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ARTICLE

Getting the Story: Joan Didion's Aesthetic Transformation

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Many contemporary readings of Joan Didion, not to mention her public profile, present her early journalism as her crowning achievement. Works such as *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album* are venerated as definitive Didion texts. However, Didion's work, in particular her journalism and memoir, underwent a radical change following these texts. This change can be witnessed in the transformation of Didion's style and politics between *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and her later work, which often appeared in the *New York Review of Books* under the editorial guidance of the late Robert B. Silvers. This article tracks this change, identifying Didion's move away from surety and an objective voice towards ambivalence, subjectivity and nuance in search of a specific ideal of truth. I argue that the development of Didion's style, both aesthetic and poetic, reflects a political evolution and a reconstitution of what it might mean to approach truth on a personal and journalistic level, and this has a particular resonance given present conversations around truth in journalism and politics.

Many contemporary readings of Joan Didion, not to mention her public profile, present her early journalism as her crowning achievement. Works such as *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979) are venerated as definitive Didion texts above her output as a novelist, her more personal work and—as will be the focus of this essay—her later journalism. It is not difficult to see why this is the case: much of Didion's work has become eclipsed by her public image, that of the young, cool reporter, leaning against her Corvette, who knew everyone from Jim Morrison to Linda Kasabian in 1960s Los Angeles. Given this context, her later work is deserving of a reappraisal, partially obscured as it has become by the dominant public image of Didion, defined either by Didion as chic young reporter or insightful, grief-struck Celine model. Her later journalism is, in a multitude of ways, a reproach of her earlier work, dealing in a more direct manner with sociopolitical and economic issues, and looking to uncover a more accurate and nuanced version of the truth than she had in her earlier, more widely-read and anthologized journalism. It is possible to observe the occurrence of an aesthetic and thematic change between “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” (1968)—the essay which provides the title of her first collection—and her later work under the editorship of *New York Review of Books*' Robert Silvers. This transformation is well worth examining in closer detail.

The transformation of Didion's work is manifested in the transformation of her poetics. Her earlier work forces a series of symbols and emblems upon the reader and makes subjective arguments veiled by a false objectivity, while later in her career she pivoted to a literary mode contrarian in its approach, which offers space for readers to reach their own conclusion. She became less interested in putting across her own subjective position in the guise of objective truth and more interested in debunking the false narratives and arguments of others, the form of which she was able to discern and pull apart particularly effectively as she had been guilty of indulging this method herself earlier in her career. As Louis Menand argues, later in her career,

[Didion] completely reassessed not only her practice as a journalist but her understanding of American life, her politics, and even the basis of her moral

judgements. She decided she wanted to get what she had failed to get with the hippies. She wanted to get the story. (Menand, 2015)

In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Didion took a view of the 1960s hippie counter-culture that contrasted with that of her fellow New Journalists: where the accounts of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson identified a sense of fun and freedom in the scene alongside certain negative elements, Didion's is altogether more sinister. Her subjects are portrayed as dangerously irresponsible, perpetuating a cycle of disorder, and include a five-year-old girl who takes LSD. The authenticity of her account is enforced on a stylistic level through her present-tense narration—a common feature of the work associated with the New Journalism—which suggests that the material has been directly reported and is unfolding to the writer at the same time as the reader, in turn bolstering the impression of objectivity. But her main method of argument is the deployment of individual images in the form of symbols and emblems in order to support the objective appearance of her argument. As argued by Mark Z. Muggli in his essay "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism" (1987), Didion's use of images is characterized either by their deliberate and considered use as symbolic objects in support of an argument or to transmit meaning, or by their independent and seemingly organic place in the text when no argument or coherent meaning is being advanced. An image, by which I mean a description of a subject or object external to the narrative development of the text, often a micro-event or single entity, can either stay an image or be utilized as an emblem. An emblem is that which takes on an external meaning and absorbs evocative power that places it beyond the directly symbolic.

