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Celebrity and Disconnection in Joan Didion's Hollywood Writings

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Abstract

In her 1979 non-fiction essay "The White Album," Californian writer Joan Didion (1934-2021) describes her living on Franklin Avenue and the peculiar atmosphere in Beverly Hills during the summer of 1969. The infamous murders on Cielo Drive put an abrupt end to the hedonistic existence of Hollywood celebrities and "music people." What Didion describes as an era of "paranoia" and "vortical tension" finds echo in her 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays*. Indeed, actress Maria Wyeth feels estranged in a life where vacuity and "nothingness" prevail. Going beyond the Hollywood novel tradition, *Play It As It Lays* not only focuses on the cinema industry, but the narrative also displays cinematic techniques and follows a film structure to convey the influence of media on Maria's reality, that consequently accentuates her feeling of disconnection. This paper aims to analyze how Joan Didion's own experience in the Hollywood milieu has permeated the narrative texture of her novel *Play It As It Lays*, especially in the portrayal of an alienating celebrity culture and the use of cinematic writing.

1. Introduction

In his 1959 book *Hollywood Babylon*, underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger describes how 1920s cinema brought about the birth of celebrity and the emergence of what he calls a "Star System." Both lionized and marketed, movie stars were akin to idols who "found themselves propelled to adulation, fame and fortune." Becoming thus "the new royalty, the Golden People," Anger points out that "[s]ome managed to cope and took it in their stride: some did not" (Anger 1959, 9). To some degree, this "star system" is what Californian writer Joan Didion tackles in her second novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970) which depicts the story of actress Maria Wyeth. In the spirit of Nathanael West's seminal 1939 Hollywood novel *The Day of the Locust*, Didion delves into the cinema industry, celebrity, and the disconnection of identity. However, the feelings of paranoia and estrangement that prevail in the novel are most certainly influenced by her own experience with celebrity and the Los Angeles social milieu. Indeed, when Didion wrote *Play It As It Lays*, she used to live and hold parties at her and husband John Gregory

Dunne's house on Franklin Avenue in Beverly Hills. In her famous non-fiction essay "The White Album" (1979), she remembers the proximity of her own house to the one on Cielo Drive where actress Sharon Tate was murdered on August 9, 1969. The event symbolized a watershed. The hedonistic lifestyle and partying gave way to a rampant paranoia amongst celebrities who lived in Los Angeles. The omnipresence of this uncanny atmosphere throughout *Play It As It Lays* makes the novel an example of the Hollywood Gothic genre, as described by Bernice Murphy: "[…] Hollywood Gothic focuses upon the 'dark side' of a specific commercial and creative industry. Here, the business which has long played a pivotal role in Southern California's cultural and economic development is invariably associated with madness, violence, and death" (Murphy 2022, 115). Indeed, the story explores the life of a former actress who has ended up in a mental institution after the suicide of her friend, BZ. In recalling the events that precede the tragedy, the narrative examines the acute feeling of disconnection felt by its protagonist. If the theme of madness is touched upon in *Play It As It Lays*, "The White Album" revolves around violence and death, namely the dark underside of celebrity cult. Far from embracing the glamour that is inherent to traditional representations of Hollywood, Didion's writings capture rather a form of bleakness that corresponds to what Mike Davis calls the "dream dump." As the result, the place encapsulates the way stardom can shape dreams and dictate a biased reality that tends to create only frustration and unhappiness. Therefore, Didion's Hollywood also becomes a "hallucinatory landscape tottering on apocalypse" (Davis 2006, 38).

This paper aims to analyze how Joan Didion's own immersion in the 1960s Hollywood milieu colors her portrayal of celebrity and disconnection in the novel *Play It As It Lays*. First, this essay is to query the extent to which stardom spurs disconnection. Then, attention will be paid to the erosion of the glamorous celebrity figure. Finally, the analysis is to focus on the cinema-influenced narrative apparatus that Didion uses in both "The White Album" and *Play It As It Lays*.

2. "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood"

In "The White Album," Joan Didion recounts the epistemic crisis she suffered from 1966 to 1971,[1] namely the timespan during which she reached the status of a celebrity after the success of her first nonfiction collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in 1968. Several times in the essay, she equates stardom to performance and alludes to the discrepancy between her public persona and her inner sense of disconnection:

[1] "I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling. I suppose this period began around 1966 and continued until 1971" (Didion 1979, 11-12).

