Narrating American Gender and Ethnic Identities

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Edited by

Aleksandra M. Różalska and Grażyna Zygadło

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INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN GENDER AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES REVISITED

ALEKSANDRA M. RÓŻALSKA
AND GRAŻYNA ZYGADŁO

Narrating American Gender and Ethnic Identities is the outcome of the annual international conference of the Polish Association for American Studies in 2010. This event has always provided a platform for thought-provoking discussions in many of the fields that the discipline of American studies comprises. During the 2010 conference, the task of deliberating over the issue of American identity was taken up by scholars from all over the world. One of the conference's most significant themes was the notion of identity which was primarily explored in relation to issues of gender and ethnicity. Specifically, the articles included in this volume investigate aspects of the relationship between representations of gender and sexuality in film and literature and the American experience of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

The aim of the volume is to provide and encourage a discussion about intertextuality and interdisciplinarity in relation to representations of minorities (ethnic, religious, and sexual); in particular, of women in intersectional contexts pertaining to race, class, and sexuality. The papers gathered in this collection contribute to the broader understanding of the depiction of women in various film genres (action and animated movies, *film noir*, camp and queer cinema, cop movies, etc.) as well as in literary accounts (Barbara Kingsolver, Don DeLillo, Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, and others). These cultural texts are analyzed using various theoretical points of view, specifically derived from feminist studies, gender studies, LGBT studies, theories of intersectionality, and film studies. The latter encompasses a varied methodological approach and specifically draws on work in genre theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory, etc. to analyze representations of women in "mainstream," "independent,"

"feature," and "documentary" film texts including, for example, *Notorious* by Alfred Hitchcock, *The Color Purple* by Steven Spielberg, and *The Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye. As such, the volume offers an interesting insight into selected film narratives that introduce active heroines, who in a variety of ways endeavor to transgress certain socially constructed roles and expectations.

In addition, the volume focuses on contemporary interpretations and re-interpretations of the experiences of various American ethnic and racial minorities—the ways in which they articulate or self-express their identities and negotiate them within and in relation to the dominant culture. These chapters focus on, for example, various aspects of the Native-American, African-American, and Latin-American presence in the United States—their representations in literature and popular culture, their often fraught relationship with the dominant culture, and their various attempts to preserve ethnic uniqueness and distinctiveness within—to use Vincent Parillo's words—"the ever-changing US mosaic" (2010).

In this context, a number of the articles here address both the past and contemporary dilemmas of specific ethnic communities. These include interethnic relations in a multicultural society between, for example, Native-American tribes and Anglo-Saxon colonizers, questions of assimilation and separation in the post-9/11 era, the expression of anti-immigrant sentiment in American society, as well as the importance of space, location, and "situatedness," all of which play a significant role in the formation of hybrid ethnic subjectivities. Finally, it should become apparent that the complex presence of various ethnic minorities within the American landscape is one of the volume's central themes. In their contributions, the authors refer to, for example, the complexities of Chicano/a experiences at the US-Mexican border, the ways in which Native Americans cope with their invisibility in mainstream American culture, and the role of literature and the media (especially film and television) in shaping and re-shaping the dominant images and stereotypes about the ethnic/racial Other.

In responding to current trends in American studies, most of the authors here have undertaken interdisciplinary approaches that implicitly and explicitly foreground specific concepts that are indicative of research in the field of contemporary cultural studies. Thus, although primarily addressing scholars and students of American studies, this volume will also be of interest to anyone interested in the study of the United States—its literature and media—from a cultural studies perspective. Selected articles in this volume might also be used, by established scholars and students, as an entry into contemporary debates about the value of

multiculturalism, the complex role of various intersections (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, religion, class, dis/ability) in shaping minority subjectivities, as well as feminist responses to, and readings of, representations of women in dominant literary and filmic texts.

The first cluster of essays in the present volume, entitled "Gender and Sexuality in Film and Literature," consists of eight texts written by Polish and American scholars from various fields including the political sciences and film and literary studies. The common denominator here is the concentration on either alternative ways of reading and re-reading the classic works of American cinema or on new methods of approaching issues involving the representation of gender, including "camp" and "queer" approaches.