To take one example, in Didion's short essay "James Pike, American" from *The White Album*, Episcopal bishop James Pike takes on a level of meaning beyond his real-life human existence and becomes an emblem: he is "a literary character in the sense that Howard Hughes and Whittaker Chambers were literary characters, a character so ambiguous and driven and revealing of his time and place that his gravestone in the Protestant Cemetery in Jaffa might well have read only JAMES PIKE, AMERICAN" (Didion, *The White Album* 216). The image of James Pike's gravestone embodies his status as having lived an archetypal American life, and therefore takes

on an emblematic quality that enables Didion to transmit meaning to the reader through the symbolic, or, rather, beyond the symbolic: James Pike, when reduced to the symbol of his gravestone, which represents his entire life, becomes more than a symbol of his faith or what he means in the context of the essay; he becomes emblematic of a wider Americanness than can only be expressed through this symbol of his gravestone and Didion's imagined inscription. Similarly, in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Didion builds her vision of societal disintegration around the image of the five-year-old girl who has taken LSD:

The five-year-old's name is Susan, and she tells me she is in High Kindergarten. She lives with her mother and some other people, just got over the measles, wants a bicycle for Christmas, and particularly likes Coca-Cola, ice cream, Marty in the Jefferson Airplane, Bob in the Grateful Dead, and the beach. (96)

Although it is easy to guess Didion's opinion here, there is a lack of stated judgment; the image stands alone. It is clear, however, that this image carries a certain rhetorical weight: the combination of the mundane details that any young child could be expected to want with the shock of her drug consumption lend an emblematic quality to the image. Like the image of James Pike's gravestone, this operates at a higher level than the merely symbolic: the child is not just a symbol or representation of the degeneration of the hippie movement that is the subject of Didion's piece, she is an emblem of wider societal collapse. It is the generalization that has this effect; the fact that the child likes Coca-Cola, would like a bicycle for Christmas and other such details positions her as the archetypal American child, and it is her normalcy that then gives power to the fact of her drug consumption. A child who takes LSD suggests an individual case of neglect; a child who takes LSD, likes Coca-Cola and wants a bicycle for Christmas is an emblem of American societal disintegration. The child is no longer an individual, nor only representative of childhood or innocence; she is an emblem of a wider sense of American collapse.

The use of such a technique in order to imbue work with a sense of authenticity is effective in convincing readers of a certain argument or worldview: the image

is the argument. But, as Didion would later realize, this approach could be used towards the wrong ends, and become detached from the actual, tangible truth. As David Eason argues in "The New Journalism and the Image-world: Two Modes of Organizing Experience" (1984), Didion is a "cultural phenomenologist": her writing orders meaningless experience and imposes perspective upon it; Eason contrasts this with "ethnographic realists," who extract meaning from "a story that exists 'out there' in real life" (Eason 59). The wider argument in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is that American society was becoming increasingly atomized, a worry that was reflected across the spectrum of contemporary thought as evidenced by the reactions to the anti-war movement, race riots and civil rights movement detailed in greater depth in Mark Greif's *Age of the Crisis of Man* (2015) and Rick Perlstein's comprehensive *Nixonland* (2008). But in citing this concern, Didion laid the blame on the individuals and their lack of personal responsibility. She went to report on the Haight-Ashbury scene and came away with an account that was exactly as she wished it to be, and her reporting style asserts her argument effectively. Reflecting on the incident of the young girl who had taken LSD in the recent Netflix documentary *The Center Will Not Hold* (2017), made by her nephew Griffin Dunne, Didion notes that she was, in fact, delighted with what was happening: it was great material (Dunne). But, as she would later realize, things are rarely so simple, and as Menand notes, citing the relatively small use of recreational drugs by Americans at large, the tiny number of hippies in Haight-Ashbury could not be seen as reflective of a wider problem engulfing the entirety of American society.

The next step in the development of Didion's outlook can be witnessed in *The White Album*, where she attempts to deploy a similar technique of reporting and reproducing images. But where in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" the images she found and reproduced fit with her argument and made sense when presented together, *The White Album* frequently finds Didion unable to mold the images she encounters into coherence and thereby establish a wider narrative or sense of a contextualized whole. The title essay from the collection begins with one of Didion's most quoted lines, and the line which provides the title from her collected non-fiction: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion, *The White Album* 185).