> It was a time of my life when I was frequently 'named.' […] I was named lecturer and panelist, colloquist and conferee. I was even named, in 1968, a *Los Angeles Times* 'Woman of the Year' […]. This was an adequate enough performance, as improvisations go. The only problem was that […] the production was never meant to be improvised: I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. (Didion 1979, 12)

This excerpt sheds light on the paradoxical nature of celebrity, namely the coexistence between a form of passivity ("I was […] named") and the act of performing ("performance," "improvisations," "a script," "cues"). Going back to Leo Braudy's observation on the reasons why one becomes a celebrity, he notes that it lies either in being oneself or in playing oneself.[2] This passage alludes to the fact that Didion embodies these two facets, as she is famous both for her autobiographical writings and for her meticulously crafted public persona.[3] By the same token, the fictional character of Maria Wyeth is both famous for playing her own part in her ex-husband Carter Lang's eponymous film *Maria* and for the role of the nameless "girl on the screen" (Didion 1970, 19) in another production. Although Alissa Wilkinson warns about not confusing Maria's existence with Didion's ("Maria's story is not Didion's story"), she notes that the author's own experience in the peculiar atmosphere in Hollywood at the end of the 1960s cannot be entirely separated: "[Didion's] feeling of disconnection from reality, her sense of doom just around the corner, suffuses the book from start to finish" (Wilkinson 2025, 105). Similarly, Maria is described as withdrawing from a reality that feels alien to her, especially when she attends a screening of a film in which she starred:

> Maria had seen it twice […] and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself. 'I look at you and I know that… what *happened* just didn't mean anything,' the girl on the screen would say, […] Maria preferred the studio's cut. In fact, she liked watching the picture: the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny. (Didion 1970, 19-20)

In this excerpt, Maria is three times designated as "the girl on the screen" which emphasizes the distance she puts between her real self and the representation of herself "on the screen." Derived at the same time from the "barrier" and "[the] surface for reception of projected images" (Etymonline), the screen works as both here. On the one hand, for Maria it generates an alien version of herself ("neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself" [Didion 1970, 20]). On the other hand, it projects the fantasy of the agency and determination that she feels she lacks. It somehow enables her to experience it by proxy ("the girl on the screen

[2] "[The celebrity] is especially the person famous for being himself or playing himself" (Braudy 1986, 554).
[3] In Didion's case, these two aspects converge toward the same image she gives of herself. As Jessica J. Salfen points out: "The images of Didion available to the public are carefully designed in a way that the viewer receives the same messages about Didion again and again, reinforcing the persona Didion wants the public to know" (Salfen 2019, 9).

seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny" [Didion 1970, 20]). In a way, the roles are inverted in the sense that the screen presence of Maria is not only a surface anymore but an active, more determined version of herself. In "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?," W. J. T. Mitchell notes that "[p]ictures […] exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface, but *a face* that faces the beholder" (1996, 72). If the screen presence of Maria is described as an abstraction, it is the character of the real Maria who seems to be the "surface" whereas "the girl on the screen" is the "*face,*" i.e. alive. Indeed, the real Maria is depicted as inhabiting a liminal state that brings about a sense of passivity, highlighted by her "inbetweeness": "*between* the earthquake prophecy and the marijuana and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility" (Didion 1970, 104); "*Between* the marijuana and the figures on the screen Maria felt flushed and not entirely in control" (Didion 1970, 112; emphasis added). Liminality resonates with the feelings of entropy and impending catastrophe that Didion depicts in "The White Album."

3. "Hollywood Babylon"

In Tinseltown, Didion observed the overall confusion and paranoia that was generated by the murder of silent movie star Ramon Novarro and subsequent massacre of rising actress Sharon Tate in the very neighborhood where she lived at the time:

> […] there were odd things going around town. There were rumors. There were stories. […] A demented and seductive vortical tension was building in the community. The jitters were setting in. […] Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled. (Didion 1979, 28; 31).

