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**‘ANOTHER CLUE FOR YOU ALL’:  
THE HYSTERICAL REALISM OF THE ‘PAUL IS  
DEAD’ CONSPIRACY THEORY IN THE GOLDEN AGE  
OF PARANOIA**

*Tereza Walsbergerová*

**Abstract**

When a rumor spread in 1969, that Paul McCartney had died and been replaced by a double, American Beatlemania fans scrambled to examine every album in search of death clues.’ This paper examines the *Paul Is Dead* conspiracy theory by building on studies of the cult of celebrity, James Wood’s concept of hysterical realism, Emily Apter’s concept of “oneworldedness”, and Timothy Melley’s theory of “agency panic.” It ultimately argues that our tendency to bury celebrities and create alternate (paranoid) narratives about them stems not only from our rejection of consensus reality but also our simultaneous desire to mythologize our idols to seek comfort in eras of social uncertainty.

**Keywords**

Hysterical realism, agency panic, oneworldedness, cult of celebrity, death, celebrity death conspiracies, conspiracy theories, paranoia, the condition of postmodernity, doubles, Beatlemania, Paul McCartney, The Beatles

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**1. The Spectacle of Celebrity Death**

AS a phenomenon in which the cult of celebrity intersects with the uncanniness of death, celebrity death has the power to fascinate, affect, and even – in extreme cases – *mobilize* the public. More importantly, as a spectacle, celebrity death occupies a unique place in pop culture, because it provides an opportunity for the public to participate in the narratives of celebrities, something that would otherwise not be possible. Daniel Harris argues that what lies beneath our fascination with celebrity death are in fact our unconscious “yearnings for equality” (Harris 2011, 889). Just like great rulers, “celebrities also have two bodies, one public, one private” (ibid., 884). The public (ceremonial) body belongs to the public and essentially represents a two-dimensional commodity rather than a four-dimensional person. It is the unreachable and un-touchable ideal that dwells beyond and above the general public. These qualities

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make it the perfect object of worship. The private (physical) body then *only* belongs to the celebrity. Although this body technically exists on the same plane as the bodies of the general public, and thus cannot be worshipped in the same way that the ceremonial body can, it still represents an aspect of the celebrity that is hidden away from the public and is thus also unreachable. Consequently, the public desperately craves to 'own' both bodies in order to fully participate in that celebrity's narrative. When celebrities die, their ceremonial and private bodies merge into one. This allows the public to fulfill that fantasy. Harris argues that the same equalization happens in case of celebrity death conspiracy theories, as those narratives fulfil the democratic fantasy in their own way:

In order to counteract the demeaning implications of star worship, we fabricate an implausible narrative, that celebrities are so exhausted by the attentions of the media and their meddlesome fans that they mastermind their own escape in a complex scheme that allows them to break free from the prison of fame and lead normal lives, incognito. We pretend that they detest the limelight, that they regret the paths that they have chosen, and long for nothing so much as the homely anonymity of simple souls like us. (ibid., 889)

Indeed, conspiracy theories that construct a narrative in which celebrities fake their own death in order to 'lead a normal life' represent the public's desire for equality. While in this case the bodies have not merged together, the celebrity has killed its public (ceremonial) body and hidden its private (physical) body away somewhere amongst the general public, effectively becoming our equal.

However, this theory does not and cannot apply to the opposite scenario in which the celebrities dies but their death is covered up through the public use of a double (thus they 'live on'). This paper focuses on this second kind of celebrity death conspiracy theory, arguing that its subscribers opt to disregard (sacrifice) the private (physical) body of the celebrity to make possible the mythologizing of the ceremonial body. The narratives around celebrity death conspiracy theories are exaggerated, illogical, and almost farcical in nature, constructed as a postmodern form of enshrinement meant to provide comfort in times of social uncertainty, and as such can be associated with James Wood's 2000 concept of "hysterical realism." This concept describes narratives with exactly this kind of reality – one that has been stretched out and overworked, containing cartoonish, empty characters who only end up being of secondary importance to the central plot. Although it was originally developed by Wood to describe a new tendency in postmodern literary works, it can also be applied to other forms of narratives – including conspiracy theories. The 1969 celebrity death conspiracy theory about Paul McCartney – known as "Paul Is Dead" (PID)

– will be the case study for this article. I argue that PID is the epitome of an American postmodern celebrity enshrinement, as its subscribers ‘sacrifice’ McCartney’s physical body to not only enshrine his 1966 ceremonial body (to retain the spirit of Beatlemania as a positive teenage rebellion movement of the early 1960s), but also to mythologize that body through a construction of a hysterically realist postmodern narrative which provides comfort to America during “the golden age of paranoia” (Wheen 2009) of the 1960s and 1970s.

