

This is the Revelatory Costume: Surface, Texture, and Authentic Self

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*The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*¹

Oscar Wilde

When questions of identity arise, they are most frequently directed at the unseen; that which is kept beneath an exterior face. It takes a little while to get to know him, we insist. Oh, she's actually much friendlier behind closed doors, we say. Honest and pure identity is often described in terms which suppose a *deeper* truth, or a *hidden* reality—meaning must be mined for, so it seems. But what about a person's exterior? What about the identity which they themselves put forth upon first impression? It is assumed that individuals cannot be trusted to show us who they really are, up front; the world's mystery supposedly lays below the surface.

In contestation, I agree with Oscar Wilde's belief in valuing the visible. The connotation of *surface*—that which is exterior, immediate, and variably textured—as superficial and dishonest is a tired concept. Subjects, and further materials of the world, show us with gumption and candor who and what they are, whether it be through dress, voice, movement, or silence—and they are to be believed. Films work in this way, too. Cinema is a process of creative excavation and provocation, which aims to make perceptible what once was imperceptible.² The immediacy of a surface texture, colour, or sound spurs an affectual relationship between viewer and diegesis, rendering the cinema screen a rich and informative medium. Sure, there can exist a wealth of thematic meaning beyond the images, sounds, and sensations we experience during a film's running time, but they do not have to derive from an ulterior truth separate from the film itself. Elements of a film's surface layer—what the film chooses to reveal, what characters tell us

about themselves, and what the performative elements of cinema show us—display a generosity of intelligence and insight. I will analyze this conceptualized surface, and in doing so explore performative identity and exterior truth. I am particularly interested in the relationship between clothing, surface, and textural landscape—fashion and fabric are tactile in a superbly intimate way, as they promote connections between persons, things, and spaces.³ Albert and David Maysles' *Grey Gardens* (1975) and Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine*

configuration of the relation between subjects and objects, the surface is also viewed as a site of mediation and projection... the reciprocal *contact* between us and objects or environments indeed occurs on the surface. It is by way of such tangible, “superficial” contact that we apprehend the art object and the space of art.”⁵ This is to say that the surface of a film and its figures must be valued as an inventive medium—the exterior does not conceal substance, it produces.

A useful word to keep in mind when thinking about a film’s surface and the communicative/productive possibilities thereof is *texture*. The textural landscape of a film⁶ is a powerful affective tool. Texture can mean “the visual or tactile surface characteristics and appearance of something,”⁷ but it can also mean the essential element, or identifying quality.⁸ Thus, describing and absorbing a film’s texture is imperative for affective experience and filmic impact. The manner in which textures (colours, patterns, sounds, sensations, and so on) are used add meaning to a film’s interface and generate connective tissue between filmic image and viewer. Texture also insinuates physical touch; it is true that what we see onscreen can produce corporeal reactions intimate in nature, such as “chills”, tears, or gut fear. To quote Bruno yet again:

The affect is here itself a landscape of the surface and a space that, being itself textured, can become manifested texturally. Affect is also exposed as a pliant, porous medium of superficial material communication. It is an extensive form of transmission that not only takes place on the surface but also communicates

that they live luxuriously. In early days, this privilege was known throughout their circles; they had a place in New York's high society, they sang in front of crowds and danced the soft-shoe with handsome gentlemen, they had a home in a mansion on the beach. But as time advanced, the Beale family wealth was withdrawn, leaving mother and daughter on their own. High society faded away, as did the crowds and handsome gentlemen, leaving only the mansion on the beach. Between its walls, a world of luxury remains, despite crumbling walls and peeling paint. The sumptuousness of Big and Little Edie's personalities is what sustains an atmosphere of extravagance.

Grey Gardens is a dynamically textured film. Its surface is covered with stimulating movement, colour, pattern, and contrast. The walls of the Beale mansion peel back to reveal a palimpsest of age and old paint, but are made beautiful in the beams of sunlight which stretch through cracks in the windowpanes. The floors, tables, and bedspreads are constantly moving with dust and dirt, grotesquely at first but then, in some strange way, endearingly. The wild garden surrounding Grey Gardens adds perhaps the most omnipresent textural spectre—it rustles and cracks in the ocean's wind and sidles up to the manor like a old friend, the gaps in its foliage leaving dappled sun on the wood panelling. All seems comfortable amidst the company of Big Edie and Little Edie. These intermingling surfaces and textures are overwhelming at times, and are so thickly layered and deep, such that one could think of them as impenetrable. Similarly, the persons among these textures—among, but also *of* and *within*—could be initially presumed to contain character more true than what is outwardly revealed.¹¹ This is where we must remember Oscar Wilde, and his assertion that it is the visible, not the invisible, which must be thoroughly

¹¹ Ilona Hongisto, "Fabulation: Documentary Visions," in *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 72.

neatly on top: A black, lace wrap-dress fashioned in mock-neck style, with a slightly risqué slit down the front skirt and yet another matching lace head-scarf, fastened once again with the same gold brooch atop her head. Tiny strips of knotted fabric adorn her shins, just above her trademark white shoes.

