

“There’s No Place Like Home:” Mothers, Daughters, and Domestic Spaces in 20th Century American Film

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This paper examines two American films from the twentieth century, The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939) and Grey Gardens (Albert and David Maysles, 1975). Although these films represent two different genres – fantasy and cinema verité respectively – they share a common purpose which is to explore the dynamics of a mother/daughter relationship within the confines of a domestic space. In this discussion, I will examine the psychological themes that unite these films and attempt to address the question of what these films reveal about twentieth century perceptions of the mother/daughter relationship.

Historically, the American film industry has been male-dominated. A survey of the productions credits for films from major motion picture studios in the twentieth century reveal distinct lack of female representation. There were, of course, exceptions and a female presence is found in the two films under discussion. The Wizard of Oz was directed by Victor Fleming and produced by Mervyn LeRoy. The writing team included a female co-writer (Florence Ryerson collaborated with Noel Langley and Edgar Allen Woolf) and the film had a female editor (Blanche Sewell). The original text is drawn from the children’s literature masterpiece, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum (1900). Grey Gardens was directed and produced by Albert and David Maysles with Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer credited as co-directors and Susan Froemke credited as co-producer. The film was edited by Froemke, Hovde, and Meyer and scripted from the narratives of Edith and “Little Edie” Bouvier Beale. However, even with this feminine creative input, these two films are representative of the cinematic “male gaze” and offer a masculine interpretation of an essential female relationship.

Mulvey defines the term, “male gaze,” in her seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She writes that the “voyeuristic-scopophilic look” is a “crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure” (17-18). This “look” involves various levels of participation. The camera watches and captures the action for the “invisible guest” (the audience) who is watching what is being displayed, and the characters in the movie play are watching each other all within the boundaries of a “screen illusion.” Mulvey critiques traditional cinema for stealing the female image, displaying “fetishistic representations” for satisfaction and pleasure, and utilizing “voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms” (17-18). She argues that the central anxiety at the crux of this cinematic male gaze is a fear of the castrated/castrating woman. In The Wizard of Oz and Grey Gardens, however, the central anxiety is not phallogentric but uterine. They are not concerned at their core with male/female relationships but rather with the primal female relationship – mother/daughter. It is this female power struggle that gives these two films their dramatic tension and it is a struggle structured and choreographed through the male gaze of filmmakers Victor Fleming and Albert and David Maysles.

The Mythic Mother: Devouring or Distracted

Various archetypes of Mother can be traced in Western mythology. Statues of ancient fertility goddesses represent the Earth Mother as fecund but featureless, all breasts and hips. This all-encompassing, all-powerful mother is the life force from which all goodness flows. She is both life-giver and destroyer. Both Freud and Lacan drew upon this ancient symbol of the all-powerful mother. In Freudian theory Mother is the child's first "love-object." For boys, it is only the intervention of the father, via the threat of castration, which forces the child to give up his desire for the mother. Girls transfer their desire to their fathers. Freud theorized that the all-powerful, Devouring Mother produced homosexual sons and Lacan posited that the Devouring Mother was a primal source of anxiety (Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis 2009). Jung defined the archetype of the devouring mother as one who is "unloving, ensnaring, and coercing" (Bowles, 1994: 909). In fairy tales this all-consuming mother sometimes does so literally. The opposite of the Devouring Mother is the Good or Devoted Mother who is "loving, protecting, and transforming. The Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is the ultimate "Good Mother" in Western tradition (909).

The Distracted Mother fails to properly protect her child. The myth of Persephone encapsulates the Ur Distracted Mother - Demeter. Demeter the Greek goddess of the harvest, the Earth Mother, conceived Persephone through Zeus, the king of the gods. In the Claudian version of the story Demeter (Ceres) goes to a wedding and leaves Persephone (Proserpine) in care of nymphs. Hades abducts Persephone and ensconces her in his underground kingdom. Because Demeter is grief-stricken over her lost daughter, the Earth becomes sterile. To set matters right, Zeus intervenes. He sends Hermes to secure Persephone's release. Hades tricks Persephone into eating pomegranate seeds thus binding her to return to him for part of the year. When Persephone is with her mother, plants grow and bloom; when Persephone returns to Hades, Demeter grieves and the earth is plunged into winter (Claudian 2009).

