Soul of the Documentary
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3. Making up legends

*Grey Gardens* is now a classic. Opening to mixed reviews in 1975, the documentary has since been adapted to Broadway and dramatized into a television feature; it has inspired pop songs and received a sequel. The lives of Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter Edie have spread through a variety of media to an array of audiences. However, 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.

The criticism directed toward *Grey Gardens* as well as other direct documentaries stems from the controversial rhetoric filmmakers used to define their observational practice. The notorious claims of being more truthful and more objective resulted in a backlash that highlighted the complex ethical issues inherent in direct cinema. 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. He describes the lives of the Beales as “a series of discontinuous takes or rehearsals” 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 speaks of the film as a crystal formation, a solid arrangement simultaneously reflecting multiple facets, interpretations and experiences of the women’s lives. The convoluted fragmentary scenes of *Grey Gardens* encourage him to compare the film to the modernist cadence of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

All the while supporting Robson’s modernist impetus, Jonathan B. Vogels places the emphasis on the self-reflexivity of *Grey Gardens*. Albert Maysles’ camerawork and the deliberate inclusion of the filmmakers themselves within the film’s setting speak of an unforeseen participatory methodology. He names 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 openess
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 elaborate analyses of Grey Gardens have not settled their relationship to the discursive premises they work to decontextualize the film from. Even Vogels uses such phraseology as “revealing their true characters,” thus enhancing the initial presumption that there indeed is a character more true than the other to be revealed. The perspective of fabulation dissociates the present analysis from such claims and draws attention to the ways in which the Beales present themselves and how their presentations are framed in the documentary. Little 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.”

Creative asymmetry

Grey Gardens portrays the lives of Big Edie and Little Edie in a highly intimate manner. Retired from socialite New York City, the two women live their lives in a ramshackle East Hamptons 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 into 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 his study on the dramaturgy of everyday life, namely the social performances that constitute the everyday, Erving Goffman makes a distinction
between an expression that is *given* and an expression that is *given off*. A
given expression is a direct verbal account with which an individual seeks
to project a particular image of him or herself. An expression that is given
off is more indirect, often contextual or even unintentional in kind. The
dramaturgy of everyday life is composed of the shifting, often asymmetric
registers of direct and indirect expression and the roles people deploy in
social situations.\(^8\)

The communicative event that takes place at the Grey Gardens mansion
is replete with direct verbal accounts and indirect insinuations. The Beales
talk a lot but their verbal accounts are meandering and leave many allusions
unclear. The Maysles observe the women’s verbal acrobatics, but they also
make insinuations of their own that co-compose the film’s communicative
texture. Comments made from behind the camera as well as facial
expressions and gestures invisible to the film’s viewer contribute to the
film’s observational dramaturgy. Both the Beales and the Maysles deploy
shifting registers of expression.\(^9\)

Despite the feeling of observing an ongoing series of rehearsals and an
asymmetric collection of expressive registers, the drama at Grey Gardens
holds together remarkably well. Paraphrasing Goffman, this is because
there is a fundamental “working consensus”\(^{10}\) between the communicating
parties. This consensus does not presume that there is a character more true
than the other to be revealed – rather, the true is replaced by an interest in

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Figure 6: Making up legends at the Grey Gardens mansion. Image courtesy of Maysles Films.
the passages between the shifting roles and expressive routines embraced at the mansion. This enables the Beales to incorporate a variety of expressive modalities they might otherwise have to hold off, and the Maysles to widen their observational practice to a cinematic encounter with dramatic sensibilities. This is the precondition for making up legends in *Grey Gardens*.

The rickety Grey Gardens mansion defines the setting of the Beales’ lives. Big Edie spends most of her time in bed and moves to the other rooms only on occasion. The camera captures the other spaces with Little 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, Little Edie cannot leave her mother’s side for long, since practically every time she is being filmed somewhere around the house, Big Edie calls for her daughter to come back and take care of something for her. The women’s bedroom functions as a communal region, whereas the rest of the house is Little Edie’s stage to go about her own activities.11

At first, the camera takes a more discreet and distant attitude towards the milieu and its inhabitants, documenting the yard, the view, the neighborhood, and some of the communal spaces of the house. It documents Little Edie conversing with the gardener and waits outside the door while she fetches a checkbook from inside. After the general introduction to the mansion and its residents, the camera moves closer and focuses on the women’s expressions and gestures more closely. From the very beginning, the women talk constantly – to each other, to the Maysles, to themselves. They talk to each other from the different spaces of the house and while they are in the same space, they talk of each other, contradicting and challenging one another and yet somehow managing to listen what the other one says. When the camera singles either one of them out visually, the other one often continues talking in the background, providing an additional dimension to the other’s self-presentation.

