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"I'm Ready For My Close-Up Now": *Grey Gardens* and the Presentation of Self

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By now *Grey Gardens* is a classic. Opening to mixed reviews in 1976, the documentary has since been adapted to Broadway and into a television feature; it has inspired pop songs and received a sequel. The story of Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter Edie has spread through a variety of media to an array of contemporary audiences. When *Grey Gardens* first came out, it was met with accusations of unethical filmmaking and inauthenticity. The directors David and Albert Maysles were blamed for framing the Beales in a manner that took advantage of the women and presented them in an inopportune light (Vogels 140, 146). This paper seeks to distance *Grey Gardens* from these accusations and to outline the remarkable system of presenting a self the documentary offers.

The criticism directed toward *Grey Gardens* as well as other direct documentaries stems from the controversial rhetoric the filmmakers themselves used to define their practice (Winston 42; Vogels 148–149). The notorious claims of being more truthful and more objective resulted in a backlash that pointed out the complex ethical issues inherent in the direct cinema practice. The rhetoric of authenticity laid the films bare for harsh criticism. In response, scholars have decontextualized *Grey Gardens* from the bounding discourse of authenticity, and repositioned the film within discussions of modernist structure and the participatory aspects of documentary filmmaking.

Taking a stance against the critics of *Grey Gardens*, Kenneth Robson foregrounds the narrative structure of the piece and its relationship to the two women's lives. Robson describes the lives of the Beales as "a series of discontinuous takes or rehearsals" (44) that never add up to a full performance. Accordingly, the film resists a linear structure that would present the viewer with a clear trajectory and closure. Paraphrasing Ellen Hovde, the editor of the film with Susan Froemke and Muffie Meyer, Robson posits the film as a crystal formation, a solid arrangement simultaneously reflecting multiple facets, interpretations and experiences of the women's lives (Robson 53; Rosenthal 383). In Robson's (43) mind, the convoluted fragmentary scenes of *Grey Gardens* encourage a comparison to the modernist cadence of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

All the while supporting Robson's modernist impetus, Jonathan B. Vogels (125, 130) places the emphasis on the self-reflexivity of *Grey Gardens*. In Vogels' approach, Albert Maysles' camerawork and the deliberate inclusion of the filmmakers themselves within the film's setting speaks of an unforeseen participatory methodology in the movement's frame. Vogels (136) speaks of the Maysles' as supporting characters in their own film, and points out the significant role the three editors had in the making of the film. In his view, *Grey Gardens* cultivates an openness that

contributes to a sensibility quite uncommon in the direct cinema movement: the editors and the Beales are equally the film's makers.

Robson and Vogels bring forth some of the singular qualities of *Grey Gardens* by respectively foregrounding the film's formalist take on the ordered disorder of the women's lives and the participatory structure of the piece. They turn the focus to the film itself in order to consider how it stands on its own two feet, so to speak. In general, turning to the films themselves tells of an effort to refresh the direct cinema movement historically and to understand its theoretical outlines beyond the self-imposed rhetorical bounds.

However, even the most nuanced and elaborated analyses of *Grey Gardens* have not settled their relationship to the discursive premises they work to decontextualize the film from. Even Jonathan B. Vogels uses such phraseology as "revealing their true characters" (134), thus enhancing the initial presumption that there is indeed a character more true than the other to be revealed. To this background, the paper dissociates itself from the context of authenticity and instead elaborates on the question of presenting a self within the axis of framing and performing. Edie describes the complexity of the dynamics befittingly when she tells the brothers: "You don't see me as I see myself. But you're very good, what you see me as. I mean it's okay." In *Grey Gardens*, the divergence between the Maysles' framing the women and the Beales presenting themselves is composed, above all, in the relations between the camera, speech, and the women's gestures and facial expressions.