The Distracted or Devouring Mother is also found in Western folk and fairy tales. In The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of traditional fairy tales and includes a discussion of archetypes of "Mother." In "Snow White," for example, the evil (step)mother is so jealous of her daughter's "budding sexuality" that her intent is to literally devour her daughter:

The queen orders the hunter not only to kill Snow White, but to return with her lungs and liver as evidence. When the hunter brings the queen the lungs and liver of an animal to prove that he has executed her command, "the cook had to cook them in salt, and the bad woman ate them and thought she had eaten Snow White's lungs and liver.' In primitive thought and custom, one acquires the powers or characteristics of what one eats. (207)

Thus, by consuming Snow White's internal organs the mother consumes her youth and beauty. Another version of the Devouring Mother is the mother who ties her daughter to her too tightly as the sorceress does with her adopted daughter in "Rapunzel." In this tale when Rapunzel turns twelve, the age of sexual maturity, her mother places her in a tower which is inaccessible to the outside world. Rapunzel's mother loves her so much that she is willing to destroy Rapunzel's life rather than risk losing her. Bettelheim states that many children find this particular fairy tale reassuring despite its violence (Rapunzel's prince falls from the tower and pierces his eyes on a thorn bush):

While it is wrong to deprive Rapunzel of the liberty to move about, the sorceress' desperate wish not to let go of Rapunzel does not seem a serious crime in the eyes of a child, who wants desperately to be held on to by his parents. (148)

In fairy tales the Distracted Mother is ineffectual and inattentive. As demonstrated in the Persephone myth bad things happen to a daughter when mother is inattentive. A girl child is particularly at risk for sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual adventures. Bettelheim uses the Grimm Brothers tale "Little Red Cap," which Charles Perrault transformed into "Little Red Riding Hood," to demonstrate the power fairy tales have to illuminate the conflicting anxiety and excitement that a child associates with pleasure-seeking behaviors and sexuality. Little Red Cap is devoured by the wolf because Mother sends her off into the forest unprotected and unprepared to face danger and temptation. Grandmother, another mother figure, is powerless to protect her grandchild or herself. If not for the entrance of the male hunter who cleaves the wolf in two, Little Red Cap would have been lost for good. Bettelheim notes that subliminally both mother and grandmother are to blame for Little Red Cap's peril: "A young girl needs a strong mother figure for her own protection and as a model to imitate." By giving the little girl the bright red cap and sending her off into the woods alone, Mother has failed Little Red Cap as Demeter fails Persephone (173). Little Red Cap is not to be blamed for her aberrant behavior, although she does suffer for it; Mother did not care for her properly.

These motifs are carried forward in modern time in both literary fairy tales and in novels read by children. Holly Blackford has traced the Persephone myth throughout the canon of children's literature. Demeter/Persephone's progeny include: Marmee/Amy (Alcott's Little Women); Marie/Mother (Hoffman's The Nutcracker and the Mouse King) Wendy/Mrs. Darling (Barrie's Peter Pan). The common thread running through these tales is that without Mother's watchful gaze, Daughter is free to undertake adventures but she is also sexually vulnerable (Blackford, 2009).

Thus, Devouring Mother/Devoured Daughter and Demeter/Persephone serve as dominant representations of mother/daughter relationships in Western literature. These motifs serve as underlying narratives regarding how adolescent girls either come of age, successfully, break free of Mother, and form adult relationships or how mothers tragically fail their daughters. These narratives are also found throughout twentieth-century American films that center on the power struggle

found in mother/daughter relationships. It is important to note that in the myths, fairy tales, and literary tales the domestic space is also an important component of the story. Hades seizes Persephone from her home and takes her to his domicile. Rapunzel is ensconced by her mother in a tower with no door. For Little Red Cap Grandmother's house, which should have been a haven, is transformed into a place of danger. It is in Grandmother's home not in the woods, that Little Red Cap is devoured. Snow White flees from the family home to find sanctuary in the home of the Seven Dwarves where she becomes a mother/wife figure. The sheltering home is transformed into a place of danger from which the daughter is rescued through the efforts of a competent male. Dorothy Gale (Wizard of Oz) and Edie Beale (Grey Gardens) encounter both Distracted and Devouring Mothers. They also have complicated relationships with their domestic spaces – a Kansas farm and a mansion in the Hamptons respectively – spaces which serve as both shelter and prison.

The Wizard of Oz

In the film version of The Wizard of Oz, unlike the L. Frank Baum book, Dorothy is a teenager – quite visibly so. Judy Garland, sixteen when filming began, was carefully corseted and costumed to hide her figure and give an illusion of a prepubescent girl. The illusion was unsuccessful; Garland was not Shirley Temple, Mervyn LeRoy's first choice for the role. However, through the casting of Garland as Dorothy the story is reinvented. Instead of an adventure tale about a young girl child exploring a fantasy land, it becomes a tale of coming of age and a search for identity. Garland brings all the aching vulnerability of an adolescent on the brink of a personal and sexual awakening to the role. "Over the Rainbow," which becomes Garland's signature song, shines at the heart of the movie as a poignant articulation by a young woman of a longing for adventure and a desire to begin one's adult life.