At times, the focus on expressions and gestures – particularly the many 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.12 In Goffman’s language, they are used to capture the indirect expressions of the characters. In the opening scene of their documentary *Salesman* (USA 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. Over the course of the documentary, frames of Brennan’s face become more frequent as his frustration grows.

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.” 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 frenetic verbal communication as well as on their more indirect and discreet expressions that the camera reacts to with sudden close-ups. On several occasions, the camera zooms into the faces of the women in a spontaneous and edgy manner, steering the focus from the meandering conversation to the indirect expressions on the women’s faces.

Laboratory of the soul

The close-ups of the women take the film beyond the setting of the mansion. They induce an inner drama to the documentary. Here, the expressive system of Grey Gardens comes close to the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs’s outline of the close-up. Isolating the human face from distracting contexts, close-ups function as thresholds to the human soul. They 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. Paraphrasing Balázs, the close-ups induce an inner aesthetics to documentary observation.

In Balázs, the movements of the soul accessed through the close-ups become the organizing principle of the themes and objects of a given film. They form a “visible spirit” that determines the arrangement of the film as a whole. Here, cinema becomes a “laboratory of the soul” that enables access to inner dimensions, organizes its cells, and expresses their complex compositions. This relates to the sociologist Georg Simmel’s analysis of the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Simmel, who is not only Balázs’s contemporary but also his teacher, claims that Rodin’s art assumes a dimension of inner atoms that make his sculptures expressions of the soul.

Balázsian inner aesthetics presupposes that the camera takes on the role of an active observer and is not satisfied with being the passive recorder of an unfolding mise-en-scène. Inner aesthetics resonates also with Walter
Benjamin’s conception of cinematic close-ups as openings to an optical unconscious that teaches the viewer to perceive familiar things and objects in new ways. In *Grey Gardens*, the close-ups invite the possibility of an inner aesthetics, but its function as the organizing principle of the whole documentary is not as straightforward as Balázs suggests.

The abrupt changes of frame and the resulting close-ups in *Grey Gardens* are paralleled with photographs, paintings and drawings of the women found on the mansion’s walls and in family albums. A photograph from Little Edie’s youth and a painting of the young Big Edie are edited together with the close-ups of the two women. The painting stands against the wall in the bedroom and the camera turns to it on several occasions. Following Balázs, these images of the past could be interpreted as a series of defining moments from the women’s past that determine their expressions and gestures in the present.

However, contrary to Balázs’s visible spirit, the past images are not a determinant laboratory of the Beales’ soul. They do not function as an anthropomorphic switchboard for their lives in the documentary. Rather, the documentary expresses the past as a vestige for performances in the present. Here, the film follows Edie’s lead and her claim that “it is difficult to keep the line between the past and the present,” which is actualized in the series of takes the Maysles refer to as the unfolding experience of life.

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. Erica Carter points out that in his analysis of Asta Nielsen, Balázs does not view the actress’s body as an unmediated expression of the movements of the soul, but in terms of the production of meaning and affect. 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 behavior could be analyzed 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 indicates 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.
“I’m ready for my close-up”

*Grey Gardens* starts with a prologue that introduces the two women, the filmmakers, and the problems that have haunted the Beales in their residence. The camera shoots the main room downstairs; Edith sits on a chair on the second floor, just up the stairs, and Edie is somewhere in the house, participating in the scene off-screen. 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 neighborhood, 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 moving in the direction of the house.

The two beginnings set the overlapping tones of *Grey Gardens*. Whereas the raid is a threatening figure in 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 unfolding tone of 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.

When Edie presents herself in a variety of costumes and roles she is, at times, like Gloria Swanson’s character Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (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 their performances exceed the everyday setting in which they operate. Norma Desmond is imbued in a Hollywood tragedy; her facial expression is adjusted to the mask of a bygone era and she believes her house is the setting of a silent film production. Edie’s performances, on the other hand, are more affirmative in tone. In the series of performances she acts out for the camera, the mansion transforms into a theatre stage for her to act the roles she never had. Grey Gardens turns from a ramshackle mansion reflecting past difficulties into a stage of possibilities. Robson’s brilliant remark that *Grey Gardens* seems to “make itself up as it goes along” is thus removed from its modernist base and reformulated in relation to Edie’s series of costumes. Moving from one character to the next, from one scene to the next, Edie makes herself up as she goes along. For Edie, to be normal is to be Norma.