In her chapter "Bitchy, Messy, Queer. Femininity as Gothic Camp in the Maysles Brothers' *Grey Gardens*, the 2009 HBO Remake, and Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Tramway*," **Agnieszka Graff** elaborates on why the documentary *Grey Gardens* and, in particular, its main female protagonists, Big Edie and Little Edie, have proved to be popular with specific gay audiences. Graff's analysis of this phenomenon is informed by "camp aesthetics" as well as feminist and queer studies. Interestingly, as the author points out, "The camp appeal of *Grey Gardens* is not a matter of the filmmakers' intentions, but rather an outcome or the gay community's interpretation of the Edies' mode of existence: their penchant for singing and drama, their way of mixing nostalgia and defiance, mockery and despair." Thus, while female audiences may find the women's representations oppressive—the film "can be interpreted as an elaborate cruel joke played at the expense of two vulnerable women"—gay audiences have generally affirmed the heroines' "theatricality" and "sensitivity." Moreover, Graff insists that feminist evaluations of Edies' characters do not necessarily have to be negative, not if arrived at through the framework of "feminist camp." Additionally, the author refers to two other cultural texts inspired by *Gray Gardens*: the 2009 HBO remake, which was much more sympathetic towards its heroines, and Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2010 staging of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* which referred to the original documentary and represented *Tramway*'s Blanche in a different, more "empowered" way.

The next chapter "'I Will Make a Man Out of You:' The Im(Possibility) of Female Individualism in Disney's Animated Films" by **Justyna Fruzińska** focuses on a completely different film genre: selected animated movies produced by Walt Disney Pictures after 1989. She analyzes four pictures with female protagonists at their center—*Little Mermaid* (1989),

Beauty and the Beast (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). Disney's productions usually concentrate on individualistic heroes whose ultimate goal is to achieve self-realization and to discover their true identities at all costs. As the author convincingly suggests, while the male protagonists are self-reliant and independent enough to succeed in this task, for female heroines it is much more difficult to both satisfy the individualistic assumptions of Disney's productions and to meet the requirements of a (still) patriarchal American society. Consequently, they "are trapped between self-fulfillment and self-denial." One of the most important points of departure for Fruzińska's considerations is that Disney movies always seem to perceive foreign cultures through the lens of the dominant American ideology—in particular, notions of an idealized American identity—regardless of whether it is either the story of Native-American Pocahontas or Mulan, who saves the empire of China, that is being told. Their stories must necessarily appropriate and reproduce dominant American values in order, it seems, to satisfy the demands of the notional American audience. For instance, despite the heroines' strength and independence, the female characters ultimately look to men for support. The author explains this by referring to the ways in which these films reproduce a post-feminist rhetoric that "tries to combine social liberties earned for women by feminism with 'traditional' thinking about the role of love as defining women's lives."

Małgorzata Martynuska in her essay "Masking of Identities: The Portrait of *Femme Fatale* in the American Film *Noir*" analyzes two 1946 films: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Notorious*, both belonging to the genre of film *noir*. The former is considered a classic *noir* picture, while the latter represents its spy equivalent with a seductive *femme fatale* heroine at its center. The main aim of Martynuska's text is, first of all, to elaborate on the emancipatory changes that women in the United States underwent during World War II and on their experiences of a post-war reality that threatened to undermine the value of their social status and accomplishments. Second, Martynuska suggests that the American *noir* films of the 1940s are a direct response to the aforementioned social transformations. In this context, she analyzes the portrayals of *femmes fatales* who are depicted as women that can never be trusted and, although seemingly independent and strong, are generally always represented as a mere adjunct to the male lead. Moreover, the *femme fatale* is not the mistress of her own fate and, as the author points out, she must necessarily be "punished for her attempts to secure independence, usually by death, thus restoring the balance of the patriarchal system." So, interestingly, the

noir heroines simultaneously threaten and reaffirm traditional American values, as well as the patriarchal social order.

