John Dos Passos and the Modern(ist) Machine

Lisa Nanney
University of North California / Georgetown University

Abstract John Dos Passos's earliest essays decried how modern culture had been dehumanized by the development of what he called "Mechanical Civilization" (1916). The novelist's "business," he wrote, was to oppose its manifestations. This essay traces how the force and image of the machine became signs of these destructive powers in his work of the 1920s and his modernist novels of the 1930s, then explores how he evoked the force of modernity structurally in his work by holding in tension the concept and image of the machine as destroyer with the machine's creative potential. In his iconic *U.S.A.* and in his 1936 unpublished film treatment, "Dreamfactory," he recreates the ambiguous dynamics inherent in one of modernity's most iconic machines, the camera. The treatment demonstrates the problematic tension in the role of artists: They must not only reflect their culture but also acknowledge how they shape and interpret it.

Keywords Cinema, John Dos Passos, Experimental Theater, Machine, Modernism, Montage.

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1 By 1941, John Dos Passos was clear about how he defined the business of the contemporary writer in his time: “to justify the ways of machinery to man” (“Duty” 205). Nonetheless, during most of his career and especially through the 1930s, when he was writing his most definitively modernist work, he was far less clear about whether the machinery deserved to be justified. But the tension between these conflicting perspectives generated the energy of his innovative, often cautionary recreations of the function of the machine in twentieth-century industrial American culture.

2 In 1935, in “The Writer As Technician,” he had cast the writer as the watchdog of individualism against a mechanizing modernity: “At this particular moment in history, when machinery and institutions have so outgrown the ability of the mind to dominate them, we need bold and original thought more than ever. It is the business of writers to supply that thought, and not to make themselves figureheads in political conflicts” (170). A 1916 essay, “A Humble Protest,” summarized the complex of intellectual, social, economic, industrial, and governmental forces that threatened individual autonomy with the term “Mechanical Civilization” (31).

3 But even as he was sounding the alarm about the dehumanizing dangers of modernization, he acknowledged its powerful potential: the same early essay that coins the foreboding term “mechanical civilization” asserts that despite its investment in “the worship of . . . Science and Industrialism,” it is nonetheless “splendidly inventive” (31). Perhaps this early essay’s admiring descriptor is satirical, but such conflicted perceptions persisted and became overt, even internally contradictory, in works across the genres he undertook in the 1920s and 1930s—plays such as *Airways, Inc.*, novels such as *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Big Money*—subtextually revealing a compelling ambivalence about what the machine signified or facilitated in twentieth century culture. This ambivalence extended into his very conception of the writer’s vital role in opposing the dehumanizing impact of mechanization. Paradoxically, often positively, the language with which he characterized the writer’s “business” invoked the functions of the very dynamos that powered modernity; it was the writer’s role to combat these forces. The writer himself, Dos Passos declared in his 1929 *New Masses* essay “The Making of a Writer,” has to be “a machine for absorbing and arranging . . . words out of the lives of the people around him” (116). By 1942, the machine that became his metaphor for the writer’s function pointed to the technology that for him and for the world had come to epitomize and represent U.S. culture in the machine age: “I cannot see how even the most immortal writer is more than the best possible type of moving picture machine contrived to focus the present moment on the screen of the future” (“Duty” 205).

4 This is the machine—the motion picture camera as recorder and projector—that plays the most ambiguous role in Dos Passos's work, the machine that poses the greatest danger for abuse yet offers the greatest potential to activate the perceiver's critical thinking. In his representation of this machine in his work of the 1930s, his earlier ambivalence achieves its most open and complex expression. In *The Big Money*, written during the late 1930s, at the apex of his modernist innovations, Dos Passos places the industry created by the camera—filmmaking—under brutal and bleak scrutiny. But in "Dreamfactory," an unpublished, unproduced screen treatment he created in 1936 while also working on that final novel of the iconic trilogy, his conflicted consciousness of the camera's possibilities actually generated the work's form, and the form enacts the perils and the potential of motion picture technology. Moving fluidly among the positions of the agent, the object, and the audience of the camera even in a short work of twelve pages, "Dreamfactory" demonstrates the internal contradictions of Dos Passos's perceptions of the machine. The creative engagement among perspectives and contradictions produced a work whose strikingly original form, unique in Dos Passos's *oeuvre*, evokes the aesthetic and ethical questions central to Dos Passos in this pivotal moment—artistically and politically—of his business as a writer.

5 In his earliest published work, Dos Passos had often focused negatively on the global drift toward dehumanization as cultures became increasingly mechanized, even if more technologically sophisticated. As early as his first paid publication, "Against American Literature," in *New Republic* in 1916, he attributed deficiencies in American writing to "an all-enveloping industrialism" (36) that had short-circuited the nation's creative vitality. The same year, in his final essay for the *Harvard Monthly*, he indicted industrialism not only for not affording humankind with greater creative freedom but for actually "[binding] three-fourths of the world . . . in economic slavery" as laborers producing goods so that the "other fourth maybe enslaved" by consumer capitalism ("Humble" 31).

6 This conviction that "mechanical civilization" not only deadened creativity but also generated enslaving systems was a fundamental thematic and aesthetic principle of the experimental theater project Dos Passos helped pioneer in New York in the mid-1920s, the New Playwrights' Theatre. Its introductory manifesto declared that all its productions would be leftist critiques of capitalist dehumanization of the working class staged with non-traditional methods ("Why" xviii). The plays Dos Passos contributed often dramatized his concern with the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism and the creation of a hollow myth of success in an America where economic inequality increasingly widened the gap between workers and financial manipulators. His drama *The Garbage Man*, produced in 1926, demonstrates how the ideals

of its protagonist Tom are warped by American myths of success and wealth. Destitute and desperate, Tom robs a bank; afterward, he is stalked by the "garbage man," who identifies himself with "Success" but who is revealed as the protean figure of Death. As the play's arc traces Tom's spiritual downfall, "the sobbing croon of vast dynamos" moans continuously even as Tom shouts "Voice of the machine, I defy you. . . " (*Three Plays* 63, 73, 70).