In the context of its quotation, this line often suggests that she is reaffirming the importance of narrative literature; these “stories” do not exist merely for pleasure, education, historical record or general interest, but are in fact vital for the continued existence of human beings. In the context of *The White Album*, however, this phrase is undermined. After suggesting that “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (Didion, *The White Album* 185). Didion begins the following paragraph by problematizing this claim: “Or at least we do for a while” (Didion, *The White Album* 185). The rest of this essay, and to an extent the rest of *The White Album*, see Didion receiving images and reproducing them while unable to arrange them towards a single polemical argument or narrative line. To establish this point and prefigure incoherence as a form for the following essays, Didion recounts a series of images in list form:

I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai. I reread all of George Orwell on the Royal Hawaiian Beach, and I also read, in the papers that came one day late from the mainland, the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child, whose fingers had to be pried loose from the Cyclone fence when she was rescued twelve hours later by the California Highway Patrol, reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for “a long time.” (Didion, *The White Album* 186–87)

She then concludes: “Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew” (Didion, *The White Album* 187). The images are listed consecutively and continuously and are included in the same sentences, and so are juxtaposed while their equivalence is simultaneously underlined. They are presented without hierarchy, and it is

suggested that hierarchy is impossible to impose. Even in the description of individual images, detail is included that prevents sense from being made of them: the young woman, we are told, is 26 years old; but her blond hair is “faded.” Didion’s provision of conflicting details prevents the image from achieving full coherence.

Elsewhere, Didion attempts to draw similar conclusions to those that can be extrapolated from “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” in terms of societal collapse, but she is unable to force the images she encounters into such a straightforward narrative. Huey Newton of the Black Panthers is shot and seeks medical care at the Kaiser Foundation Hospital, only to be turned away when he refuses to sign an admission form. Didion is ready to grant this occurrence emblematic status, presenting it as “a classic instance of a historical outsider confronting the established order at its most petty and impenetrable level” (Didion, *The White Album* 201). But she then finds out that Newton was in fact enrolled in the Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, which renders this emblem mute: if Newton was a true outsider striking out against the established political order and white supremacy, this could be emblemized by his disengagement from a bureaucratic system even in the event of his shooting. But for Newton to refuse to sign a hospital admission form even when he held the requisite health insurance is too complicated, too full of conflicting symbolic value, to be wrapped up into an emblem, particularly an emblem that carries political weight. Didion’s deadpan delivery emphasizes this contradiction and incoherence: in her final words of description, she quotes a nurse from the hospital who informs her of Newton’s healthcare status by describing him as “a Kaiser” (Didion, *The White Album* 201). This could not be further from Newton’s public image as an agent of the Black Power movement; he is described in the bureaucratized, archaic, marketing-inflected language of European white power and supremacy as if he were a part of this group.¹ Muggli argues that this encounter, due to its incoherence, “does not represent anything” (Muggli 414). While he is correct that it does not represent a coherent emblem that might endow the essay with a political narrative, I would argue that it does, in

¹ “Kaiser” here of course refers to the name of the healthcare insurance consortium founded by Henry J. Kaiser, but the nurse’s referral to Newton as a “Kaiser” brings to mind the German term for “emperor.”

fact, represent its own incoherence: *The White Album* is an artefact of a time in which meaning lay in disorder. It suggests that Didion had begun to regard the value of truth above coherent argument and meaning; it would surely have been possible for her to disregard the images that contradict the impression she wished to communicate and create a coherent narrative, as she had in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." But this would not have been the truth, a value which Didion's work places at its center: as she remarked in an interview about her reporting trip to El Salvador, "It's more an insistence that people tell the truth. The decision to go to El Salvador came one morning at the breakfast table. I was reading the newspaper and it just didn't make sense" (Daugherty 420).

Another instance of this from *The White Album* comes in the description of Manson murderer Linda Kasabian. Again, Didion describes her subject in list form, which has the effect of presenting the reader with a seemingly non-hierarchical set of details and allowing these details to form their own meaning in the reader's mind:

When I first met Linda Kasabian in the summer of 1970 she was wearing her hair parted neatly in the middle, no makeup, Elizabeth Arden "Blue Grass" perfume, and the unpressed blue uniform issued to inmates at the Sybil Brand Institute for Women in Los Angeles. (Didion, *The White Album* 208)

Again, the mundane details suggest normality and conventional, archetypal Californian young-womanhood, down to the name of the perfume she is wearing. There is then a subtle, ironic equivalence drawn: both the perfume and Kasabian's uniform are described as blue, one through product name and one through its literal color. Kasabian wears "no makeup," and her blue uniform is "unpressed"; there is again a sense of ironic similarity, which stems from the evident fact that while the tone of the description does not change, what is being described is either mundane or associated with extreme, unsettling violence. Didion herself comments on this effect, noting that the "juxtaposition of the spoken and the unspeakable was eerie and unsettling, and made my notebook a litany of little ironies so obvious as to be

of interest only to dedicated absurdists" (Didion, *The White Album* 209). Didion's awareness of these ironies does not enable her to make sense of them. They coexist in single images packed with contradictions so intense that they are impossible to disentangle or interpret. The image of Linda Kasabian in her cell is another instance of this; her outside appearance has nothing in common with the terrible acts that she has participated in. She therefore exists, in Didion's account, as pure image, representative of nothing but disorder.

