

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Jesse Thorn	Host	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p>It's <i>Bullseye</i>. I'm Jesse Thorn. Just before Christmas this past year, the writer Joan Didion died. She was 87. Didion rose to fame for her journalism. She immersed herself in stories. In the late '60s, she broke through with <i>Slouching Towards Bethlehem</i>. In her career, she covered all kinds of different stuff: the counterculture war, immigration. She also wrote a handful of acclaimed novels and some similarly acclaimed memoirs. A couple of weeks ago, <i>The New Yorker's</i> Hilton Als wrote of Didion, "Her genius—and it was genius—lay in her ability to combine the specific and the sweeping in a single paragraph. To understand that the details of why we hurt and alienate one another based on skin color, sex, class, fame, or politics are also what make us American."</p> <p>I never got to interview Didion. She became a pretty private person in her last years. But in 2017, there was a documentary about her. The film is called <i>Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold</i>. It's an intimate look at Didion's writing and her personal life. It paints a portrait of a person committed to their craft absolutely—someone who lived a life beset by tragedy. In 2003, Didion's husband, John Dunne, died of a heart attack. Not long after, she lost her daughter. The documentary was directed by Griffin Dunne, her nephew. Griffin Dunne is also an actor. He was in <i>My Girl</i>, the Martin Scorsese film <i>After Hours</i>, the TV show <i>This is Us</i>, among others.</p> <p>I talked with Griffin Dunne about <i>Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold</i> when it came out. Here's a little bit from the film. In this clip, Didion is reading from her book <i>The Year of Magical Thinking</i>, which is about the loss of her husband.</p>
00:01:57	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:58	Clip	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Gentle, melancholy piano.
00:02:14	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:15	Jesse	Host	Griffin Dunne, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It's great to have you on the show.
00:02:17	Griffin Dunne	Guest	Thanks, Jesse. Good to be here.
00:02:19	Jesse	Host	Were you scared to make a documentary about your aunt?
00:02:23	Griffin	Guest	Uh, yeah. I guess I did feel this incredible burden from the moment she said, "Yeah, okay," when I asked if she'd let me make a doc. The gravity of what I had taken on hit. You know? It was—there was a lot to be, you know, concerned and worried. And scared is just as good a word. You know. I grew up knowing—as so many know—that this is the importance that she has in the world and the intense passion and ownership so many of her readers have about

her work. And she's been such an influence on so many people. You know, from—whether they become a writer or where they live or you know, benchmarks in their lives. They can—they can equate to what they were reading of hers.

So, I hope to deliver something that would both honor her work and show her fans and people who didn't know anything about her what—you know, what she's like in her home and how much she laughs and is—and is engaged, despite the gravitas and heaviness of her observations about America and its darkest periods. That she is actually—you know, my Aunt Joan, who I grew up with hearing laughing all the time.

00:03:52 Jesse Host

I mean, one of the things that would scare me about making this movie—and it's also an incredible opportunity in making this movie—is that your aunt, Joan Didion, has—you know, in attaining icon status, one of the odd things about that is that icons are necessarily abstracted. You know? They're reduced to a few lines. And your aunt had become like almost as much an object of like aesthetic admiration—like visual aesthetic admiration—as anything else.

*[Griffin agrees.]*

So, this brilliant, brilliant writer—one of the greatest of her generation—ran the risk of being the beautifully cool woman in the big sunglasses holding a cigarette in these famous images of her, in the 1960s and '70s.

00:04:51 Griffin Guest

Yeah. You know, and I've always thought that one of the reasons that her—that she gained such readership at that period was that the photographs—those Julian Wasser photos of her standing in front of the Stingray, that's what drove people to the bookstore. They wanted to know who that woman was. What was she writing about? What was she like?

You know, there was a section in the—in the movie that didn't end up making it that kind of addressed her image. You know, how conscious she was about it and how conscious other people were about it. And we interviewed Phoebe Philo, who is the marketing director at Céline, who was the woman that had the idea of putting Joan in a—in a Céline ad, a fashion ad. You know. And it was enormously successful and unusual to have an 80-year-old woman in the big sunglasses promoting sunglasses or shoes. I don't know what they were selling, but it—whatever it is, it really caught on and sold very well. She's always represented, visually, something very important to people.

