"'THE PARANOIA WAS FULFILLED' – AN ANALYSIS OF JOAN DIDION'S ESSAY 'THE WHITE ALBUM'"

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at Joan Didion's essay "The White Album" from the collection of essays *The White Album* (1979), as a relevant text to reflect upon America's turmoil in the sixties, and investigate in particular the subject of paranoia. "The White Album" represents numerous historical events from the 1960s, but the central role is played by the Manson Murders case, which the author considers it to be the sixties' watershed. This event–along with many others–shaped Didion's perception of that period, fueling a paranoid tendency that reflected in her writing. Didion appears to be in search of a connection between her growing anxiety and these violent events throughout the whole essay, in an attempt to understand the origin of her paranoia. Indeed, "The White Album" deals with a period in Didion's life characterized by deep nervousness, caused mainly by her increasing inability to make sense of the events surrounding her, the Manson Murders being the most inexplicable one. Consequently, Didion seems to ask whether her anxiety and paranoia are justified by the numerous violent events taking place in the US during the sixties, or if she is giving a paranoid interpretation of completely neutral and common events. Because of her inability to find actual connections between the events surrounding her, in particular political assassinations, Didion realizes she feels she is no longer able to fulfill her main duty as a writer: to tell a story. Surrendering to the impossibility of building a narrative, she can only juxtapose images that results in what she defines as a *cutting-room experience*. Paranoia appears to be a *fil rouge* that tightens everything together, influencing Didion's perception of the world and, ultimately, her writing.

KEYWORDS: Joan Didion, The White Album, Sixties, paranoia, Manson Murders.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last fifty years, numerous studies have been conducted on Joan Didion's non-fiction and her representation of the sixties (cf. Duncan 2013, Foster and Porter 2012, Houston and Lombardi 2009), but the subject of paranoia in her works has often been overlooked. This article, therefore, aims at investigating the representation of the sixties, and in particular of paranoia, by means of an analysis of Didion's essay "The White Album," from the collection of the same name. She gives a subjective and personal representation of the 1960s which, even ten years after the ending of the sixties—when her collection was published—was still an influential point of view on that time, although contemporary historiography would consider it outdated.[1]

Joan Didion is a widely recognized author–along with Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and many others–belonging to *New Journalism*. New Journalism is a narrative form that developed in early times, in particular during the nineteenth century with Pulitzer and Hearst, but made a comeback in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century (Dennis and Rivers 2017, vii). The main characteristics of this style are the author's personal involvement in the narrative and careful field work. From a stylistic point of view,

1 Didion's representation of the sixties is, in fact, in line with the *declension thesis* of historiography—now obsolete—according to which the sixties suddenly ended with the decade.

New Journalism allows the writer creative freedom and the use of literary techniques typical of fiction, such as realistic dialogue, personal voice and subjectivity. Along with New Journalism, appears the term *non-fiction*. The term describes a new genre characterized by hybrid stylistic elements, taken from both novel and reportage: non-fiction highlights the subjectivity of this kind of narratives and the authors' rejection of the possibility of creating an objective form of journalism (Scarpino 2012, 457-458). It was used for the first time in this sense by the writer Tom Wolfe (1973). It is within this context that *The White Album* appeared in 1979.

Didion's collection features essays dealing with the author's personal life and her work as a field reporter during the sixties and the seventies in the United States. The essay titled "The White Album" refers extensively to the main events of American 1960s political and social situation, with particular attention to political assassinations. However, in line with New Journalism style, Didion does not tackle historical issues directly, rather she refers to them while describing events belonging to her private life and feelings. The essay results in a portrait of her spiritual confusion, interwoven with (and apparently caused by) major historical events from the history of the Sixties in the US.

While Foster and Porter (2012) focus on *The White Album* mainly to investigate the "Women's Movement," or Houston and Lombardi (2009) give a general overview of the essay, this article aims at investigating Didion's representation of the sixties by analyzing the underlying paranoia in "The White Album." Indeed, the author represents the Manson Murders as the fulfillment of paranoia, the climax, but the essay presents numerous references to paranoia before the telling of the Manson killings, and draws a path of historical and personal events of which the Manson Murders represent only the final step.

The first section of this article will analyze the way Didion represents the Manson Murders in the "The White Album." The second section will investigate secondary representations of paranoia in her essay, putting them in relation with some historical events of the sixties. Finally, the last section will assess the consequences that the paranoid interpretation of the historical events of the sixties had on Didion's writing.