Hongisto states that “[Little] Edie’s orientation for outfits is one of the features that sets the unfolding tone of the film. She changes costumes constantly, poses for the camera and asks how she looks.”¹⁵ It is always with a tone of honesty and authenticity that she does so, proving the interconnected nature of a film’s players, its surface, and its meaning. Hilton Als, in an essay written especially for the Criterion Collection release of the film, writes warmly that “the Beales are themselves, born into a particular class at a particular time. But they are also the selves they’ve created; a singer, a dancer, whose florid self-presentation cannot be eclipsed by hard times, bad times—so-called real life.”¹⁶ Little Edie dresses for herself; she dresses for survival.¹⁷ And so, the visual becomes tantamount to truth.

LITTLE EDIE. Do you think my costume looked alright for Brooks? I think he was a little amazed.

ALBERT MAYSLES. He’s probably seen it before.

LITTLE EDIE. No, no. This is the revolutionary costume, I never wear this in East Hampton.

ALBERT MAYSLES. He seems okay, he seems like he can handle it.

LITTLE EDIE. You can’t be too careful, know what I mean?¹⁸

¹ Ibid., 77.

¹ Hilton Als, “Staunch Characters,” *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert Maysles and David Maysles (1975; The Criterion Collection, 2013), Blu-Ray.

¹ Hongisto, 69.

¹ *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert Maysles and David Maysles (1975; The Criterion Collection, 2013), Blu-Ray.

Now is the time to diverge from

photographs, transferring the glam rock power onto themselves with aspirations of equally metamorphic imagery—in layman’s terms, they take what they see and fashion themselves in its likeness, trying to understand its meaning and transform their worlds. Oscar Wilde’s introductory quote has now become even more significant, no?

In *Velvet Goldmine*, the textural landscape is ablaze with glitter and sharp colour, creating space for bodies and identities engaged in “connective, pervasive, [and] enveloping substance.”¹⁹ Here, Bruno’s discussion of the surface as site for “mediation, transfer, and transformation” resounds clearly and fully; surface is everything for Wild and Slade, because surface—the interface of invention—constitutes reality. In fact, in one of the film’s final scenes, Curt Wild plainly states, “a man’s life is his image.”²⁰ What these performers feel compelled to create through costume, makeup, and music has ramifications in the real world, and they know it. They strive for it, wholeheartedly. Haynes is well-familiar with the synergy between identity and surface image, so much so that his film is bursting at its seams with intertextual references to fashion, performative self, and exterior truth. As already mentioned, Oscar Wilde is featured in the film like a spectre of superficiality. Characters read *Dorian Gray* aloud to each other, quoting its pages like prophecies: “There were times when it appeared to [him] that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions.”²¹ Brian Slade takes this sentiment to heart especially, and creates for himself out of passion and imagination a costume of identity, richly decorated with sequins and leather, but authentic nonetheless. The

¹ Bruno, 5.

⁰ *Velvet Goldmine*, directed by Todd Haynes (1998; Miramax Lionsgate, 2011), DVD.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 1999), 150.

people in his inner circle declare that Slade became some else, yet always was.²² Images have agency and life; they can change a person's trajectory. Much like Little Edie and her rebellious/essential costume, the characters in *Velvet Goldmine* craft identities using fabrics, colours, and styles, inventing an exterior self that is transitive, intimate, permeable, and erotic.²³ Superficiality reigns supreme in this world, and thus allows the visual to be privileged over any "hidden" self, and for characters to produce their own realities. In her essay, titled "Cinema and the Affective-Performative," Elena Del Río states:

One may say that a body's existence is always performative insofar as it does not pre-exist its own unfolding/becoming through particular actions and thoughts. As well, in performance as in expression, beings manifest/explicate themselves not as static entities, but as constantly evolving and mutating forces. Both expression and performance are conceptually linked to a rhetoric of action, relation, and modification.²⁴

For viewers, the textural landscapes of these two films offer possibilities of strong affective interplay and absorption. In the superficial (read: expository, perceptible, emergent) worlds of both the Maysles brothers' and Haynes' films:

Places and affects are produced jointly, in the movement of a superficial projection between interior and exterior landscape. Affects not only are makers of space but are themselves configured as space, and they have the actual texture of atmosphere. To sense a mood is to be sensitive to a subtle atmospheric shift that touches persons across air space. In this way, motion creates emotion and, reciprocally, emotion contains a movement that becomes communicated.²⁵

Velvet Goldmine, directed by Todd Haynes (1998; Miramax Lionsgate, 2011), DVD.

Bruno, 35.