00:06:12 Jesse Host

But I mean, that's a—that is both a gift to you and a challenge. I mean, the gift is that there are these beautiful images to show. And your aunt remains very beautiful. And you know, you're making a movie. You're looking at things.

00:06:25 Griffin Guest

Yeah. A visual medium.

00:06:27 Jesse Host

On the other hand, you have to think about well, how do I let this—you know—specifically non-visual art be represented in this—you know, when I'm surrounded by all these incredibly powerful images?

00:06:44 Griffin Guest

Uh, yeah, that was—that was certainly—that was certainly the challenge. You know. Her—you know, and her writing—that was

always the intent, was to also visualize her prose. You know? And the things that she writes about. You know, from *Slouching to Center Will Not Hold*, there are these incredible images of families falling apart and boards of lost and missing children that she talks about. And so, putting the—putting the pictures to her writing and putting her from that time—from the pictures taken at that time—they blended very well together. It was sort of, you know—making that collage, fabric kind of tapestry was really the most fun in the editorial process.

00:07:39	Jesse	Host	We're taking a break. We'll be back in just a second. It's <i>Bullseye</i> from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:07:46	Music	Transition	Relaxed, chiming synth.
00:07:51	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Griffin Dunne, director of the documentary <i>Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold</i> . Joan Didion died last month. She was 87. Let's get back into it.

Was part of why you wanted to tell this story about your aunt that you and she share—particularly in light of her more recent books, which have been about grieving—that you and she share a kind of survivorship status in this, you know, big, exciting family? That—you know, you—there are further generations of your family, but you and she are sort of—

00:08:41	Griffin	Guest	The last two standing in a way.
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*[Jesse affirms.]*

Yeah. I wouldn't say—I was—I was very aware of that. But that wasn't really the reason for making the movie. But I was—you know. You know, when John died, my father kind of was sort of next in line to be like John. And then when he died, then I was. You know. I have dinner with, you know, her—she has a group of friends, of which—you know. And myself. All of us have dinner with her—you know—maybe once or twice a week. And she has—you know—people over all the time. So, I—long before I'd ever thought of a—of the documentary, I was just sort of aware of, gosh, how I fit through attrition into her life.

What really motivated me was that I didn't realize there'd never been a documentary about her. And I kind of felt—without getting too kind of heavy about it—I thought because of, you know, this is what I do, is make movies—while not documentaries necessarily. I felt obligated to ask and to make it, because I knew—I knew besides being a very personal experience for me, I also knew that there was a real hunger for this. That there was like a—that this would be something people would really, really wanna see. Which has borne itself out. And you know, we had a—the way I got some of the money was through a Kickstarter campaign. And the campaign had a trailer and to raise money—well, we raised money like by lunch on our first day. And then the comments and the attention of the press from all over the world was huge. I'd never seen anything like it.

So, I kind of felt like I was providing a service as a well. You know, getting really—being the only person able to give what a lot of people really wanted to see.

00:10:53	Jesse	Host	I wanna play a clip from the movie. And my guest is Griffin Dunne. He's directed a new documentary called <i>The Center Will Not Hold</i> about his aunt, Joan Didion. And one of the defining works of her career has been a piece that became a book, called <i>Slouching Towards Bethlehem</i> . It's about—as you described, Griffin—the kind of human realities of the abstract ideas about hippiedom. And the sort of broader social meaning. And there is this scene in the piece that's about Joan Didion going to this apartment in San Francisco. She sees this little girl wearing white slipstick, licking her lips, five years old. And she's on acid.
00:11:47	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:11:49	Clip	Clip	<b>Griffin:</b> What was it like to be a journalist in the room when you saw the little kid on acid?
			<b>Joan:</b> Well, it was... Let me tell you, it was gold. I mean, that's the long and the short of it, is you live for moments like that—if you're doing a piece. Good or bad.
00:12:19	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:12:20	Jesse	Host	That might be the most intense—
00:12:21	Griffin	Guest	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> It really is. I'd never—it's the most amazing moment in the movie. I never tire of looking at it. To me, that line is just pure Joan. That says everything—when I saw that moment happen, I saw the structure of the film. I saw the character. Kind of how the balance goes from family to the work. And because that time, her daughter, Quintana, was two and a half years old. She was going to San Francisco for weeks at a time on assignment. And she missed her daughter terribly. So, she missed her daughter terribly and then see a five-year-old be in this horrific situation and you think she's going to say—you know, what was it like? “Well, it was—” And you think she's going to say, “The most horrible thing I ever saw. As a mother, I feel so deeply.”
			No, she says, “It was gold.” She can draw the line between how she sees the world as a journalist and how she feels things as a mother. And that's how it's played out all her life. You know. When—so, she can write a book like <i>Year of Magical Thinking</i> . She can write about it to investigate her own grief as a wife and as a mother who's in loss, in grief. But she can write about it like a reporter. That's her balance and that's the balance I tried to create in the movie, as well.
00:13:51	Jesse	Host	Was it difficult to ask your aunt about the deaths of your uncle and cousin? Which are—you know, central to her work and central to the film?
00:14:03	Griffin	Guest	Yeah, yeah. Very much. I think in a way—in a way, I had a harder time asking than she did answering. I think both were tough, but <i>[sighs]</i> I felt—you know, making her have to relive it and talk about it. But at the same time, you know, she's a journalist and is being interviewed and she knows of course I'm gonna ask that and probably would not have any respect for me if I didn't—you know—go there. So, she was—while it was very tough, there'd be also moments in the silences where she'd—you know, look up and go, you know, “Keep going. Bring it on. I know where you're going.”
			So, I guess in a funny way, she made it—you know, easier. But it was extremely difficult.