## 2. Thank You Girl (For Loving Me)

As with any conspiracy theory, it is difficult to identify the origin of PID. Several instances seem to be the main sources of the hysteria. The first public mention of the rumor is a 17 September 1969 *Drake Times-Delphic* article by Tim Harper titled “Is Beatle Paul McCartney Dead?” In this article, Harper ponders the rumor, stating that “Lately on campus there has been much conjecturing on the present state of Beatle Paul McCartney” (Harper 1969, 1). Still, the rumor began to snowball. Only a month later, on 12 October 1969 (Patterson 1994, 5) Russ Gibbs – a WKNR-FM radio DJ at the University of Michigan – received a phone call from an upset Beatles fan who was worried that Paul McCartney had indeed died. The story caught the attention of another student of the same university, Frederick LaBour, who decided to turn this idea into an article that was published in *The Michigan Daily* on October 14. This article, titled “McCartney Dead; New Evidence Brought to Light,” represents a comprehensive write-up of the conspiracy theory according to which Paul McCartney had been “killed in early November 1966 after leaving EMI recording studios tired, sad and dejected” (LaBour 1969, 2). It also contains a detailed analysis of the so-called “death clues,” which were said to have been put into Beatles songs by the other members to alert fans to this conspiracy. The theory became incredibly popular and – fueled by the WMCA-AM DJ Alex Bennett (Patterson 1994, 5) – soon found its way into the national press. In a more recent interview with Alan Glenn for *Michigan Today*, LaBour recalls that the theory was “quoted extensively everywhere” and had reached both coasts fast (Glenn 2009).

It is not difficult to deduce how this story gained this kind of momentum so fast, given the immense power of Beatlemania, a power that was so enormous in America that some go as far as calling it a “social movement” (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs 1992, 85). I propose that in the peak American Beatlemania years (1964–1966), the ceremonial bodies of Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, and Starr existed

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solely for the pleasure of the fans. These are the years in which the group released “I Want to Hold *Your* Hand,” “Thank *You* Girl,” “P. S. I Love *You*,” and “I Need *You*” – songs specifically tailored to profit off of the desire of the audience to own and consume the ceremonial bodies of the group as a commodity. According to Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, “In one city, someone got a hold of the hotel pillowcases that had purportedly been used by the Beatles, cut them into 160,000 tiny squares, mounted them on certificates, and sold them for \$1 a piece” (ibid., 86). This incident perfectly illustrates the phenomenon.

The advent of Beatlemania in America had a social significance as well. According to Frontani, the fact that the Beatles became a phenomenon in the US during a time of sociocultural change significantly boosted their image as heralds of a new age. He states: “It was an America on the verge of events that would highlight divisions of age, race, gender, and class” (Frontani 2007, 2). Patterson also highlights the positive effect of the group on the depressed American society by stating:

The Beatles were the forerunners of [a] new experiment. Their tight harmonies and melodies helped combat the great loss encountered by a generation fostered on Camelot and untimely assassination of John Kennedy – the American President who represented the American dream of endless youth and embedded the growth of hope and opportunity for all. (Patterson 1994, 4)

Dale Ford – a contemporary of Beatlemania – sums up this attitude in Berman’s oral history of Beatlemania, *We’re Going to See the Beatles* by noting: “I don’t think I’ll ever enjoy anything as much as the early Beatles. It was so innocent, it wasn’t jaded, the music wasn’t cynical, it was just fun. It was pure fun” (Berman 2008, 216–17). On top of this, Beatlemania also represented a post-McCarthyian type of rebellion wherein the younger generation could stand up to the world of adults in the form of their parents and grandparents. As Patterson puts it: “The sixties generation desperately needed something to believe in” (Patterson 1994, 8). Essentially, the Beatles became a type of religion, and though it was a certain type of conformity, as Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs argue: “it was conformity to an imperative that overruled adult mores and even adult laws” (Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1992, 89).

