Grey Gardens and the Problem of Objectivity

Notes on the Ethics of Observational Documentary

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Abstract: This article turns to the Maysles brothers' 1975 film *Grey Gardens* to problematize the philosophical assumptions at work in debates about objectivity and direct cinema. With a suitable picture of documentary objectivity we can avoid endorsing the claim that no film can be objective or the corollary that only documentaries that reflexively acknowledge the biases of their makers can succeed aesthetically or ethically. Against critics who have attacked *Grey Gardens* for its problematic claims to objectivity as well as theorists defending it for how it undermines objectivity, I argue that the film's objective treatment of its subjects is part of its aesthetic and ethical achievement. In the context of observational documentary, being objective does not mean taking a purely dispassionate stance toward one's subjects, but treating them without prejudice or moralism and letting them reveal themselves.

Keywords: authenticity, direct cinema, documentary, ethics, *Grey Gardens*, objectivity, performativity, reflexivity

Assertions about the objectivity afforded by new technologies were common currency among supporters of direct cinema during the heyday of the movement. Such claims were also vigorously contested, as critics and theorists argued that the notion of objectivity was ethically, ideologically, and philosophically pernicious. When filmmakers celebrated the potential of lighter cameras and synchronous sound-recording techniques to make them less obtrusive, they were met with the claim that documentarians always affect the scenes they are recording, inevitably introducing partiality: a fact obscured by the disingenuous rhetoric of objectivity and the allegedly "observational" style of direct cinema films. If this debate seems quaint to us today, perhaps it is because there is now much sympathy for versions of the position espoused by Emile de Antonio in 1982 after the direct cinema movement had dissipated: "As soon as one points a camera, objectivity is romantic hype" (quoted in Zheutlin, 2005, 158).

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This article turns to one of the great works of direct cinema – the Maysles brothers' 1975 film *Grey Gardens* – to problematize the philosophical presuppositions at the heart of this debate. Focusing on two former socialites[1] living in squalor in a sprawling mansion in the Hamptons, *Grey Gardens* presents a series of intimate and at times discomfiting views of their private lives. As Edie Beale and her daughter talk and bicker about the past, they carry out acts of performance: singing, dressing up, and dancing, clearly playing for the camera. Many critics were offended by *Grey Gardens* on its release, claiming that the brothers had exploited two vulnerable and perhaps unstable women. They missed the dark humanism of the film, blinded by moralism (or perhaps their own embarrassment) to the brothers' frank but empathetic and unflinching treatment of the Beales. Throughout the film the Maysles acknowledge their acts of recording, openly talking with their subjects and sometimes appearing on screen. Unlike many of the filmmakers who responded to direct cinema by emphasizing their presence on the scenes they recorded, however, the Maysles do not deploy reflexivity as a rejoinder to naiveté, nor to undermine pretensions to authenticity. Instead I take these techniques as acknowledgments in Stanley Cavell's sense of the word: ethical responses to the women they filmed, acts of solidarity with them. This may give us more charitable ways of reading some of the pronouncements of the brothers about their intentions as documentarians, which sound so problematic to certain ears. For example, it may give us a way of understanding the brothers' equation of objectivity with "personal integrity: being *essentially true* to the subject and capturing it essentially" (in Vogels, 2005, 8).

With a more suitable picture of documentary objectivity we can avoid endorsing the claim that no film can be objective, or the corollary that only documentaries that reflexively acknowledge the biases of their makers can succeed aesthetically or ethically. And we can do it without affirming the metaphysic underlying scientistic accounts of documentary. As a defense of the film against its critics, this article is part of what Anna Backman Rogers calls the tradition of "revisionist readings" (2015, 115) of *Grey Gardens*. But to borrow a phrase from Theodor Adorno, this article is also a defense of the film from some of its devotees. That is because I want to support the film for different reasons, arguing that there are important senses in which it treats the Beale women objectively, and that this is part of why it is such a brilliant and affecting work of cinema.