The following chapter, "What to Do with Her? Female Law Enforcement Figures in American Cinema" by **Elżbieta Durys**, also refers to various film texts, this time representing "cop cinema," which, as the author explains at the beginning of her article, belongs to the genre of "order." Police movies are stereotypically regarded as "the so-called male genres as they mostly appeal to the male audience, but also in the sense that there is a male hero, an individual depicted as a sort of warrior, who enters the community threatened or ridden by chaos and he saves it." The author investigates here what happens when female protagonists enter the world of "cop cinema" and, in particular, what the consequences of their appearance in this male-dominated world are. Undoubtedly, cop heroines transgress traditionally fixed social roles, yet the question of whether or not there is a price that they have to pay for this, remains. Durys suggestively contends that Hollywood cinema, despite its apparent progressiveness and innovation in terms of its depiction of women, is still relatively conservative and patriarchal. She demonstrates her point by referring to the 1991 Jonathan Demme picture *The Silence of the Lambs*, whose heroine—the skilled, educated, and independent FBI agent-to-be, Clarice Starling—provides a promising example of a "rookie cop." But, as a serious analysis of the film's narrative and the heroine's position within the story shows, women are not always accepted on equal terms with men, either within "cop" culture or the cop genre itself.

Krystyna Mazur's chapter "*The Watermelon Woman* as Black Queer Cinema" is devoted to an examination of revolutionary representations of black female sexuality in *The Watermelon Woman,* a 1996 film by Cheryl Dunye, which appears to be the perfect illustration of "black lesbian camp." In her discussion of the movie, Mazur concentrates on the director's attempt "to recover the story of a black lesbian actress and singer, Fae Richards"—"the Watermelon Woman"—something which, on a larger scale, serves as a repossession of the forgotten stories of black lesbians that have been generally "suppressed by the racial and sexual norms which govern the production of history." According to Mazur, Dunye plays with and even mocks the form of the classic documentary which, it seems, is her way of "highlighting the awareness of the limitations of documentary "truth," thus provoking the reader to question the integrity of existing socio-cultural models and norms.

Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko in her essay "Illustrating Letters to God—Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* Twenty-Five Years After" uses a reflective perspective to examine the accuracy of Steven Spielberg's

adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple,* and to subsequently consider the efficacy of the choice of Spielberg as director. She reconsiders the quality and significance of the movie, compared with the original text, from a contemporary perspective, drawing our attention to the concerns for which Spielberg's production was criticized. For example, "the general softening of the original drama, the depiction of black men, and the decision to refrain from presenting Celie's sexual awakening." Rokosz-Piejko analyzes each of these problems and concludes that, in spite of some obvious faults, the movie is still a valuable contribution to the "history of black experience" in America. She also remarks that "had the film been directed by a less-known and less 'commercial' film director, it would not have caused so much upheaval, and would never have received so much attention. The fact that a wealthy Jew was trying to relate to the oppression and abuse of a Black woman seemed to be beyond comprehension for many."

In her chapter "The Fantasy of Liberation: Politics, Pornography, and Women's Lives in *Running Dog*" **Heather Hadar Wright** claims that although Don DeLillo by many critics has been considered a misogynist writer because of his focus on men who objectify and use women, in fact this type of behavior was never "lauded by DeLillo" who simultaneously "has devoted considerable attention to drawing significant female characters." His female protagonists are, to use the author's words, "not convenient appendages to men, but rather individuals of interest in their own right." Subsequently, Wright cautiously analyzes DeLillo's 1978 novel *Running Dog* predominantly concentrating on the relationships between the main character, Moll Robins, and the men in her life. Wright finally concludes that as a result of our contemporary obsession with consumption and "materiality", including sexuality—side-effects of a destructtive global capitalism and liberal ideology—neither men nor women are able to achieve "wholeness."

The text "Experiencing a Place. Discovering Oneself. The Inhabitants of Barbara Kingsolver's Southern Appalachians in *Prodigal Summer*" by **Katarzyna Czerwiec-Dykiel** focuses on the significance of regionalism with regard to the formation of human identity and the development of self-awareness. She discusses how geography, history, as well as the "biology" of a particular region become inseparable elements in the process of the novel's heroine's "discovery" of self. The formative aspect of nature and landscape is here examined using the theory of Edward Ayers. According to him, regions "provide the framework for understanding who we are, what has happened to us, and what we can look forward to" (Ayers 1996, 1). Kingsolver exemplifies this approach in her

fiction which often alerts the reader to the ways in which "individual stories are interwoven with the country's landscape." As Czerwiec-Dykiel argues in her paper this is exactly what happens to Lusa Landowski—the heroine of *Prodigal Summer*.

The second cluster in this volume, "American Experiences of Ethnic Diversity," is a collection of texts written by scholars specializing in: ethnic and racial aspects of American multicultural society, the complex interrelationships between the dominant and the marginalized or, if you prefer, the center and the periphery, as well as comparative studies examining the experiences of minorities in America. It also focuses on their "(un)fitting" into the dominant culture, mainstream politics, and the cultural canon.