Following *The White Album*, Didion's focus shifts. After the events she had covered in that collection demonstrated that the truth is never straightforward or even coherent, much of her work began to focus on debunking false claims or narratives in the public realm. Menand argues that this change took place in an instance she recounted in *Where I Was From* (2003), a work of memoir which Didion began as early as 1973, although it did not see publication until after the death of her parents (it was published in 2003). Menand argues that Didion's worldview shifted from that of a Goldwater Republican (she voted for him in 1964) to something different altogether. Although Didion had mounted a convincing argument of moral disintegration as a symptom of societal collapse with her portrayal of the hippie movement in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," this was in fact a flawed picture: "In 1967, when Didion's article came out, only one per cent of college students reported having tried LSD. In 1969, only four per cent of adults said they had smoked marijuana" (Menand). It is clear that, although the media might have been interested in such a story, this was not the widespread social disintegration that Didion seemed to suggest it to be. Didion had certainly conjured images that suggest the authenticity of her account and of the subjects that make up her account, but, on the level of the narrative, she had been pulled in to the wider, inauthentic infrastructure of the contemporary mass media.

Menand identifies the shift through two instances in Didion's work. Firstly, he draws attention to an episode in *Where I Was From* where Didion introduces her adopted daughter Quintana to a reconstruction of Sacramento as it existed in the 1850s, when Didion's father had owned a saloon. While explaining this to Quintana, Didion realizes that

in fact, I had no more attachment to this wooden sidewalk than Quintana did: it was no more than a theme, a decorative effect.

It was only Quintana who was real. (Didion, *Where I Was From* 1100)

The language of authenticity is deployed, with Didion citing the “real” nature of her daughter, and it is used to contrast the authentic with the inauthentic. Prior to this incident, Didion has been subtly conjuring and then undermining the image of the American West and her Californian ancestors, and the contrast of these two images is the climax of this continuous thematic development. Previously, Didion had been in thrall to the idea of California as the fulfilment of manifest destiny and pioneer spirit, a living monument to a particular resourceful and dynamic American spirit. She recreates this impression through reproducing the travel accounts of her ancestors, who made the treacherous journey across the country, and includes the text of a speech she gave at school as a young girl in June 1948: “They who came to California were not the self-satisfied, happy and content people, but the adventurous, the restless, and the daring” (Didion, *Where I Was From* 961). But in fact, as Didion argues, the Californian reality is a little different. The development of the state relied on heavily subsidized agriculture and federally-funded industry, and so the image of California as a dynamic, independent land of pioneers is an illusion: “The extreme reliance of California on federal money, so seemingly at odds with the emphasis on unfettered individualism that constitutes the local core belief, was a pattern set early on, and derived in part from the very individualism it would seek to belie” (*Where I Was From* 966). And so when Didion visited Old Sacramento with her daughter, who, as a result of her adoption had no ancestral link to the heritage that Didion sought to acquaint her with, Didion was presented with two conflicting manifestations of California: the official story and the real story. Didion’s conclusion that “It was only Quintana who was real” displays a will to find the authentic, and she again locates this in an image: that of her daughter in a model town. It is a powerful visual symbol that positions the single authentic figure in inauthentic surroundings, and Quintana takes on no description besides Didion’s insistence that she is “real.” The town, in contrast, is described by repeated references to its sidewalk, the wooden

construction of which is noted on seven occasions in less than a page. Describing the sidewalk as wooden not only emphasizes its ersatz, dated construction material, but also relates to the fake in an adjectival sense, just as a bad actor might be described as having wooden delivery. Quintana, in contrast, is only referred to as “Quintana,” with no additional description. Therefore, while she might represent youth or an external, non-Californian impulse, here she plays the role of the post-symbolic representation of authenticity, of the authentic against the fake. Didion’s aesthetic technique of claiming authenticity reinforces her thematic argument, but does this in the face of false narrative, complicating the too-easy, over-simplified popular conception in order to approach the truth as it is.