In his 1964 essay on *cinema vérité*, Peter Graham praised a group of American directors who would later become associated with direct cinema, and which included Albert Maysles:

> *The Americans have made considerable technical advances: handy silent cameras; quick, precise exposure settings; fast film; portable recorders*

> *synchronized electronically with the camera. With this equipment they can approximate quite closely the flexibility of the human senses. This opens up whole new fields of experience; they can follow their subjects almost anywhere, and because of their unobtrusiveness (they need no artificial lighting) people soon forget the presence of the camera and attain surprising naturalness. (1964, 34)*

Starting with a claim about the new possibilities afforded by developments in filmmaking technology, Graham moves to another about the human sensory apparatus, and the potentials of this technology to approximate it. Then he makes assertions about new fields of experience: new ways of treating subjects on location, and how the unobtrusiveness of these technologies leads them to forget they are being filmed and so to act more naturally. Note the inference from the claim about approximating the human sensory apparatus to the claim about the effect (or rather, the supposed lack thereof) of these new recording apparatuses on subjects. Of course, arguments in support of direct cinema regularly turned on the unobtrusiveness of new filmmaking apparatuses, with proponents arguing for an inverse relationship between the intrusiveness of equipment and the possibility of capturing authentic human expression and behavior on film. As we can see in this passage, however, there is a rather interesting logic at work here. One might wonder about its endpoint. If the only way to have truly natural subjects is to achieve "the flexibility of the human senses," then surely smaller cameras could only ever approximate the ideal arrangement, which would have to involve completely imperceptible equipment. Or as Richard Leacock put it in a discussion of how he and his sound recorder went about establishing a relaxed, intimate relationship with their subject in 1966's *A Stravinsky Portrait*: "I'd rather not have a camera at all" (in Mamber, 1974, 201). I will return to this wish, which haunts debates about direct cinema.

Rhetoric like Graham's soon seemed contentious to many documentarians, critics, and theorists. As Emile de Antonio would put it in an interview just under two decades later:

> *There lies behind cinéma vérité the implication of a truth arrived at by a scientific instrument, called the camera, which faithfully records the world. Nothing could be more false. The assumption of objectivity is false. Filmmakers edit what they see, edit as they film what they see, weight people, moments, and scenes by giving them different looks and values. As soon as one points a camera, objectivity is romantic hype. (In Zheutlin, 2005, 158)*

Critiquing "the pretentiousness" (158) of observational documentary, these claims from Antonio are exemplary of the critiques of direct cinema that

emerged after its heyday. He denounces the ideals of non-intervention and authenticity that drove filmmakers like the Maysles. He challenges the very possibility of presenting events objectively, arguing that filmmakers must always make selections in shooting and editing, selections that inevitably betray their values. Antonio responds to direct cinema practitioners' celebrations of their imperceptibility by arguing that filmmakers are always intervening, always altering the reality they record, and necessarily doing so with partiality. For Antonio, the aesthetic and moral error of direct cinema practitioners was to deny their own involvements in the scenes they recorded. The line he took here was an influential one; versions of it played decisive roles in the filmmaking practices of documentarians who worked in the wake of direct cinema, employing some of its techniques while pushing back against the philosophies that animated it.

Paradigmatic here is the early theoretical work of the anthropologist and documentarian Jay Ruby. In an important 1977 article, Ruby argued forcefully that filmmakers have "ethical, political, aesthetic, and scientific obligations" (2005, 34) to be reflexive about their work. By "reflexive" Ruby means something quite specific. He distinguishes it from what he calls "autobiography" (in which the self of the filmmaker stands "at the center of the work"), "self-reference" (the "allegorical or metaphorical use of self" (2005, 35) in which the filmmaker's life is used as raw material, as in Truffaut's *400 Blows*) and "self-consciousness" (a trait Ruby associates with the upper middle class and Fellini's "turgid pseudo-Freudian" (2005, 36) self-reflections). He argues that reflexivity can be deployed in a range of different ways, including in films that parody or satirize filmmaking or otherwise take filmmaking as their subject, or in modernist films that explore the nature and limitations of the medium. It is characterized by practitioners becoming "publicly concerned with the relationship among self, process, and product": carrying out in their films forms of inquiry into, reflection on, and critique of those very films as complex social products. "To be reflexive," Ruby writes, "is to reveal that films – all films, whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art – are created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records" (2005, 44). For Ruby, no film is objective, because all films are the personal expressions of those who make them; it follows that claiming to record and present objective reality is at best self-deceiving, at worst a conscious falsehood designed to manipulate credulous audiences. So he demands that documentary filmmakers explicitly acknowledge their own biases and political commitments, and deploy techniques designed to draw viewers' attention to the fact that their films are artificially constructed. Hence the conclusion of his article, which would be little more than sophistry without this theoretical basis: "documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to *not* be objective" (2005, 45).