Paulina Ambroży begins her essay "'Alma entre dos mundos': Spatial Metaphors in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes" by stating that the notion of space and territory is of primary importance in Chicana literature. In proving this claim she analyzes several poems by contemporary Chicana poet, Lorna Dee Cervantes, who often uses the metaphor of space to "dramatize tensions between the past and the present, myth and history, reality and utopia, the private and the communal," thus participating in the creation of Chicana's "theoretics of space." In order to explain "the richness and complexity of Chicana conceptualizations and constructions of space" critics often confront Chicanas' works from two theoretical perspectives: first, Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland theory and, second, the notion of the contact zone, formulated by Mary Louise Pratt in her essay "Arts of the Contact Zone." Ambroży approaches Lorna Dee Cervantes' poetry using these two perspectives and concludes that Cervantes manages to create a new dynamic zone of "in-between-ness" in which the coexistence of different, split selves is possible, even desirable.

Similarly, **Katarzyna Nowak** in her text "California after the US Conquest and the Status Anxiety. Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don*" also focuses on the importance of space, land, and territory. This provides the starting point for her discussion of Ruiz de Burton's book—the first narrative about Californian history written by a woman. Nowak aptly notices that although the novel is a typical example of its genre, namely the romance, it is also a very detailed account of the political and personal consequences that the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo has brought for California's native people. Moreover, Nowak places her study of the novel in relation to contemporary border studies, concentrating on the difficulties of negotiating one's ethnicity in the face of colonization and cultural domination. She observes that such

historically challenging moments usually require, from the native inhabitants of a particular territory, renegotiations and reconceptualizations of their racial and ethnic identities and that this often results in the formation of new *mestizo* subjectivities.

Likewise, in her text "American Narrative of the Return to the 'Peripheries' in Bernard Malamud's *Pictures of Fidelman* and Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto Barroco*" **Dominika Bugno-Narecka** focuses on the complicated and multilayered relations between the center and the periphery, as well as on the experiences of being "here" or "there," "us" or "them," "the major" or "the minor." Whereas, for the colonizer the perception of the center is rather clear and unproblematic, for the colonized his/her position is far more complex because, as the author explains, "despite being treated as the periphery by the colonizer, [the colonized] is in fact a member of a different cultural center on whom the features of a new (dominant) center are imposed." Both protagonists in the two literary texts that Bugno-Narecka analyzes here have to renegotiate their relationship with Europe, which they perceive as the center, and with America, which they view as the periphery. Both of them have to find their way to—as the chapter's title suggests—return to the peripheries, to rediscover the New World, and regain their "true" identity. Malamud's Fieldman "transformed by his stay in Europe, goes back to America to fulfill his dream of being endlessly happy." Similarly, Carpentier's Montezuma, although from a very different social background than Fieldman, comes back to his homeland in Mexico, deeply disappointed with his European experience but also well aware of his identity and the place of his belonging.

Aleksandra M. Różalska's chapter "Native Americans in Television Narratives: *Dr. Quinn, the Medicine Woman* and *Northern Exposure*" elaborates on the processes of inclusion and exclusion of ethnic experiences in mainstream popular culture. Here she refers to two television series aired in the 1990s. A Native-American presence in television has been problematic for at least two reasons. First, their representations have always been reduced to a few schematic, very often negative, stereotypes of the "bloodthirsty savage" or, alternatively, to the peaceful, stoic "noble Indian" who is doomed to extinction. Second, dominant depictions of Native Americans have situated them necessarily in historical, mainly 19th-century contexts, which is the case with *Dr. Quinn, the Medicine Woman*. Although the series tries to show the Cheyenne in a sympathetic or even idealized way, Różalska argues that it actually diminishes their presence and in so doing fails to seriously address the complexity of American-Indian relations on the frontier during the time depicted in the

show. Another TV series that Różalska examines, *Northern Exposure*, is represented here as an example of mainstream television that positively foregrounds its native characters in the narrative. Importantly, the show, although not without its flaws, depicts the Alaska Native as belonging to a contemporary people that constitutes an inseparable part of the entire local community. Here, Native Americans are ambiguous and complex characters who are able to easily reconcile the values of the dominant American culture with their own traditional tribal customs and beliefs.