A historical context for the film was gives an additional layer of meaning to Dorothy's domestic space, the Kansas farm of Uncle Henry and Aunt Em. In the 1939, the date that the film was released, the United States was reaching the end of the decade-long Great Depression. Thousands of families had been dispossessed and dislocated from their farms. They were victims of the economy, natural disasters, and failed farming practices. Throughout the 1930s, devastating dust storms ravaged the Mid-West, Oklahoma, and Texas. On "Black Sunday," April 14, 1935, a dust storm of epic proportions occurred. It thrust the problem into the public arena and the public consciousness. In 1939, Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck, which chronicled the struggles of these farm families, was a bestseller (in 1940 it won the Pulitzer Prize).

The film reflects the times and cultural sensibilities. The grey and bleak Kansas landscape references contemporary newsreels of farmsteads in the Heartland. The Gale's struggle with Miss Gulch echoes the farmers' struggles with the banks. Aunt Em notes the Miss Gulch "owns half the county" and Uncle Henry looks helplessly at the sheriff's order to seize the family dog, Toto, just as

countless farmers had been helpless in the face of eviction notices used to seize their family farms. Indeed, Charles Grapewin who plays Uncle Henry went on the next year to play Grandpa Joad in the film version of The Grapes of Wrath. On a somewhat ironic note, Robert Schumann's "The Happy Farmer" is the musical motif used in the film score for the Kansas farm scenes.

There are three mother figures in The Wizard of Oz: Aunt Em, The Wicked Witch of the West, and Glinda. Aunt Em is the Distracted Mother. She fails to protect Dorothy from Miss Gulch and she fails to protect Dorothy from the twister. After a vain attempt to locate Dorothy, she goes with her husband and the farm hands into the storm cellar and abandons her. Like Peter Pan before her, Dorothy returns home from her adventure only to find herself locked-out by Mother. Dorothy takes refuge in the house. The house protects Dorothy from the storm but conveys her to an adventure. The house propels Dorothy forward in her search to establish her own identity. It takes her "Over the Rainbow" the place that she had longed for. Through the agency of the house, Dorothy is successful in conjuring Oz.

Once there, Dorothy is threatened by the Devouring Mother, the Wicked Witch. In the movie, the Witch of the East's magic shoes are no longer silver slippers of Baum's book but ruby red high heels. As in "Little Red Cap," it is Mother, in this instance the idealized mother, Glinda, who gives the daughter the token of female sexuality and puts her at risk. Dorothy does not take the shoes; Glinda thrusts her into them. An interesting visual juxtaposition occurs; Dorothy wears red high heels with blue bobby socks, the ultimate symbol of teenage girlhood in the late 1930s/early 40s is paired with the ultimate symbol of female adulthood.

By placing the Ruby Slippers on her feet, Glinda makes Dorothy vulnerable to the Wicked Witch who is desirous of the shoes and the power that they embody. Unlike traditional fairy tales, the males in the film, The Wizard of Oz are incompetent. Dorothy has no male rescuer although she attempts to recruit some. The Wizard is a sham and Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion and ineffective. None of them can ultimately save her from the Witch or help her to get home. It is Dorothy herself who destroys the all-powerful evil mother (by "liquidating" her) and it is Dorothy who gets herself home to Kansas again through the agency of the house. She uses the house and her ruby slippers to conjure home. Once there, Aunt Em and the adult males dismiss Dorothy's tales of adventures but Dorothy knows what she has been through and is willing to accept the limitations of home and hearth for the security that they provide. True to the American "can-do" ethic, Dorothy has solved her own problems, decided to work within the law, and has returned to her rightful place within the family home. All will surely be well because after all, there is "no place like home."

However, a few questions linger in the air. The viewer is left to wonder if Dorothy still has her ruby slippers since her feet are not shown in the shot. Has Dorothy retained this vital piece of evidence to demonstrate that her adventure was real? If she has the slippers can she go back to Oz if she wants to? Also the audience

is left to wonder about the final resolution of the conflict with Miss Gulch. Perhaps, like her counterpart in *Oz* (Margaret Hamilton plays the dual role of Witch of the West/Miss Gulch) she too has perished or is no longer a threat. Miss Gulch is the only figure from the first part of the movie who does not show up in the finale so perhaps the audience can surmise that Toto will be safe as well.

Judy Garland would be inextricably tied to the role of Dorothy for the remainder of her career. She was a contemporary of Edie Beale (Garland was born in 1922 and Beale in 1917). In many respects, Grey Gardens feels like a continuation of the story of Dorothy/Garland: fast-forwarded almost forty years. What happens to Dorothy after she comes home from *Oz* and tries to settle into a domestic, female life? The Kansas farm transforms into a mansion in the Hamptons and Aunt Em and Miss Gulch merge into Big Edie, alternately distracted and devouring. The answer is moving, funny, and disturbing.