A Laboratory of the Soul

Grey Gardens portrays the lives of Edith and Edie in a highly intimate manner. Retired from socialite New York City, the two women live their lives in a ramshackle East Hampton mansion in isolation from the rest of the community. Overgrown vegetation walls off their house, and the odd visitor is outnumbered by the cats and raccoons that share the house with the women. The way the Beales live their lives raised questions about their competence to deal with filming and resulted in accusations of intrusion to their private space.

The criticism that rests on the dual presupposition that people like the Beales are not capable of presenting themselves on film and that authenticity can only be achieved with an objective distance to the film's subjects misses the exceptional dramaturgy of the Beales presenting themselves and the Maysles' rendition of it. *Grey Gardens* consists of dramatic scenes of interaction in which both the Beales and the Maysles' negotiate their respective roles and strategies. In *Grey Gardens*, the Beales project images of themselves and the Maysles capture and express the received impressions.

The sociologist Erving Goffman provides apt tools for an analysis of the encounter at the Grey Gardens mansion. [1] In his study on the dramaturgy of everyday life, namely the social performances that constitute the everyday, Goffman (14–15) makes a distinction between an expression that is *given* and an expression that is *given off*. He argues that a given expression is a direct verbal account with which an individual seeks to project a particular image of herself. An expression that is given off is more indirect, often contextual or even unintentional in kind. In Goffman's (24–26) view, the dramaturgy of everyday life is composed with the shifting registers of direct and indirect expression and the roles people employ in social situations.

Goffman's outline of communication draws out a highly useful feature that can be taken further within the direct cinema's frame. Goffman claims that there is "a fundamental asymmetry" (18) in the communication process, one that evolves in the distinction between direct verbal expression and its indirect counterpart. A social interaction or a communicative encounter is a play of asymmetrical registers of expression and produced impressions that are kept together by a

“working consensus” (21) between the communicating parties. Goffman places the emphasis on the sociability of the interaction and moves away from the disposition of a predetermined true character. In the communicative event, the presented self is always asymmetrical.

The rhetoric of authenticity put forward in the direct cinema movement rests on a presumed symmetry of direct and indirect communication. It is assumed that the “true character” of an individual may be revealed by observing her in social situations. Goffman’s (26) dramaturgical setting of social interaction in which the “true” is replaced with played parts and routines invites an analysis of *Grey Gardens* in terms of projected expressions and captured impressions.

The rickety Grey Gardens mansion defines the setting of the Beales’ lives. Edith spends most of her time in bed and moves to the other rooms only on occasion. The camera captures the other spaces with Edie; she feeds the raccoons in the attic, fetches things to show the Maysles’, observes the surroundings with binoculars from the porch and goes swimming at the nearby beach. However, Edie cannot leave her mother’s side for long, since practically every time the Maysles are filming her somewhere around the house, Edith calls for her daughter to come back and take care of something for her. Edith’s bedroom functions as a front stage or a communal region for the two women, whereas the rest of the house is Edie’s stage to go about her own activities (cf. Goffman 114).

In the mansion, the Beales are framed in two primary ways. At first, the camera takes a more discreet and distant attitude towards the milieu and its inhabitants, documenting the yard, the view, the neighbourhood and some of the communal spaces of the house. It documents Edie conversing with the gardener and waits outside the door while she fetches a chequebook from inside. After the general introduction to the mansion and its residents, the camera moves closer and focuses on the women’s gestures and facial expressions.

The transition between the modes of framing is bridged in speech. From the very beginning, the women talk constantly – to each other, to the Maysles’, to themselves. Edith and Edie talk to each other from the different spaces of the house and while they are in the same space, they talk off of each other, contradicting and challenging one another, and yet somehow managing to listen to what the other one says (see Vogels 134). When the camera singles either one of them out visually, the other one often continues talking on the background, providing an additional dimension to the other’s image.