Ruby explicitly refers to *Grey Gardens* in his essay. Despite its deployment of reflexive techniques, however, he does not regard it as carrying out the kind of cinematic program he was recommending. Though it "contains interaction between the subject[s] and crew," Ruby argues, this was the result not of a deliberate and critically motivated attempt at establishing reflexivity, but of accidents of circumstance. He writes:

> *'[B]ig' Edie and 'little' Edie Beale would not ignore the presence of the camera and crew, that is, learn to behave as 'proper' subjects of a documentary film. In spite of this situation (or possibly because of it), the Maysles brothers decided to continue and make Grey Gardens even though it has a 'look' which is different from their other films. . . [T]he filmmakers were allowing the circumstances of the shooting to dictate the form of the film, which consequently revealed the process and producer. (2005, 43)*

The apparently reflexive elements in *Grey Gardens* do not fit Ruby's criteria for reflexivity, so despite their obvious importance to the film he is forced to read them as standing in a kind of tension with the practice of the brothers and the movie they must have set out to make. Because the Beales refused to behave like ordinary subjects, he infers, the Maysles must have had no way of filming them in their usual observational style; hence they decided just to go with it, departing from that style. While the Maysles' reflexive techniques may well have been deployed somewhat experimentally as part of an unplanned response to their subjects – as Jonathan Vogels acknowledges, the brothers had a dynamic and "ad hoc" approach to filmmaking, underscored by Albert's assertion that he would use "'[a]nything that works!'" as a technique (2005, 151)[2] – Ruby's refusal to see reflexivity in this film is symptomatic. Thanks to his theoretical commitments, he has saddled himself with a particular understanding of the consequences of reflexivity; as the reflexive techniques of *Grey Gardens* do not have these consequences, he is forced to argue it is not truly reflexive.

Though he does not develop his claims about the film any further, the position Ruby outlines is congruent with those taken by many of the film's detractors on its release. In his insightful discussion of the film, Vogels describes the theoretical position that had taken shape in the years leading up to its release as follows:

> *Theorists held that cultural and artistic bias of all kinds reduced the artist's search for truth to just another search, no more or less pure or authentic than any other. Indeed, authenticity was dismissed as a sociohistorical construct that was itself laden with subjectivity. These theorists argued that because every film and every filmmaker must have*

> *a distinct point of view, only films that openly acknowledge their own processes for negotiating these limitations and biases could be considered trustworthy documents. (2005, 142)*

As Vogels shows, because of shifts in the academic landscape through the first half of the 70s, theorists were primed to attack *Grey Gardens*. Just before its release, for example, Thomas Waugh had presented a "eulogy" for direct cinema, arguing that its aesthetic of authenticity and spontaneity "was in effect a gospel of subjectivity." The problem for Waugh, of course, was not the subjectivity of direct cinema practitioners, but how they denied that subjectivity, their "persistent pretense of impartiality." So he condemned their films for how they "bore highly charged emotional statements beneath their posture of objectivity" (in Vogels, 2005, 143; see also 144) and even claimed that an attitude of contempt for subjects lay at the heart of works of direct cinema. Singling out the Maysles, Calvin Pryluck raised related objections regarding the ethics of observational works, referring to invasions of privacy, the intimidation of subjects by filmmakers, and the difficulty of obtaining genuinely informed consent. Arguments such as these from Waugh and Pryluck dovetailed in some of the critical responses to *Grey Gardens*: Richard Eder claimed that the film effectively turned moviegoers into exploiters, arguing that it created a kind of "carnival" of its "two willing but vulnerable" subjects; Walter Goodman claimed that the Beale women appear sad and ludicrous in the film, but that this quickly gives way to "disgust at the brothers"; David Sargent claimed that the brothers had cynically used the lives of Beales "in dubious service" of their own careers (all in Vogels, 2005, 146); Jay Cocks extended these points in an exemplary way when he attacked the brothers as "inveterate seekers after the phantom of documentary 'truth'" (in Vogels, 2005, 147). As Vogels writes, the Maysles were "derided [as] direct cinema idealists whose claims to pure filmmaking were misguided and naïve. . . manipulating audiences and then hiding behind their allegedly authentic process" (2005, 13). The Maylses' claims to authenticity were attacked not simply for their falsity, but for enabling their exploitation of subjects, and for obscuring that very exploitation. It is crucial that aesthetic and ethical issues are intertwined in many of these criticisms, with the claim that the brothers' gestures toward objectivity and authenticity were disingenuous giving teeth to the claim about exploitation. If we read these accounts together, it seems the moral problem with *Grey Gardens* was not simply that its makers intruded into the private lives of two vulnerable women, but that they dared to claim to be presenting the truth about them.