**Facilitating cohesion**

The working consensus between the Beales and the Maysles produces a remarkable sociability in the world of the film. The relations, roles, and routines put on stage at the gritty mansion exceed notions of participatory filmmaking and foreground the collective character of the filmmaking process. It is not only the Maysles who participate in the everyday drama of the Beales, but the Beales equally enable the making of the film.

In the filmmaking process, the Beales and the Maysles become each other’s facilitators. They intercede in each other’s lives in productive ways and thus co-compose a sociable environment in which the Beales can make themselves up and the Maysles can bend the routines of observational filmmaking. Put differently, the remarkable sociability created in the filmmaking process enables the involved parties to invent new styles of being and techniques of doing.

Deleuze briefly mentions the importance of facilitating in his discussion of storytelling in Pierre Perrault and Jean Rouch’s cinemas. He insists that both filmmakers – in their respective processes – also “become another” as they embrace real characters as intercessors and replace predetermined
models of truth and fiction with their storytelling. Perrault's *Pour la suite du monde* (Canada 1963) is set on the island of Ile-aux-Coudres, which is demarcated from both the Anglophone and the French-Canadian cultures of Quebec. The people of the island speak a distinct dialect that is hard to understand, even for native French speakers. In the film, Perrault encourages the islanders to take on fishing white beluga whales with the traditional method of erecting a weir barrier in the St. Lawrence River. By “pushing” the islanders into action, Perrault facilitates the re-actualization of a tradition that in the past gave the island community cohesion. The storytelling of the islanders intertwines with taking up the actual techniques of the tradition. In this sense, Perrault’s storytelling is not about the tradition, but an act of telling in which the tradition is re-actualized. This makes Perrault’s work “cinema of the lived.”

The women of *Grey Gardens* have developed their own way of speaking that fluctuates between hostile and affectionate, and meanders into songs and theatre plays. Instead of trying to adjust their manner of speaking to a predefined form, the filmmakers are interested in making them talk more and thus egg them on with questions and comments from behind the camera. In this way, they facilitate the women in taking up the things they are most passionate about in life: performing, singing, and dancing. Here, facilitating coincides with a turn Dave Saunders detects in American direct cinema of the 1960s and that he describes as “a revolution in the head.” When direct cinema broke free from its dispassionate methods drawn from the broadcast environment, it began to work on “the revivification of [America’s] national consciousness that could effect a renaissance of compassionate community politics.” The change from the television network environment to a more passionate methodology of filming appears as the mutually facilitating working consensus in *Grey Gardens*.

Pierre Perrault argues that the pushing into action and the invocation of speech in the act in the filmmaking process enables him to overcome his own colonized upbringing and the consequent internalization of a classical French mentality. By facilitating the speech acts of the islanders, his own powers of expression are reinstated. He could only access Ile-aux-Coudres as an outsider, but with the willingness of the islanders they are able to fashion a “communal lore,” where the islanders overcome the shambles of an abandoned tradition and where the filmmaker surmounts the hindrances of his background. Perrault needs the islanders to make “cinema of the lived” and the islanders need him as the instigator of their self-invention.

Charlie Michael notes that Perrault’s focus on speech in the act sets the Québécois filmmakers apart from their French contemporaries, the
“Roucheoles,” and their more interventionist approach.27 Although the Québécois cinema of speech acts – *le cinéma de la parole* – is undoubtedly different in spirit to some of the more reflective works of the Roucheoles, the two strands of documentary filmmaking share a common ground in how they facilitate the making up of legends.

Perrault’s documentary and its speech acts are comparable, for example, to Jean Rouch’s *Moi, un Noir* (France 1958) in which young Nigerian immigrants tell the story of their lives on the soundtrack to images recorded on the streets of Treichville, Abidjan, on the Ivory Coast. Rouch construes the relationship of speech and action differently from Perrault, but nevertheless has the immigrant youngsters take on roles that produce storytelling integrally woven into the actions on screen. Speaking in present tense over sequences of themselves, the young men invent themselves in a socio-historical situation that otherwise places harsh limits on their existence. In Rouch’s documentary, the protagonists relate their lives to characters familiar from Western popular culture – such as Tarzan, Eddie Constantine, and Edward G. Robinson – and address their situation with these fictional characters. Consequently, *Moi, un Noir* envisions, for instance, a Treichville where the young men are not caged in their everyday struggles. The film ends with Edward G. Robinson assuring Little Jules that maybe the future will be better as they cross a bridge early in the morning after having visited a friend in jail.