The focus on gestures and expressions – particularly the close-ups of their faces – extracts the women from their verbal account. In direct cinema more generally, close-ups of the face are used to bring out the hidden or restrained reactions in on-going situations (Vogels 1). In Goffman’s language, they are used to capture the indirect expressions of the characters. In the opening scene of their documentary *Salesman* (1968), the Maysles’ use close-ups in response to an on-going verbal exchange. In the scene, the salesman Paul Brennan tries to convince a hesitant housewife to purchase a bible. Set in the woman’s living room, the polite exchange of persuasion and declination is complemented with close-ups of the bible, the salesman, and the woman’s child. The close-ups foreground the frustration of the salesman to close the deal and the family’s indifference to his proposal.

In an interview a few years prior to the making of *Grey Gardens*, Albert Maysles argues that in their filmmaking, the brothers are interested in “experiencing life and telling exactly that experience to the world” (Levin 275). Accordingly, the changes between the more open frames and the close-ups simulate the asymmetry in the experience of encountering the Beales. The impression of the Beales depends on their direct and often frantic verbal communication as well as on the more indirect and discreet expressions the women give off that Albert Maysles’ camera captures with sudden close-ups.

The camera zooms into the faces of the women in a spontaneous and edgy manner, steering the focus from the meandering conversation to the expressions on the women's faces. The close-ups are paralleled with zooms into photographs, paintings and drawings of the women found on the mansion's walls and in family albums. A photograph from Edie's youth and a painting of the young Edith are edited together with the tightly framed shots of the Beales of Grey Gardens.

The tightly framed images of the women and their reproductions take the documentary beyond the setting of the mansion. The parallel between images of the past and close-ups in the present induces an inner drama to the documentary. Here, the expressive system of *Grey Gardens* comes close to the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs' outline of the close-up. For Balázs, close-ups of the human face are first and foremost a threshold to the human soul as they isolate the face from distracting contexts (*Theory of the Film* 55–56; "Visible Man" 102–103). In Balázs' view of cinema, close-ups of the human face pull the character out of the linguistic and spatiotemporal coordinates of the film and transpose the drama to a realm of emotions, moods and thoughts (*Theory of the Film* 61; cf. "Visible Man" 96). Drawing from Balázs, the close-ups induce an *inner aesthetics* to the dynamics of presenting a self.

Leaning on anthropomorphism, Balázs claims that the movements of the soul that are accessed with the close-ups become the organising principle of the themes and objects of a given film (*Theory of the Film* 77; Koch 170). In Balázs, who writes mainly in the context of silent film, the movements of the soul form a "visible spirit" that guides the organisation of the film on the whole ("Visible Man" 96, 98; *Theory of the Film* 60). Gertrud Koch reads Balázs' disposition of cinema as a "laboratory of the soul" (176). Inner aesthetics surpasses the level of realism and places the focus on the organisation of the individual cells of life with the means of cinema ("Visible Man" 103). Here Koch (170) reads Balázs in relation to Georg Simmel's analysis of the sculptor Auguste Rodin. In Simmel's reading, Rodin's work assumes a similar dimension of inner atoms that make his art an expression of the "state of the soul."

In Balázs the visible spirit gets a totalising and even an essentialist function whereas the inner aesthetics of *Grey Gardens* adheres to a more asymmetric disposition. The inner aesthetics foregrounds the fine line between the past and the present that, as Edie points out, "is difficult to keep." Contrary to Balázs' system, the inner dimension does not appear as the organizing principle for what happens on the screen but the close-ups of the women, their photographs, paintings and drawings offer a possible outline for the lives of the Beales (cf. Deleuze, *Movement-Image* 90–91). The inner aesthetics – or the indirect drama – of *Grey Gardens* does not offer an anthropomorphic switchboard for the whole of the film but it provides an indirect counterpart to the verbal performances of the women.