00:15:04	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with Griffin Dunne after a quick break. Don't go anywhere. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:15:12	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Upbeat, fun music.
			<b>Lisa Hanawalt:</b> I'm Lisa Hanawalt.
			<b>Emily Heller:</b> And I'm Emily Heller.
			<b>Lisa:</b> Nine years ago, we started a podcast to try and learn something new every episode.
			<b>Emily:</b> Things have gone a little off the rails since then. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Tune in to hear about:
			<b>Lisa:</b> Low stakes neighborhood drama.
			<b>Emily:</b> Gardening!
			<b>Lisa:</b> The sordid, nasty underbelly of the horse girl lifestyle.
			<b>Emily:</b> Hot sauce!
			<b>Lisa:</b> Addiction to TV and sweaty takes on celebrity culture.
			<b>Emily:</b> And the weirdest, grossest stuff you can find on Wikipedia.org.
			<b>Lisa:</b> We'll read all of it no matter how gross. <i>[Laughs.]</i> There's something for everyone on our podcast, Baby Geniuses!
			<b>Emily:</b> Hosted by us, two horny adult idiots.
			<b>Lisa:</b> Hang out with us as we try and fail to retain any knowledge at all.
			<b>Emily:</b> Every other week on Maximum Fuuuun.
			<b>Music:</b> <i>Baby geniuses, tell us something we don't know!</i>
			<i>[Music ends.]</i>
00:15:55	Music	Transition	Thumpy rock music.
00:15:59	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is actor and director Griffin Dunne. He made the film <i>Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold</i> about his aunt. Didion died last month at 87. Let's get back into it.
			I wanna talk—before we're out of time—with you a little bit about your acting career.
			<i>[Griffin affirms.]</i>
			You studied with three— <u>three</u> —of the most important acting teachers of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century. You were at The Neighborhood Playhouse during the very end of Sanford Meisner's career. You studied with Uta Hagen. And in Los Angeles, you studied with Stella Adler.

*[Griffin confirms.]*

Those are three teachers, each of whom has a very different perspective on acting. So, starting with Sanford Meisner, with whom you studied—and also with who’s proteges you’d studied. ‘Cause I think he was—it was very late in his life. What did you learn about acting from him?

00:17:08 Griffin Guest

Before I went to The Neighborhood Playhouse, I had known who Sanford Meisner was and I’d read a book about the group theatre that Harold Clurman had written. And I knew the roots from Stanislavski. So, I knew I was going to—oh! And then on top of that, my father had also briefly studied with Sanford Meisner. He originally wanted to be an actor or a movie star, as he said.

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

And Sanford said, “You’ll never make it as a movie star. You’re too short.” And Dad took him at his word and quit acting. So, I knew this was the guy who told my dad he was too short to be an actor. And I’m not that much taller.

