is not according to my fantasy of what I have in mind [and if] I don’t feel it, it makes me suffer.’ Suffer? ‘Yes. Very much.’ Physically? ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

Here then is one of the many contradictions sold so charismatically through much of what she says. The concepts she develops have nothing to do with clothes necessarily (fashion, she says later, is ‘my instrument’). Whether those clothes ‘work’ is not a priority (at the conceptual stage). But if she should witness them out in the world and find them wanting? Disaster. For a moment I imagine her like a disappointed deity, looking down on their creations, never entirely satisfied. Prada though makes God look lazy. He took six days to make the world, then rested. She’s putting on six shows every year.

For all that output and despite such evident success, she never, she says, resorts to trying to guess what people want. ‘No, no, no. Absolutely not. Because it doesn’t work. First of all it’s impossible. Only once in my career I did a show and listened to some advice at the beginning and I felt so bad and it was such a disaster for me that I said, “No way.” So. Never again. So I have to do what I feel is right in general. Also I don’t think any success of anybody came about by a marketing or a merchandising thing. Any Prada success came from pure idea of something that is good. Never from a commercial need. After, we sell a lot of commercial stuff, but at the end, the real success is always something that’s an original idea.’

But you, when you sit down and think about what’s next...

‘Oh, no, no, no. [I am] Completely free.’

Here, as elsewhere, freedom is a relative concept. For all the seemingly divergent interests

'I make the men more sweet and the women more powerful to balance what is usual in life'

of the business, from the array of items that bear its name and the names of the other brands it has either started or acquired, to the arts and projects made through its 'Fondazione', Prada insists there are strict parameters to what she does.

'I am not working as an artist. I am working as a fashion designer, so I think about fashion and what to wear. So in a way I think about commerce. I like the idea of commerce very much because it's where you prove that what you are doing is meaningful. However good, more or less, my stuff is, it's meant to wear.' But you say you don't consider that when you're designing? 'True – but probably I have deeply in my mind that this is the job that I am doing. So it seems like a contradiction, but it's not.'

Imbued then with a sense of mission so subconscious that she can forget the sartorial endgame, she is free when blending ideas to form concepts and take inspiration from wherever she chooses. 'Fantasy' is a word she comes back to all the time, by which (I think) she means an imaginary narrative that is a conscious process, both for her as creator and even down the line for the (seemingly) disconnected customer. 'Not dreams!' she stresses. 'I do not like this word. My fantasies are about the lives of people. So I think about people – not about a body. But about people as a life, like a story. So I am doing clothes for people, for a life to live with those clothes. And how a dress can help you have a fantasy in your own life.'

Does she prefer designing for women? 'Yes. Because in fashion men are limited. I like to enlarge a little bit, but not in a way that becomes ridiculous or so exaggerated that it becomes a joke. Actually, to have an idea for the men I have to think about women, because there are more possibilities. And after, I try to reduce to the possibility of a man. So there are little things that could become, by the time [the item's finished], really kind of normal. But if you do exaggeration it becomes a joke or a provocation, and that I don't like. Because I am a woman, my fantasies are more about women. When I do clothes and I really don't have an answer, I think, if I would be a man, what would I like to wear? So I try to imagine myself as a man.'

So in case of emergency, break gender? She smiles at that, but in a way that suggests she's allowing an over-simplification. 'I imagine myself

into character,' she explains. 'Inside I am acting. When I really don't know the answer in my bed in the morning I think and I start fantasising. When I don't have an answer the only way is imagining myself. So if I would be a man, what would I wear? And that comes only when I have few ideas, when I am desperate – the only way to have ideas is to really be in myself and launch my imagination.'

How often do you get desperate?

'Not so often – thank God – once every two years.'

Talk of men's fashion leads to talk of how poorly most politicians (who of course are mostly men) seem to dress. 'In antiquity – much better!' she laughs, 'and they used the clothes better.' Democracy seems to place stylistic limits on its leaders. Dictators – who aren't worried about re-election – seem to go to the other extreme. 'It's a very interesting subject,' says Prada. 'It's true, when power used to be "power" and not democratic, they used appearances a lot. Now not.'

There are exceptions though. 'Look at the Pope,' she says. 'He's still very able to show the power with those clothes. Completely wrong in a way, but effective. But now this is something of the past. But it's interesting.' Could it be that the accessories of antique power, crowns and sceptres and the like, have been replaced by secular, populist alternatives – her own products? Apparently not.