Gertrud Koch claims that "[inner aesthetics] presupposes that the camera assumes the role of an active observer rather than that of a mechanically recording apparatus before which the *mise-en-scène* unfolds" (173). She (171) argues that Balázs' essentialist anthropomorphism has often been excessively emphasised over the weight he puts on the technical innovations of cinema. Koch (172) reads Balázs in connection to Walter Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious and foregrounds the attention Balázs puts on the cinema as a creative technological apparatus that deepens the scope of our perception of familiar things and objects (see Benjamin 232–237; *Theory of the Film* 46–51).

Dave Saunders describes the workings of American direct cinema in the 1960's as "a revolution in the head" (191). He argues that after direct cinema broke free of its dispassionate methods drawn from the broadcast environment, it worked on "the revivification of [America's] national consciousness that could effect a renaissance of compassionate, community politics" (Saunders 190, see also 26). Saunders (25, 191) thus graphs the direct cinema movement as a line from a de-emphasised rhetorical perspective drawn from the television network environment to a more passionate expression equipped for counter-cultural projects.

Whereas Balázs' laboratory of the soul favours a Romantic sublimation of the human spirit, the Maysles' laboratory of compassionate community politics frames its characters on the fine line between the past and the present. What is noteworthy is that the past is not determinate of the present but its indirect companion. More precisely, the inner drama of the past is coupled with a series of takes or rehearsals that the Maysles refer to as the unfolding experience of life (cf. Levin 274–275; Dixon 180; Robson 44).

The Great Singer and The Great Dancer

In her introduction to a new translation of Balázs' early writings, Erica Carter (94) notes that although there is an essentialist tendency in Balázs to privilege the film image and especially the close-up as a physiognomic window to the human soul, there is also a noteworthy ambivalence in his take on the performing body. [2] Carter points out that in his analysis of Asta Nielsen, Balázs does not view the actress' body as an unmediated expression of the movements of the soul, but in terms of "the process of production of meaning and affect" (ibid; cf. *Theory of the Film* 284–285). Thus, an asymmetry between an inner landscape of thoughts and emotions and a projected expression or a bodily performance can be found even in Balázs.

Following a traditional Balázsian disposition, Edie's agitated behaviour could be analysed as an effect of the disappointment of having to take care of her mother and not having seized the opportunities of marriage and success she was presented with in her youth. Whereas Edith is much more affirmative about the way things turned out for her ("I had a terribly successful marriage," she posits), Edie constantly circles around how displeased she is with her life ("I can't take another day," "I have to get out of here," she insists).

Even though Edie scolds Edith in her presence – and vice versa – she praises Edith's talents in her absence. When the camera frames Edith out of the shot and focuses on Edie, the frustrated and even angry dialogue turns into an appraising monologue. The opening scene expresses the juxtaposition of frustration and affirmation as the organizing principle of the Beales' lives. *Grey Gardens* starts with a prologue that introduces the two women, the filmmakers and the problems that have haunted the Beales in their residence. Albert and David Maysles shoot the main room downstairs, Edith sits on a chair in the second floor, just up the stairs, and Edie is somewhere in the house, participating in the scene from the offscreen. The camera goes on to film the crumbling walls and the hallway. The women exchange their views on how the cats got out and how they might be raided again since the raccoons are breaking down their new wall. From a series of shots of the neighbourhood, the scene turns into an array of newspaper articles that set out the raid the women refer to. The mansion was in such a state of decay that the village of East Hampton ordered it to be cleaned or the women would be evicted.

After the series of newspaper clippings, the documentary in a way starts again. The Maysles present themselves as the gentleman callers and greet and compliment Edie who states that one of the cats got out. During their exchange, a photograph of the Maysles fills the screen. The photograph is followed by a cut outdoors where Edie returns the compliment to David by stating that he "looks absolutely wonderful" and "has light blue on." The scene then turns to Edie herself who describes her own outfit in detail and asserts that she has to "think these things up." Then, Edie asks the Maysles' if they want to photograph on the top porch and they start to the direction of the house.