7 Dos Passos brought to the project both his commitment to proletarian drama and his equal interest in the visual aspects of theater, presaging his exploration of the mechanized visual aesthetics of film. He created sets for the group that often literalized the suppression of individuality by modern industry, using the machine as a synecdoche for its forces. For Paul Sifton's 1927 *The Belt*, for instance, he devised a set consisting primarily of a massive, functional conveyor belt, at which players actually labored throughout the drama on a diagonal across the stage.

8 But the ambivalent perspective on the machine that became more conflicted in later work surfaces in the 1920s also. In his 1928 *Airways, Inc.*, the innovative aircraft the protagonist designs promises transcendent mobility, but marketing it industrially catalyzes his professional exploitation and the crash of its prototype eventually cripples him. Such dualism suggests the tense but creative conflict between a pessimistic view of emergent technologies and the cross currents of politically charged visual aesthetics that increasingly informed Dos Passos's work. Exposure to the innovations of avant-garde artists such as the Futurists had excited the writer when he first encountered their work in 1917, in Milan during World War I, as a member of the Norton-Harjes ambulance corps assisting the Italian wounded. The fascination with motion and process that infuses the Futurists' aesthetic and cultural agenda also characterizes the works of the Russian Constructivists, whose unconventional dramaturgical practices and minimalist set designs had influenced Dos Passos and his fellow New Playwrights. Amid the artistic ferment generated by the political upheaval in post-Revolutionary Russia, the Constructivists made industrialism and its enabling technologies integral parts of the theater experience, creating what they called "a theater of the machine aesthetic" celebrating both the worker and the technical circumstances of production (Haran 61).

9 In their positive representation of the transformative, dynamic velocity of the industrializing world and the power of the machine, Futurism and Constructivism, along with other modernist aesthetics such as Cubism, sought to engage the perceiving individual completely in the dynamism of the modern. Modernist artists often fragmented the set or the stage or the picture plane into its elemental components, then immersed the individual into a "flux of movement and interpenetration" to enact the simultaneity of multiple realities and perceptions whose realization was fundamental in the

scientific revelations that characterized early twentieth-century thought (Tisdall and Bozzolla 32).

10 Not surprisingly, given the methods evolved by such avant-garde artists to create a fully immersive spectacle for the participant, some practitioners of experimental theater found the evolving technologies of film powerfully effective to achieve the kinds of audience response envisioned by the New Playwrights and other leftist drama groups. Both Futurism and Constructivism celebrated film as a groundbreaking product of the machine age and often included actual film, film screens, or film projections onto transparencies in its set designs as part of its dramatic spectacle. Yet, Dos Passos quickly apprehended that film as a mechanism defining modern life had the potential to be exploited by commercial interests into a force capable of deadening rather than liberating individuals' creative potentials. When he wrote "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?", his 1929 *New Masses* post-mortem evaluation of his short-lived drama group, he attributed what he saw as the inevitable failure of radical innovation on the stage chiefly to the public's growing demand for the movies. He asserted that experimental theater could never draw audiences or achieve its intended "political results" until it found "new tools" to provide something that "the Talkies" offered more successfully. In competition with the movies, experimental theater as Dos Passos saw it practiced in the 1920s was "doomed" ("Did" 120).

11 The masses, the audience for whom idealistic artists such as the New Playwrights crafted their work, had been conditioned rapidly to expect unchallenging entertainment for their twenty-five cent admission. Easily accessible movie houses and quickly-produced short films and feature-length productions flourished even before D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent *The Birth of a Nation*—whose aesthetic and political impacts are still controversial in the twenty-first century—broke records for attendance and established new standards in film editing artistry. As Dos Passos ruefully acknowledged, films succeeded in the one area in which he had most keenly felt the shortcomings of the New Playwrights: the cinema became a monolithic *cultural* force almost from the beginning of its development. Most discouraging for the ambitious dramatists, the cinema did so using the very tools that the New Playwrights and other practitioners of experimental theater believed would speak most directly to working-class audiences: the elements of "spectacle" advocated by the Russian Constructivists as appropriate for a people's entertainment and conducive to immersing the audience in the noise and dynamism of modern life—such "low culture" staples as filmed acrobatic performances and circus acts, magicians' tricks, or live vaudeville accompanying film. From the outset, early films and film technologies had used the machine—the motion picture camera—to achieve what even the radical theater apparently could not: to

thrust the viewer through direct sensory immersion into the immediacy of modernity.

12 Still asking what would be "the goal of this mechanical, splendidly inventive civilization of ours" ("Humble" 31), in the mid-1920s Dos Passos searched for narrative methods that would evoke from readers the same question and involve them actively in the same dualistic creative role with which he charged the artist—to be simultaneously *engagé* and *disengagé* ("Interview" 281). The onward rush of "mechanical civilization" threatened the creative, intellectual, and economic autonomy of the individual in the industrializing world, yet the creative ferment of the 1920s demonstrated the "splendidly inventive" potential of the machine age, and he was increasingly fascinated by the ways it was infusing the arts of innovators with whom he interacted creatively. When he encountered fellow artists such as poet Blaise Cendrars and painters Fernand Léger and Gerald Murphy in Paris, he saw in their work methods that made their work "stand up off the page," as he said of Cendrars' fusion of poetry with the visual in his "simultaneous texts" ("What" 272). Though working in different mediums, Cendrars, Léger and Dos Passos found their interartistic association crucial in evolving methods that could transcend the limitations of their own disciplines. They shared also an early attraction to Futurism's passionate interest in speed and its apotheosis of technology.

13 Both Léger and Dos Passos sought to convey directly the experience of modern life and to create through dissonant and powerful contrasts the essence of the machine age. One of the methods by which both achieved these goals was by incorporating the functions of the machine directly into the structures of their creations. A painting such as Léger's *Le Mécanicien* (1919) evokes the energy of the machine in the juxtaposition of exaggerated fragmented machine parts with the static diminutive figure of a human relegated to the right margin of the picture space. Likewise, in his 1925 *Manhattan Transfer*, which was already underway during his post-war periods in France, Dos Passos identifies what generates the power of New York City by fragmenting its working elements—transportation, industry, commerce, mass culture—and labeling them in chapters bearing the names of the machinery of the urban landscape: "Ferryslip," "Tracks," Steamroller," "Nickelodeon." As in Léger's painting, the mechanical dominates the human.