THE MANSON MURDERS FROM JOAN DIDION'S PERSPECTIVE

This first section of the article aims at giving an overview of "The White Album" and its structure, and at analyzing the presence of Joan Didion's paranoid tendency through a detailed analysis of the section of the essay where the description of the Manson Murders occurs. Indeed, despite the numerous references both to other historical events—such as the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the My Lai massacre and the Black Panther Party—as well as to the popular cultural landscape of the sixties, such as The Doors, Janis Joplin, and new religious groups, the central role in "The White Album" is played by the Manson Murders case, which represents the sixties' watershed. As Alzena MacDonald notices:

> The murder of Tate and the LaBiancas in their own houses demonstrated in absolutely stark and chilling terms that no one, from the richest and well-known Hollywood stars to the anonymous self-made wealthy class, was safe from the lower-class murderers . . . *The murders were a watershed moment* that augured the *death of the hope and promise of the nascent youth movement of the 1960s* and ushered in the profound disillusionment of the 1970s (MacDonald 2013, 186-187; italics mine).

According to MacDonald, the Manson Murders proved that no one—regardless of their social status—was safe from killers like the Manson Family. As the US was entering a new decade, these murders embodied the symbolic death of all the hopes the sixties youth movements had been promoting.

The Manson Family was a radical commune of roughly a hundred people who lived in California during the late 1960s under the leadership of Charles Manson. Manson's followers began to grow during the Summer of Love in 1967, until 1971, when their leader was imprisoned. The expression Manson Murders refers to the massacre—commissioned by Charles Manson to his "family"—of an eight-months pregnant Sharon Tate Polanski, along with four friends on August 9, 1969, and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca the following night in Los Angeles (in Didion's essay, the killings are referred to as the "Cielo Drive murders" after the area of the city where they were committed). The murders held a wide appeal for the general public, because of their violence and their targeting people from the Hollywood jet set. Two years after the murders, Charles Manson was sentenced to death, but, since California abolished death penalty in 1972, his sentence was then commuted to life imprisonment. Key witness at the Manson trial and his final judgment was Linda Kasabian, a former member of the Manson Family very close to Charles Manson, and eventually accessory to the Manson Murders. During Manson's trial, Kasabian testifies against him, playing a crucial role in his imprisonment. It is during these years that Joan Didion meets with Linda Kasabian several times and gets the chance to interview her, as she will report in "The White Album" (Bugliosi and Gentry, 1974; Guinn, 2013).

The first evidence of the central role played by the Manson Murders is the title of Didion's essay: both the essay and the collection are titled after The Beatles' *The White Album* (1968). This choice comes from a message the Manson Family left on the refrigerator during the murders at the LaBianca house: the killers wrote "Helter Skelter" in blood, the title of a track from the aforementioned album that was very popular among the members of the Family. Indeed, Charles Manson was convinced that the Beatles' songs were the prediction of a violent war, which he and his Family decided to ignite by committing this massacre. If taken literally, the expression "Helter Skelter" means "chaotic" and "disordered." Both adjectives, according to Katherine Henderson, seem to be suitable to describe the Manson Murders and the social situation during the sixties in the United States: a diffused sense of confusion among the population, "[Helter Skelter] was an appropriate comment, not only on the mass murder, but on the decade of the sixties in the United States" (1981, 119). Moreover, along with the writing "Helter Skelter," on the refrigerator of the LaBianca house, the writing "Piggies" was found. It was a reference to another track from the Beatles'

The White Album called "Piggies" and also a very offensive expression employed during these years by members of countercultural groups, such as the Manson Family, to address police officers.[2]

As far as the structure of the essay is concerned, "The White Album" is divided into fifteen short sections, and the representation of the Manson murders appears in section "10." Section 10 can be divided into two parts: the first one, where Didion depicts society's turmoil in the Los Angeles area during this period, and the second one, where she describes the reaction of the community to the massacre. In the first part, one can find the climax of the spiraling tension of the sixties. Didion represents these years as a period of excess, in which people often tended to cross lines, to commit crimes, without any fear of consequences, "This mystical flirtation with the idea of 'sin'—this sense that it was possible to go 'too far,' and that many people were doing it—was very much with us in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1969" (Didion 1979, 41). As she states, the population of Los Angeles is aware of this complex social situation, and is increasingly concerned about it, "[T]here were odd things going around town. There were rumors. There were stories" (41). Nevertheless, the population may be able to imagine what is going to happen, but they appear unable to talk about it. This explains why, referring to that period, Didion writes, "Everything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable" (41), as if everyone is silently expecting something terrible to happen.