Thus, in the minds and memories of Americans who came of age during this period, Beatlemania would always be associated with revival, revolution, excitement, and general positivity, though their parents would remember it as an age of mass hysteria akin to an “epidemic.” Indeed, as Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs also stress, Beatlemania was the first star-centered craze of its intensity and scale in America (ibid., 86), even surpassing excitement about such celebrities as Elvis

or Frank Sinatra. Young American girls were especially in danger of contracting this “illness” as their adoration of the Beatles became a part of their sexual maturation – they would “pee their pants,” faint, or even collapse (ibid., 87) from excitement at the concerts. McCartney was responsible for a major part of these afflictions as he was known during Beatlemania as the “cute Beatle,” which was established in their first movie, *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964).

### 3. Surrender to the Void

To circle back to the connection between Beatlemania and PID, it is necessary to highlight that the date of McCartney’s alleged death – November 1966 – coincides with a key middle point in the group’s history when they transitioned from their positive Beatlemania period to their more serious psychedelic period. The 1966 album *Revolver* exemplifies this era and is often seen as the turning point in the Beatles’ career. According to Reising, who refers to it as “revolutionary” and an “album of firsts” (2006, 112–13), it is the first example of the group intentionally voicing their political opinions through lyrics. It is also their first album to embrace the themes of death and morbidity (ibid., 115). The song “Tomorrow Never Knows” in particular heralds a major turn towards a new kind of music through both its experimental composition and existential storytelling. The lyrics “Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void” and “play the game ‘Existence’ to the end” (The Beatles 1966) in particular represent Lennon and McCartney’s preoccupation with one’s inner world and mortality which is a far cry from the cheerful altruistic lyrics of “Thank You Girl.”

These changes in style, and the turn from light to darkness, coupled with the Beatles’ announcement in 1966 that they were to stop touring, confused and sometimes even enraged fans. One of Berman’s Beatlemania interviewees, Ford, talks about being “disappointed” and “heartbroken” about the end of touring (Berman 2008, 216), while others describe the dwindling interest of their friends in the group as a direct consequence of these changes:

Debbie Levitt: I know there were a lot of fans back then that did let it go, and never followed it. Or if it wasn’t to their liking say, after ‘65 and couldn’t get into *Revolver*, just let it go by. (ibid., 218)

Wendi Tisland: You know what? I was upset at first. I didn’t really care for it. They were changing from the Beatles we knew, their appearances were changing, the music was changing, but I never wrote them off. (ibid., 220)

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All of these accounts only reinforce the image of the pre-*Revolver* 'Beatlemania Beatles' as the ultimate American Beatles (and – by association – the ultimate American McCartney), the group that came to America as the headliners of the so-called 'British Invasion' and took it by storm, capturing the hearts and minds of teenagers with the shake of their heads.

In other words, it was to be *this* image of the group and the man that would become enshrined and immortalized. Again, I argue that this is one of the reasons why PID subscribers situate McCartney's death to 1966 – the year that marked the end of the 'mop-top' Beatles. This change was reinforced in 1967 with the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. As Harper puts it: "*Sergeant Pepper* signified the 'death' of the old Beatles who made girls scream when they sang 'yeah yeah yeah!' The new Beatles blew grass and dropped acid, criticized religion, studied under Maharishi in India, and had a new sound" (Harper 1969, 1). Thus, it is not surprising that *Pepper* would become the quintessential PID album, with nearly all of the tracks containing the so-called 'death clues.'

#### **4. Killing Paul**

1969 was the year in which the PID theory was conceived, and the Beatles began to fall apart. Their official breakup on 10 April 1970 was then another event that largely upset the fans. Berman's interviewees describe it as "devastating" and "upsetting:"

Maryanne Laffin: I was devastated. It was like losing a parent after your parents get divorced. We had a fear that they wouldn't make music again as individuals. And we didn't want to lose that.