14 Because the mechanical was fundamental in creating the urban environment, assembling a portrait of the defining city of America as immediate as *Manhattan Transfer* demanded that Dos Passos confront the conflict between modernist fascination with the promises of technology and his own apprehension about its capacity to subsume the human. His narrative solution in the mid-1920s was to bifurcate how the novel acknowledges the duality of technology; the work's story shows how the city-machine overwhelms, but the work's form

conveys the energy and ingenuity of its mechanical engines and inventions. *Manhattan Transfer* succeeds in powerfully evoking on the page the velocity and clamor of an urban center of "mechanical civilization." But the ability to assemble a fully simultaneous text immersing the viewer in a spectacle that recreates the totality of experience, as Dos Passos had tried to do in his plays and sets for the experimental theater, was inherent in the structural potentials of film, and especially in film editing techniques, in a way neither narrative nor painting could achieve, both he and Léger realized. Adapting cinematic structural devices into narrative strategies offered the artist a way to "record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film recorded it. By contrast, juxtaposition, montage, [the artist] could build drama into his narrative," Dos Passos explained retrospectively of the impact of film technologies on his work ("What" 273). He plunges his reader directly into the elements of "mechanical civilization" in his portrait of New York City. It was critically acclaimed upon its publication, and critics such as D.H. Lawrence increasingly apprehended the style's adaptation of film editing techniques as the most radically innovative of its narrative strategies: "a very complex film . . . [of] New York," he wrote (364).

15 Through its cinema-inflected structure, *Manhattan Transfer* represents the most fully realized modernist aesthetic of his work to that point. As in earlier novels such as the anti-war 1921 *Three Soldiers*, in which the military constitutes a monolithic dehumanizing force, *Manhattan Transfer* focuses on the individual's relationship with a powerful mechanistic system—the city and the culture it represents. Both theme and form continue to explore the relation of the parts to the whole, a consistent concern in Dos Passos's writing. But in this novel, the parts have no center to imply a whole; instead, they work only in mechanical combination—like a machine in continuous motion. Accordingly, some critics have perceived this novel as reflecting only chaos: Lionel Trilling called it "an epic of disintegration" (21). If it is concerned with disintegration, it is the deconstruction of the human, the organic, the holistic; but at the same time, it constructs a powerful machine itself. The structure of *Manhattan Transfer* evokes the culture Dos Passos is portraying. His form—the constant motion of the narrative, its dynamic swirl mixing and propelling characters deterministically—is inseparable from his message.

16 How to portray a culture that no longer possesses any organic structure demands methods that can convey that fragmentation yet remain intelligible. To find a structural language equal to such an internally contradictory narrative problem, Dos Passos adapted the vocabulary of signs in modern culture—the aesthetics of the machine age. Visual artists such as Léger and Stuart Davis and Max Weber had used the quotidian objects and incidental signage of urban industrial America to evoke its material identity in their work of the 1920s. In narrative form, Dos Passos likewise employed the products and

processes of industry and technology—“the rhythms, images, and above all the headlong energy,” as Alfred Kazin wrote of the radical achievements of Dos Passos’s modernist style (x)—to make *Manhattan Transfer* a working machine composed of parts of the city. People, skyscrapers, trains, subways, songs, and newspaper clippings, the phenomena of popular culture, all function as mere cogs in an inexorable urban structure. The urban machine threatens to devour the individuals who people this novel, but the novel’s mechanistic strategies function creatively for the reader, providing a way of perceiving connections among and humanity in them. The reader both enters the form and observes the mechanisms it recreates even as they overwhelm the characters; thus, Dos Passos thrusts the reader into the same creative position he proposes for the writer—to be simultaneously *engagé* and *disengagé*. Although critics such as Donald Pizer maintain that one reads *Manhattan Transfer* “not for its ‘subject’ but for its ‘shape’” (17), its subject and its shape are in fact inseparable.

17 Perhaps the most potent of the novel’s mechanistic strategies is to use the varying kinds of motion created by editing in film—montage—to immerse the reader into the vortex of the city along with the characters. Crosscutting establishes dynamic patterns of motion in the novel—linear, circular, and random—that sometimes intersect, but most often move in independent directions. By crosscutting between shots tracking the motion of central and incidental characters subsumed in these patterns of motion throughout the city as they struggle with its demands, Dos Passos achieves a narrative montage conveying the sensation of life in New York City through the early 1920s. Progressive manuscripts of the novel underscore the intentionality of the methods of literary montage Dos Passos evolved. Initially he created each of the central narratives separately, then broke them apart and spliced the various pieces into the order he sought, a process akin to film editing. Fragmentation, then, was both the technique and the theme, but his montage created simultaneity among his narrative threads—although the narratives do not always progress at precisely identical speeds—and created meaning by juxtaposing narrative threads, images, and themes.

18 Imagery in the novel also identifies the city as a machine inseparable from the engines of industrial capitalist culture in the U.S. The form of the work disallows protagonists in the conventional sense; the city itself may be said to be the novel’s primary subject and character, and the novel’s human characters are thematically defined by association with specific recurrent urban or mechanical signs of the city. The novel’s predominant female character Ellen Thatcher, for instance, dehumanized by her quest for success on the city’s superficial terms, survives as she drives toward fame as a celebrity actress by making herself impervious to organic relationship. Communicating Ellen’s loss of humanity through images of machines and inexorable cyclic motion,

Dos Passos makes her characterization a part of the dynamic mechanism of the novel. She becomes "an intricate machine of sawtooth steel whitebright bluebright copperbright," with a voice "like a tiny flexible sharp metalsaw" (228) when she dances with one man, Jimmy Herf, in an effort to rid herself of her feelings for another, Stan Emery. After Stan's suicide in despair over his prominent family's insistence that he abandon his artistic goals as an architect for a more lucrative profession, Ellen feels like "a stiff castiron figure in her metalgreen evening dress" (261) as she continues her professional ascent. She sheds insufficiently advantageous marriages eventually to marry a man she does not love but who will assure her economic security and social position; then, as she seals the engagement with a kiss in a taxi, she sees "out of a corner of an eye whirling faces, streetlights, zooming nickelglinting wheels" (376). With any trace of an authentic self eradicated by her compromises for success, she is pulled into the vortex of the city's amoral energy.