So it is unsurprising that defenses of *Grey Gardens* have been mounted on the grounds that the brothers do not try to treat the Beale women truthfully or objectively. In a 1981 piece on the film, David Davidson provided a new account of the artistic program of the Maysles, arguing that they had picked up

a particular set of modernist concerns. He points to how they break with the tradition established by direct cinema practitioners like Robert Drew, arguing that they "were less concerned with being 'fair' and 'informative' than with employing observational methods to communicate a more complex type of film truth" (1981, 3). He highlights their use of intricate reflexive techniques; and he argues (to my mind rightly) that they are committed to dealing with "the problematic," to "formal experimentation," and to confronting "experiences whose contradictions cannot be resolved" (1981, 12). Along with his understanding of modernism as a "offering. . . a multi-leveled and relativistic perspective on the subject being represented" (1981, 7) crucial to Davidson's arguments are the claims that the Maysles recognized the "necessarily 'subjective' perspective of the documentarist" (1981, 3) and that *Grey Gardens* makes a case for "the relativity of all perceptions" (1981, 7). In her much more recent piece, Rogers makes a rather similar set of claims, arguing that the film "throws into crisis the notions of objectivity, truth and selfhood through its reflexivity" (2015, 115) and that it "offers a special case within the Direct Cinema movement because it both acknowledges and simultaneously aims to eschew (by making apparent) the many ways in which reality can be mediated and, by extension, manipulated by the film director, the camera and the cinematic apparatus" (2015, 117). Rogers also argues that the film undercuts ideas of authentic selfhood by showing that "there is no 'true' self. . . that the self is a confluence of gestures that is solidified through performance" (2015, 116).

What *is* surprising about these defenses of *Grey Gardens* is how much theoretical ground they share with the attacks I described earlier. On Ruby's account, as for those of Davidson and Rogers, reflexive techniques problematize ideas of authenticity and objectivity in documentary film: for all three of them, it seems, to draw attention to process in a documentary film in a properly reflexive fashion just is to critique the documentary film as such and the ideals that have defined it. The point of contention between Ruby's account and those of Davidson and Rogers in relation to *Grey Gardens* does not have to do with the meaning of reflexivity, as all three understand it in a very similar way. Instead the differences are interpretive: they pertain to whether or not *Grey Gardens* really is a reflexive film, with Ruby arguing it is not, and Davidson and Rogers attempting to redeem it by making the opposite case. In my view, there are a number of assumptions being made on both sides here, not least the idea, which I have critiqued elsewhere (see Abbott 2016, 129–46), that our standard mode of responding to (non-reflexive) films involves a kind of credulity, a tendency (conscious or otherwise) to believe in the reality of what we see unfolding in front of us – a belief, of course, it will be the task of the reflexive filmmaker to call into question. Perhaps most problematic, however, is that all these accounts understand reflexivity in documentary in a monolithic way: as though the deployment of a reflexive technique – for example, through a

documentary filmmaker's deliberate appearance on a scene they are recording – could only mean one thing.