The chapter "Visualizing Sensory Identities: Exploring Ways of Perception among Small Communities in an Auto-driven Photographic Project by Oneida and Polish Youth Conducted in 2007-2008" by **Alicja Froń** summarizes the results of an extremely suggestive comparative project conducted in two, seemingly unconnected, communities of the Oneida of the Thames, Canada and Nowa Wola in Podlasie, Poland. The primary focus of this study is on the visual aspects of participants' experiences; however, in the course of the research it became apparent that participants' other senses were also important in the socialization processes. The author compares various sensory experiences (olfactory, tactile, auditory, and gustatory ones) of the two communities, whose shared "life on the verges of the mainstream society has founded multilayered internal/external distances." Among the reasons that alienate the participants from the rest of the society, as well as from their own community, are factors such as the generation gap, intra-community and language differences, religious distinctiveness, and geographical remoteness. Froń comes to the conclusion that visual methods can be the source of both symbolic violence and empowerment. Generally speaking, "the action project demonstrated multi-facet nature, which allowed all the engaged parties to perceive a wider picture of the two communities." In addition, the author also points out the importance of a sensory approach in this type of research.

Manlio Della Marca's chapter entitled "Native-American Responses to America: William Apess and Leslie Marmon Silko" concentrates on American-Indian negotiations of the concepts of nationhood and citizenship. To illustrate his argumentation, the author chooses to analyze two Native-American literary accounts: "The Eulogy on King Philip" by William Apess and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko. Both approach the issue of American identity from a different perspective—that of resistance/exclusion and of appropriation/inclusion, and both elaborate on the complex interrelationships between nationhood and war. The choice of authors was not accidental as they both "wrote within complex cultural contexts, at crucial moments in the US history marked by heated debates about the

American national identity: Apess in the 1830s Jacksonian America and Silko in 1970s post-Vietnam War America." Della Marca tries to link this to the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath by drawing parallels (after Donald Pease in his book *The New Exceptionalism*) "between the concept of the 'domestic dependent nation,' invented by Justice Marshall in 1831 to justify the Indian Removal, and the State of Exception initiated by Bush's Global War on Terror."

Grażyna Zygadło in her text "The Symbolism of Blue Eyes in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie" compares two novels by prominent ethnic writers, Toni Morrison and Sherman Alexie, specifically in relation to their bringing into question the standards of beauty in mainstream American culture, against which the heroines of both novels judge themselves. In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Reservation Blues* women want to have blue eyes which, they believe, would increase their chances of attaining personal happiness, power, and popularity. The paradox here is that this unattainable dream—which they share—leads to a failure to accept themselves as they are. This results in the so-called "double consciousness" or split-identity syndrome. Moreover, Zygadło focuses here on the problem of the interdependence of sexism and racism, which is the experience of many women coming from any minority group. She writes that "by addressing the problem of sexism in isolation from racism and classism 'mainstream feminists' have alienated working-class and colored women from the liberation movement," and that this "gave rise to the development of distinct feminist discourses." Subsequently, both Morrison and Alexie illustrate how two seemingly very different ethnic groups, African Americans and Native Americans, are both subjected to the white man's continuous cultural domination.

In her study of the welfare system in the US entitled "Race, Ethnicity, and Welfare. How Does Diversity Challenge Redistribution in the US?" **Emilia Świętochowska** concentrates on the impact of factors such as race, class, and ethnicity on welfare policy and the redistribution of capital. She takes a comparative stance and analyzes differences and similarities between welfare systems in Western-European countries and the US and, in doing so, ponders the historical and political origins of those differences. She also presents an overview of historically and culturally significant acts and documents which shaped the formation of the present-day system in the US. Moreover, Świętochowska skillfully links contemporary, often hostile, attitudes in American society towards welfare politics with the recent, rapid increase in immigration of various ethnic groups, particularly Latinos. Świętochowska refers to various scholars

who "believe that resources which facilitate public agreement on redistribution, such as trust, solidarity, and reciprocity, benefit from the existence of a certain degree of national homogeneity, common identity, and a sense of belonging" (Miller 1995; Tamir 1993, 127) which, as some conservatives claim, is threatened by immigration. She concludes that "the question, how to sustain and improve social solidarity and the commitment to welfare provision in such a heterogeneous society as the American one, still remains open."