Underlying anxiety befell the community at a time when celebrities became the targets of an extreme violence that questioned the very fabric of stardom. If victim Sharon Tate and murderer-accomplice/Manson girl Linda Kasabian share the same number of occurrences in the essay, only Kasabian is described as a "star."[4] At the time, boundaries were frequently blurred, from the adulation of Hollywoodian stars to the turning of subversive figures and criminals into celebrities.[5] This phenomenon also echoed the Hollywood industry fascination for violence and

[4] "Linda Kasabian, star witness for the prosecution in what was commonly known as the Manson Trial" (Didion 1979, 18).

[5] The fascination for criminals can be traced back to the extreme popularity of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow in the 1930s and continues with the contemporary obsession for true-crime documentaries and podcasts. In Didion's times, the press coverage of Charles Manson's trial gained a huge amount of attention.

death, especially with the rising of New Hollywood antiheroes.[6] For celebrities, real as well as fictional, this reshaping prompted confusion. To some extent, this literal liquidation mirrors Maria's symbolical erasure, especially when she experiences watching herself on film:

> The other picture, the first picture, the picture never distributed, was called Maria. Carter had simply followed Maria around New York and shot film. […] The picture showed Maria doing a fashion sitting, Maria asleep on a couch at a party, Maria on the telephone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdale's, Maria cleaning some marijuana with a kitchen strainer, Maria crying on the IRT. At the end she was thrown into negative and looked dead. The picture lasted seventy-four minutes and had won a prize at a festival in Eastern Europe and Maria did not like to look at it. She had once heard that students at UCLA and USC talked about using her the way commercial directors talked about using actresses who got a million dollars a picture, but she had never talked to any of them (sometimes they walked up to Carter in front of a theater or a bookstore and introduced themselves, and Carter would introduce Maria, and they would look sidelong at Maria while they talked to Carter about coming to see their film programs, but Maria had nothing to say to them, avoided their eyes) and she disliked their having seen her in that first picture. (Didion 1970, 20-21)

If Maria's existence is being documented and filmed, it equally feels terminated when the movie ends ("At the end she was thrown into negative and looked dead"). The "picture […] called Maria" seems to be nothing more than a scripted reality at first, a form of hyperreality; but it ends up being the only way for Maria to exist in the Hollywood milieu.[7] Indeed, her image acts as a face the audience looks at whereas the real Maria becomes invisible in real life as others will not engage with her ("students at UCLA and USC […] would look sidelong at Maria while they talked to Carter"). Her celebrity has somehow erased her physical existence to merge with the image she (re)presents, merely the extension of her own projection on screen. Indeed, Maria's opening testimony, in the first chapter, alludes to a deep intertwining between her life and the film medium insofar as the two are easily blurred: "it was falling apart […] and

[6] On the cover of their December 8, 1967, edition, *Time Magazine* put the faces of Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in their roles in the new Arthur Penn's film *Bonnie & Clyde*. The headline read "The New Cinema: Violence…Sex…Art" (available on time.com/vault/issue/1967-12-08/page/1/ [last visited 16/07/2025]). Didion takes the example of "exploitation bike movies," in particular "Roger Corman's 1966 The Wild Angels" (Didion 1979, 99) which most likely inspired the fictional "bike picture" (Didion 1970, 111) *Angel Beach* in *Play It As It Lays*. Their respective descriptions have common dismal motifs: "Here it is: the Angels, led by Peter Fonda, are about to bury one of their number. They have already torn up the chapel, beaten and gagged the preacher, and held a wake, during which the dead man's girl was raped on the altar and the corpse itself, propped up on a bench in full biker colors, dark goggles over the eyes and a marijuana cigarette between the lips, was made an object of necrophilia" (Didion 1979, 99); "The second picture she had made with Carter was called *Angel Beach*, and in it she played a girl who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang." (Didion 1970, 22). The representation of biker-movie antiheroes would reach its peak in 1969 with the release of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, also starring Peter Fonda.

[7] In Maria's nihilistic world, her only way out and solace is her daughter Kate whom she wishes to gain custody of throughout the novel.

everything showed in the camera by then" (Didion 1970, 9). Therefore, not only does the image of the camera permeate Maria's actions but it has seeped into her way of reasoning as well. As Pingatore suggests, *Play It As It Lays* evokes "the pervasive effects of the media" (1987, 124) and "Maria has unconsciously appropriated the metaphor of film to structure her memories" (1987, 123). In the end, both the image of Maria and the real Maria become surfaces that contribute to her experiencing life like a film.