The two beginnings set the overlapping tones of *Grey Gardens*. Whereas the raid is a threatening figure on the background, it does not determine the whole of the piece. The second opening directs attention to the procession of events in the house. In a way, the second opening invites the viewer into a series of unfolding scenes that are occasionally linked with a background that

proposes possible outlines for the events unfurling in the frame. Edie's orientation for outfits is one of the features that sets the sense of unfolding in the film. She changes costumes constantly, poses for the camera and asks how she looks. As a result of the editing, she seems to wear multiple outfits every day, finishing off her look with scarves. In addition to the camera framing her in tight and intimate frames, Edie herself works to be framed in close-ups. She comes very close to the camera, flirting with the Maysles behind it or alternatively putting on the face of a "staunch character," as she describes herself.



Figure 1: "A staunch character"

When Edie presents herself in a variety of costumes and roles she is at times like Gloria Swanson's character Norma Desmond in *Sunset Blvd* (Billy Wilder, USA 1950). Desmond has lost her silent film star glory with the talkies but lives in a fantasy world where she is still a renowned star. At the end of the film, Desmond, who has been hiding away in her room, agrees to come downstairs, as she believes a film crew is waiting for her. She approaches her trusted director and his camera, proclaiming theatrically with a charged expression on her face: "Mr DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up now."

The similarity between Edie and Norma Desmond is in how they are disconnected from the setting in which they operate. The impression of Norma Desmond is imbued in a Hollywood tragedy; her expression is adjusted to the mask of a bygone era and her world has turned into an illusory setting of a silent film production. Edie's separation, on the other hand, is more affirmative in tone. In the series of takes or rehearsals that comprise the documentary, *Grey Gardens* is transformed into a stage on which a series of performances take place. The setting of the women's lives goes from a ramshackle mansion reflecting past difficulties to a place of possibilities. Kenneth Robson's (43) statement that *Grey Gardens* seems to make itself up as it goes along can be read in relation to Edie's series of costumes. Moving from one character to the next, from one scene to the next, Edie thinks herself up as she goes along. For Edie, to be normal is to be Norma.

The camera's dual function makes the system of framing a self remarkable in *Grey Gardens*. To begin with, the camera decontextualises the characters from their everyday setting and gives

them an inner scope of relations, but on the other hand, the camera seems to walk into a process of takes and rehearsals in which the characters think themselves up. Taking Jonathan B. Vogels' (136) emphasis on the participatory methodology of *Grey Gardens* further, one could argue that the second aspect of the camerawork turns the participants into each other's "facilitators".

In Gilles Deleuze's terminology (*Negotiations* 125), facilitators are "intercessors" that intervene in a process of formation. Translated quite unfortunately as "mediators," Deleuze's intercessors do not exactly mediate ready-made objects into new forms but they enable creative "legending" in places where it might otherwise be hindered. [3] Legending, in this instance, is tantamount to the performances in which the Beales think themselves up. The Beales' past, the raid on their house and their secluded lives are consistently played out in relation to the performances facilitated with the Maysles' presence in the mansion. In Deleuze's (*Time-Image* 126) terms, the Maysles capture the two women in the act of thinking up their lives and in doing so they present the Beales within a series of unfolding scenes instead of locking them up to a derelict existence determined by events in their past.

In *Grey Gardens*, the performances proceed in tune with the women doing what they are most passionate about in life. One of the most affective scenes is a moment attuned to Andre Kostelanetz' arrangement of "Tea for Two" from the musical comedy "No, no, Nanette." In the scene, Edith sings to the arrangement, gets terribly excited and makes a real show of the song, all the while being in bed and wearing a huge red brim hat. She tries to get Edie to do the soft shoe waltz that goes with the rhythm, but Edie modestly refuses the offer, smiles and affirms how wonderful it all is. Toward the end of the song, in synch with a chord Edith claims is particularly beautiful, the scene cuts to a painting of the young Edith and zooms in. The drama of the singing is transposed to the drama of the zoom that frames the face of the reproduction in a close-up.