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PART I

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN FILM AND LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE

BITCHY, MESSY, QUEER. FEMININITY AND CAMP IN MAYSLES BROTHERS' *GREY GARDENS*, ITS HBO REMAKE, AND KRZYSZTOF WARLIKOWSKI'S *TRAMWAY*

AGNIESZKA GRAFF

"It's a revolutionary costume"—thus concludes Edith Bouvier Beale's speech on the advantages of combining pants and pantyhose. The strangely clad speaker smiles knowingly, standing in the midst of wild greenery. A revolutionary costume should be done in such a way, she explains, as to leave oneself the option of wearing one's skirt as a cape. This monologue—and the accompanying demonstration, complete with sweater worn on her head—is the opening scene of *Grey Gardens,* a documentary film about Edith and her mother. Made by the brothers David and Albert Maysles in 1975, the work is a classic example of *cinema vérité.* It is also a camp classic with its own fan page, a blog devoted to on the Internet, and guided tours offered on the site of its making. *Grey Gardens* is not only quoted, sampled, and excerpted on YouTube, but it has been also followed up with bizarre contributions of a male Edie impersonator.

This article aims to examine the cultural and political meaning of the film's continuing appeal to gay audiences by putting its reception in a broader context of debates about camp aesthetics and camp's relationship to feminism. Besides looking at the original documentary and its changing reception among gay audiences, I examine two recent recyclings of this cultural text: the 2009 HBO remake and Krzysztof Warlikowski's 2010 theater production *Tramway.* The former is a film aimed at a broad audience, named *Grey Gardens* and surprisingly faithful to the original in some ways, but—I argue—both more "cozy" and sympathetic towards the women portrayed. The latter is an experimental staging of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* (Warsaw, Paris,

2010), which uses *Grey Gardens* in order to position his *Streetcar* within today's queer culture.

1. The Original *Grey Gardens*: Tenderness and Betrayal

It is not an easy film to watch. Irresistible to some, the original *Grey Gardens* appears unbearably dull or just plain odd to others. Made in accordance with the direct cinema aesthetics, whose main rule is that subjects should gradually forget they are being filmed, it is a highly fragmented and inconclusive record of the lifestyle of two aging and profoundly eccentric women—mother and daughter, both named Edith Bouvier Beale. In the movie they are referred to as Big Edie and Little Edie, respectively. When we meet them, the two women are leading a secluded but mostly happy life in a dilapidated rat-, raccoon-, and cat-infested mansion in East Hampton, New York, the summer residence of their once wealthy family. One bizarre bit of information, casually offered early in the film, is that they are cousins of Jackie Kennedy. The world of celebrity, however, seems utterly irrelevant both to the Beale women and to the filmmakers. In fact, it is their very obscurity, their bizarre over-the-top reclusiveness that makes the two Edies so appealing to the Maysles.

The film, as one critic notes, may seem like an "exploitative invasion of privacy, a mockery of two sadly deranged women" (Colman 2005, 1). Regardless of how we may judge its ethics, this invasion makes aesthetic sense. In terms of technique the film is faithful to the rules of the direct cinema style: a hand-held camera is employed throughout; the film makers make a sustained effort to build a close relationship with their subjects. The aim is to establish trust, building an aura of intimacy and immediacy. Ideally, a product of the cinema direct school should be not so much an invasion of, as an effort to participate in, someone's private life. The film should rather feel as though we, the viewers, are being allowed to partake, unseen, in the intimacy of another human being. The effect is one of authenticity and fragmentation; little effort is made to cater to our need for coherence or explication, closure or completeness. The film overflows with mis-remembered quotes, unfinished actions, and misunderstood gestures. To cite a useful early study of *Grey Gardens'* narrative structure, "[t]heir lives are like a series of discontinuous takes or rehearsals, but we never witness the full performance" (Robson 1983, 44). In fact, the film is a highly structured piece of art, but it takes a real fan—someone who has watched it attentively several times—to spot the recurrent themes.