Deleuze calls Perrault and Rouch’s method a “story-telling function of the poor,”28 because they both work to overcome the colonizing perspectives of language and filmmaking – including the hindrances brought about by their own backgrounds – in order to produce a cohesive vision that exceeds the social hierarchies and regulations that demarcate the people recorded on camera.29 In a documentary film made about his work, Perrault names the effect of his storytelling method a “becoming luminous within one’s own discourse.”30 Becoming-luminous in both documentaries intertwines with creating visions with which life can continue even in the most difficult of circumstances [*pour la suite du monde*]. From this perspective, the cinemas of both Perrault and Rouch can be described as ethnographies of the living present.

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’s arrangement of *Tea for Two* from the musical comedy *No, no, Nanette*. In the scene, Big Edie 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 her daughter to do the soft shoe waltz that goes with the rhythm, but
Little Edie modestly refuses the offer, smiles and affirms how wonderful it all is. Toward the end of the song, in synch with a chord Big Edie claims is particularly beautiful, the scene cuts to a painting of Big Edie in her youth 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 Big Edie 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, Big Edie boldly foregrounds her voice and carries on the role of the great singer. Little Edie, on the other hand, often speaks about what she did not have a chance to do and brings up 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 in a close-up – are remarkably flamboyant and showy.

Little Edie’s self-invention relates quite candidly to the performances in Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason* (USA 1967). Clarke’s documentary was filmed over one night in a New York City apartment and it portrays the self-invention of Jason Holliday. Jason, a black, gay man in his forties, talks to the camera about his painful and pleasant childhood memories, his years of hustling, and his faraway dreams. Edited into chronological order, the documentary follows the changes that take place over the night as Jason gets more intoxicated from the liquor and joints he consumes while speaking. The particular twist in Clarke’s film is in the way Jason relates his dreams to his accounts for the camera. Dreaming of a nightclub act he has been planning for years, Jason not only speaks about the roles he would want to play but also takes up performing them for the camera. He sings excerpts from the musical *Funny Girl* in a heartfelt manner and thus invents himself as a nightclub actor while performing. Although the odds of him landing a role on Broadway are slim, the documentary provides him a frame for performance, a frame he has awaited for many years.

In *Grey Gardens*, starting with the costumes, scarves, and implying expressions, Little Edie sings, marches, and dances herself into a legend. She takes on the roles she has always wanted and makes them her own for the camera. The past is no longer a distant domain of failures and bad memories, but it is re-actualized in the roles and routines of the performances. The past is the virtual image Little Edie has of herself, an image she actualizes in the presentations she performs for the camera. Little Edie 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 Little Edie invents herself for the camera she becomes the great dancer she was
on the verge of becoming when she was younger. [“I was discovered in New York,” she tells her mother.]

A stage for making up legends

In the performances, the mansion turns into a stage on Broadway and the past and the present form a cohesive and continuous series. The before and the after appear as the two sides of the process in which the Beales become legends in their own right. In the working consensus of the Maysles and the Beales, Grey Gardens places its characters on the fine line between the past and the present, and facilitates their appearance as the great singer Big Edith Bouvier Beale and the great dancer Little Edie Beale. In the series of performances, the grey features of Grey Gardens are wiped away and replaced with the red of Big Edie’s hat and the red and the blue of Little Edie’s marching costumes. In true musical fashion, the colors, the singing, and the dancing take over the grim, everyday existence of the Grey Gardens mansion.

Storytelling in Grey Gardens bypasses categorical distinctions between the true and the false. Little Edie’s roles are “made up,” but they are nevertheless not “false.” Documentary fabulation, then, is not conditioned on drawing a line between the true and the false, but powered by the admittance that the line is, indeed, difficult if not impossible to keep. In Ronald Bogue’s terms, “[f]abulation challenges the received truths of the dominant social order, and in this regard it ‘falsifies,’ but it also produces its own truths through its inventions, and in this sense it manifests the creative powers of the false.”

For Deleuze, making up legends comes to the fore in speech, but in Grey Gardens it is actualized also in singing, dancing, and marching. The women’s seemingly aimless conversations, which flow from one person and event to the next, provide the documentary with a point of entry into the folds of the true and the false in the reality of the two women’s lives.

The affirmative effect of the documentary’s asymmetry is echoed in the women’s comments on the film. After having seen it for the first time, Little Edie called it a classic. On her deathbed, Big Edie stated that “[t]here’s nothing more to say, it’s all in the film.” It might be that one of the reasons for the distribution of the Beales’ story over a variety of media is precisely in how they, from the start, participated in making themselves into legends. In the final scene of the documentary, the camera observes Little Edie from upstairs as she keeps marching and singing in the hall. Oblivious to the camera, Little Edie keeps making up legends even though the shot comes to an end.