This theme is also present in one of Didion’s most effective and directly political essays, “New York: Sentimental Journeys” (1991), which dealt with the New York Central Park jogger rape case of 1989. The piece was published in 1991 in the *New York Review of Books*, and sees Didion taking as her subject the media coverage of a criminal case that had caught the imagination of the city. Besides its bold tone and orthodoxy-challenging content, the essay is notable for the fact that it subverts the aesthetic of authenticity that Didion had cultivated in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” and, to some extent, *The White Album*. Whereas in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” Didion had been guilty of relying on the reproduction of images she had encountered to support an argument that was not necessarily true, using this to create a false narrative, in “Sentimental Journeys” she did almost the exact opposite while still orienting her critique around a single emblematic image; in this case an image that was unstable and transitory.

The crux of Didion’s argument is as follows: the brutal rape of a female jogger running through Central Park had been adopted by the media as a symbol of a city overrun by crime, specifically street crime, perpetrated by the black population. This had the effect of advancing New York’s image as an exciting and dynamic city, held back only by its unfortunate crime problem and also somehow enlivened by it. The foregrounding of the image of the rape of a young, attractive, female, white investment banker as she jogged through Central Park by four black men and one Latino man enabled the city to focus on an overstated black crime problem rather

than its more pressing issues, such as a lack of tax revenue and a failing economy. Didion cogently sums this up in her dissection of the *New York Times's* coverage of the case:

New York, the Times concluded, “invigorated” the jogger, “matched her energy level.” At a time when the city lay virtually inert, when forty thousand jobs had been wiped out in the financial markets and former traders were selling shirts at Bergdorf Goodman for Men, when the rate of mortgage delinquencies had doubled, when fifty or sixty million square feet of office space remained unrented (sixty million square feet of unrented office space is the equivalent of fifteen darkened World Trade Towers) and even prime commercial blocks on Madison Avenue in the Seventies were boarded up, empty; at a time when the money had dropped out of all the markets and the Europeans who had lent the city their élan and their capital during the Eighties had moved on, vanished to more cheerful venues, this notion of the city’s “energy” was sedative, as was the commandeering of “crime” as the city’s central problem. (Didion, “New York: Sentimental Journeys”)

Although Didion does not state it directly, it is clear that she suspected the men to be innocent, their arrests a symptom of the New York establishment’s racist outlook. Despite the efforts of Donald Trump and the tabloid press, they were cleared of the crime years later in 2002, and received compensation from the city of New York for \$41 million.

Didion’s essay is a case study in what can happen when the image-led form of argument that she had deployed in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” goes unchallenged, and the material it communicates is therefore accepted without critical engagement. Here, the press has taken an image and transformed it into an emblem of not just New York’s crime problem, but of New York as a whole, distorting the truth for political ends; this is possible through the evocation of authenticity. Didion draws attention to the press depiction of the jogger, who was “reported to be a vegetarian, and ‘fun-loving,’ although only ‘when time permitted,’ and also to have had (these

were the *Times's* details) 'concerns about the ethics of the American business world'" (Didion, "New York: Sentimental Journeys"). This is contrasted with the accused, who are referred to in heavily racialized terms, and likened to feral animals. Didion includes newspaper headlines to make this point, which include: "*Teen Wolfpack Beats and Rapes Wall Street Exec on Jogging Path. Central Park Horror. Wolf Pack's Prey. Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang. Rape Rampage*" (Didion, "New York: Sentimental Journeys"). These descriptions are striking as they aren't far from those deployed by Didion in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" to create a particular political and social impression of the hippie movement—Didion's description of the child who takes LSD is less sensationalist, but her juxtaposition of signifiers of the child's youth directly with her drug use has a tabloid quality to it. Similarly, the jogger is the authentic character of a new, aspirational, young and capitalist America, heralding the possibility of New York's bright future: she is a vegetarian, and hence socially conscious, while she is also "fun-loving" and works in finance. The accused teenagers, by contrast, resemble animals, and represent the dark past that New York is moving away from, a past which, however, still serves to add to the impression of New York as a dynamic and exciting city. There are so many layers to the symbolism here—a latent underclass pitted against an aspirational middle class, the city's black population contrasted with its white population, new economic opportunity, sexual violence, the inherently good against the inherently bad, city planning—that the event has an element of the post-symbolic. It is an event that transcends its implicit symbolic potential and signifies an entire city and an entire decade. In the words of the *New York Daily News*, "This trial[...]is about more than the rape and brutalization of a single woman. It is about the rape and the brutalization of a city" (Didion, "New York: Sentimental Journeys"). The event symbolizes so much and so many contradicting forces that it becomes more than a symbol.

