

Garden of Ambivalence

The Topology of the Mother-child Dyad in Grey Gardens

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## Abstract

*The Maysles brothers' 1975 documentary, Grey Gardens, portrays the lives of Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter, Edith, known as Little Edie, the aunt and first cousin, respectively, of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. As their identical names imply, the Beales share a symbiotic relationship which is reflected in every aspect of their life. This article argues that Grey Gardens calls for Julia Kristeva's insistence on abjection as a crucial struggle with "spatial ambivalence (inside/outside uncertainty)" and an attempt to mark out a space in the undifferentiated field of the mother-child symbiosis. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva (1982) states, "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship" (p. 10). Grey Gardens portrays the topology of the mother-child dyad, which pertains to a particular spatio-temporality: where this primordial relationship is concerned, object and subject crumble, and the distinction between past and present is irrelevant.*

*Keywords: documentary, truth, fiction*



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## *Garden of Ambivalence:*

### **Direct Cinema's Failures of "Authentic" Aesthetics in *Grey Gardens***

The Maysles brothers' 1975 documentary, *Grey Gardens*, portrays the lives of Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter, Edith, known as Little Edie, the aunt and first cousin, respectively, of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. The mother and daughter live together in their East Hampton house that is literally falling apart. As their identical names imply, the Beales share a symbiotic relationship which is reflected in every aspect of their life. I argue that *Grey Gardens* calls for Julia Kristeva's insistence on abjection as a crucial struggle with "spatial ambivalence (inside/outside uncertainty)" and an attempt to mark out a space in the undifferentiated field of the mother-child symbiosis. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) states, "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship" (p. 10). *Grey Gardens* portrays the topology of the mother-child dyad, which pertains to a particular spatio-temporality: where this primordial relationship is concerned, object and subject crumble, and the distinction between past and present is irrelevant.

"It's very difficult to keep the line between the past and the present," Little Edie utters in an early scene in the film. This statement explains Little Edie's relationship to her mother, but it is *paradoxical* since despite the spatio-temporal ambiguity that concerns the psychosexual dimension of their relationship, the way the Edies recollect the past is mythical, as if there is a rupture that fundamentally separates their past from the present. Each tells her own story which diverges from the account of the other. Also, they often contradict even their own versions of events, memories or views. In one scene, Edith says, "I had a perfect marriage. Beautiful children. Terribly successful marriage. Never had a fight in my life." In a later scene, she declares, "I don't think people should get married. I don't believe in it at all." Therefore, the way they narrate their history does not document any fact, as it is full of ambiguities and conflicts. In his essay, "The Crystal Formation: Narrative Structure in *Grey Gardens*," Kenneth J. Robson (1983) writes, "They are performers whose lives have been scripted by themselves from a complex inter-weaving of memory and imagination" (p. 43). In *Grey Gardens*, it remains ambiguous whether Little Edie's mother blocked her access to the symbolic order, thus locking her in such maternal closeness, or if it is Little Edie's repetitive failures and her unyielding struggles in the symbolic world that

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qualities. That is why at the center of this mother-daughter

After the years The Beales spent in the mansion, it seems as if the house has turned out to be an extended organ of these women's bodies. In this sense, the mansion is the locus of non-differentiation where the demarcating line between the internal and external is annihilated as well as the one between fantasy and reality. Nothing is in its place in this disordered house. However, what is disturbing about the Beales' way of living that arouses the feeling of abjection is not a "lack of cleanliness or health," but rather their dyadic relationship, which demonstrates the problem of non-differentiation. This mansion is marked by ambivalence, as the subject's distinction from its objects is collapsed. Despite their twenty eight-room house, they spend most of their time together in their shared bedroom. The Beales' two twin-sized beds are covered in a pile of books, newspapers, and photographs. Also, as the mother and daughter's eating rituals mostly take place in their beds, the residue of food and utensils are scattered over the sheets or next to their beds. Not to mention that the house is filled with cats and raccoons that freely roam around. In rare moments, Edie attempts to show other parts of the mansion to the directors, as the camera follows her in the darkly lit corridors. But instead of revealing any clearer sense of the building's structure, the camera witnesses that the space does not have definitive borders. The house has cracks and big holes in its walls; such permeableness between the outside and inside further annihilates borders. The borders of this house cannot be well defined as if the occupants' bodies and this space have a mutual openness.