19 The other more central character in the novel, Jimmy Herf, likewise confronts the city's demand that he sacrifice his humanity and principles to rise in his chosen profession, as a writer. To characterize Jimmy's struggle with the commercial goals of journalism and the cheapening of language and life those goals dictate, Dos Passos intercalates bits of newspaper stories into the narrative montage; lines from stories that exploit and dehumanize their subjects to sell sensationalized tabloids bring verbal signs of urban life into the text as Léger had done to lighter effect by incorporating words and phrases from advertising into his urban paintings. Jimmy comes to identify his relationship with Ellen with the city's hollowing out of his hope to deploy words truthfully, to reclaim what Dos Passos in *The Big Money* (1936) would call "the old words" on which the nation was founded—"the old American speech of the haters of oppression" (469). From Jimmy's first appearance in the novel—on the Fourth of July, with the Statue of Liberty in the background—the character is identified with a fundamental questioning of the fate of American values in an age of superficial materialism. In a pivotal passage that interweaves central images and circular patterns of motion and extends their significance to a symbolic level, Jimmy struggles to reclaim "the old words":

> Pursuit of happiness, unalienable pursuit . . . right to life liberty and . . . All these April nights combing the streets alone a skyscraper has obsessed [Jimmy], a grooved building jutting up with uncountable bright windows falling onto him out of a studding sky. Typewriters rain continual nickelplated confetti in his ears . . . . And he walks round blocks and blocks looking for the door of the humming tinselwindowed skyscraper, . . . and still no door. Every time . . . he stops arguing audibly with himself in pompous reasonable phrases the dream has hold of him. [Y]oung man to save your sanity you've got to do one of two things . . . one of two unalienable alternatives: go away in a dirty soft shirt or stay in a clean Arrow collar. But what's the use of spending your whole life fleeing the city of Destruction? . . . His mind unreeling phrases, he walks on

> doggedly. There's nowhere in particular he wants to go. If only I still had faith in words. (802-03)

20 While in thrall to the monolithic city whose symbol is the skyscraper, the apex of machine culture architecture, he can never regain "the dream," never construct truth from the culture's compromised language. If he is ever to regain "faith in words," then, he must reject the city, and he does. He escapes Manhattan without the money or the desire to travel at the city's pace or by means of its rapid transit, whose images and sensations zoom through the novel's pages. He is as uncertain of his destination as he is of how language can be reinvested with meaning or transformed to communicate the human experience as it has been remade in the machine age. But he has begun the process of discovery and reinvention—he is actively in search of his freedom—by "fleeing the City of Destruction."

21 In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos had confronted his conflicts about the powers of the mechanical in modern life by incorporating its dual potentials into a tension between narrative and form. Beginning to draw on the visual aesthetics inherent in motion pictures, the art form with which America became almost synonymous, he had recreated the fragmentation of modern culture and rendered visible the machines that drove it. In the three novels that followed—*The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936), the volumes of U.S.A.—the tension between the annihilating potential of the machine and its capacity to be "splendidly inventive" became more pronounced as Dos Passos built an even more complex formal structure than he had in *Manhattan Transfer*. Employing the dynamics of defining modern technologies, the trilogy's Newsreels and biography segments recreate sound and print media of the era; the fictional narratives depict the resonance of that constant cultural noise in the characters' lives; but all the segments, especially the Camera Eye, incorporate in their content and especially in their intricate juxtapositional interaction the capabilities and impact of motion picture technologies and processes. Concomitantly, the tension inherent in the artist's role moved to the foreground of the three novels as both a formal and a thematic concern. Where in *Manhattan Transfer* Dos Passos consciously tried to eliminate the subjective consciousness of the artist, even as the artist's hand was implicitly experimenting with the novel's form, in U.S.A. he shows his hand on the levers of the novel-machine: he acknowledges both his own consciousness and the purposes informing the structures he creates and, this time, explicitly defines. The voice of the Camera Eye device, it becomes clear, belongs to the same consciousness that owns the hands wielding the camera, choosing the Newsreel shots, focusing the angle of vision in the novels' biographies, and evolving the characters in the fictional narratives.

22 Once again, in these works that would come to define his career, his theme was the "basic tragedy" that, he observed in 1959, all his work expresses—"man's struggle for life against the strangling institutions he himself creates" ("Looking" 235). He knew both the scope and the materials of these new novels: "as much as possible of the broad field of the lives of these times" ("Introductory" 179) from 1916, as the U.S. becomes involved in World War I, through the 1920s, as the postwar economic boom leads to the Stock Market Crash of 1929. He wanted to create "a contemporary commentary on history's changes, always as seen by some individual's eyes, heard by some individual's ears, felt thorough some individual's nerves and tissues" ("What" 31). He came to know, during the course of completing the trilogy during the 1930s, that his aims in this new work were more overtly political than in *Manhattan Transfer*. As he found the methods of Communist factions within both the American and European Left increasingly intolerant of independent positions that deviated from their Party doctrines, he began to view the Left as a force potentially destructive to individual thought and agency just as the machine of industrial capitalism was. These goals, more complex and fraught than those of the disengaged if dynamic urban spectacle of *Manhattan Transfer*, would require methods that could articulate his conviction that the writer is the "architect of history" who has the responsibility to "write straight" no matter what the cultural or political pressures. Yet, to achieve both his artistic and his political goals without "preaching" ("Introduction" 147), he realized he needed to be both inside and outside of the narrative, as he insisted even at the end of his career the artist must be. To achieve dynamic interaction between passion and objectivity called for a dynamic structure that required the *reader's* active critical engagement. The structure Dos Passos evolved for these purposes places fiction and history, the subjective and the objective, into tension in interactive relationships that create meaning in the same way the planes and forms of a Cubist painting interact visually.