Like Didion's evocation of American youth corrupted by drugs in Haight-Ashbury almost thirty years earlier, the narrative is not borne out by the numbers. Just as the story of widespread drug use that Didion recounted in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" was not at all representative of at the very least 96% of Americans, in New York in 1989 "3,254 other rapes were reported"—so why did the press expend

so much column space on only one of these events? The first of these statistical arguments is a critique of Didion's work, whilst the second is Didion's critique of the New York press, and both serve to undermine their respective text's claim to authenticity, highlighting the difference between the authentic and the factually true. This is a particular literary mode for Didion: it co-opts the symbolic and emblematic modes that Didion had previously employed in her own work, annotating texts and arranging them into her own narrative. Rather than insert her own images into the text, Didion does no original reporting of her own, but this serves to create a specific effect: this is not a story about the case, it is a story about the coverage of the case.

Covering the press gives Didion the opportunity to pinpoint the aesthetic conception of authenticity and separate it from what might be the truth. The best example of this is her essay on the 1988 election campaign, "Insider Baseball" (1998), in which she both reported on and dissected the press's coverage of the Democratic and Republican primary campaigns. In this essay, we see Didion expanding upon the theme of narratives and symbols of authenticity deployed in order to mislead the public towards the ends of the powerful, and it is perhaps a stronger essay than "New York: Sentimental Journeys" as it enables her to combine reporting with close reading. While in her essay about the Central Park jogger case Didion dissects press coverage to undermine and recontextualize the narratives that are being advanced, in "Insider Baseball" she is able to uncover exactly how the process works, using her position as a member of the press pack to witness firsthand how the relationship between the press and power functions. She is also able to endow her own position with authenticity by deploying her own counter symbols, which take the place of the statistics that underpin her argument in "New York: Sentimental Journeys."

The title of the collection that "Insider Baseball" appears in is *Political Fictions* (2001). This gives a clear idea of Didion's argument: American politics has become a process of fictionalizing, of creating narratives and claiming their authenticity through symbolism. But the title has two meanings: it is also a pun around the idea of political fiction, a genre which Didion had indulged in in several of her novels before this point, notably *Democracy* (1984) and *The Book of Common Prayer* (1977), and there is therefore a level of irony here, as the novels in which Didion deals with

politics invariably reveal a murky, immoral underbelly that lies beneath the external moral sheen of her political characters. For example, in *Democracy* Inez Victor, the wife of Harry Victor, a US Senator and failed presidential candidate, has a long-running, intermittent affair with Jack Lovett, a CIA agent, fixer and profiteer. Harry Victor is an all-image, hollow and purportedly idealistic politician, whilst Jack Lovett is the cynical, corrupt political reality behind Harry Victor's empty words. When Harry Victor gives a speech at a university and proclaims "over and over again that Americans were learning major lessons in Southeast Asia," (Didion, *Democracy* 99) Jack Lovett states that "he could think of only one lesson Americans were learning in Southeast Asia. [...] 'A tripped Claymore mine explodes straight up'" (Didion, *Democracy* 99–100). For Didion, this is how democracy has come to function: as a media exercise that operates on behalf of the interests of capital.

The use of irony in the titles of her essays and novels signals the split-level understanding of authenticity as it functions in this relationship. There is first the surface level, where meaning exists in the single understanding of terms such as "political fiction", "democracy" and "insider baseball." There is then the second meaning, which undermines the first: "political fiction" is first fiction about politics that might try to tell some truth about it or accurately represent it, but in Didion's hands this term in fact suggests that all politics is just an exercise in fiction; "democracy" might suggest an open and fair system of government, but is revealed in the novel to refer to the corruption of this system. In "Insider Baseball," Didion literalizes this dynamic. The essay's title refers to both the specific and niche shared knowledge and lexicon of a particular clique, in this case the political class and the political media; and also to the bizarre, press-focused ritual of Democratic primary candidate Michael Dukakis of throwing a baseball on airport runways with his aides and other staff after landing at campaign locations. Here, irony draws attention to the difference between the assertion of authenticity and actual truth: the first, non-ironic level of these titles might aestheticize totally the concepts behind them. For example, *Democracy* might refer to a work that considers the surface machinations and operation of a democratic society without acknowledging its superficial nature, but adding a level of irony cuts through this level of the aesthetic and underlines the concept's falsity, revealing its

true, existent nature. This is a concern that Didion voiced about the work of Bob Woodward, whose accounts of American politics she saw as an aestheticization of politics in which “measurable cerebral activity is virtually absent,” where Woodward notes surface details such as “[Bob Dole was] dressed casually in a handsome green wool shirt” (Didion, “The Deferential Spirit”) while details such as Dole’s insistence that the public often picks the wrong winner escape interrogation (although this suggestion might have deep implications for democracy should Woodward care to consider it). Didion’s irony, notable in the titles of her political novels and essays, exposes the shallow aesthetic considerations at play in contemporary politics.