Consider the first sequence after the title. We start with shots of newspaper clippings, which detail an order the Beale women received from the Suffolk County Health Department, threatening them with eviction unless they clean their house (an order little Edie is quoted as calling a "raid" organized by a "mean, nasty Republican town," and "the most disgusting, atrocious thing ever to happen in America"); the subsequent cleanup effort, which saw them successfully avoid eviction; and news about the film itself, which an article describes as likely to return the Beales to the public eye. We see a photograph of the brothers with their camera as we hear the beginning of a conversation between them and the younger Edie (or 'little Edie' as she has become known): "It's the Maysles!" she cries; "Hi Edie!" replies one of the brothers, as the other describes them as her "gentlemen callers." There is a cut to Edie, who is returning a compliment from David about how fantastic she looks, and making fun of Al. She starts discussing her own outfit, or "costume" as she calls it: pantyhose pulled up over underwear, the bottom of which is exposed underneath a skirt she has fashioned from a piece of brown material and fastened with a pin and a knot at her hip, and which she claims can double as a cape; a brown skivvy; and a black scarf fastened tight around her head with a gold broach. "So I think this is the best costume for today," she says, before laughing a bit exasperatedly. "I have to think these things up you know. Mother wanted me to come out in a kimono so we had quite a fight." Soon she is suggesting that the Maysles head up onto the balcony of the house to take pictures of the work of her gardener Brooks; the brothers agree and follow her into an overgrown thicket, making their way toward the mansion. After chatting with Brooks, Edie confides to the brothers that he seemed "a little amazed" by her costume. "I never wear this in East Hampton."

Apart from Edie's outfit, what first registers about the scene is the easy familiarity that she and the brothers display together. They seem genuinely pleased to see each other; they joke, flirt, and tease; Edie questions the brothers about their directorial decisions, before gently taking control of the situation. She seems pretty much unfazed by them. And of course, the film draws attention to itself as such right from the start: there is the newspaper description of the movie, recording it as a public event; there is appearance of the brothers in the photograph with their camera; there is Edie's talk of her costume, and the implication emerging from her remarks about Brooks that she has dressed up especially for the film; there is the talk of picture-taking and camera angles. All of this makes the sequence a perfectly suitable candidate – it is one of many from the film – for Ruby's notion of reflexive filmmaking as "publicly concerned with the relationship among self, process, and product." That Ruby cannot see this shows how wedded he is to his commitment regarding the

consequences of reflexivity, which he finds emerging nowhere in the film. On this at least he seems broadly right to me: certainly there is very little here to trouble objectivity or authenticity, or the idea of documentary truth. Above all, what is missing in this opening sequence is any moment – or even any intimation – of formal violence or rupture. There is no estrangement in the classically modernist sense, though the scene is obviously strange in a range of ways. It is also – and at least as importantly – funny and charming.

As Rogers acknowledges, *Grey Gardens* shares features with four of the six documentary modes Bill Nichols has described: as a work of direct cinema, it is part of the observational tradition; with its chains of associations, fragmentary structure, and surreal imagery it is also poetic; because of the elements I have already begun identifying – and despite what Ruby claims – it is reflexive; and Rogers raises something particularly significant when she claims the film is also performative. In Nichols's terms that means it "emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own involvement with a subject," and "strives to heighten the audience's responsiveness to this involvement" (2010, 32); in Rogers's words, the film "reveals the inherently performative and creative nature of selfhood as well as the inextricable link between the filmmaker and the documentary subject" (2015, 117). Though I want to resist such claims about selfhood, she is right that performativity is essential in *Grey Gardens*. That the Beales are performers is crucial to the film, crucial to the identities of Beales themselves, and crucial to the relationships we see them establish with the Maysles.