23 The vehicles of these relationships are the four modes of the three novels, first published together as U.S.A. in 1937. In the introduction to the 1937 Modern Library edition, he described the functions of these working parts of the trilogy's mechanisms. The fictional stories, the "long narrative" of the trilogy, he explained, recount "the more or less entangled lives of a number of Americans during the first three decades of the present [twentieth] century." Three other "sequences . . . [thread] in and out among the stories." Biographies of "real people . . . embody . . . the quality of the soil in which Americans of those generations grew." Newsreel sequences, built from fragments of newspaper and tabloid headlines and stories, snippets of popular songs, and lines from speeches, convey "the common mind of the epoch." The Camera Eye "aims to indicate the position of the observer" through impressionistic,

autobiographical observations in a stream-of-consciousness style emanating from the point of view of a persona who is contemporaneous with the era of the novels ("Introductory" 179). The persona's experiences and perceptions chart the growth of a writer's commitment to his vocation and articulate the genesis of his realization that "we have only words against POWER SUPERPOWER" (*Big* 1210). Dos Passos later observed that in the other three modes he "aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting views," juxtaposing the segments purposefully, but he explicitly identified the Camera Eye persona with himself: the device was, he stated, "a safety valve for my own subjective feelings" ("John Dos Passos" 247).

24 However objective he asserted the other three modes were, his overt identification of himself with the Camera Eye reveals his own hand on the engine of the work. Indeed, these segments enact the speaker—and Dos Passos—assuming the creative charge toward which the novel's narrative builds: the novel's form is the manifestation of the artist's "business." In the Camera Eye persona's hard-won recognition of the tools available to contend against "power superpower," Dos Passos acknowledges implicitly that the trilogy is—the novel must be—a forceful machine itself, wielded forcefully by a maker, to militate against the social, economic, political, and cultural forces of "mechanical civilization." But the Camera Eye persona's control of all the narrative choices never asserts itself until very late in the trilogy, at a point where form and theme are revealed to be synonymous. That the disclosure occurs only after readers have perhaps internalized the relative functions of the novels' devices to reach this insight actively themselves may be a mark of the "hidden" nature of Dos Passos's art, as Sartre phrased it (85).

25 But cinematic montage, the formal paradigm for the interactive tension among the modes of the novels that makes its meaning, had already proven to be insidious in its power to control not only the vision but the volition of the viewer. As early practitioners in America and the Soviet Union evolved film editing techniques into powerful, highly adaptive dynamics, the political potential of montage became evident in American works such as *The Birth of a Nation*, with its revolutionary cross-cutting between parallel and contrasting narrative lines, unprecedented variations in focal lengths, transition effects, and orchestration of battle scenes. James Agee compared viewing it to "being witness to . . . the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel." In post-Revolutionary Russia, cinema supported by the state and developed in its service for a time fostered similarly highly innovative cinematic production from directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, who, like Dos Passos, combined fiction and history and exploited juxtaposition and simultaneity. The Russian innovator's 1925 silent propaganda film *Battleship Potemkin*, dramatizing the 1905 rebellion of the ill-treated crew of the battleship against their Tsarist

officers, used montage to appeal directly to the emotions of proletarian viewers and activate them politically. The New Playwrights were conversant with Soviet film innovations; Dos Passos traveled to Russia to see state-subsidized art in action in 1927; and they had shared with the Russian avant-garde the commitment to political film and theater and drama as spectacle that motivated the group.

26 Nevertheless, the "splendidly inventive" possibilities of the motion picture camera and the experience it made possible did not obscure or outweigh for Dos Passos its dangerous potential to be deployed in the service of "mechanical civilization." Griffith's film, despite its merits, has become notorious for the racial animus it promulgated through its representations of racial stereotypes and sexualized racial violence in the Civil War and post-bellum South. It exacerbated active persecution toward African Americans during the Jim Crow era and spurred a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. Griffith's artistry not only showed audiences *what* to think about race but *how to act* on the prejudices it inculcated.

27 Dos Passos himself had experienced firsthand the potential for governments to use film to manipulate emotions, create alternate versions of history, and command mass behavior, while he trained in 1918 at Camp Crane, New Jersey for the military ambulance corps. In his journal of the period, he admitted the undiscriminating "delight" with which he and the other trainees fell under the spell of the movies screened nightly in camp (*Fourteenth* 220). In *Three Soldiers*, the anti-war novel that drew from his exposure to military routine and indoctrination, he recreates the power of film he had perceived in his own reactions when he depicts his three central characters watching a feature presentation. The three view along with the other troops a feature film rife with propaganda in which "soldiers in spiked helmets [march] into Belgian cities full of little milk carts drawn by dogs and old women in peasant costume." Even such contrived scenes inspire the soldiers to "hate the Huns" viciously: "I'd give a lot to rape some of those goddam German women," one soldier declares. Despite himself, John Andrews, the protagonist and representative conscience of the novel, feels "blind hate stirring" within him until he is "lost in it, carried away on it, as in a stampede of wild cattle." When he looks about him in the darkened movie hut, he sees not individuals but "one organism" united in "common slavery" (*Three* 108). Film, Dos Passos recognized, is a modern technology particularly adaptable by systems of government to obliterate individual will and extinguish independent thought.

28 This tension between the creative possibilities inherent in the motion picture and its dangerous possibilities for exploitation moves to the foreground as U.S.A. progresses, until the trilogy's final novel, *The Big Money*, brings the dualism into sharp focus and makes it central both narratively and structurally.

Not only the fictional engagement with the film industry in the novel but also its cinematic formal devices express Dos Passos's concern with the impact of cinema itself and the machine it had become in American culture. These concerns would continue to preoccupy his work as he became further involved with filmmaking itself, and they would dictate the method and the message of the one independent direct-to-film project he undertook, a never-produced film treatment, "Dreamfactory."