Nowhere is Didion’s project of exposing the truth behind the projection of the authentic more obvious than in her dissection of this image of Michael Dukakis:

About this baseball on the tarmac. On the day that Michael Dukakis appeared in the high school in the Woodland Hills and sat at the office plaza in San Diego and in the schoolyard in San Jose, there was, although it did not appear on the schedule, a fourth event, what was referred to among the television crews as a “tarmac arrival with ball tossing.” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 752)

The event is supposed to appear spontaneous, but it is pre-arranged, with the press briefed on its occurrence and nature. It is clear that Didion expects the reader to interpret this as ridiculous and false. The press, on the other hand, interpret it as an example of Dukakis’s authenticity:

“Just a regular guy,” one of the cameramen had said, his inflection that of the “union official” who confided, in an early Dukakis commercial aimed at blue-collar voters, that he had known “Mike” a long time, and backed him despite his not being “your shot-and-beer kind of guy.” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 752)

The likeness Didion draws between the campaign commercial and the cameraman’s feedback suggests that the press is playing the same role as the campaign, and is regurgitating the same material without questioning it. This material is aimed at

establishing Dukakis as an authentic character, but it is, ironically, the very definition of inauthentic, a fact that is further enforced by a revelation from a CNN producer, who tells Didion that “[t]he first recorded ball tossing on the Dukakis campaign had been outside a bowling alley somewhere in Ohio. CNN had shot it. When the campaign realized that only one camera had it, they restaged it” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 753). The press dutifully reproduces these events to the ends that the campaign wishes them to, without deviating from the campaign’s lines: Didion reproduces the press reports from the reporters watching the baseball throwing ritual, and notes that they paint Dukakis as “tough.” There is an internalized uniformity to the press coverage, an expectation that the image will be reproduced: “What we had in the tarmac arrival with ball tossing, then, was an understanding: a repeated moment witnessed by many people, all of whom believed that only an outsider, only someone too ‘naïve’ to know the rules of the game, would so describe it” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 754).

The image of the baseball throwing is a direct example of a surface aesthetic of authenticity being deployed in the service of manipulation and falsehood. Like Didion’s description of the child in Haight-Ashbury, or the New York press conjuring the image of sexual violence, it is pure aesthetic with no substance. Michael Dukakis’s campaign staff hope that the image of him throwing a baseball will transmit his presidential qualities in a post-symbolic manner: not only is he tough, a leader, and someone that you can “have a beer with” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 753), but this show of the supposedly authentic establishes him, in the words of *Time* magazine, as someone who might “go beyond the pedestrian promise of ‘good jobs at good wages’ to give voice to a new Democratic vision” (Didion, *Political Fictions* 755). Images here communicate the idea of the authentic, going beyond basic symbolism (“good jobs at good wages”) and endowing events, narratives and individuals with a pervasive sense of authority (“a new Democratic vision”).

It is interesting that Didion chooses the press as the subject of two of her most effective pieces in exposing the deployment of hollow aesthetic conceptions of authenticity. It suggests that, although literature can play a role in promoting false narratives by endowing them with the aesthetic sense of authenticity, it is also possible to put this right, or at least provide a viable counterpoint through literature. In

both “New York: Sentimental Journeys” and “Insider Baseball,” Didion clarifies and debunks the dominance of the emblem and the image, revealing the truth behind them just as she herself deployed them in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” and *The White Album*. But while she abandons the technique of conjuring the wholly dominant image and emblemizing in order to claim authenticity, she does use similar techniques towards a different end.