The contrast between what can and what cannot be said will also recur later in the essay, when the author tells about her meeting with Kasabian. Didion explains how "the case," namely the Manson killings, are not referred to explicitly, they rather use different expressions:

> In fact we never talked about 'the case,' and referred to its central events only as 'Cielo Drive' and 'LaBianca'. . . This particular 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. (43-44).

Moreover, at the heart of the Manson Murders case lays what the author refers to as an "awesome and impenetrable mystery" (44), stressing once again the idea that the real trigger for these murders will probably never be fathomed.

In this situation, every crime that takes place during the sixties fuels anxiety in the whole community, which contributes to a building tension in society and a diffused sense of paranoia that leads Didion to "participat[e] in the paranoia of the time" (12). In her words, "A demented and seductive vortical tension was building in the community. The jitters were setting in. I recall a time when the dogs barked every night and the moon was always full" (41-42). As I will show, Didion appears to be in search of a connection between her—and the community's—growing anxiety and these violent events throughout the whole es-

2 Another reason for Didion's choice of the title is the heterogeneous and experimental nature of The Beatles' album, to which the author implicitly compares her collection of essays (Scarpino 2012, 455).

say, in an attempt to understand the origin of her paranoia. Indeed, she is hoping to understand whether her anxiety generates from the atmosphere in Los Angeles, or if she is giving a paranoid interpretation to events such as the Manson Murders.

A further consideration concerns the fact that, while a large part of the population in L.A. seemed afraid of the criminal groups committing violent acts around the city, another part seemed to be lured by them. Indeed, Didion seems to be aware of the attraction that groups like the Manson Family may have had on young people. And this could be the reason why Didion uses terms belonging to the sexual semantic field while describing the atmosphere in Los Angeles and the crimes: the word "flirtation" connected with the idea of sin, and "seductive" related to the vortical tension (Didion 1979, 41-42).[3] These details from the first part of section 10 concerning the atmosphere in Los Angeles contribute to preparing the reader for the ensuing events, giving a clear frame in which to set the Manson Murders: a precise place, Los Angeles; in a precise time, 1968 and 1969; and in a precise mood, anxiety and paranoia. In other words, this is the prelude to the fulfillment of the sixties' paranoia:

> 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 bushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. *The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled.* (47; italics mine).

Then, in a move that is characteristic of Joan Didion's style, as well as other New Journalism authors such as Hunter S. Thompson, she does not describe the events directly, but she depicts them through her personal experiences and memories, assuming that her readers will have previous knowledge of the events she only evokes: "On August 9, 1969, I was sitting in the shallow end of my sister-in-law's swimming pool in Beverly Hills when she received a telephone call from a friend who had just heard about the murders at Sharon Tate Polanski's house on Cielo Drive" (42). At first, the author recalls that she was in the swimming pool, when she first heard the news, then she remembers the confusion following that moment and the several contradictory and incorrect police reports.

This technique of the representation of a pivotal historical event filtered through her own personal experience is recurrent in Didion's essay. A further example is when she mentions Robert Kennedy's funeral: "I watched Robert Kennedy's funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai" (13). The two quotes show the subjective way of representing events—typical of new journalism—by framing major historical events, the Manson Murders and Robert Kennedy's funeral, into a common and intimate context.

Finally, particular attention must be paid to the closing sentence of section 10, which sums up the premises on society that the author makes in the first part, "I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and I wish I did not: *I*

3 As Crenshaw remarks (2014, 1), this sex/death duality can also be related to the The Doors' lyrics of the song "Moonlight Drive," which are highlighted earlier in Didion's essay (22).

remember that no one was surprised" (42). According to Didion, at the time when the Manson Murders are committed, the community in Los Angeles is in a state of profound paranoia, of which the killings represent the climax. In the author's view, the majority of Americans deems all of the events from the sixties to lead up to that inevitable point: the Manson Murders. Thus, the sentence reveals a paradox because, one the one hand, Didion writes that "no one was surprised" by the Cielo Drive murders, but on the other, it is impossible to predict when and where these crimes are going to take place. In the following section, I will explore how this unpredictability of danger fosters the author's tendency toward paranoia during the sixties to reach its climax in 1969 (cf. Melley 2000).

"THE PARANOIA WAS FULFILLED"

This section aims at demonstrating that Didion's tendency toward paranoia manifests long before the Manson Murders. Indeed, while in section 10 paranoia refers almost exclusively to the atmosphere in Los Angeles and the Manson killings, in other sections of the essay, Didion connects it with her own personal condition. In particular, the author's paranoia seems fueled by the physical and mental health problems in the author's life: Didion at that time was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and suffered from several nervous breakdowns. Moreover, the sixties' rise of conspiracy theories highly influences the author's relationship with history, master narratives and the ability to understand the events surrounding her.

At the time, the US was shocked by several political assassinations: John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. Even though Didion mentions only two of them in her essay—John and Robert Kennedy's—the consequences of the other assassinations are no less important, because they pave the way for the diffusion of the so-called *conspiracy theories*, which will have a great influence on the culture of that time. The term conspiracy theory refers to the attribution of a cause of one or more historical events to a conspiracy, which the majority of people have no knowledge of. If *paranoid style* has always been present in American politics, as Richard Hofstadter remarks (1966, 4-8), the assassination of JFK created the perfect breeding ground for the development of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories express the doubt of the population towards the legitimacy of their government, and they originate from people's uncertainty and skepticism towards authorities and their narration of major historical events. As argued by Peter Knight, "Narratives of conspiracy now capture a sense of uncertainty about how historical events unfold, about who gets to tell the official version of events, and even about whether a causally coherent account is still possible" (2000, 3). As Knight argues, if before 1963 conspiracy theories were used almost exclusively by politicians, after the ending of the sixties, it is the people themselves who propose conspiracy theories about authorities' abuse of power, attempting to put into question—and in some cases delegitimize—American *master narratives*:

> From being a mark of extreme but influential politics promoted by those on the fringes of power, the paranoid style became a popular and perhaps indispensable cultural sensibility. In brief, the sixties witnessed a shift from conspiracy theories being told by the authorities about the people in the name of countersubversion, to conspiracy theories being proposed by the people about abuses of power by those in authority. (Knight 1995, 96).

Conspiracy theories become the inescapable filter through which Americans interpret and understand the world around them (Knight 2000, 3). Consequently, by becoming part of people's everyday life, conspiracy theories foster paranoia within Americans and considerably influence their cultural productions (Knight 2000, 2-3).

As Knight remarks, thus, paranoia and conspiracy theories go hand in hand from the sixties onwards, influencing people's perception of reality and the cultural productions of the period. As he highlights: "One of the most significant shifts in the function and format of conspiracy thinking in recent decades is from the deliberate promotion of single-issue demonological doctrines to a more fluid and contradictory rhetoric of paranoia that suffuses everyday life and culture" (11). Unlike other authors such as Don DeLillo, Didion never tackles conspiracy theories directly in her essays and novels, but the pervasive paranoia in "The White Album" seems to answer precisely to the climate of anxiety caused by the resurrection of conspiracy theories. In fact, paranoia in the United States—and particularly in Los Angeles—does not take over because of the Manson Murders, it is already there, present in society. For instance, according to the writer Norman Mailer, after the assassination of JFK, Americans constantly lived in a spiritual state characterized by paranoia, "Since the assassination of John F. Kennedy we have been marooned in one of two equally intolerable spiritual states, apathy or paranoia" (1992, 129).

In the definition given by Timothy Melley, paranoia is understood as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a feeling of "suspicion about the causes of important social events," and, on the other hand, the awareness that—despite the attempts—the real causes of said events will never be fathomed, which makes people skeptical about their own thoughts and theories (Melley 2000, 26). As Maldwyn A. Jones highlights, all the major historical events taking place in the sixties make Americans feel unsure, to the point where they start putting into question the organization of their society and their system of values and beliefs, "The 1960s and 1970s were among the most traumatic decades in American history. The country was shaken by a sequence of political assassinations and by a protracted, shabby and shaming political scandal . . . These experiences left Americans divided and unsure of themselves. Some carried their rebelliousness to the point of questioning the very moral and constitutional foundations of American society" (1992, 543). During these years, such feelings permeate every kind of cultural production, from music to literature.

It is within this context that paranoia can be seen as the central element of "The White Album," a *fil rouge* that tightens everything together. According to Melley, Didion's essay deals with a period in her life "of deep uncertainty and nervousness," caused mainly by the increasing impossibility of the author "to understand her relationship to the chaotic

world around her" and to make sense of the events surrounding her, the Manson Murders being the most "inexplicable and disturbing" one (2000, 26). Melley, thus, establishes a relationship of cause-effect between Didion's mental health and the social situation in Los Angeles. In fact, according to Melley, this increasing paranoia undermines Didion's mental and physical health, and will lead her to suffer a major nervous breakdown in 1968. What makes her particularly anxious is the fact that her house is liable to be broken into by killers as is every other house in Los Angeles. She fears that something terrible is about to happen at any moment to her and her family. This is why, for example, she starts writing down all license numbers of panel trucks that come by her house and seem suspect, and then puts these notes into a drawer, where the police could find them when time may come, and, to use Didion's words, "[t]hat the time would come I never doubted" (Didion 1979, 19). As mentioned earlier, Didion lives near Cielo Drive, where the Manson Murders and Ramón Novarro's killing took place, in an area of Hollywood that is described for this reason as a "senseless-killing neighborhood" by one of the author's acquaintances, and that is characterized by "sinistral inertia" something she cannot spell out by Didion herself (15).[4]

Dangerous events taking place in the outside world—such as Ramón Novarro's killing and the Manson Murders—are paralleled by Didion with her inner world so that the boundary between that and outer world is blurred, and it is difficult to understand where one ends and the other begins. In "The White Album," she links the randomness of the killings around Los Angeles to her illness, which—just like the killers—strikes randomly.

> I had, at this time, a sharp apprehension not of what it was like to be old but of *what it was like to open the door to the stranger and find that the stranger did indeed have the knife*. In a few lines of dialogue in a neurologist's office in Beverly Hills, the improbable had become the probable, the norm: *things which happened only to other people could in fact happen to me*. (1979, 47; italics mine).

Didion's paranoia will grow even stronger when she later meets Linda Kasabian, who tells her that the Manson Family passed in front of her house on the night of the killings, "Linda Kasabian, the person I was interviewing on the Manson case, told me they had gone by our house, which was spooky" (Dunne 2017).

More evidence of Didion's growing paranoia and imminent nervous breakdown is present later in the essay when Didion includes several excerpts from reports, interviews, and official documents. Among these is the psychiatric report of a woman who alienated herself from the surrounding world, losing touch with reality, and whom later readers will discover to be the author herself. Didion shares this very intimate document with her readers, using it as a chance to discuss the social situation in Los Angeles. In her opinion, this document gives an important commentary on the city at this time, almost comparing her

4 Before the occurrence of the Manson Murders, in 1968, Los Angeles is struck by another violent killing, the one of the Hollywood actor Ramón Novarro. He is murdered by two brothers, Paul and Tom Ferguson, who went to his house pretending to be hustlers while actually searching for a large sum of money. Novarro dies as a result of the torture he is inflicted by the Ferguson brothers who wanted to know where the money was hidden.

state of mental health to the city's. As Lynn Marie Houston and William V. Lombardi remark, "She is not as much interested in her own diagnosis as she is in its ability to provide a commentary on the time and the city in which she lived, specifically Los Angeles in the late 1960s" (2009, 84).

The question that Didion seems to ask is whether her anxiety and paranoia are justified by the numerous violent events taking place in the United States at this time, or if she is giving a paranoid interpretation of completely neutral and common events. In other words, is her anxiety a symptom of the social (dis)order or is she projecting her anxiety on society? The numerous aforementioned citations concerning Didion's apprehension about her family's safety, the strategy she used to try to keep them safe and the social situation in Los Angeles prove how, to Didion, the sixties were indeed a violent period, preventing her from leading a quiet life. Ultimately, Didion's answer appears to be clear when she states, "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968" (1979, 15), thus implying that the cause of her mental instability and nervous breakdown is to be attributed to the complicated social situation and upheaval.

In fact, the numerous major historical events taking place during the sixties in the United States, together with the rise of conspiracy theories, fuel Didion's paranoid tendency for the most part of the decade, and will reach their tipping point with the Manson Murders. Such events significantly influence Didion's perception of the world, ultimately resulting in a change of her writing style, as I will argue in the following section.

THE "CUTTING-ROOM EXPERIENCE" AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON JOAN DIDION'S STYLE

In this section, I highlight and analyze the passages from "The White Album" where Didion openly speaks about her anxiety to argue that it is Didion's feeling of paranoia that prevents her from understanding her time and building connections between some of the events occurring during the sixties, particularly during their final years.

Didion cites relevant historical events, such as Robert Kennedy's assassination and the My Lai massacre, and less popular news like a woman who had left her five-year-old daughter on the street to die, as something she cannot fathom. On this, Didion comments, "Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew" (1979, 13), implying that she had never witnessed anything of the sort, thus making it impossible for her to understand said events. In her attempt to compensate for what she considers a lack of logic behind these, she tries to establish some connections with the numerous (apparent) coincidences occurring in her life during these years. For instance, Didion recalls that, on the day when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, she was in the city, buying a new silky dress. Some years later, she happened to wear that same dress at a party in Bel-Air, and Roman Polanski—who was attending the party with his future wife, Sharon Tate—ruined it by spilling some

red wine on it (Didion 1979, 44). However, she also soon acknowledges that connections like this are weak, and the violence is still unfathomable: "In this light all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless . . . I believe this to be an authentically *senseless chain of correspondences*, but in the jingle-jangle morning of that summer it made as much sense as anything else did" (Didion 1979, 44-45; italics mine). Didion cannot make sense of that time but she acknowledges this only on recollection, when she writes about it ten years later in "The White Album." That is, during the sixties, what she defines as a "senseless chain of correspondences" appears to comfort her, as if she had found a semblance of logic in these events.

As a consequence of Didion's inability to understand the historical events happening around her, she becomes increasingly disoriented and symbolizes this through her watch. The watch—the object one uses to make sense of time—is missing in the author's list of things to carry on her trips, "There is on this list one significant omission, one article I needed and never had: a watch . . . *This may be a parable, either of my life as a reporter during this period or of the period itself*" (Didion 1979, 35-36; italics mine). As noted by Mark Z. Muggli, the watch stands not only for Didion's disorientation during the sixties, but also for the author's perception of the sixties, a period where people seem to have lost track of time, and, consequently, do not know what they are supposed to do, "We recognize the incident [the missing watch] as a symbol of her life, and we might even be able to see it as an emblem of the period as it is characterized in 'The White Album'" (1987, 415).

Because of such disorientation and the inability to find real connections between the events surrounding her, in particular the political assassinations, Didion realizes that she is no longer able to fulfill her main duty as a writer, that is to tell a story, as Scarpino remarks (2012, 455). The author admits that she no longer has what she calls the "script"—a plan according to which events are supposed to take place; she starts to question all the premises of the stories she has ever told herself, and she gives up any attempt to find an explanation and build a coherent narrative: "I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but *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*" (1979, 12-13; italics mine). This shows how Didion's paranoia and disorientation have a direct influence on her writing because they prevent her from building a coherent narration of her time. She surrenders to the absence of a bigger picture, a structure, which is the ultimate demonstration of a lack of connection between the events and facts she wants to report.

As John Hollowell argues, Didion's works are about meaning, and, more precisely, about the impossibility or unwillingness to find a meaning. She seems to be obsessed by the interpretation of the events, until she finally realizes that it is impossible to build a pattern:

> [Didion's works] are about *the making of meaning*, and writer's *inability or unwillingness* to do just that . . . In all her work, Didion is obsessively fascinated with the interpretation of facts, events, the motives of people . . . Quite frequently, however, the act of interpretation breaks down, or the storyteller becomes frustrated with the act of *constructing meaningful patterns*. (1984, 164; italics mine).

Didion surrenders to the impossibility of finding a narrative: she is no longer interested in the plot, but only in images (Scarpino 2012, 455). In fact, she opens her essay with a description of the picture of a naked woman standing on a ledge outside her window, and she wonders whether this woman is about to commit suicide, her motives, and how the story will end. At the end of the essay, the author comes back to this image and states, "I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor jumped or did not jump, or in why. *I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind*." (1979, 44; italics mine).

As Muggli remarks, "'The White Album' . . . is Didion's report on certain events that have *resisted her understanding*; these are the shimmering episodes that would in most of her works become emblems, but which here remain *images*, parts of a story for which she says *she can find no plot*." (1987, 412; italics mine). That is, since Didion asserts she can simply describe and juxtapose pictures rather than telling a story, the images and events that she represents are conveyed without a precise order. The pattern followed by Didion becomes, as Scarpino highlights, "a-hierarchical" and "a-linear," (2012, 457; my translation). The events that she describes are left without an ending, without any moral, and they are followed—by juxtaposition—by a new image: "The stories fade into each other, like in cinema" (457). This is what Didion defines a *cutting-room experience*: instead of having a linear and coherent narration of events, she builds a narrative where facts are laid out as a series of (apparently) disconnected facts and images represented in no coherent pattern, reflecting the absence of connections between events in her real life. It results in a prose more similar to a movie, where scenes follow one another, rather than a fluent narration of events (cf. Hollowell 1984, 164).

Didion's writing style, thus, is fragmentary and blunt: Chris Anderson describes it as composed by "unrelated scenes, portraits, dialogues, and stories, creating a verbal collage," and "sentences [which] are unadorned and straightforward, connected by blank space rather than conjunctions" (1987, 137). This fragmentary style can be traced back to Didion's careful study of Ernest Hemingway's prose (cf. Griffin Wolff 1984, 127), but the lack of conjunctions in her prose is also the expression of what Didion defines as the "atomization" of society. Indeed, Didion's work reflects what she defines as "society's atomization" (1968, 31): the destruction of society as she knows it. Because of the lack of social fabric and order in the organization of society, the author suggests that it is impossible for her to retrieve the true meaning of existence. And her writing becomes nothing more than the expression of this absence. Despite Didion's several attempts to impose a narrative on

experience, nothing can be done to avoid what in the author's mind appears to be a social disintegration (cf. Hollowell 1984, 164-165).

The author's fragmentary style and the absence of connections make the reading more problematic. The various story lines are not connected, as to communicate to the readers a sense of disorder and disorientation: "the various story lines," Malin highlights,—"Didion's, the 'psychiatric report,' the traditional narrative—fight one another and, by doing so, fight our sense of order" (1984, 177). In other words, Didion's works demand interpretation: like Leonard Wilcox remarks, it is the duty of the readers to be active and make sense of what they are reading, they have to pick up the pieces left by the author and put the puzzle together in order to understand the bigger picture (cf. Wilcox 1984). In order to do that, readers always need to be alert because Didion's prose is rich in isolated sentences that may pass unnoticed, but are actually key elements to the understanding of the succeeding passages, or refer to other of her works. For example, when she introduces Linda Kasabian, she incidentally refers to the "dice" theory: "Linda operated on what I later recognized as 'dice theory,' and so, during the years I am talking about, did I" (18). "Dice" theory will not be mentioned again in the essay, but is a central element of her novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970). Or, again, she reports a quote by Linda Kasabian concerning her opinion on chance in life, "'Everything was to teach me something'" (18), which she will repeat at the end of her essay making a slight but important modification: substituting the pronoun "me" for "us," implying that Didion made this theory her own: "Everything was to teach us something" (45).

Because of her fragmentary and disconnected prose, her style and structure may distance the reader, yet, on the other hand, the strategy Didion uses to describe events is much closer to how actual readers experience their everyday life. The author represents the impossibility of separating common events occurring in one's life and major historical facts: everything is hopelessly intertwined.

To conclude, the sixties in the representation given by Joan Didion are portrayed as a complex—and occasionally violent—period. Indeed, Didion, along with many other Americans at that time, appears to have lived in a constant state of paranoia, fostered by several killings taking place in the US. Among these, the Manson Murders are the most relevant, and they represent the fulfillment of paranoia, the point of no return that determines the ending of the sixties. This complicated period resists the understanding of the author, preventing her from making a coherent representation of the time. Therefore, she surrenders to a situation that is to her ineffable, and she decides to represent it exactly as she sees it: a series of disconnected facts and images. The fragmentary style of her prose and the juxtaposition of images are the ultimate reflection of the "atomization" of society and the lack of connections between events during the sixties. Through her critical and personal approach, the author gives a vivid representation of her feeling of uncertainty and paranoia about the time she is living in. Since the sixties had such an impact on Joan Didion

and her writing, future research may focus on a comparison between her paranoid tendency in "The White Album" and more recent works such as *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (2003).

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