Barbara Boggiano: I remember being very, very upset when they broke up. It almost seemed inevitable, but something that was so magical like that . . . But at the time, it just looked like, how can this be? How can these four people come together and make such fabulous music, and how can they break up like this? (Berman 2008, 248)

Ultimately, it was the rift between McCartney and the rest of the group regarding management that sped up the process. McCartney, who was in deep depression during 1969 and 1970, spent most of his time on his farm in Scotland and limited his appearances in public, including the press. His seclusion may have prompted the original hoax as McCartney himself argues in John Neary's 1969 *LIFE* magazine interview: "Perhaps the rumor started because I haven't been much in the press lately . . . The people who are making up these rumors should look to themselves

a little more. There is not enough time in life. They should worry about themselves instead of worrying whether I am dead or not” (Neary 1969, 105). Based on Neary’s observations, the snow-ball effect of LaBour’s write-up was already unstoppable, however: “Large number of investigators went right to the core of the conundrum and called the Beatles’ firm in London, Apple, Ltd” (ibid., 105).

As can be seen, Beatlemaniacs all over the world – but specifically in America – opted to reject the consensus reality of the break-up as it symbolized the end of innocence, youth, and happiness in 1969. People needed a scapegoat. Some blamed Yoko Ono (Berman 2008, 249) as she was an easy and straightforward target, and a number of people opted to go the mythologization route and become subscribers of the PID conspiracy theory: Though “It was unimaginable that the American public easily accepted such an unfounded rumor” as Patterson points out, this is the same country and the same generation that has lived through a number of political scandals and witnessed a multitude of *actual* conspiracies: “We, as a generation, began to dispute what we were told. If a conspiracy hiding the facts of an American President’s murder existed, then it would not be out of the realm of possibility to suggest that the death of Paul McCartney could be hidden from the public” (Patterson 1994, 7). This kind of anxiety Patterson describes in his book is consistent with symptoms of the “condition of postmodernity,” which include certain “resignation to bottomless fragmentation” (Harvey 1989, 59). As Harvey also points out, “Time-space compression” – which is another symptom of this historical condition – “always exacts its toll on our capacity to grapple with the realities unfolding around us” (ibid., 306), so it makes sense that people choose to cling to realities that give them comfort.

This idea of needing and seeking comfort is consistent with Timothy Melley’s concept of “agency panic,” which is defined as “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful, external agents” (Melley 2000, vii). This generation was suffering from paranoia as a form of a post-traumatic stress disorder and if one considers the breakup of the Beatles yet another instance of cultural trauma for the country, it is no wonder that this trauma triggered a conspiracy theory that is still gaining subscribers to this day. Perhaps ironically, the creation of alternative narratives in the form of conspiracy theories is often the answer to this kind of psychological pain and cultural trauma. Someone who chooses to believe in a conspiracy theory is essentially fighting for their agency – again, to seek that comfort – by conforming to the concept of what Emily Apter calls “one-worldedness” and defines as “a delirious aesthetics of systematicity . . . the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise



that ‘everything is connected’” (Apter 2006, 366). As Patterson points out, “those fans filled with insecurity were only too eager to search for the clues” (Patterson 1994, 10). Clues, that would, indeed, prove that everything is connected. And so, McCartney’s body – and more specifically his physical body – became the sacrificial lamb that would bring on this relief and bring back the comforting nostalgia of Beatlemania in the form of a hysterically realist postmodern narrative that mythologizes McCartney’s 1966 ceremonial body.

## **5. Mythologizing Paul**

As is clear from the short amount of time that was necessary for PID to spread from America across the world, celebrity death conspiracy theories are capable of harnessing great power and thus hold a prominent place in popular culture. Ballinger defines a celebrity death conspiracy (referred to as CDC in his article) as “specific form of event conspiracy,” “a particular type of narrative of celebrity that function[s] to develop and maintain discourses of celebrity status,” and “powerful means of immortalizing iconic celebrities” (Ballinger 2014, 180). As opposed to Harris, whose “desire for equality” argument perceives CDCs as a means of bringing the celebrity down on the level of the public, Ballinger seems to be suggesting the opposite – that CDCs can in fact boost that celebrity and “[reinforce] their status as cultural spectacles” (ibid., 179).