29 Before he directly confronted the dualistic potentials of the movie camera in his own screen treatment, Dos Passos gained entrée into the workings of the film industry as a contract screen writer. Hollywood had lured into its service some of Dos Passos's well-known contemporaries—Dorothy Parker, Herman J. Mankiewicz, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner—and, as Dos Passos wrote in his 1966 memoir, *The Best Times*, in 1934 when he "got a bid from Josef von Sternberg to work with him on a Spanish picture [*The Devil Is a Woman*] he was getting up for Marlene Dietrich," the writer accepted. For one thing, he needed the money: 1919, the most recent volume of U.S.A., had been a "flop . . . on the sales end" (*Fourteenth* 437). But in addition to the income, the Paramount Studio contract to create the script for *The Devil Is a Woman* gave him a close-up education about the industry. Already at work on *The Big Money*, Dos Passos used this insider's exposure to the mechanics and the politics of film production to extract the material for one of the novel's major fictional threads—the story of the rise from squalor to film stardom of the opportunistic Margo Dowling and the calculating director, Sam Margolies, who engineers her ascent by molding and marketing her. Though the exploitative symbiosis between the two clearly draws from what Dos Passos observed of the Dietrich-von Sternberg alliance, the writer places his fictional adaptation of the successful professional strategies of the German actor and her director into an explicitly American economic and social framework. As in *Manhattan Transfer*'s depiction of the power of the capitalist engine in American culture to control individuals' self-determination, the Margo Dowling narrative in *The Big Money* demonstrates the destructive effect of commodifying sexuality and womanhood, and the addictive and corrupting nature of unachievable desires generated by the culture of celebrity and status. Like the earlier novel's Ellen Thatcher, in her youth Dowling possesses not only beauty but a vitality that suggests the potential for achievement and authenticity. But both women sacrifice that promise for luxury and fame—success as defined by Broadway and Hollywood—and both women eventually disappear into the hollow identities they have manufactured to monetize and reflect the desires and values of the cultures that produced them. In Ellen Thatcher's final appearance in *Manhattan Transfer*, as she mentally enumerates the wardrobe requirements for all her upcoming social appearances, she envisions herself

"all dressed up like a Christmas tree, . . . like [a] . . . walking talking doll." Yet, she senses a vestigial "sudden pang of something forgotten" which she cannot define (833-34).

30 Likewise, in Margo Dowling's final scene—in which she is relegated to a walk-on in a major narrative thread devoted to another character, Mary French—the reader sees Dowling narratively as well as culturally minimized and objectified. A crowd, of which Mary French is part, awaits Dowling's arrival at a social event at which she is to be the celebrity attraction. But when she enters the room, a cameo appearance narrated as if from the perspective of a fan, she is revealed to be merely "a small woman with blue eyes and features as regular as those of a porcelain doll" adorned with "a lot of big sapphires." And she is already a has-been: "it seems she's through," the crowd gossips; "it seems that she's no good for talking pictures . . . voice sounds like the croaking of an old crow over the loudspeaker" (1233-34). She has risen to the crest of stardom by the accident of her beauty and the ruthlessness of her ambition, in whose service she has manufactured a false history for herself, coupled and married opportunistically, and sacrificed any artistic talent to the production of superficial commercial film vehicles. But the cinematic creation Margo has become will be rendered obsolete and discarded by the relentless advancement of technology in an industry as intent as the star was on maximum exposure and profit by any means.

31 The incorporation into the novel's structure of the essential machine of the film industry—the camera itself—reveals insights as bleak as those disclosed by the fictional narrative borrowed from the industry. But the Camera Eye segments as structural elements of the novel also increasingly focus the reader on the artist's potential to affect the operations and outcomes of the discourses manufactured by cultural machines. Throughout the three novels, the cross-cutting between the Camera Eye segments and other modes has intensified the narrator's identification with the events that occur within the fictional and biographical modes. Although in the first two novels the persona has little sense of himself as an agent in history and seems caught up in his own isolated imagination, by *The Big Money* he has begun to define himself within the struggles of his times. He bears the "hated years in the latrine-stench at Brocourt under the starshells" (790); when he returns from World War I he feels the press of "Coca Cola signs Lucky Strike ads pricetags in storewindows . . . money" in New York (892-94); and he searches for a redeeming value in the 1927 deaths of "the brave men our friends" Sacco and Vanzetti, accused anarchists executed by "strangers who have turned our language inside out," the "betrayers" of truth (1156-57). When he joins the defense of the impoverished striking coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1931 (1209), the narrator struggles for some weapon to bring to bear against the economic

and governmental institutions that rob individuals of identity and substance. In identifying himself with the struggle against oppression in all its forms, he has become part of the "we" (Ludington 455)—the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, the strikers in Harlan County and their allies, the common people who militate against "power superpower" as it has come to be represented by the forces of monopoly capitalism and its attendant institutions and vices.

32 Moreover, in defining himself as an individual, the narrator has also defined himself as an artist. In the penultimate Camera Eye segment in the trilogy, he concedes that "the scribbled phrases the nights typing . . . stringing words into wires the search for stinging words to make you feel who are your oppressors America" have not saved the accused anarchists from execution. But even in the face of the defeat of individual freedoms that their deaths symbolize for him, he asserts that "the old American speech of the haters of oppression" (*Big* 1157) is being renewed in the continuing efforts of common people to combat the corruption of the "old words" of America—the principles of individual liberty and equal opportunity on which the nation was founded. And although the narrator recognizes the seemingly invincible coalition of law and government, industry and finance, arrayed against the common workers he encounters in Kentucky, he ends the final Camera Eye by asserting that "we have only words against" that "power superpower" (*Big* 1210). In identifying language and its practitioners with the only possible defense against the multiple forms of oppression exerted by "mechanical civilization" in America at the beginning of the twentieth century, he has acknowledged and assumed the redemptive quality of the imaginative act: the narrator-author, announcing his identification with and control of the Camera Eye and of the work of art as a whole, has enacted his own theme.

33 Yet, the interposition and cross-cutting between the deterministic Margo Dowling fictional narrative and the struggle toward self-determination against "power superpower" enacted by the subjective Camera Eye segments maintain a tension that informed Dos Passos's other artistic engagement with the mechanics of film, his treatment for "Dreamfactory," included in full in *John Dos Passos & Cinema* (Nanney 200-211). The most direct exercise in the dynamics of film production and editing of his career, this work was initiated by an exchange of general ideas in 1936 with Joris Ivens following what proved to be a portentous acquaintance with the Dutch documentarist who in 1937 would direct the troubled production of *The Spanish Earth*. Dos Passos became involved with that project, intended as a relief effort for the Spanish Republican cause, as a commitment to their struggle against the fascist alliance of Germany and Italy in Spain. However, his experiences during the filming in Spain, a country Dos Passos knew well and identified with culturally, shook his belief in the integrity of the political methods of the

Left and in the artistic and personal integrity of the director Ivens and of his cohort, Dos Passos's longtime friend Ernest Hemingway, whose enlistment in the project brought it the publicity conferred by his literary celebrity. Dos Passos found himself at odds with the two over the aesthetic and personal compromises they were making to render the film a more compelling work of propaganda. For Ivens and Hemingway, the ends—eliciting financial support for the Spanish cause from American donors—justified the aesthetic and ethical means. Worse, Dos Passos discovered that they had concealed from him the execution of his close Spanish friend and translator José Robles, by the very Soviet Communist factions whom he was assisting and who were ostensibly allies of the Republicans. These professional, political, and personal disillusionments became major factors in the refocusing of Dos Passos's career and activism toward increasing conservatism and an anti-Communist agenda that characterized much of his work after 1937.