*Grey Gardens* opens with the image of a screen door. The camera is placed back from the door, poised to view the doorway and porch from within the interior of the house. As the opening image shows, the house has even more central importance than its occupants: it stands at the threshold of the symbolic world. After observing the doorway, the camera's stationary position is interrupted when an unidentified voice asks, "What are you doing down there? Are you standing there?" David Maysles answers the question: "I am just filming the main room," then his camera follows the voice and looks up to show Big Edith who is sitting on a chair upstairs. The camera then tilts up and exposes the hole in the wall pointed out by Edith. By looking up at its subject and also by following her lead, the

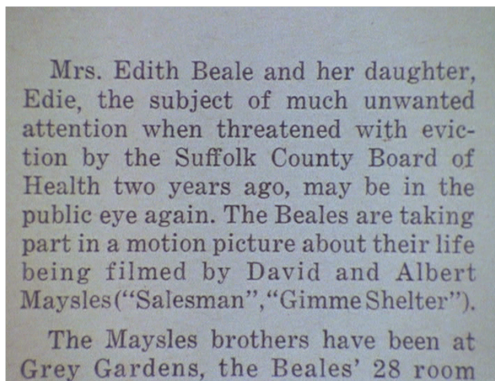
camera endows a certain power to the subject in question. Thus, Edith's authoritative position and omnipresence is emphasized right from the beginning. By contrast, during the whole scene, Little Edie's voice comes from afar and is shadowed by her mother's high-pitched voice. However, the film's prologue ends with Little Edie's commentary. To create an obvious contrast, the camera cuts from the image of the hole at the wall to a series of shots of East Hampton. We are shown the center of the village with its pond, windmill, and neat, big mansions with beautiful gardens. Meanwhile, Little Edie's voice-off is carried over from the previous scene and we hear: "We are going to be raided again. You know they can get you in East Hampton for wearing a red shoe on a Thursday." After the images of East Hampton houses, the camera shows the exterior view of the Beales' house. As the title *Grey Gardens* is superimposed onto this image, the color photo dissolves into a newspaper photograph taken from the same angle.

In this opening sequence, Edith is physically present and her voice guides the camera. Yet Little Edie is absent from the whole sequence. Her voice is not submitted to her body, as it seems she cannot find her own voice all through her life. Edie's voice is mediated through editing only to insert certain meaning into the subsequent images of East Hampton. In this prologue sequence, Albert Maysles becomes part of the documentary by engaging in a dialogue with Edith and thereby losing his distance from the subjects of the documentary. This sequence provides the filmmakers' first of many involvements in their own film. In *Grey Gardens*, the Maysles brothers do not remain hidden, they do not stay silent behind the camera; on the contrary, they are heard and seen occasionally. Thus, *Grey Gardens* diverges from the Direct cinema conventions and often violates them. In *Theorizing Documentary*, Michael Renov (1993) writes, "Direct cinema hides its processes" through conventions



such as “the long takes, the lack of commentary, music and sound effects, [and] the absence of cinematic lighting (p. 50). In *Grey Gardens*, the directors’ engagement with the film’s subjects—either being manipulated by them or manipulating them—fatally endangers the Direct cinema’s claim of authenticity, if not objectivity. Moreover, the moments of on-screen presence by the directors and their vocal interactions not only make the filming process visible but also create a distance between the spectators and the film.

The next scene begins with shots of Edie out in the garden. Then, the camera shows a series of newspaper articles and still photographs of Grey Gardens. The last of these is a newspaper clipping, which is about the Maysles brothers’ pending film project on Grey Gardens. The sequence ends with a black and white photograph that shows Albert and David Maysles with their camera and sound equipment looking directly at us.



These images inform us about the film we are about to watch and introduce its directors to us. As the directors’ photograph still lingers on the screen, Edie’s voice-off is heard. “It is the Maysles.” David’s off-screen voice replies, “Hi Edie. It’s the gentlemen callers.” Again in this instance, the Maysles brothers’ on-screen presence makes their audience aware of itself as an audience and of the film as an artificial construct. Therefore, it

is clear from the start that their interventions are not accidental but designed. In this respect, the film violates the Direct cinema principle of nonintervention and “its implied promise of unmediated observation” (Renov, 1993, p. 44). The Maysles’ attempt to manufacture meaning or to inject their subjective views into the film is also clear by how they dub themselves “the gentlemen callers,” which is a clear reference to Tennessee Williams’s “The Glass Menagerie.” Here, the directors purposely attempt to shape the meaning of the world in which they claim to be only unobtrusive observers. This reference not only comments on the Beales’ life, but also alluding to a literary text increases the fictiveness attached to the world of *Grey Gardens*. As the accounts of the two women with regard to the men in their lives are ambiguous and often contradictory, this allusion cannot be fully supported. However, the directors’ commentary manipulates the spectator’s expectations with regards to what they are going to watch, as the directors guide the spectator to spot the parallelism that they assume to exist between Williams’ play and the Beales’ life.

Jonathan B. Vogels (2005), in his book *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, asserts that these moments of self-reflexivity create a Brechtian alienation effect. Vogels argues, “the push-and-pull of the modernist text asserts itself [in *Grey Gardens*] and leaves an unsettling feeling” (2005, p. 133). Although self-reflexive gestures in *Grey Gardens* create a distance between the film and the spectators, nevertheless I disagree that the film generates modernist estrangement or unpleasure. Modernist devices such as self-reflexivity and self-consciousness do not necessarily estrange or alienate spectators from the text or make the text difficult or unpleasurable. In *Grey Gardens*, the modern distancing techniques, employed to foreground the constructedness

of the medium, take us away from the film only momentarily, yet the very theatrical, performative acts of the Edies—their singing, dancing, and costumes—create short episodes that keep draw us back in. Moreover, these moments of self-reflexivity are well suited to communicate the mother-child dynamics in the film.

