Transfer Points: Artistic Intersections and Cultural Transitions in John Dos Passos's Fiction of the 1920s

Robert MCPARLAND*

Abstract
John Dos Passos conveyed multiple intersections of art and culture and the spirit of the 1920s in his prose. His novel Manhattan Transfer is characterized by intermediality: a combination of theatre, film, and visual art. With this novel, Dos Passos became a chronicler of American life. A passionate critique of modern society runs through Manhattan Transfer. The city is presented in this novel as a site of cultural intersections and transition and this focus is matched by the fragmentary qualities of the text. From his war novel Three Soldiers through his city novel Manhattan Transfer, Dos Passos places his readers in the swirl of the human currents of his time and argues for the human spirit against the forces of a mechanistic world that would crush them. The harshness of the vibrant city is illustrated through the strivings and affairs of these immigrants, Broadway stage performers, journalists, and business aspirants. The relationships between Dos Passos' experimental fiction and modern art and film are explored, along with the cultural transition of the American 1920s.

Keywords: *John Dos Passos, fiction, art, culture*

John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) presents the modern city as a complex, fragmented point of convergence. Here meet the arts, textuality, and lives engaged in the difficult art of living in the modern world. Jazz age modernism, exemplified by Dos Passos's text, is characterized by intermediality: the innovative work of writers who drew upon and interconnected many of the arts. Visual art and film influenced John Dos Passos's approach to *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). The novel suggests how American culture in the 1920s emerged at a transfer point; shedding its Victorian ghosts, it stood on a platform overlooking the wasteland, and then plunged into cities of ferocious motion, advertising and credit, passing into a new era. Dos Passos caught a glimpse of this new world.

* Professor, PhD. Department of English, Felician University of New Jersey, USA, mcparlandr@felician.edu

Manhattan Transfer is not a novel of narrative order. The fragmented nature of this work reflects the simultaneity of cubism and montage. There are juxtapositions and structural schemes and images. This novel gathers fragments of news clippings, voices, songs, and the elements of popular culture. Dos Passos's notebooks show that the sections of his novel were written separately. He intentionally broke sections of his work into parts and then edited them, as a filmmaker would do. In Dos Passos's novel we can see a mechanical world spilling forth immigrant energy, people caught in urban industrial life, seeking love and meaning in the web-like cables of bridges and the shadows of skyscraper aspirations. Dos Passos rejects modern systems that depersonalize and overwhelm people. He seeks to reshape words and form, to humanize, to find power again in words, to affirm the human spirit, to save humanity. To accomplish this, he reinvents the novel. He is interested in innovating and utilizing cinematic techniques, to attempt to grasp human consciousness fully alive. His art engages a radical politics and theatre and in *Manhattan Transfer* a nation is reflected in a city mirror. For D. H. Lawrence, this novel was a very complex film of New York City (1927: 72). It was also a precursor to Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, in which he further developed his artistic and filmic techniques.

Through fiction, Dos Passos provided his readers with a sociological and historical rendering of his culture. He commented: "The business of the novelist is, in my opinion, to create characters first and foremost and then set them in the swirl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate and permanent record of a place in history" (*Business* 4). As a critic of his time, Dos Passos was particularly incited about the effects of modern systems, from politics to corporate business to warfare, upon the individual. His emphasis upon visual and structural techniques in his fiction may suggest that he increasingly distrusted words (Nanney 1998: 127). Against the mechanistic forces that would crush him, the fragmented world of the individual must be given voice or be newly formulated. The novel itself would be a new construction, an architecture that would involve the reader in a visual aesthetic and in the new rhythms and patterns of a changing world. The fragmented individual would find integrity within the diverse features of this world. In Dos Passos's view, no mechanistic ideologies or empty rhetoric should manipulate the person or deny the individual's hope.

This vision was, in part, forged on the battlefields of Europe in the First World War, when Dos Passos was an ambulance driver. It was also

informed by modern art, which he had studied while at Harvard and further discovered while in Europe. Dos Passos's search for form, from his earliest novels, *One Man's Initiation* and *Three Soldiers,* to *Manhattan Transfer*, was a sign of the times. When readers first encountered the impressionism of his character John Andrews in *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos had begun painting quite seriously. He returned to Europe after the First World War and he also lived in Greenwich Village in New York City. There he had started writing experimental drama for theatre, creating plays like *The Moon is a Gong*, later called *The Garbage Man*, and he sought to integrate themes, characters, and style. As a writer and painter, Dos Passos developed a synaesthesia, drawing upon many of the arts.