Elena Del Río, "Cinema and the Affective-Performative," in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008): 9.

Bruno, 19.

The movement that Bruno speaks of here, that which creates emotion and sparks communication between “persons across air space,” can be understood just as poignantly when part of the film-viewing experience as it can be when part of every-day life. The surface of a cinema screen may not at first appear equal to the dimensions of the known material world, but it too contains multitudes; surface texture in cinematic terms means sensory, elastic, and corporeal forms. Once again, in Bruno’s words, “images have a definite textural quality. It is no wonder, then, that they touch us. They are fabrics.”²⁶ I think here of a scene close to *Velvet Goldmine*’s end, during which the legendary Jack Fairy sings an ode to the end of glam rock and its shining stars. Dressed extravagantly in a sparkling jumpsuit with a plunging V-neck and feathered wings, Fairy gestures to the sky as he sings: “Long time since we’re together, now I hope it’s forever.” A curtain suddenly falls behind the musician, and the blown-up, brightly coloured faces of Brian Slade and Curt Wild appear, projected onto its folds. The crowd cheers, sending a toast for their glamour kings into the night. Just an image is enough to generate transformative feeling.

The common ground shared by *Grey Gardens* and *Velvet Goldmine* is made clear via Little Edie and Brian Slade/Maxwell Demon, in that the two figures are clearly immersed in a performance of self, and are both intimately expressive through fashion. This interface of fabric —“a surface forming a common boundary of two bodies, spaces, or phases”²⁷—is what must constitute reality, for it engenders agential and fluid methods of becoming instead of simply being.²⁸ Bruno astutely declares that “fashion is shown to be a dermal, haptic affair as well as a

Ibid., 33.

“Interface,” *Merriam-Webster* online, last modified April 18, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interface>

Del Río, 7.

subjective experience, and, in this tangible sense, it is also revealed to be a connective thread between persons and things.”²⁹ The dazzling jumpsuits of 1970s glam rock add textural resonance to not only Brian Slade’s person, but also to *Velvet Goldmine*’s thematic meaning; they constitute a surface upon and through which affect is generated, thus substantiating the film’s interface between cinema screen and viewer. Affective exchange takes place because the filmic surface is sensorily strong, porous, and communicative. Similarly, the meticulous and sumptuous outfits from Little Edie’s closet, inspired by her 1950s debutante past, add texture and feeling to an already rich diegetic surface. To see Little Edie marching around the garden, dancing the soft shoe, or twirling in the hallways of Grey Gardens manor is to feel a close connection with her. We are connected to her identity and her undeniable vibrancy via the texture of fabrics and the fortitude with which she wears them. In the space between us and her, clothing is “indeed, transitive matter, and fashion [a] form of intimate contact. It can ferry much across bodies and spaces and carry the very scent of being in its cloth.”³⁰ To express this same point more succinctly, Todd Haynes interrupts an early scene in *Velvet Goldmine*

performance [begets] its own possibilities of becoming.”³³ In tandem, “Little Edie’s roles are “made up,” but they are nevertheless not “false.” Documentary fabulation, then, is not conditioned on drawing a line between the true and the false, but powered by the admittance that the line is, indeed, difficult if not impossible to keep.”³⁴ Both embrace contingency and exploration, and both make strong the case for superficial value and complexity. Gilles Deleuze, whom both Bruno and Hongisto cite as inspiration for their texts, might say that these new possibilities of becoming are the acts of legends in the making.³⁵ There is power in self-declaration and in the creation of identity through surface texture, image, and affect. Visual forms and faces are made beautiful and mysterious when in the command of whom they belong to.

Little Edie stands against a backdrop of waving leaves and blossoms, arms planted firmly on hips, as she speaks to both Albert (“Al,” as she calls him) and David Maysles. She gleams in the sunlight, emitting a giggle or two. The scene is significant for two reasons: one, it is Little Edie’s premier personal introduction, and two, in it she offers a delightful explanation of her outfit. “This is the best thing to wear for the day, you understand,” she says. “This is the best costume for the day.” She has on a brown turtleneck sweater, tight-fitting, with a matching brown skirt (seemingly fashioned from another sweater that’s been tied around her waist and pinned

Del Río, 22.

Hongisto., 82.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 150.

together mid-thigh). Underneath the skirt, her nylon stockings are hoisted up and over a pair of white undershorts which, according to Little Edie, is a tactic which allows the wearer to unfasten the skirt and use it as a cape, while still remaining neatly clothed. Her head is covered by a navy blue scarf, perhaps made of cotton or silk (it's hard to tell), which hangs behind her neck and down her back like a nun's veil. It stays in place thanks to her sartorial signature—the ornate gold brooch, shaped like a bow and pinned just below Edie's left ear. "I have to think these things up, you know!" she exclaims. I admire her for it.

*Oh, I was moved by a screen dream. Celluloid pictures are living.*³⁶

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