34 Though the making of *The Spanish Earth* in 1937 resulted in his lifelong estrangement from both other artists, when he first encountered Joris Ivens in 1936 Dos Passos recognized in the director kindred perceptions of both the power and the potential dangers of the film industry. Ivens had been enthusiastically received by leftists in the Hollywood community as he sought financial backing for upcoming projects, particularly one about American movies, and used his time in their midst to investigate the practices of the commercial film industry. Dos Passos would draw on what he learned about Hollywood during his brief employment at Paramount to develop the narrative and methods outlined in "Dreamfactory"; Ivens, being generously and personally supported by the members of the industry while brainstorming a project that might cast them as complicit in the political irresponsibility of the industry's products, practiced a more precarious ethical balancing act. A meeting with Dos Passos at the New York premiere of one of Ivens' films prompted an exchange of letters discussing an idea that had occurred to each of them independently, a "picture about the function of the movie pictures in the daily life of the people," as Ivens described it in one of his letters, printed in *John Dos Passos & Cinema* (Nanney 197). Ivens seems to have intended to use not only Dos Passos's ideas but also the writer's Hollywood connections to launch such a project. In a letter of 4 June 1936, Ivens communicated a general concept for a semi-documentary film contrasting actual life among the American proletariat with the pernicious effects on their values and behavior of the "false illusions" they imbibe from a Hollywood film (Nanney 197).

35 Dos Passos worked on the treatment, which he soon titled "Dreamfactory," progressing through notes and a series of short drafts that he sent to Ivens a few times to illustrate the direction the work was taking, until late 1936, when both artists went to Spain to collaborate on *The Spanish Earth*. After the events

in Spain not surprisingly terminated their professional relationship, work never resumed on the project. What exists of the treatment, in the Dos Passos Collection at the University of Virginia, consists of Dos Passos's handwritten notes and what seem to be four preliminary typewritten drafts, some with emendations and additions in Dos Passos's hand. They are in varying stages of completion and include a plot summary, notes on his goals for the film, a complete opening sequence, and character descriptions (Nanney 200-11).

36 The correspondence between Ivens and Dos Passos, also in the Dos Passos Collection, does not show Dos Passos responding specifically to the suggestions Ivens communicates, confirming, along with the drafts, that Dos Passos was sole author of "Dreamfactory." Indeed, the letters indicate that the artists had different conceptions of the film and its methods and that Dos Passos adhered to his own goals and aesthetics to develop the project. His intentions seemed to be to expose the reality of the Hollywood dream factory, to reveal the machinery by which Hollywood manufactures unrealizable desires, by artfully using the tools with which films create illusions. Ivens' intentions and his suggestions to Dos Passos, on the other hand, would have moved the project toward the narrative and aesthetic simplifications of social realism. The 1934 Communist Soviet Writers' Congress artistic manifesto, which Ivens—a member of the Communist Party of the Netherlands—enthusiastically endorsed, specified that the aims of social realism were to present straightforward uplifting stories of the worker's triumphant struggle, eschewing the individualist expressions of modernism.

37 This was the thematic goal toward which Ivens would try to shape *The Spanish Earth* in 1937. His letters about "Dreamfactory" encourage Dos Passos to foreground and develop the only character the director sees as a noble worker representing the "real life, the social fight going on" in the U.S.—Joe, a poor but enterprising airplane mechanist. In a letter of 8 October 1936 responding to Dos Passos's preliminary work on the treatment, Ivens is dismissive of characters whom he sees as unfit vehicles to convey the workers' struggle. He advises that Dos Passos minimize and simplify the female protagonists—Mabel Small, a single mother who works in a beauty parlor, fond of reading movie magazines and determined to get her daughter into moving pictures; and her daughter, nineteen-year-old Ella May, who longs to attain the fame, fortune, and romance the movies have made her believe are within her grasp. To Ivens they are "people who are in their life and profession . . . already predestined to fall easily in the hands of Hollywood." The second male lead, Fred Hammond, is a slick shallow bit player in the movies; he competes with Joe for Ella May's affections, trying to buy them while Joe tries to earn them, and Ivens dismisses Fred for his "almost criminal childishness" (Nanney 212-13).

38 Not only the ideas the two artists exchanged but also the sample scenes, shots, and techniques Dos Passos outlined in the film prospectus attest that while Ivens envisioned a reductive exposé of the evils of capitalism, the complicity of Hollywood motion pictures, and their assault on the American worker, Dos Passos was trying to discover innovative ways to lay bare the methodological manipulations of the entertainment factory by using its own tools—camera dynamics, editing, and internal continuity and juxtaposition. Using such methods, he indicates, could involve the viewer creatively as he was doing with the dynamics of U.S.A., opening for perceivers the possibility of agency in their engagements with cultural products of "mechanical civilization." The resulting draft of "Dreamfactory," even in its preliminary state, constitutes a much more complex implementation of the potentials of the camera and of editing techniques than in their literary adaptation to the page in U.S.A. Other modernists who wrote Hollywood novels placed them amid the mechanics of filmmaking and the "dream dump" *mise-en-scène* of capitalism and created characters involved in the construction of illusion—F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Last Tycoon*, for instance, or Nathanael West in *The Day of the Locust* (132). But none would go as far as "Dreamfactory" promised to do in using the studios' methods to dismantle their factories. Dos Passos's treatment employs the tools of its own making to critique itself as a product.