Dos Passos's art developed a uniquely spatial sense, as well as a curiosity about time. World War I confined space into a broken field: a muddy, blasted zone of territorial combat. Paul Fussell has written of the "gross dichotomies" of safety in the trenches and "no man's land" (1977: 79). Officers attempted to control time in coordinated movements of troops. However, an individual's personal experience of time, or *durée*, was quite something else, as Proust, or Bergson would show. Time was indeed out of joint. Post-war writers like Joyce, Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Woolf would explore the simultaneity of events within consciousness.

Space and time were reconstituted in visual art by the cubists. Paul Cezanne worked to redefine ways of seeing and imagining landscapes and space. Cubism emerged from his innovations. These Cubist painters would present multiple angles of vision simultaneously along a series of planes. The changing view emphasized subjectivity. Writers like Dos Passos were drawn to cubism in developing their styles. *Three Soldiers* by Dos Passos would attempt to reflect a convergence of simultaneous happenings and, in this respect, would be a precursor to his more developed cubist style in *Manhattan Transfer* and his *U.S.A*. Trilogy.

The "impressionistic" technique used by Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* preceded Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*. Crane records the impressions or sensory moments of Henry Fleming's experience of battle as they occur. Dos Passos works similarly, moving into the consciousness of each soldier and placing them in juxtaposition to suggest simultaneous experiences. The sensory experiences of these soldiers intersect with each other. As Gertrude Stein claimed, the war advanced cubism and reflected fragmentation (498). The works of Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris were a visual complement to the experimental tendencies in John Dos Passos. For

Dos Passos, visual art informed his seriously playful encounter with words and ideas. Affected by his experience of the Great War, he challenged society with his art.

In Dos Passos's war fiction the war brings a shattering. This account of war offers us Dos Passos's imaginative extension of his first-hand experience. Dos Passos became a member of the Norton Harjes Ambulance Corps in 1917. His background was somewhat unique among the drivers. He was a multi-talented artist who had attended Harvard and he could work in several media, including painting, theatrical scene design, and poetry.

In *Three Soldiers* the military machine tears through the Loire Valley, betraying the artistic beauty of the place. The world can no longer express "an ideal state of wholeness" or provide "a basis for… a faith in man" (*Three Soldiers* 87). As John Andrews is arrested, a windmill positioned against the sky is "turning, turning," like a circular machine: a wheel of fortune gone awry. John Andrews searches for meaning amid the disintegration of values. Fuselli comes from San Francisco and Chrisfield comes from the Midwest. John Andrews is a musician from Virginia who, like Dos Passos himself, has gone to Harvard. Their war is one of mechanism and devastating irony, much like we see in Stanley Kubrick's film *Paths of Glory*. H.L. Mencken applauded Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* as the best of the war novels to appear soon after the war. About three to four thousand copies were distributed and they sold well.

In *Three Soldiers* (1921), we see John Andrews in a hospital, thinking about the disintegration of all that people value; all that has been preserved in intellectual tradition has been shattered. Andrews muses: "There must be something more in the world than greed and hatred and cruelty" (87). The wisdom of "Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, Christ" seems to have been devoured. The culture that Matthew Arnold once prized, that of the best that has been thought, has been turned into empty clichés. Andrews imagines that he might turn misery into music, recalling the rebellious John Brown in a composition he will title "The Body and Soul of John Brown." For how else, he wonders, can a man find meaning when he is trapped in mechanism in which past values no longer seem to matter? Dos Passos's readers encountered his arguments against dehumanization. The individual, lying in a hospital bed, has been subjected to formation in "Making the Mould" and has been blasted by a cruel war of "Machines," "Rust," and "Under the Wheels." In his introduction to the 1969 reprinting

of *One Man's Initiation*, 1917, Dos Passos called Woodrow Wilson's change from American neutrality to involvement in the war "a bitter disappointment" that turned him toward Socialism. For, it soon became clear that "war was the greatest evil" (*Fourteenth* 69-70).