Take one of the film's most famous scenes. It starts with a discussion between the women about the difference between how little Edie feels and how she appears to others: she says that in Grey Gardens she feels like a little girl, while big Edie says she sees her as an immature child. "You don't see me as I see myself," she says to Al's camera. "But you're very good what you do see me as. I mean, it's okay. . . They see me as a woman, I don't see that. In here I'm just Mother's little daughter." Then big Edie suggests she play Al a record she has bought her, which features a march performed by the Virginia Military Institute. Little Edie is delighted to discover it, but big Edie warns her – or baits her – by saying that she won't be able to dance to it, because she has never seen her "do anything military." After little Edie asserts that there isn't anything she can't do, there is a shot change: we find ourselves at the bottom of the stairs that lead up from the entrance to the bedroom. Edie descends dramatically, still wearing the same brown dress, but now with a new scarf, this time in bright red and blue, and an American flag in her hand. She dances around the room as the music plays upstairs, marching back and forth, spinning and grinning, and waving her flag. When the music stops she slouches laughing out the doorway, but turns back to address David: "Darling David where have you been all my life!? Where have you been? Only thing I needed was this man!" Or consider a scene from earlier in the film, one of a few in

which big Edie sings for the camera. She asks the brothers if they know the song "You and the Night and the Music." David claims he does; she asks him to sing it for her; he starts up with the lyrics to Dean Martin's "The Night is Young and You're So Beautiful." After Edie scolds David for getting it so wrong, Al provides the right line and melody. Pausing to comment on how wonderful the words are, big Edie picks it up and takes it away (her haunting performance is interspersed with shots of cats slinking around the room).

Performativity is central in both scenes, and not simply because they both feature performances. First of all, note how in little Edie's case the performance emerges out of a discussion of how she appears to others, and how she does not feel like the woman she thinks the Maysles see her as. It is hard to say whether her actions after this are deliberately ironic or whether there is a kind of dissonance here; either way it is fascinating how her worries about a disconnect between her sense of self and the self she presents are played out theatrically, as though the best way for Edie to deal with her fear of being a mere performer is by putting that to the test in playing to the crowd. The performance itself is punctuated by gestures soliciting the brothers, as Edie makes clear she is putting on a show (that she is putting on a show is part of the show). It concludes with her lamenting that it has taken this long for David to enter her life. What have the filmmakers given her, which clearly means so much? Nothing more or less than a stage on which to perform: by turning up with their camera and sound recorder, they have allowed her to be the performer she seems to have always wanted to be. In my reading, little Edie's worries about how she appears to others – and her attempts at denying or working through them by performing for others – do not demonstrate that selfhood is a fiction. Rather, they show how fraught it can be (an issue that simply would not arise for Edie if she had given up on the idea of being who she is). In big Edie's scene we find something similar: her act of performance implicates the brothers, as her song effectively emerges out of a kind of collaboration with them.[3] Once again the performance engenders a remarkable double reflexivity: because of its theatricality, it draws attention to itself as a performance, and so to the fact that the brothers are making a film; that the performance directly implicates the brothers deepens and complicates this, effectively rendering them performers. And as they draw the brothers into the performances, these acts also effectively draw in the women as collaborators on the filmmaking process itself.[4] Despite these complexities, none of this challenges the idea that the camera is recording reality. It is a performed reality, to be sure, but that does not render it unreal.

Try imagining what would have happened if the Maysles had actually achieved the direct cinema practitioner's wish to make the recording apparatus imperceptible. Imagine, for example, they had access to the technology we do, and were able to record simply by wearing glasses. Or imagine they had

access to more advanced technology, and were able to record video with undetectable contact lenses. The setup would have more closely approximated the conditions of standard human relationality, perhaps creating more naturalness. But without the camera in the room the women would not have had the same compulsion to perform, and so we would not gain but actually *lose* something revelatory. If we can characterize performativity as a mode of human relationality in which performance becomes crucial to relationality – a mode of acting in which the fact that one is acting before others is crucial to the meaning of those actions – then the recording equipment enables the performativity that is so important to this film. It transforms the rooms in which the drama of *Grey Gardens* unfolds, charging them with energy. It is part of what allows the women to reveal themselves in the ways they do.