In this respect, there is a certain concordance between the subject matter of the film and the way it is conveyed. Just as there are only few moments in the film that momentarily push the spectators away from its world, similarly, only in rare moments is the physical closeness between the mother and child is halted. Even when Edie goes out to the porch or into another room, her mother constantly calls for her needs or just to keep things under control. In this respect, the film constantly reinforces the lack of distance between the two women. Besides the Maysles brothers' photograph shown at the beginning and their vocal interventions, there are two occurrences in the film where we witness the director's on-screen presence. Both of these instances come in the middle of a heated argument between the mother and the daughter.

In the first of these scenes, Little Edie is giving one of her tirades about how she cannot live in East Hampton anymore, that she needs to leave for NY City. We then see a close-up of Edie, who is looking directly into the camera. She says, "I came down here to take care of my mother, I'm sick and tired of worrying about her night and day." The mother immediately responds, "I had a very good man who took care of me for twenty five years." Then, Al Maysles, who is behind the camera, intervenes and asks who was that man who took care of Mrs. Beale during those years. As soon as he asks the question, Al turns his camera to the mirror that shows his own

reflection while he is shooting the scene and in the rear we can see the mother lying on the bed. The camera closes in on the mother and Al's torso fills the right side of the frame. Upon hearing Al's comment, Edie bursts into flames. She comes near him with her back to the mirror to look at her mother and David, who is off-screen. Edie screams, "I took care of this damn house for twenty five years." Between Edie's and Al's torsos, the mother's face is seen in the back, smaller and weak, as if she is squeezed between them.



The mother seems worried and hesitantly says, "I am on the air?" This comment reveals her unwillingness to be recorded at the moment. Edie yells at Al, "dare say mother was ever taken care of by any man but my father and I'll push you under the god dammed bed." Then, still off-screen, David tries to calm her down: "No Edie, I think Al was referring to Gould" (Mrs. Beale's composer friend). Right at this moment, Al focuses the camera on himself, acknowledging David's comment.



Edie, still angry, says, “No one took care of Mrs. Beale.

She had my father’s money, and her own money.” This scene is apparently a far cry from the Direct cinema’s slogan, “Recording life as it exists at a particular moment before camera” (Renov, 1993, p. 44). The Maysles brothers, if they didn’t fuel the Beales’ quarrel directly, certainly contributed to its intensity with their intrusions. The directors do not merely record reality but they temper with it and impose it. What they present is not life observed by the camera but rather life recreated or restructured for it.

The Maysles brothers’ second and last on-screen appearance comes close to the end of the film. The scene presents rare moments in which the mother and daughter are together outside their bedroom. In the pink room, Little Edie is preparing lunch, running around and trying to satisfy her mother’s requests by bringing her slippers or her radio. Meanwhile, she sings a song by Marlene Dietrich, which provokes the angered response of her mother who shouts, “I’ll never see you again as long as I live.” However, even this brutal comment does not stop Little Edie from singing the song. She comes closer to the camera and sings the song even louder and in a more distorted way. As Mrs. Beale utters “I hope my bathing suit falls off. Something fell off just then,” the camera turns to her and momentarily shows the towel wrapped around her chest falling. Mrs. Beale gets up to stop Edie.



Finally, she gives up singing but starts to complain about how she cannot have any fun in the house. As they continue to argue, Mrs. Beale says, “I can’t go back to my seat now. There is no back to this bathing suit.” David immediately responds, “We won’t look,” and turns his camera to the mirror to reveal Al’s and his own reflection.



Eddie says, “Mother you realize that your whole chest was showing in that movie.” While Mrs. Beales responds to her by saying, “Yes, everything is perfectly disgusting on account of you. You did it; you sure do bring out the worst in your mother,” the camera pans and closes up on the drawing of young Eddie on the wall. Instead of showing Eddie’s reaction as the event happens (what is happening in front of the camera), the directors prefer to show this nostalgic image to its spectators to create a sort of imaginary flashback in their minds.



Moreover, by turning their camera to the mirror, the directors try to deny the voyeurism on their part, despite the fact that they already revealed Mrs. Beale's bare chest. The directors' on-screen appearances seem to be enforced by their inability to present their subjects within the constraints of the Direct cinema, even within the conventions of documentary. At some moments, the dramatic intensity of the episodes enacted by the Beales' performances perpetuate the level of fictiveness so much that the directors feel the urge to prevent the audience's involvement in the "fiction" produced and the need to remind that they are indeed watching a "documentary." The Maysles film fails to represent any truth or authenticity about their subjects. In *Grey Gardens*, the notion of authenticity not only becomes problematical, but in the end, it is nullified all together.

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