Three Soldiers cuts through the mythology of glory and contrasted with the image of American participation in the Great War as glorious. This was controversial and raised the ire of those who disagreed with Dos Passos's perspective. Dos Passos made use of several perspectives, as would a painter, to show these issues of war and Western civilization from a variety of angles.

The novel was not universally accepted. Conigsby Dawson criticized the novel in the *New York Times Book Review* for its "calculated sordidness" and "blind whirlwind of rage", adding that it was either "a base lie or a hideous truth" (*Critical Heritage* 2). Harold Norman Denny, writing in the same newspaper section two weeks later, rejected Dos Passos's portrayal of soldiers, asserting that he had never seen any soldiers like that during his time of service (*Critical Heritage* 12). Norman Shannon Hall, in *Foreign Service*, simply called Dos Passos a liar. However, several critics applauded the novel, which just goes to show the variety of reading responses that any work can generate. Heywood Broun in *The Bookman* called the novel "honest" and he wrote: "it represents deep convictions and impressions eloquently expressed" (*Critical Heritage* 14). James Sibley Watson, writing as W.C. Blum, noticed the novel's "well-chewed rage" (*Critical Heritage* 13) and Henry Seidel Canby recognized in it "sufficient passion and vividness of detail to count as literature" (*Critical Heritage* 3). Sales suggest that many common readers also embraced the novel, or at least were curious enough about it to buy it. One veteran wrote: "This is the truest damn book ever written" (Carr 1984: 187). "It is magnificent," A. Hamilton Gibbs told Carl Brandt, he found in Dos Passos's book "a combination of Barbusse and Sassoon and Frankau, an extraordinary mixture of poetry and terrible prose pictures, one after the other without a thought for sequence or so-called rules" (187). Gibbs's comment reveals that he perceived in *Three Soldiers* Dos Passos's gradually emerging methods of fragmentation and montage, which anticipated his later work in *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*

Manhattan Transfer was begun upon a return from Europe and it was further developed during another trip overseas and there is a clear through-line from scenes of destruction and concern for civilization in the

early novels to those in *Manhattan Transfer*. In *Manhattan Transfer* the turbulent life of New York is seen through the minds of dozens of people. The text shifts focus rapidly. The centre of focus is a vignette that proceeds for a few pages - a love affair, a business deal - only to shift into some other focus. The stories of Ellen Thatcher and Jimmy Herf and Bud Korpening are loosely held together in a cityscape where people enter our awareness and then exit. There is motion and fragmentation: reflections in a revolving door, passengers entering and exiting trains at rush hour.

Manhattan Transfer is the novel in which Dos Passos's artistic style of quick juxtapositions begins to appear. It also extended his criticism of elements of the modern world. In his review in the *New York Times Book Review*, Henry Longan Stuart contrasted John Dos Passos's narrative technique with that of James Joyce. He viewed Dos Passos's image of New York as more pessimistic than it need have been. Dos Passos was called one of those young writers who experience "the challenge of New York to their imaginations and descriptive powers." Stuart's own descriptive writing filled much of his review. New York, he wrote, "a piled-up mass of humanity, amorphous and heterogeneous at one and the same time, is a storehouse of impressions…" (*Critical Heritage* 61). Dos Passos's novel offered impressions, scenes, and sharp glances of light off of the towers of the city. He showed that there was much energy in the small space of Manhattan. Stuart saw in the novel "no vestige of a plot" but recognized that "one story runs through it" (*Critical Heritage* 61). Dos Passos later noted, in his essay "What Makes a Novelist," that he had given attention to "reportage" of New York City. When he had arrived back to New York from his time in Europe and the Mideast, he wrote in "Best Times," "New York was a continent in itself" (*Best Times* 32). His novel painted images and summoned up voices of the many lives that made up that continent.

When Dos Passos arrived in Manhattan on a boat via Havana he described the city as "like a badly drawn cartoon" (Carr 1984: 173). Dos Passos found in New York City a theme of fragmentation. He jotted in his notes a series of descriptive words: "skies-buildings-garbage cans" (174). He began to write *Manhattan Transfer*, the novel that Lionel Trilling would call "an epic of disintegration." In writing *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos pursued something organic, voicing humanity in a 1920s culture of billboards, ads, subways, and Times Square. The centre of his novel is the city itself: its movement and the people who live and work in its busy swirl of activity. Dos Passos sensed that visual art and the written word might

capture a sense of consciousness and the cultural energy in New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century. With *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos abandoned traditional storytelling methods and chronology. He saw around him a polyglot city of tumultuous motion and to convey his sense of this, he juxtaposed scenes and joined several shots to create a single image. Dos Passos made use of fragmentation in *Manhattan Transfer* and then he learned to control this to a greater degree in his subsequent novel, *42nd Parallel*.