When Edith sings, she brings out the fact that she used to be a great singer, but her performance is not reduced to her past fame. Singing to one of her old recordings, Edith boldly foregrounds her voice and carries on the role of the great singer. Edie, on the other hand, often speaks about what she did not have a chance to do and brings out the absence of fame in her youth. In response, her bodily performances – that almost systematically end up with her approaching the camera and framing herself into a close-up – are remarkably flamboyant and showy.

Starting with the costumes, scarves and implying expressions, Edie sings, marches and dances herself into a legend. Edie performs the roles she has always wanted to have for the camera. The past appears as an image Edie has of herself; an image according to which she wants to present herself to the camera. She invents herself as the object of desire for Jerry the Marble Faun, the handyman who occasionally visits the women, and marches for peace to a Virginia Military Institute record – something that she never had a chance to do in her youth. As Edie invents herself for the camera she makes herself the great dancer she was on the verge of becoming when she was younger ("I was discovered in New York," she tells her mother).

To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze (*Time-Image* 152), *Grey Gardens* carries out the making of the Beales into legends. In the collaborative interventions of the Maysles', the Beales and the film's editors, *Grey Gardens* places its characters on the fine line between the past and the present, and presents them as the great singer and the great dancer Edith Bouvier Beale. In the series of scenes, the grey features of *Grey Gardens* are wiped away and overturned with the red of Edith's hat and the red and the blue of Edie's marching costume. In a true musical fashion, the colours, the singing and the dancing take over the grim everyday of the *Grey Gardens* mansion.



Figure 2: Edie the legend



Figure 3: Edith the legend

Working in two directions at once, Albert Maysles' camera actively frames and attentively receives. *Grey Gardens* moves between capturing reflections of the past and framing performances in the present in a manner that charges the documentary with an asymmetry that does not let its audience off the hook easily. The encounter at Grey Gardens is composed of direct and indirect expressions that are held together with the "working consensus" between the Beales and the Maysles'. In a manner reminiscent of Erving Goffman's outline of the presentation of self, *Grey Gardens* bypasses the axes of authenticity and true characters and suggests viewing the self in

asymmetrical terms. The affirmative effect of the documentary's system of presentation is echoed in Edith and Edie's comments on the film. After having seen the film for the first time Edie announced it a classic. On her deathbed, Edith stated that "[t]here's nothing more to say, it's all in the film" (Dixon 192). It might be that one of the reasons for the distribution of Edith and Edie's story over a variety of media is precisely in how they, from the start, participated in making themselves into legends.

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Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Professor Seija Ridell (Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere, Finland) for initially pointing out Erving Goffman's relevance to the present discussion. The paper was further inspired by a panel on D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus chaired by Professor Charles Musser (Yale) at the documentary studies conference Visible Evidence XVI held in Los Angeles at USC, 13–17.8.2009.
2. A new translation of Béla Balázs' early writings is forthcoming in 2010 from Berghahn Press (*Visible Man, or the Culture of Film*, 1924, trans. Rodney Livingstone). The references in this essay are to short segments of the translation published in *Screen* 48:1 (2007): 96–108.
3. Deleuze draws legending from Henri Bergson's notion of fabulation. He elaborates on legending in relation to the Canadian filmmaker Pierre Perrault's experience of making the documentary *Pour la suite du monde* (1963). With Perrault, Deleuze claims that in order to surpass the problem of taking a master's perspective on the filmed subjects, the director must become an intercessor and capture the subjects in the process of making themselves up. In other words, if the situation of filming is taken as a communicative event in Goffman's sense, the documentary can simultaneously frame and express a particular subject or a community and allow the community to make itself up (see *Negotiations* 125; *Time-Image* 150–153; on the conceptual frame of legending see also Bogue, Ronald. *Deleuze's Way. Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics*. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2007, pp. 91–106).

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