Little Edie's flirting with David and her profession of delight and relief that he has arrived in her life come in the context of the film's foregrounding of many conversations between the Beale women about the men in their lives, and especially about the men who have exited little Edie's life, or never quite entered it (perhaps something like this is true of Jerry, the handsome young man the women call "The Marble Faun"; he appears regularly in *Grey Gardens*, ostensibly to do work around the house, but by the end of the film his relationship with little Edie has soured for reasons that are not made clear). Edie's performances are tinged with the need for audience of a natural performer whose career has been defeated, but her need can seem tinged with another. Perhaps that is part of what critics found offensive in this film, as though little Edie's performances reveal something doubly desperate in her. But to find desperation offensive says something of the offended; it can be a way of denying what is human in desperation (hence desperate in ourselves). And if we are offended by the candor of the depictions of the Beales' bodies in this film, it is worth asking what we find so disturbing, and whether we would respond the same if we saw the bodies of men shown in that way.

A couple of temptations characteristically arise in discussions of performativity. In some moods, we may find ourselves equating authenticity with acting without any regard for the eyes of others, and so dismissing performative modes of acting as inauthentic; in others we may end up celebrating performativity because of how it undermines the very notion of authenticity, effectively saying so much the better. In both cases, a certain assumption has been made: that because performativity involves a highly mediated, other-regarding mode of acting it could never count as authentic. But there are differences between authentic and inauthentic performances, differences that do not always map onto differences between audience-regarding and audience-denying performances. And despite the shallow romanticism that might lead us to think otherwise, mere sincerity is no guarantee of authenticity (consider earnest but self-serving and narcissistic social media posts: in such

cases, inauthenticity can arise from failures to take into account the highly mediated, performative nature of the context in play, in which it can be more authentic to proceed with a degree of ironic distance.)[5] In some contexts, acting ironically, being theatrical, or performing 'in quotation marks'[6] might be a path to authenticity; in some of those it might be the only path. Yet ironic distance can enable an inauthentic kind of flight from reality too (these kinds of complexities are tracked in some of the fiction of David Foster Wallace).[7] Playing themselves with wit, passion, and outlandishness, the Beales' acts of performance are ways of insisting on themselves, and of defying the society that has abandoned them, after putting them at its mercy. The women act with an awareness of acting, and of what can be terrible about that. One of the film's moral claims is that this can be a way of being authentic.

Underlying the commitments I am problematizing regarding the consequences of reflexivity and the mutual exclusivity of performance and authenticity is a certain notion of objectivity. For though the theorists I am engaging regard themselves as critical of objectivist accounts of documentary, they proceed on the basis of an assumption about what objectivity must be like. The assumption is rooted in scientism.[8] On this notion of objectivity, being objective means abstracting away from one's subjective standpoint in order to view the world dispassionately. As John McDowell argues, this notion of objectivity as an impersonal stance was foundational for the development of modern natural science, and so for the objective improvements in our understanding of the world that science has delivered us. Yet as he writes:

> *[I]t is one thing to recognize that the impersonal stance of scientific investigation is a methodological necessity for the achievement of a valuable mode of understanding reality; it is quite another thing to take the dawning grasp of this, in the modern era, for a metaphysical insight into the notion of objectivity as such, so that objective correctness in any mode of thought must be anchored in this kind of access to the real. (1998, 181–2)*

This notion of objectivity is methodologically crucial in the context of natural science, but it is a confusion to think it is the only viable notion of objectivity, importing it into all other contexts. When the theorists I have engaged argue that documentary filmmakers can never be objective, they mean that filmmakers can never take a purely impersonal stance, that they are always viewing things from their own subjective standpoints. The same notion of objectivity is also at work in the remarks of Graham I treated at the beginning of this article: it is what explains the triumphalism of such claims about direct cinema, the idea that new technologies had finally granted documentarians access to something that had hitherto been out of reach – a pristine world going on without regard for them – as though making the camera dis-

appear is the only way to access objective reality. Each side disagrees about the possibility of realizing the scientistic notion of objectivity, but both are beholden to it.

Scientism conceives of objectivity as the opposite of subjectivity, setting up true reality as something unmediated. One consequence of this is the desire to view the world from what McDowell calls a "sideways on" (1998, 214) perspective: to see reality from a position outside it. Another consequence is the opposing but equally confused idea of reality as something forever out of the reach of human beings: the notion that our emplacement in the world – the fact that we always engage it from a particular subjective perspective – necessarily condemns us to bias and partiality. While it is a mistake to argue that documentarians can access objective reality in this impersonal, natural scientific sense, it is just as mistaken to try and get real mileage out of the fact that they cannot. For what would it be to film the world from no perspective?