Grey Gardens

Albert and David Maysles, were documentary film makers who had a commercial success with Gimme Shelter (1970) a chronicle of the Rolling Stone's Altamont Concert, They were drawn to the story of the Beales which first surfaced in an article in New York Magazine by Gail Sheehy (January 10, 1972). Sheehy described the squalor in which Big and Little Edie Bouvier Beale, the eccentric aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Lee Radziwill, were living in their dilapidated mansion in the Hamptons (New York). By the time the documentary was shot, Ms. Onassis and Princess Radziwill had restored the home to a semblance of respectability but the eccentricities of the Beales, which included excessive hoarding, keeping dozens of cats, and a general unconcern for the maintenance of their home and grounds, put them at odds with the social norms of the Hamptons. The Maysles shot the film in the mid 1970s and even though it was a dozen years since the Kennedy assassination, the American public was still consumed with the remaining members of the former First Family. Aristotle Onassis, Jacqueline's second husband, had died in 1975 and Mrs. Kennedy Onassis was very much in the public eye.

The movie, Grey Gardens, has developed a cult status. It has spawned various adaptations including a Tony award-winning musical (2006) and an Emmy award winning HBO film with Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange (2009). In the original Maysles film, as well in the various adaptations, the tension centers on the conflict between the two Edith's – mother and daughter. The dialogue is often difficult to follow since the two women talk simultaneously at and to each other but a basic story line eventually emerges. Big Edith (the mother) took refuge in the family home of Grey Gardens, a large, rambling mansion in the Hamptons, after a painful and difficult divorce from her husband, attorney Phelan Beale. She lives at Grey Gardens with her adult daughter, Little Edie. Little Edie had attempted to establish a career as a model and actress in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s but was unsuccessful and had a nervous breakdown. The

movie documents the daily life of the Beales, their interactions, their environment, and the differing narratives that each has explaining who they are and why they chose to live the way that they do. After Big Edie died in 1977, Little Edie had some success as a cabaret performer due in large part to the notoriety she achieved through the movie, Grey Gardens. Little Edie passed away in 2002.

There are two distinct narratives that emerge from Big and Little Edie. As did Kurosawa in the movie, Rashomon, the Maysle brothers demonstrate that there is no single "truth" in their story. The conflicting narratives of Big and Little Edie give insight into their struggles to establishing their identities and construct power in their lives. Little Edie tells the story of her life straight into the camera. The Maysles are not seen but they become part of the story. Little Edie flirts with David, sings and dances for him, and dresses up for him. In the outtakes included in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, she sings to David "I'm after Little Brother" to the tune of "You Ought to Be in Pictures." Little Edie paints herself as Rapunzel, she is the victim of the Devouring Mother. Big Edie has her trapped and will not let her go. She tells the story of a young man that wanted to marry her after she returned that her mother chased away. She often repeats, "I have to get out of here" and longs for a little place in New York City. The viewer feels Little Edie trying to lure the Maysles into the role of the competent, rescuing male. Part of the poignancy of the movie is that the viewer knows, the Maysles know, and Little Edie knows that "we" will leave and she will always remain. She will always sit singing in the tower awaiting rescue.

In Big Edie's narrative she is a Distracted Mother who has now become a Devoted Mother. Big Edie sees herself as the protector of Little Edie who is too fragile and incompetent to live a life in the outside world. When Big Edie "looked away," Little Edie's father took her to New York where she got into trouble as a young adult by failing to establish a career or find a suitable husband. Now that she is home where she belongs they can take care of each other. There are other minor characters in the film some female friends and Little Edie's brothers. Males are mostly invisible at Grey Gardens, though. There are the unseen Maysles and Jerry, a neighborhood teenager who helps the Beales with repairs and odd jobs. But even Jerry seems to be only a pawn that the Edies use to battle against each other. Ultimately, as presented by the Maysles, this is a story about two females locked in battle negotiating their identity and their domestic space with each other and with the outside world.

The Case for Further Scholarship

There were dozens of films by male directors that dealt with the mother/daughter relationship: Little Women (1933); Now Voyager (1942); The Haunting (1963); Marnie (1964); Mommie Dearest (1981) among many others. In the last part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first century, more women directors and producers are coming up through the ranks of the major film studios or are working as independent film makers. Films like The Piano (1993) by Jane Campion, Waitress (2007) by Adrienne Shelly, and Julie and Julia (2009) by

Nora Ephron present a more nuanced picture of how mothers and daughters structure their relationships and navigate their identities. As more movies are shot through a female gaze, alternate narratives are emerging. Other paradigms of motherhood (Devouring/Detached/Devoted) and successful daughterhood seem to be emerging. Perhaps someday a woman director will essay a re-make of the MGM version of The Wizard of Oz and, perhaps, the audience will see what happened to Toto and whether Dorothy got to keep her shoes.

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