An odd kind of tenderness appears to drive the Maysles' interest in the Beale women. Nonetheless, the subjects' confidence in the brothers

appears to have been betrayed. The film repeatedly forces us to see the two Edies' embarrassment and humiliation, as well as their petty acts of mutual disloyalty, recrimination, and regret. *Grey Gardens* exposes the catastrophic state of the mansion, the two women's grotesque domestic ineptitude, and their bodily deterioration. In the background there is the story of their past—wasted talent, stupid choices, and mutual entrapment. This combination of empathy and cruelty results in an unsettling effect: the viewer's growing suspicion that the Edies' trust is being betrayed here. As spectators we partake in this betrayal and, again, it makes perfect aesthetic sense. Both tenderness and cruelty are inalienable aspects of what has been described as the "new grammar" of cinema direct. According to the author of a monograph on the Maysles, the style relied on a peculiar mixture of subjectivity and self-effacement on part of the filmmakers. The documentary was considered a success as it managed to capture its subjects at their most "authentic" moments, oblivious of the fact that a camera was there. It is an aesthetic of immediacy and vulnerability. The visual effect often feels like a painful violation of privacy, because "operators and directors preferred the close-up, scanning the faces of their subjects, frequently holding the shot for long takes, in order to capture their emotions and reactions" (Vogels 2005, 1-2).

The direct cinema movement is best understood as part of the 1960s and 1970s counter-cultural effort to shake Americans awake, to bring them out of their materialistic stupor, and force them to enter into direct contact with what that generation liked to call "unmediated experience." The philosophy behind this spiritual and political project was influentially expressed by the British psychiatrist, R. D. Laing, in his book *The Politics of Experience* (1967)—a passionate tract that challenges mainstream society's idea of psychological norm, describing social outcasts as prophets of the truths that our civilization has abandoned. All this is of relevance to *Grey Gardens* and is part of the cultural competence required in watching the film. It is not, however, my purpose here to examine such sources and contexts in detail. Nor do I intend to address the unacknowledged ideological implications of the idea of "authenticity," or to examine the type of mediation that the "unmediated" effect of cinema direct in fact requires. Instead, I want to raise a question of gender politics of *Grey Gardens* and suggest that it can be usefully read in the light of debates about camp and feminism.

What is the gender politics of a documentary whose making requires securing an old woman's complete trust and then putting in public view her sagging breasts, or the crumpled newspapers that serve her as napkins? What did this violation of privacy mean in 1975, and what does it mean

today? Does it matter that the filmmakers were men? Is the resulting effect of "authenticity" shaming or liberating for the film's two heroines? Or could it possibly be both? And what should we make—politically—of *Grey Gardens'* gay following? Is the film "camp" only from the point of view of a properly distanced, sophisticated (and mostly male as well as gay) audience, or can it also be seen as "feminist camp," i.e., as somehow "empowering" to the two women filmed, as well as to some hypothetical female audience? Such questions take us into debates about the politics (specifically: gender politics) of camp as a cultural practice. To go there, however, we need first be convinced that the category of camp is a relevant reference point for *Grey Gardens*.

2. *Grey Gardens* as a Camp Classic: from Sophistication to Coziness

In 2006 the Maysles brothers capitalized on the film's success by producing a sequel called *The Beales of Grey Gardens*, put together from unused footage and now sold in a collectors' package with the original film and additional materials, such as directors' commentary and interview excerpts. In 2009, when HBO released its remake, it was no secret that the film's following was largely composed of gay men. Although devoid of any direct references to homosexuality, the film has enjoyed enormous popularity among gay audiences for several decades; its two protagonists (especially the daughter) have been widely considered icons of gay culture. Asked in 2011 what he had thought about the film's recent comeback, Albert Maysles stated: "I should have expected that it would have that kind of reaction. When the film first came out there were dozens of gay men having *Grey Gardens* parties all over the country and even in England where gay men would dress up as Edie and have their parties and it's still going on" ("Gay Ally Albert Maysles Speaks OUT" 2011). Watching the film was described as a significant generational experience for those who came of age as gay men soon after Stonewall rebellion. In the words of a film scholar, John David Rhodes, in the late 1970s *Grey Gardens* served as a "rite of passage for gay men. . . . It was one of the films that all of us quoted to each other. . . . It served as a kind of recondite, East Village version of camp, classical Hollywood" (cited in Colman 2005). Guy Kettelhack, the author of a nostalgic tribute to the Beale women, which is a permanent fixture on the film's official fan site, remembers his own early viewing as having occurred in the general context of mid-1970s youthful "sophistication." *Grey Gardens* came into his life as a part of a countercultural package that included: