

# Incident

In the early 1960s, drafting her first novel at night after her job as a copywriter ended for the day, Didion, over a number of years, worked on scenes for the book in no deliberate order of sequence; taping pages together and pinning these over the walls of her apartment, later selecting at random which particular scene to rewrite. Her following novel published in 1970, *Play It As It Lays*, was constructed in similar fashion, beginning, as she notes, with a picture in her mind from a scene she witnessed: a young woman with long hair and a short white halter dress walking through a Las Vegas hotel casino at one in the morning, en route to collect a waiting phone call.

Naming this stranger-as-functionary Maria, the protagonist of the incipient novel, Didion thought she could be a model, getting a divorce, going through grief: “I watch her because I have heard her paged, and recognize her name”, Didion remarks in an interview, “a minor actress I see around Los Angeles from time to time...once in a gynecologist’s office in the Beverly Hills Clinic, but have never met. I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this?”

With this brief observation a perfunctory prompt, she begins the book with no conception of character nor plot but two pictures—the actress, and white, empty space—disclosing no objective other than to suggest a book in which “anything that happened would happen off the page”, a blank form upon which the reader would have to “bring his or her own bad dreams”. The secondary intention was to write a novel “so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it...so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all”.

Indeed, the novel is a mode of *cinéma vérité* comprised of spliced vignettes, flashing images and terse, visually alert scenes ordered in an at times jarring sequence as though a narrative comprised of photographs mailed as fragments of epistolary correspondence, suggesting a dormant, more sinister and plenary plot behind the scenes. The heroine, or the victim, or both, directionless and numbing out, obsessively drives the freeways of the city in her yellow Corvette as an act of avoidance and amnesia, both attempting to escape, and circling, her fate. A car and an endless freeway might infer freedom, but, as we observe, she has nowhere to go. Maria, the traumatized and dissociated ingénue prototype for the fall-out of the '60s and the existential malaise of the ensuing decade—the detached tone of Didion’s locution not only her stylistic cadence but perhaps evincing her own particular politics—is self-destructive and only vaguely interested in the mechanics of her own life, as disclosed by her emotionally anesthetized role in the novel.

The book opens at a psychiatric institute where Maria is in recovery from a mental breakdown. There, she recounts her previous life through distorted flashbacks that shift from first to third person, ordered in a dream-like logic. Disrupting the security of order is a logic of trauma, which dislodges the arrangement of memories in the way one shuffles a pack of cards. As the title of the novel suggests, Maria's moral architecture, if she possesses such a thing, is that of a remorseless, fated imperative to play things as they are, not as they were, or might be. For Maria there is only the present—no past, no future, just the immutable now. *Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut.*

Outwardly bordering on non-verbal, and indifferent if not, with good reason, hostile, to those around her, Maria's roaming inner monologue reconciles both the narrative structure and arrangement of images; reticent and askew short takes that gesture at abject glamor playing at beauty, which yet insists upon revealing the corrupt emptiness just below the veneer. Starring a pathologically inane cast of film producers and directors and aspiring starlets and bored wives all uttering meaningless pronouncements and the banal but ebullient patois of the Hollywood bourgeoisie—not quite the elite— Maria orbits a tableau of ennui: parties with awful people, breakfast on the hotel balcony, hungover under a particularly violent sunlight, glittering swimming pools, a slamming car door. Haunted by the figure of her incarcerated daughter who suffers from some 'aberrant chemical in her brain', she drinks coke and drives, hoping to annihilate the present and its memories of the past, of betrayals, of the abortion clinic and her weeks of bleeding...dark sunglasses and chiffon scarves...images and words colored by romance but entirely delusional. The dream of that era, as it were, is over—thankfully. What remains is the milieu of dread running as an undercurrent; the spirit of the time which holds fast.

For Kierkegaard, dread, or anxiety, is 'unfocused fear'. He illustrates this displacement with the image of a man looking over the edge of a building or precipice who at once feels both the sense of falling and the impulse to throw himself over. It is the sense of possibility, both temporal and eternal, he argues, that shapes dread, which he names our "dizziness of freedom". To script a scene, to take a photograph is, then, an uncertain act of dread; to seize what cannot be seized, which is time, and to arrange it in some sequence that attempts to cohere this dichotomy. An unsettling sensibility of dread presides in the self-surveillance of Porteous's photographs: a disembodied hand on a car door, a woman, herself, caught running, seen

from above, her pace outrunning the focus of the camera, outrunning time and caught in the tension between still life and self-portraiture. A narrative of motion. In the negation of totality, the viewer sees only a partial frame; description by omission which invokes an unnerving foreshadowing of the uncanny or of some climactic moment of drama out of frame—off the page. A pause in chronology and a cut to another scene. A fragment of a memory—the briefest exchange of a glance at a party—might comprise the entire life of a person.

Style is fate, wrote Hardwick, whose *Sleepless Nights* complicates genres of fiction and autobiography and 'reports by inventing and invents by reporting'. In this, she explores our agency over what we remember, the means by which we select those memories and yet still those memories we falsify to ourselves. The book amounts to a work of negative capability which 'haunts as much as by what it leaves out as by what it contains'. "The arrangement was the meaning", Didion remarks, a logic applicable to both the sentence and the object captured by the camera.

Porteous, who has in the past paid someone to surreptitiously follow and photograph her, is a cartographer of the self as a screen even as she averts composing a 'complete' picture and instead offers reflexive, indistinct moments that form an indeterminate narrative, which, in this instance, integrates Benjamin's methodological insistence that under capitalist modernity totality must yield to the fragment in order to reveal the whole. Alert to the double power in things—their material form and their essence—Benjamin (who loved detective novels) employed indexical montage in his literary approach. This impulse corresponds with the means by which one might read the poetic strategies inherent in Porteous's pictures: classical in composition yet operating as a structural constellation of suggestive, associative ideas and scenes and codes wrenched from linear interpretation that, rather than functioning as cryptic images to decode, are instead encoded with a historical consciousness. A dialectic at once both ambiguous and precise.

In an email conversation, Porteous recounts Flusser's comparison of photography to that of playing chess. "Just as they play with chess-pieces", he writes, "photographers play with the camera...yet photographers do not play with their plaything, but against it". Personally, I feel as though I'm back in Tudor Mansion, detective notes in hand playing *Cluedo*, alongside chess, my childhood obsessions, when I consider Porteous's photographs (winning strategy: Miss Scarlett / Candlestick or Rope / Billiard Room). Photography, according to Flusser, is 'an act of phenomenological doubt' insofar as it is an interpretive tradition of

consciousness. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* he eschews the notion of linear causality. By extension, he describes the space and time specific to the image as a world of magic, “structurally different from that of the linear world of history in which everything has causes and will have consequences...thus it is wrong to look for ‘frozen events’ in images. Rather, they replace events by states of things and translate them into scenes”.

Can one erase memory by reordering it? I like to think so. Entire selves fashioned within the context of past relationships recede into a dossier of episodic scenes that at times magically appear and alter the present, if only in glimpses. Memories once charged with blood red desire now fade into a pale vermilion. On style and mood, the tenor of Porteous’s photographs is cool and refined like the steel and glass of a hotel room in a modern metropolis, and warm like expensive angora in fawn. The muted and emotionally adroit color palette of her photographs is only occasionally interrupted by the full pigment of a primary color, which, with its bright disclosure, suggests the shock of memory trespassing into the now. In this I’m reminded of a classic filmic exposition of non-linear memory, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which I recently revisited, curious as to how it had aged. I was struck by the colors of Clementine’s hair and its figurative function in accordance with my conjecture here—a vestigial detail in an otherwise subdued, winter-grey timbre. Here, the shock of bright color advances the idea that a memory can continue to dazzle, even as it lives in the fading old world. Some memories remain as electric as blue Gatorade.

In the film is a scene which shows a scan of the brain lighting up with green dots as it undergoes scanning throughout the memory-erasing process. This recalls Porteous’s estranged photograph of an x-ray of her teeth, an image considered a trusted photographic document; understood as credible for its technical acuity and implication of truth, but one that suggests an undisclosed trauma at hand, thus providing only a partial truth. We believe in such images because of their formality and the medical lexicon in which they reside. In the film, the shot of the brain scan then cuts to a sequence of memories deleting from the hard drive of the mind. Like Porteous’s photographic juxtapositions of the assumed truth of detail (the x-ray) and those photographs oriented toward narrative in which this truth resides (still-life, the side of a car door) there is the problematic of truth and invention—the gaps in the narrative.

Stills: A young woman in blue jeans, dark hair obscuring her face, mid-step, zipping a

bag. Now snapped from behind, walking the same city street, past the same marble building, a blur, headed someplace—home? in haste. Each are open, interpretative images to which I could ascribe a variegation of narratives and in which I, the passive observer, am assigned the unsettling role of voyeur. A photo of Porteous as a young girl with a deep gash sliced into the corner of her mouth, eyes rimmed in tears and that unmistakable hue of hospital-blue in the background. Papped clutching a brown paper bag of McDonalds, disheveled post-club hair, a low cut dress, straw to her mouth, eyes unaware of the camera, her stare askance. A near-naked selfie that resists being visually understood as such insofar as the many degrees of remove—the reflexive surface of the camera lens, and the mirror—which functions not as a reflection but a window—empties the photo of erotic sensuality. Instead, the self-portrait becomes a technical image in its composed precision and restraint. As in the exacting gestures of the muscular ballet dancer there is a kind of grace expressed in the portrait yet the photograph is, still, psychologically unnerving. Not only due to the disorientating angle of the camera lens and the set of referents and visual cues in which I read the image, it’s partly, too, the blunted palette of the photograph that vacates the image of overt sexuality. The tan neutrals, various shades of grey and gunmetal blue and Ferrero-Rocher gold in Porteous’s photographs invoke a professional-class realism that visually recalls those classic mid ‘70s and ‘80s female-narrative driven films which delineate the vulnerability, menacing dread and precarity for women—particularly working women—in the aggressive male-dominated corporate world.