4. An electrical experience

In the same way that Maria's daily experience and memories are influenced and shaped by the medium, Didion describes her own life with a similar apparatus in "The White Album." The relying on the medium of cinema enables her to create a protective distance from a mystifying reality while allowing her to make some sense of otherwise otherworldly events ("[I was] trying to bring the picture into some focus" [Didion 1979, 11]). She also borrows narrative techniques from cinema to capture the zeitgeist of the late 1960s-early 1970s, a milieu she knew well since she and husband John Gregory Dunne were writing screenplays together at the time.[8] The pending and uneasy suspension that permeates the inertial atmosphere in Beverly Hills during the summer of 1969 is also nuanced with eschatological concerns. Indeed, Didion describes the way she used to write down the license plates of suspicious cars that roamed the streets of her neighborhood: "I put these license numbers in a dressing-table drawer where they could be found by the police when the time came. That the time would come I never doubted" (Didion 1979, 12). The description leans toward hallucinations fueled by a growing paranoia: "all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience" (Didion 1979, 8). Similarly, Maria experiences images in her head that seem to have a power of their own since they impose to her: "the specter of his joyless face would reach her […] would flash across her hapless consciousness all the images of the family they might have been" (Didion 1970, 137); "[t]he images would flash at Maria like slides in a dark room" (Didion 1970, 138). In both cases, the relying on the medium of cinema is triggered by experiencing the meaninglessness of reality.

In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria reflects on her life as being a scenario that is composed of a succession of sequences: "It came to her that in the scenario of her life, this would be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play" (Didion 1970, 50). Her depending on the film process creates both a distance that disconnects Maria from reality and evokes her own taking part in it, almost against her will

[8] They wrote their first screenplay *The Panic in Needle Park*, a film directed by Jerry Schatzberg and released in 1971.

("an obligatory scene" [*Ibid*]). This total osmosis with the medium applies to Carter as well. For instance, he expresses his disorientation to Maria by using a cinematic technique: "'I missed a transition,' he said finally" (Didion 1970, 48). The influence of the medium has pervaded their lives so much so that they can only experience reality through this filter. Furthermore, the introductory chapter that is narrated from Carter's point of view testifies the extent to which (his) reality is malleable: "Here are some scenes I have very clear in my mind […] I played and replayed these scenes and others like them, composed them as if for the camera" (Didion 1970, 13-14). The numerous instances of Carter's active voice ("Carter's original cut," "Carter began cutting the film together" [1970, 19], "the summer Carter was cutting *Angel Beach*" [1970, 110]) convey a certain form of agency and power that Maria precisely lacks. It should be noted that the 1972 Frank Perry's film adaptation of the novel (for which Didion co-wrote the scenario) includes the opening credits of the fictional film "*Maria*" with the title "*Maria*, a film by Carter Lang."

In addition to the semantic ambiguity between Maria and the film about her, this choice reinforces Carter's active and creative role whereas Maria is relegated to the role of subject in the production. The alienating nature of the cinema industry in which Maria evolves is echoed in both the structure of the novel (which resembles a movie script) and the narrative display of cinematic techniques. In the same manner that Didion uses the lexical field of performance to describe her existence ("production," "cues"), Maria can only experience life through a medium that perversely reinforces her impression of "a world of cinematic stills and unconnected 'facts,'" as Jennifer Brady pinpoints (Brady 1979, 463). Indeed, both Didion's own narrative and Maria's story rely on powerful visual associations ("a pygmy rattler in the artichoke garden," "a coral snake still coiled in the thermal blanket" [Didion 1970, 3]; "The child, whose fingers had to be pried loose from the Cyclone fence" [Didion 1979, 13]) that contribute to create a collage of images rather than a cohesive ensemble ("Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew" [Didion 1979, 13]). Maria's disorientation echoes both Didion's fragmented experience of the everyday (that is impacted by the "attack of vertigo and nausea" from which the author suffered)[9] and the structure of the essay "The White Album" in which apparently unrelated vignettes coexist.