39 Dos Passos's overview and sample scenes for "Dreamfactory" prepare for this visualization of the professional and cultural dynamics that create the classic movie product and which it in turn creates. But in essence, the treatment turns an archetypal film of the Hollywood golden age such as *The Devil Is a Woman* inside out. In "Notes" included in the treatment, Dos Passos describes the opposing worlds the characters in the film experience: industrial production; "the dreamworld of the screen"; and the actuality of producing movies, both the technical processes and "the intrigue, finagling, big talk, and bootlicking behind the screen" (Nanney 207). He dramatizes the intersection between the characters' workaday worlds and the "dreamworld" offered by film initially at the level of plot and character; the plot is intended to be a simplistic paradigm of the kind of movie popular in the 1930s that sways credulous people like Mabel and Ella May and Fred.

40 The primary interest in the proposed film, then, lies in the structure Dos Passos outlines. Like Griffith's problematic masterwork, "Dreamfactory" constructs thematic parallels and contrasts through cross-cutting between narratives. Developing yet another layer of complexity in the technique, Dos Passos envisioned "Dreamfactory" as constantly revealing through metafilmic devices the manipulative mechanics of the movie industry and the interconnectedness of its cultural, social, and economic components. He even suggests specialized editing cuts or picture effects in places to alert the viewer to the metafilmic

level: "Shots of the camera and projector can be used to bracket the digression off from the story," he suggests in a very early draft, or "Perhaps the real life section could use the whole screen and the movie part the small screen," an early imagining of picture-in-picture technology common today ("Sample opening sequence"). These devices, unparalleled in his fiction, originate in his first extant notes on the project in the Dos Passos archive; they demonstrate the methods by which the "dreamworld of the screen" interpenetrates all the realities of the characters' worlds (Nanney 207).

41 One metafilmic method recasts the mundane activities of the Smalls' economically marginal world as events echoing those in a movie they attend, though the film version features glamorous parallel characters and upscale lavish production values that inspire envy and dissatisfaction in the starstruck mother and daughter. Another metafilmic montage demonstrates the destructive effect of such doomed longings for the unattainable. The "Sample opening sequence" for the treatment opens on a party Mabel has organized for her daughter out of her limited financial resources, where Fred and Ella "dance to the radio and drink gingerale." While they dance, "there is a shot of the radio, the mike at the other end, the expensive nightclub the music is coming from." Inserting this quick series of shots into the middle of a series of shots tracking Mabel around the lowly fixtures of their shabby bungalow, with the overlapping sound of nightclub music to connect them, visualizes both the relentlessness of the "continual drone of the big money luxury dream through the movies and the radio" and the hopelessness of such acquisitive dreams for people such as the Smalls (Nanney 211).

42 Innovatively mixing film genres within the same sequence was another way Dos Passos proposed to point the viewer toward the ways film functions to shape behavior. A documentary montage in the "opening sequence" visually situates Fred, Ella's bit-actor suitor, as only one player in the complex process of the construction of film as fantasy and embedded cultural message. Leading up to the montage insert, Dos Passos cuts between shots of Ella and Joe, her other suitor, viewing a feature film and the film itself. Dos Passos then guides the viewer's perspective as the camera zooms or irises in on Ella's first excited glimpse of Fred onscreen as an extra, "looking verry [sic] dapper in evening dress." The zoom or iris out then effects a transition between the feature film within "Dreamfactory" and a documentary montage within "Dreamfactory" to expose the production chain that placed Fred, a mere walk-on in clothes he had earlier pawned, on the screen and in the midst of a fabricated world of glamor. The complicated montage, now displacing the primary viewers of "Dreamfactory" by three metalevels and making them aware of their own role in the business of watching, reveals "the whole machinery of taking the picture." It begins with Fred "on the set" during shooting, then moves backward

in time to shots of Fred "standing in line at the casting office, getting his dress suit out of hock," then widens to encompass the entire industrial process of production:

> Carpenters building the set
> Scenic artists desgining it
> Director working on the script
> Writers phoning back and forth from their offices
> Censorship
> The cutting room
> The camera
> The projector
> and back to the screen,
> where the picture is ending in the usual clinch. (Nanney 210)

43 Visually, the metadevice, crossing generic boundaries, unmasks the economic, creative, professional, technological, and political processes that generate and are generated by motion pictures. Like the juxtaposed modal segments of U.S.A., but with greater economy, the inserted montage creates what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick" history (3).

44 Such innovative devices characterize the entire twelve-page treatment, enacting both the creative power and the potential for abuse of the camera eye. Its visual dynamics would have been radically experimental for commercial film in the 1930s, but there is no evidence that Dos Passos ever developed the treatment further or sought to pursue its realization on the screen. That decision was concomitant with and perhaps a result of the professional and personal crisis precipitated by the making of the Spanish documentary. The aesthetic and ethical compromises Dos Passos perceived as informing Ivens' professional choices of covertly manipulative and propagandistic methods in *The Spanish Earth*, and the larger compromises of integrity the writer began to believe were reshaping the methods employed on the Left in the U.S. and in Europe, challenged Dos Passos's thinking about the fragile interrelationship among aesthetics, political action, and the responsibility of the artist.

45 Whatever his position later became about these fraught interrelationships, Dos Passos never resolved the more specific issues that helped generate the achievements of his modernist work in the 1930s. Increasingly, the work confronted its audience with dualistic perceptions of the mechanistic and the conceptual and formal tensions they created. He continued to assert that the writer had to be part of society's machines to be able to accomplish the artist's cultural "business"—"to justify the ways of machinery to man" ("Duty" 205), even at historical moments when "machinery and institutions

have . . . outgrown the ability of the mind to dominate them" ("Writer" 171). Yet, the structural complexities of U.S.A. and the "Dreamfactory" experiment demonstrate Dos Passos's paradoxical insistence that the writer must at the same time be *aware* of his own immersion in "the obsessions of the hour" ("What" 268) and, most imperatively, must acknowledge the role of his own consciousness and his own hand at work in shaping the dynamics of his work.

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Biography

After faculty positions at University of North Carolina affiliates and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service-Qatar, **Lisa Nanney** co-edited and co-authored the 2017 study of John Dos Passos's visual work, *The Paintings and Drawings of John Dos Passos: A Collection and Study*. Her 2019 book, *John Dos Passos & Cinema*, investigates his little-known writing directly for the cinema and his concomitant re-evaluation of the Left. Nanney is also the author of *John Dos Passos Revisited* (Macmillan Press, 1998), a critical biography.