00:17:53 Jesse Host

*[They laugh.]*

I—I—I wanna—I wanna—I wanna retroactively let your father know, in case he’s listening from heaven, that I know from my own acting career as a very tall person that while it is great in the world to be tall, it does not particularly help on camera. *[Chuckles.]*

00:18:13 Griffin Guest

Yeah, yeah. It’s not a shoe-in.

00:18:15 Jesse Host

It’s like the one place *[laughing]* where it’s not worth anything!

00:18:18 Griffin Guest

No, actually—you know, Alan Ladd didn’t need that height. They just—that’s what they had—

00:18:24 Jesse Host

Tom Cruise isn’t sweating it.

00:18:25 Griffin Guest

Absolutely! That’s what they got those boxes for, to stand on. But so, when I got there it was bad for me and I know worse for him, but it was still bad for me that Mr. Meisner’s larynx was removed shortly before I arrived. So, he was speaking *[voice becoming strangled]* through one of those machines, you know? It was very monotone. *[Returning to his usual voice.]* And it was—you know—very... it was really weird, ‘cause I’d seen stuff of him, you know, energetically getting involved in scenes with other actors, with the other actors and everything.

So, when I got there, it was—I don’t wanna do the voice. It’ll sound like I’m making fun of it. But it was—it was—to be getting notes as if by a computerized machine. I thought, “Ah, I just missed it.” You know? “If I’d just got here a year earlier, then I’d really get the Sanford Meisner experience.”

00:19:27 Jesse Host

That’s a really like 20—I don’t know how old you were. I’m gonna say 20.

*[Griffin affirms.]*

You know, that’s—yeah, so that’s a teenage—that’s a teenage actor’s perspective on a man’s life leaving him.

00:19:38 Griffin Guest

Oh, without a doubt! ‘Cause I’m making it all—but still an actor who’s gonna be around, ‘cause I’m making it all about me. So, I did

00:19:58 Jesse Host however get the full—the full head-on experience with Uta Hagen, who was truly terrifying. And, you know—  
And she—for anyone who doesn't immediately recognize her name, she among other things wrote the book *Respect for Acting*, which is probably the first—the first book that they hand you in any acting school.

[Griffin confirms.]

00:20:21 Griffin Guest And was—you know—an immensely legendary teacher into the—into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She only died 10 or 12 years ago.  
Exactly. And she—and on Broadway, she was the very first Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. And her method was still the most effective and the most helpful that I've known to this day. But she had a—she was tough, tough, tough. And what I—what I learned was the worst thing that could happen would be if she didn't yell at you. 'Cause it meant she didn't really care. And the most cutting thing I ever saw happen was two actors in a scene that clearly wasn't going very well. She just didn't even take the time and she just went, "Oh, okay, darlings. Oh, that was wonderful. Thank you. Who's up?" And you could just feel a chill. And those—I don't know where those two young actors are today, but that was a bad day for them.

But she—you know, if she—it was like that kind of old school thing where, "I like you so much, I believe in you so much, I'm gonna torture you so that you can withstand all the hurt you're gonna face once you leave this classroom and go out in the professional world." And then Stella [chuckles]—Stella, I had for one summer in Los Angeles. She—she was very—you know, she was very helpful with me when I did a real serious scene. But when she'd get excited about something, she would hold onto her dress—the blouse that she had on—and she'd go, "You gotta feel it from your heart!" And she'd pull down her hands holding onto her dress and expose her breasts for one shocking brief moment and then pull the dress back up. And the cast would go [gasps].

But that would be like, "It's gotta come from there!" So, I love her.

[They chuckle.]

00:22:16 Jesse Host Well, Griffin Dunne, I've used more of your time than had been allotted to me, so thank you so much for making the time to come and be on *Bullseye*.

00:22:25 Griffin Guest Thank you, Jesse.

00:22:27 Jesse Host Griffin Dunne from 2017. His beautiful documentary is called *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*. It's streaming on Netflix now.  
Chiming synth.

00:22:37 Music Transition

00:22:38 Jesse Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where right at this very moment, a man is in my crawlspace with some all-weather, indoor-outdoor ethernet cabling, ready to connect this very computer that I'm talking you on directly to the internet. So, I don't have to worry about dumb, old Wi-Fi.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is “Huddle Formation” recorded by the group The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it with us.

You can also keep up with our show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post our stuff in all those places as well as at [NPR.org](http://NPR.org). I think that’s about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:23:41    Promo                    Promo

**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*