'That I hate,' she says emphatically. 'I believe that dressing tells a lot about you – but in completely different ways. You dress punk, you dress aggressive, more naked or more grand... so you can use the clothes also to have fantasy. I once read a book or an essay that said about the importance of fashion: it said that the deeper need of people is for changes – and the clothes is probably one change you really can do.'

Well it's a change we can control.

'So. We can choose changes, probably in a little way – but probably this is a reflection of that.'

We all have good and bad days in the mirror.

'For sure. When you feel good, it's a better day. Mainly for women but probably also for men.'

Do the men's and the women's designs all come from one main concept? 'Yes. Of course the men limit, but sometimes I try to make the

men more sensitive and more open to beauty, and women more powerful – I try to make the men more sweet and the women more powerful – to balance what is usually in life, no?'

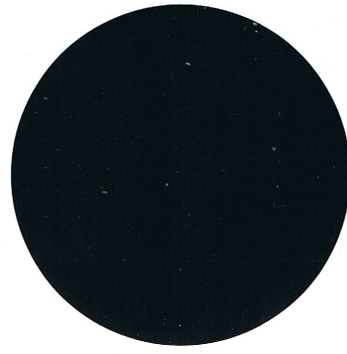
Talk of power and clothing brings up the idea of uniforms: the Italian police, I venture, have much more adventurous uniforms than their British equivalents. Again, she frowns benignly. 'In England, usually with uniforms you are good, because you have the Queen, the King, the people outside the palazzo... There is a tradition, a great tradition in dressing in England, much more than in Italy.'

You think? Most people would have it the other way around. 'Oh yes. I never really thought about it, but I think you see more – when England ruled the world and they used a lot of that instrument [clothing] in other countries, the appearances were very important to control the power – until recently. Can you imagine instead of beautiful horses, beautiful uniforms, they wear just trash? The controlled country probably wouldn't be fearful. You have to have the fear of the power, no?'

I mention the Romans as the potential forefathers of that technique and she shakes her head. 'That's too much past.' But it's to do with power, colour. 'Absolutely. But now that's not used as power; but could be used as fantasy.'

Later, I wonder if this is maybe how she interprets fashion: an imaginative adventure in symbols that once had real meaning; modern clothing as a therapeutic re-enactment of the rituals of older power. I suspect that, as with most things, what you suspect her of thinking is some way from what is really going on. For the moment though, the recurring theme is fantasy. 'People who like fashion like fantasy, probably, no? They like to transform themselves in a character, or at least I see this a lot. They deal in character and stories. You can't live them, but maybe in your fantasy you can live stories different from your own.'

Escapism: that seems like a pertinent link to mention her involvement with costumes for the recent *Gatsby* movie. Instead she raises her hand at the mention of it as though she might be stopping traffic. 'I tend to avoid too-famous references. I prefer to invent my own fantasies that are much more complicated.' *Continued on p461*



TANGERINE DREAM



Continued from *p355*

It's an intriguing proposition she is suggesting here. Elaborate, almost indecipherable fantasies distilled into an arena of huge commercial expectations. There must be moments when she worries that the fantasies might not translate? These are substantial acts of creative transubstantiation she's describing. Ones that have to be performed several times a year.

'I feel a lot of pressure,' she says. 'I'm very scared. Because you present yourself to the press. I care a lot. I feel pressure. I feel fear. I feel everything. And I think it's good because that's what drives me. If I didn't do the shows probably I wouldn't work so much. No, no. I care a lot.'

Does she think she's a perfectionist?

'Yes. No. No one asked me ever. I never thought of myself as a perfectionist but in fact I am. Probably a horrible perfectionist. Ha!' But there's no creativity in perfectionism *per se*; she's maybe more of an idealist, albeit a deadly serious one. 'Yes, yes,' she smiles, 'that is much better.'

It's a great notion, that an elaborate series of sources and inspirations can be united into a concept that's in turn legible in the pieces that are sold. If it works, there's a kind of magical telepathy to it, the purchase being the prism between Prada's fantasy and your own. 'That is the good thing,' she concurs. 'They relate to what you're doing. They have the same fantasies.' And if someone is buying Prada just to be fashionable? A stormy look descends. 'Fashionable is not something you want to aspire to. It's kind of an insult... To be fashionable is too easy.' This might come as a surprise to some of her customers, but after more than an hour in her company I think I know what she means. Everything that comes out of here is borne of hard work.

In the end, perhaps this is her grandest fantasy: that a business on this scale survives through methods more magical than marketed. Either way, fantasy is often defined as imagination unrestricted by reality. Leaving Prada – the woman and the building – you get the sense that seldom have the two been quite so thoroughly entwined. ●