I want to suggest that in the case of CDC scenario in which the celebrities die but their death is covered up through the use of a double (while in reality they live on), and certainly in the case of PID, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. While I agree with Harris that it is necessary to ascribe some agency to the fans, the scenario does not work with his equality argument. Rather, it is more consistent with Ballinger’s idea of immortalization and cultural spectacles. As he points out, “the essentially pathetic deaths of these celebrities . . . are transformed through conspiracy theory into graphic political events of historical significance” (ibid., 180). This is certainly the case of PID as Beatlemania was such a significant part of the 1960s movements, particularly in the U.S.

What then makes PID even more specific – as well as a case reaching even beyond Ballinger’s scope of analysis – is the fact that at least some of its originators (certainly LaBour – as he admits in Glenn’s 2009 article) fabricated, fueled, and disseminated the rumor as a *joke* – joke that was then picked up by the group itself (particularly John Lennon) as they opted to participate in this “hoaxing” of the fans. Looking at PID as a narrative (as Ballinger suggests) – essentially *a text*

– it can be examined it alongside other postmodern texts of the time, texts that work with the concepts of “agency panic” as well as “oneworldedness” to try and make sense of the world via literary language. In a 2000 essay which was later published as a part of his 2004 literary study, *The Irresponsible Self*, Wood talks about the necessity to establish a new kind of mode for postmodern works of fiction the storytelling of which has become “a kind of grammar” (Wood 2004, 168). He has named this mode “hysterical realism.” As opposed to magical realism, where what is happening could never happen, and actual realism, which is simply too mundane to provide authentic representation of the condition of postmodernity, hysterical realism “exhausts” and “overworks” conventions of realism to a version of reality that has been *pushed to its very limits*. This definition is consistent with Ballinger, who points out that CDC theories as “stories that enhance the spectacular appeal of celebrity figures by endowing them with a high degree of dramatic reality” (Ballinger 2014, 179). What more, it is consistent with the playfulness of the PID conspiracy theory.

While Wood’s theory of hysterical realism obviously focuses on works of literary fiction, the way that characters exist, act, and behave in these stories (Wood specifically mentions Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*) closely resembles the treatment of McCartney in PID. Just as, according to Wood, hysterical realism “suffices to make do with lively caricatures, whose deeper justification arises – if it even arises – from their immersion – in a web of connections” (Wood 2004, 175), so do CDC theories use his 1966 ceremonial body to create such caricature and position it in a center of a web of narratives that both boost the image of the era of Beatlemania and provide comfort to fans in 1969 onwards. As a part of this postmodern hysterical mythologization, McCartney himself becomes void and irrelevant and his physical body is sacrificed for the good of the public.

## **6. He Blew His Mind Out in a Car**

In the hysterically realist narrative of PID, the ‘hoaxed’ Beatlemaniacs become vital participants (nay, co-protagonists and co-caricatures alongside the ceremonial body of McCartney) in the narrative when they opt to follow the ‘clues’ left to them by the creators and perpetrators of the theory (who claim that these clues had been left by the group itself). Each clue described by Harper and LaBour in their original articles twist and reimagine the lyrics to take the meaning into a completely different

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direction from either the actual authorial meanings of the songs (as described by the group) or even critical interpretations based on cultural studies and literary criticism. These new meanings also possess a sense of the hysterical, slightly macabre, and even *legendary*: Not only had McCartney died and been replaced by a perfect double, but the remaining members of the group decided to defy their managers and secretly send their fans messages coded into the songs to tell the true story of his death. This includes the story of the accident itself which Harper and LaBour indicate to be coded into the group's 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

As the first album released after McCartney's alleged death, it tends to be the most referenced in association with the "death clues." The song "A Day in the Life" is then said to represent the narrative of the moment McCartney died. Generally speaking, the song can be described as a commentary on the everyday mundanity of human life and death as a key part of that mundanity. It presents the speaker (the "I" of the song) experiencing a regular day, taking notice of that mundanity in the midst of chaos and anxiety of the condition of postmodernity. Lennon's section of the song in particular reflects the more solemn side of everyday life with the following lyrics:

He blew his mind out in a car  
He didn't notice that the lights had changed  
A crowd of people stood and stared  
They'd seen his face before  
Nobody was really sure if he was from the House of Lords (The Beatles 1967)