On voyeurism and crime scenes and plotted characters and *Cluedo* and the requisite notepad endowed to each player to keep track of one’s suspicions, the arrested suspense and both visual and narrative cues employed in Porteous’s work summons the psychological tension of Hitchcock and De Palma—the latter indebted to the former, naturally. De Palma’s 1973 homage to Hitchcock, *Sisters*, is a prompt never far from my mind when I regard Porteous’s oeuvre. Particularly my favorite photograph: the elegant *40 denier (looking for corporate womenswear)* from 2018. The composition displays a lifted, semi-sheer-stockinged leg which bends outward from the corner of the frame, foot perched on an off-white ledge, a balustrade fashioned on the ledge the sole architectural detail of the interior scene. The woman’s leg is partially obscured by the drape of a black skirt, revealing her calf. In a dark teal shirt, her arm reaches toward her foot, as though adjusting the fabric of the stocking. A gold watch

just barely in focus grazes her wrist.

Formally classical, subtly erotic, the image holds as a distilled moment in a charged atmosphere wherein one senses the air could be cut with a knife. By way of such suspense and visual imputation the figure paraphrases those stylish city women in such aforementioned films whose lives, as a young girl,

I longed to live—as a writer, a journalist, some kind of academic or nondescript businesswoman in a white shirt, navy pinstripe mini skirt, linen suiting, gold jewelry, sheer stockings, beige pointed heels.

Yet there is an ambient terror percolating the image. The viewer, cast as silent voyeur in a psychological thriller, or perhaps melodrama, glimpses an intimate moment that feels stolen. The voyeur adopts the macabre role of the thief, or the killer about to inflict a deathly blow on the unsuspecting victim. Prima facie the photograph is classical, yes, but while belonging inside a set of cultural and historical referents the image also dislodges its set of particulars. The photograph is itself a cultural object, which is to say an informed object, thus in this respect functions as a seductive lever on memory, while contemporaneously offering myriad interpretations and narrative excursions.

Like Hitchcock, De Palma employed the visual technique of the split-screen as a blueprint for suspense and, like *Rear Window*, *Psycho*, and so forth, so too does *Sisters* make a voyeur of those watching by offering a partial view of the film as seen through the windows of New York City apartment buildings, mirrors, binoculars. And yet, despite the characters' spying on one another the case of the murder goes amiss—a classic case of looking, but not seeing.

A film which surveys entangled and bifurcated feminine dualities, the origin story holds that *Sisters* was inspired by a 1966 article in *Life* magazine about a pair of Moscow sisters and conjoined twins. De Palma is said to have been struck by a photograph wherein one possessed a cheerful disposition and the other a sinister demeanor. From this prompt he crafted a filmic disquisition which examines a fissure between two sisters who are to the other an extrasensory counterpart. This inner doubling is illuminated by the logic of the split screen which illustrates not only split personalities, but multiple perspectives both subjective and objective, and the scads of

truths to uncover as the film progresses.

By extension, the unstable narrative and camera techniques advance the proposition that it is those disparate fragments that make the whole. Ultimately, the journalist who witnesses the crime from her apartment is tasked with finding the killer through her gathering of connective material from which to assemble a linear structure of evidential proof.

The film is one sustained note of suspense and, as in Porteous's work, creates a distinct pace, holds a sharp pitch on a resounding key. In its subtle pronouncement it is a tone both bound by and transcending the moment. Porteous's photographs have altered temporal aesthetic conditions to such an extent that her work is shorthand for a particular tone for which I don't yet have a word, but it is unmistakable. In a certain light, in a certain mirror, I see her work in my face, in the flick of a gaze. I see it when a woman runs faster than can be caught down on the street outside my apartment window. In my face glanced in the smeared wing mirror of the car. I see it as I peel off my deeply dated yet, for a certain sect, always fashionable, flesh-toned stockings. Perhaps this makes her work post-historic—momentary and fleeting, yet belonging to a deep lineage of accumulated references.

One photograph can hold and synthesize an entire history in a moment, of a time—across policy, economics, philosophy, literature, fashion—and capture a zeitgeist in its frame. It can trigger an entire consciousness inside its composition and provide a visual summary of the era in which it was made, and those principal concerns of that ghost, who sometimes appears, holding the lens. Fixing our gaze outward, whatever line one scripts about the world, whatever image one captures for a moment, whatever films we compose, whatever claims and suppositions we devise within our accumulation and arrangement of words and pictures we are, after all, piece by piece, only writing ourselves.

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