The issue of unsteady perspective in *Play It As It Lays* is conveyed through the shifting of points of view (from Maria to Carter, and then a character named Helene in the first three chapters) as well as the recurrence of the verbs "see," "watch" and "look [at]" which explores the notion of the gaze and intrinsically that of power. If Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that in *Play It As It Lays* "Carter is the camera's eye […], absorbed only in the mechanical arrangement of shot

[9] "I suffered the 'attack of vertigo and nausea'" (Didion 1979, 13).

after shot" (Griffin Wolff 1983, 486), she also calls to mind the well-known image from transcendentalist poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson of the "transparent eyeball" that "[is] nothing" and yet "see[s] all."[10] Indeed, Maria insists on the correct pronunciation of her name "Mar-*eye*-ah" (Didion 1970, 487) as though she was reclaiming the position of the beholder rather than the person who is looked at. Indeed, the notion of gaze appears to be endemic to the story. Sandra K. Hinchman points out a parallelism between Carter's directorial job and Didion's writer position: "Carter simply 'followed [Maria] around… with a camera' (as Didion does when she narrates the novel)" (Hinchman 1985, 470). Nevertheless, the way Didion "narrates the novel" is close to neutral since visual blankness is omnipresent on the page. Indeed, Didion stated in a 2006 interview that her desire was to "make up to write a fast novel" that "was going to exist in a white space" (Academy of Achievement 2006). To a degree, a correlation may be drawn with the cinematic (and artistic in a broad sense) technique of the "white space," also known as "negative space," in composition. If visual arts use this "enclosed empty space" (Lucie-Smith 1984, 128) in order to emphasize the actual work of art, its use in *Play It As It Lays*, and to some extent in "The White Album," conveys rather a sense of disconnection that leaves the reader unsettled. As a result, these narratives display a hypnotic quality that go beyond the one-dimensionality of cinema scripts to evoke the eerie texture of experimental films.

5. Conclusion

In a 2007 article entitled "In the Cut," Melissa Anderson revisits Frank Perry's film adaptation of *Play It As It Lays* and draws a parallel between Maria Wyeth and the character of Diane Selwyn in *Mulholland Drive*.[11] The reference to David Lynch's nightmarish vision of the film industry puts the emphasis on a tradition that leans on representing Hollywood as a crushing microcosm where the promise of celebrity is appealing but restricted to few people. Those who "did not" take it "in their stride" (Anger 1959, 9) may end up alienated and desperate, such as Maria and Diane. To some degree, they both serve as cautionary tales. The definition of Los Angeles given by Jean Baudrillard can also apply to *Play It As It Lays* and *Mulholland Drive* respectively: "Los Angeles is […] nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture" (Baudrillard 1994, 4-5). As a result, the cult of celebrity that both Maria and Diane are victims of appears to be a vacuous goal. This idea is reinforced by the shapeshifting, and

[10] "'Mar-*eye*-ah' (…) echoing Emerson's Nature. 'I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all'" (Wolff 1983, 487).

[11] "If you were to imagine a celluloid ancestor to *Mulholland Drive*'s Diane Selwyn, she'd probably look a lot like Maria Wyeth, the heroine of Frank Perry's acerbic *Play It As It Lays*, a 1972 film based on Joan Didion's merciless second novel, published two years earlier" (Anderson 2007).

therefore elusive, nature of celebrity that Didion touches upon in "The White Album." Indeed, the collection tackles an array of celebrities who are each famous to different degrees and for different reasons: Hollywood people (Sharon Tate, Paul Newman), politicians (Robert Kennedy, Ronald Regan), music people (Jim Morrison), criminals (Charles Manson, Linda Kasabian), civil rights activists (Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver), religious figures (preacher James Pike), and, of course, Didion herself. They are all parts of the Californian mosaic. Not only, as Wilkinson notes, "this overlap of spheres intrigued and dismayed her," but her kaleidoscopic writing also offers a shape-shifting definition of stardom, at the same time "demented" and "seductive" (1979, 28). To her, stardom is an integral part to the fabric of Americanness in the sense that society is built around the quest for fame in addition to a heavy relying on mythical narratives and wishful thinking (or what she calls "dreamwork" [Didion 1979, 19]). Ironically, *Play It As It Lays* could be summed up with a line from Eve Babitz, Didion's famous L.A. writing counterpart who never reached the same celebrity status as Didion: "I did not become famous but I got near enough to smell the stench of success. It smelt like burnt cloth and rancid gardenias" (1977, 53). What Babitz underlines is what Didion alludes to through the character of Maria, namely the odd feeling of entropy and the disconnection of identity that celebrity entails.

Bionote

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