Though they reportedly refer to a newspaper article Lennon had read while writing the song as well as the death of McCartney's friend Tara Browne (Davies 2014), PID subscribers consider this track – and particularly this section of the track – the ultimate story of McCartney's death. Both Harper and LaBour focus on the song in their articles with LaBour actually interpreting the lyrics "nobody was really sure if he was from the House of Lords" as related to the alleged decapitation of McCartney during the accident: "When the top of a man's head is sheared off his identity is partially obscured" (LaBour 1969, 2). Once again, this kind of near-absurd and mythologizing narrative is consistent with Wood's description of hysterically realist fiction (i.e. the exhaustion and overworking of realism).

The *Pepper* cover is then said to contain visual clues that tie all the clues from the tracks together. The front of the cover depicts a large crowd of people, mainly celebrities, but also seemingly random figures such as a deceased friend of the group from Liverpool, Stuart Sutcliffe, and the younger versions of The Beatles dressed in black suits. The entire group is standing above what Harper describes

as “grave.” One of the onlookers’ hand is raised directly above McCartney’s head and Harper sees this as “ancient death symbol of either the Greeks or the American Indians” (Harper 1969, 1). LaBour corroborates this part of the theory, claiming that: “It was decided that the appropriate cover would include a grave and so it does” (LaBour 1969, 2). The PID interpretation of the *Pepper* cover even makes connections between the individual tracks. As Harper points out, the cut-out photo of Harrison on the back of the cover (which also contains the lyrics of the songs for first time in the Beatles’ discography history) is pointing his index finger at the lyric “Wednesday morning at five o’clock as the day begins” from the song “She’s Leaving Home” (The Beatles 1967). Though the song itself has no connection to “A Day in the Life” and tells a story of a young girl who runs away from home to join a commune as many young people were prone to in the late 1960s, Harper considers the timestamp in “She’s Leaving Home” directly related to McCartney’s car accident described in “A Day in the Life” (even to the point of mistakenly taking them for one song): “George is pointing towards a phrase from the song from ‘A Day in the Life’ pertaining to a certain Wednesday morning at 5 a.m. when some famous but unnamed person ‘blew his mind out in a car’” (Harper 1969, 1).

This obsessive (but at the same time chaotic and even careless) connecting of clues is also consistent with Wood’s description of hysterical realism: “The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and hidden plots, and paranoid parallels . . . There is an obsession in these novels with connecting characters with each other, as information is connected in the World Wide Web” (Wood 2004, 170). Once again, it is apparent that the originators and propellers of PID had on their hands a narrative that perfectly played into the symptoms of the condition of postmodernity (as is apparent from Apter’s concept of oneworldedness and Melley’s theory of agency panic) and – through their mythologization of McCartney’s ceremonial body – were able to both comfort and mock Beatlemaniacs in America and all over the world.

## 7. Doubling Paul

A key part of the hysterical realism of PID is then the element of the double. This is an element may *also* be considered a staple motif of paranoid fiction as a literary subgenre in general. According to Slethaug, “the double in postmodern fiction explores a divided and discontinuous self in a fragmented universe. Its mission is to decenter the concept of the self, to view human reality as a construct, and to explore the inevitable drift of signifiers away from their referents” (Slethaug 1993,

3). Typically, this doubling is encountered in relation to the protagonist – the “I” of the story (e.g., in P.K. Dick’s short story “Imposter”) – and so the PID narrative offers a more complicated instance of this phenomenon as it is the subscribers of the conspiracy theory who effectively create these postmodern deconstructionist splits in reaction to their sociocultural distress. Thus, as a part of a hysterically realist narrative that is PID, the McCartney double becomes an *imposter*, a cunning sort of double who is being paid by an authority (in this case the management) who wants to ‘trick’ Beatles fans into believing that the real McCartney is still alive in order to continue making profit off the Beatles brand. Additionally, this imposter also represents a social construct created by the PID subscribers who have rejected consensus reality for a false universe where this fake McCartney holds power over them.