To clarify this point, I return to Louis Menand’s essay:

The No. 1 sin in print journalism is repetition. Pages are money; editorial space is finite. Writers who waste it don’t last. Conditions demand a willingness to compress and a talent for concision. The ellipses and the refrains that characterize much of Didion’s writing are methods of economizing the exposition and managing the reader’s experience, ways of getting the reader to participate in the job of making sense of whatever it is, hippies or someone who once wrote about hippies, that the writer is trying to think through. (Menand)

While in her later work Didion might not rely on the single image, symbol or emblem to the extent of her previous essays, and in fact attempts to undermine the use of such by others, she does use similar devices to a different end. Didion’s prose frequently uses ellipses, and brings abrupt ends to short sections, representing incidents and images that she has noticed in sparse prose. But rather than assert prescriptive images as she had in her earlier career, Didion’s work here is far more democratic. “Insider Baseball” consists of seven sections, each of which is split into a few short parts—this is in an essay only twenty-six pages long. Much of this has to do with the practical fact, as Menand notes, that many of these pieces of non-fiction were originally printed in magazines; primarily, in later years, in the *New York Review of Books*. But even when her work is longer, this economy of style remains.

One example of this is the section that consists of single paragraphs from another essay collected in *Political Fictions*, “Eyes on the Prize” (1992), this time following the 1992 election campaign. Didion proceeds through a series of quotes from the press

and Democratic operatives regarding Bill Clinton, before quoting Clinton himself and abruptly ending the section: "By the time the candidate reached Madison Square Gardens he had incorporated into his acceptance speech the very line with which the incumbent Republican president, in February 1992 at Concord, New Hampshire, had formally opened his campaign for reelection: 'If we can change the world we can change America'" (Didion, "Eyes on the Prize" 828). What is the reader supposed to take from this quote? Didion provides no supplementary commentary, and the dialogue is left to stand on its own: the following section does not pick up where this section left off, instead pivoting to consider a different issue entirely. It forces readers to think for themselves. Is this quote an example of a vacuous political class sloganeering to no end? Is it, as Didion has been arguing, an instance of the Democratic party distancing itself from issues in favor of personality? Does it represent the narrowing of the political field, the exponential growth of the middle section of a Venn diagram enveloping Right and Left? There is the impression that although it could be any or all of these things, it is important that Didion does not do the thinking on behalf of the reader, following this quote with a break in the text. In this silence, the reader is forced to draw their own meaning. This approach serves to democratize her perspective. The spaces that she so frequently leaves grant the reader the opportunity to reach their own conclusion, a rhetorical style which enables reader participation. Although this could lead to manipulation on Didion's part, with her making an argument and then aestheticizing it towards authenticity in order to give the reader the impression that they have reached their own conclusion when in fact Didion has manufactured their response, I would argue that this is not the case. It can be seen in my readings of her earlier work, and her fixation on the image as mode of delivery (whether she is advancing it or trying to reveal what an image disguises), that Didion's instinct is towards the unrepresentable, towards ambivalence and the pursuit of clear, transparent truth, whether this is coherent or not. She invites the reader to help her elucidate, and grants them the space in which to do so.

There is a political dimension to this evocation of authenticity, and it's one which can be mapped to Didion's own political outlook. In her more bluntly political essays, such as "New York: Sentimental Journeys" and the essays that make up *Political Fictions*,

and even to an extent the memoir *Where I Was From*, Didion came to view politics as manipulation on behalf of an economic class who distorted any notion of truth in exchange for capital—at the expense of the majority. This argument is embodied in a variety of ways: in “New York: Sentimental Journeys” it is the press establishment working on behalf of the economic interests of rich New Yorkers; in *Political Fictions* it is various political candidates working alongside the press machine to present false and manipulative images to an unsuspecting public; in *Where I Was From* it is the federal government-backed pioneers misrepresenting their own history to advance a Libertarian political agenda. Didion’s use of authenticity as an aesthetic counters this type of political power. It would have been possible, and perhaps effective, for her to have maintained her earlier style to support her own argument. But this would be to use the same tactics as the political-economic media class that her later work attempts to expose; it is what she was guilty of in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem”—allowing the image to dominate uncontested, resulting in an undemocratic, dictated argument veiled in the appearance of authenticity, an approach which would constitute bad faith. Instead, in her later work, Didion leaves space for the readers themselves to enter the text, ensuring that they join her in the project of elucidation rather than submit to her control. This approach has much to teach us in the current climate of “fake news” and a new nadir of political falsehood. Didion’s technique served to aid the exposure of a New York real estate mogul in “New York: Sentimental Journeys.” We should hope that such an approach might help again now that he’s President.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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