In the context of observational documentary, being objective does not mean taking a purely impersonal stance, somehow recording reality from a position outside it, leaving the world one records untouched, or catching one's subjects unawares. It means being true to one's subjects, letting them reveal themselves instead of imposing an agenda on them. It means refusing to judge one's subjects in a moralistic or otherwise prejudiced way. It means being fair to them. Of course lighter and less obtrusive recording apparatuses will have a different effect on the people one records. But the mere presence of a camera on a scene does not automatically undermine objectivity. Nor does it guarantee that one's subjects will behave inauthentically. It might lead them to start performing. In the case of *Grey Gardens*, the presence of the camera enabled all kinds of performances: performances that reveal the Beales, but which also implicate the Maysles as (men and) filmmakers. The result is a fascinating reflexivity, but it doesn't disqualify the film from objectivity. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, *Grey Gardens* is exposing: it shows its subjects as the singular beings they are. And as he writes: "The singularity exposed as such. . . is loveable" (1993, 2). If the film is objective in the sense I have described – revealing, unprejudiced, fair – that is because it lets the Beales perform and be exposed.

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Notes

[1] They are the aunt and cousin of Jacqui Onassis. Both women are named Edith. Throughout this article I will follow convention and call the older woman 'big Edie' and her daughter 'little Edie.'

[2] See also Vogels's claim that the Maysles "decision-making in this regard provided one more example of their ad hoc direct cinema; after all, life-as-it-happens dictated different responses and strategies from the filmmakers" (2015, 151).

[3] These collaborative aspects of the film resonate with the deeply collaborative nature of its production. As well as the Maysles duo, with Albert as cameraman and David on sound, two of the film's editors—Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer—are credited as co-directors.

[4] Matthew Tinkcom writes of how the "bond between documentary subject and filmmaker" that emerges through the film complicates the usual direct cinema setup:

> Direct cinema, relying as it does upon a purported agreement among the film-maker, subjects and audience to act as if the presence of the camera does not substantially alter the recorded event, encounters an important problem in *Grey Gardens*: one of the subjects—Little Edie—repeatedly brings the film-makers back into the film by addressing the camera, making eye-contact with the film-makers and discussing her romantic and erotic intentions with the Maysles and with David specifically. (2011, 63-4)

[5] As Robert Pippin writes: "A person can be quite sincere and not realize the extent of her submission to the other's expectations and demands" (2005, 31).

[6] The phrase is from Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" (2009, 280). If she is right that a camp performance is one carried out 'in quotation marks'—and that an earnest performance can have a camp appeal if it is appreciated in the same fashion—it gives weight to the claim that we should regard the Edies as camp performers. However I agree with Joe McElhaney when he argues that it would be a mistake simply to read the cult appreciation of the film among gay men as a kind of camp appreciation in Sontag's sense. Rather, the Beales' fans tend to celebrate them "with a straightforward and almost innocent investment" (2009, 131). That the Beales' performances are camp is part of what makes it possible to appreciate the women in earnest.

[7] My reading of this aspect of the film is somewhat similar to the one offered by Ilona Hongisto: "Storytelling in *Grey Gardens* bypasses categorical distinctions between the true and the false. Little Edie's roles are 'made up,' by they are nevertheless not 'false'" (2015, 82). To put it a little simplistically, my claim is that little Edie's roleplaying is part of what shows the truth about her.

[8] If my argument in this article is right, we should hesitate before accepting Brian Winston's claim—made in the context of a critique of direct cinema—that "the camera's sci-

entific status is the bedrock upon which documentary's truth claim must rest or collapse" (1995, 142). The problem with Winston's account is clear enough in the phrase "documentary's truth claim," which betrays an assumption that has arguably caused a great deal of confusion in documentary theory: that documentary as such makes a single kind of claim to truth. Winston has qualified the claim in a more recent edition of his book (see 2008, 143). His commitment to a scientistic notion of documentary evidence must be part of what leads him to regard Albert Maysles's statements about the complex relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in direct cinema as "sophistry" (161).

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