According to the original creators of the theory, there are several clues in the Beatles albums that there are more than one McCartney – often even more than two. Though Harper indicates that the man calling himself McCartney may be an impostor, it is LaBour who elaborates on the theory in his article, claiming that: “Lennon’s plan was to create a false McCartney, bring him into the group as if nothing had happened, and then slowly release the information of the real Paul’s death to the world via clues secreted in record albums.” LaBour then goes on to describe the system through which this double had been selected, revealing that the management opted to hold a “Look-a-Like contest” in Scotland (LaBour 1969, 2). At this point of the narrative, there are presumably perhaps a dozen McCartney doubles, whichever number of look-alikes decided to sign up for the contest. This notion indicates that the number of possibilities and alternative dimensions for PID just as it was being constructed in LaBour’s mind. The winner of this contest – “an orphan from Edinburgh named William Campbell” then, with its near-absurd story of plastic surgery and voice training, pertains to Wood’s theory of hysterical realism. Patterson’s description of the web of connections that was created between this contest and *Pepper* then once again confirms the status of PID as a hysterical realism: “One of the most fascinating rumors of this period dealt with a McCartney look-alike contest in the early sixties. The Paul McCartney look-alike winner’s photograph was never published, but the rumor spread that his name was released as Billy Shears. ‘Billy Shears’ could well have been a pseudonym for William Campbell” (Patterson 1994, 37). Thus, when in the song “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” McCartney sings

So let me introduce to you  
The one and only Billy Shears  
And Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (The Beatles 1967),

he (or whoever he is according to PID subscribers) is in fact introducing their “new” band-member to the fans. The following song, “With a Little Help From My Friends,” as Patterson adds, then expresses the imposter’s anxiety about being accepted by the fans even if he sings “out of tune” (The Beatles 1967), indicating a fear of being identified as the double (Patterson 1994, 38).

As Hassold claims in “The Double and Doubling in Modern and Postmodern Art,” “The ways in which doubling is manifested in postmodern art become even more novel and often involve absence as well as metamorphosis. It is almost as if a flood of otherness has been unleashed and has completely erased stable identity” (Hassold 1994, 260). Again, this is consistent with PID when one imagines each potential McCartney double from the competition in a center of individual alternative realities. In the context of these alternative realities, the real McCartney’s body – as well as his physical body – becomes obscured and obsolete to make way for this rise of the ceremonial body or bodies.

## **8. Those Freaks Was Right: Conclusion**

Ultimately, though the conspiracy theory most likely originated as a joke, a hoax to perhaps mock those Beatlemaniaics who were not only upset by the imminent breakup of the group but also fatigued by the sociopolitical events of the late 1960s and early 1970s (i.e., the golden age of paranoia), it has prevailed and even continues to metastasize to this day, fueled by the internet. It no longer matters which clues were fabricated as a joke and which clues have been ‘discovered’ by conspiracy theorists in a serious manner. The PID conspiracy theory is indeed the epitome of an American postmodern celebrity enshrinement – what matters is that the narrative, shrouded in postmodern imagery, has served a purpose to some of the public. Long removed from the main original propellers – Harper, Gibbs, LaBour, and Bennett – the PID theory has provided comfort and entertainment through the mythologization of McCartney’s ceremonial body to some Beatles fans in two major ways.

First, it has provided creative minds like Harper and LaBour with the opportunity to deal with the condition of postmodernity through the creation of hysterical narratives and becoming ‘postmodern tricksters’ – an opportunity so attractive that even Lennon could not resist joining in with the hoaxing of Beatles fans through his McCartney-centered song from *Imagine*, “How Do You Sleep,” where one of the lyrics says “Those freaks was right when they said you was dead” (John Lennon 1971). As Lennon has always been seen by the PID subscribers as the person with the most authority and the main disseminator of clues throughout

the Beatles post-1966 discography (LaBour 1969, 2), this song, of course added fuel to the theory.

Second, it has provided comfort to some Beatles fans in times of social insecurity through the revivification of the Beatlemania-era ceremonial body of Paul McCartney. Though the PID narrative is exaggerated, illogical, and almost farcical in nature – all characteristics consistent with the kind of literary mode of writing Wood calls “hysterical realism” – that playfulness along with the joy of “hunting for clues” has ironically given generations of American Beatles fans something stable to hold onto, especially in times of social instability.

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