It has often been noted that Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* suggests filmic qualities, although it was written prior to his exposure to the work of Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. In his 1926 introduction to the novel, Sinclair Lewis observed the filmic quality of Dos Passos' transitions. "It is indeed the technique of the movie, the flashes, its cutbacks, its speed," he wrote. More than any other writer of his generation Dos Passos used these techniques, Lewis added (*Critical Heritage* 6). In his film *Intolerance*, D.W. Griffith had introduced montage experiments while telling four stories: the fall of Babylon, crucifixion, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, and a strike in a modern setting. Eisenstein's work would contribute the development of montage. Critics have considered Dos Passos's novel alongside the films of V.I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, in which pieces are linked and each visual shot is like a cell that collides with other cells. There is in Dos Passos's novel, as in those films, a montage of parallels that intercut each other.

Dos Passos's initial inspiration for this technique came from visual art rather than from film. The fragmentation and intercutting emerged from movements he knew well in painting: Cubism and Futurism. Dos Passos sought the simultaneity of cubism and montage. Dos Passos could see a similar technique at work in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The verbal fragmentation in his text further emphasized his sense of the machine age and a splintering of the self in the modern city. His exposure to Russian film later underscored this perception. He would capture the world moment to moment, frame by frame, as a motion picture would record it. Dos Passos was a consummate combiner of the verbal and the visual arts: an artist of intermediality. He drew upon Cubism, Futurism, the motion of narrative, and the techniques of film and experimental theatre with a sharp awareness of modernist trends.

In film, a contemporary parallel with *Manhattan Transfer* is the Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand creation *Manhatta*, an abstract film of New

York City which introduces subtitles from the poetry of Walt Whitman. *Manhattan Transfer* appears as filmic at a time when Dos Passos, whose primary inspiration was from modern art, was just beginning to explore the medium of film and images of the city like those in *Manhatta*. In the 1920s, the city was a principal subject for painters, like Charles Sheeler in *Aucassin and Nicollette*, Charles Demuth in *Machinery* (1920), and George Ault's *Brooklyn Ice House* (1926). In drawing upon Cubism, Futurism, and the motion of narrative, Dos Passos investigated a theme of fragmentation. Dos Passos rendered a picture of the jazz age- its social fragmentation, its energy and life- as social criticism, providing us with a complex image of the times.

Manhattan Transfer begins by evoking the city's power in sections called Metropolis, Dollars, Tracks, and Steamroller. Next, fragments of communication are introduced: nursery rhymes, slogans, newspaper clippings. There are sound bites that appear in rapid succession. The narrative of the final section of the novel moves into a Biblical tone, suggesting apocalypse. There is Nikelodean, Revolving Door, Skyscraper, and the Birth of Nineveh. Throughout the text, Dos Passos gives us a sense of the city as a place of collision and opposition. Joseph Warren Beach saw in *Manhattan Transfer* "an atomistic world, a moral chaos" (1960: 42). Blance Gelfant has asked whether we can identify with these characters: have we any emotional engagement with these readers or do we simply observe them? (1961: 62) It is fairly clear that we do, if we happen to read our own human vulnerability and dreams alongside theirs.

The lives of Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher are at the centre of *Manhattan Transfer*. We discover their histories and emotions and how they respond to the city and a corrupted ideal of success. Ellen learns how to dance in an effort to capture her father's affection. She becomes a dancer and actress, a fashion periodical editor, and a superficial success. Jimmy, returning from abroad with his mother, sees the Statue of Liberty in the harbour. He wants to join the 4th of July celebration and waves his little flag, disembarking near the immigrants who are arriving in America. As an adult he decides that will not enter the family banking firm and its version of New York and success. He refuses to be caught in a revolving door, or to be grinded out like meat (*MT* 119-20).

Ellen marries John Oglethorpe, gets into the theatre in musicals, and advances her career by flirting with theatre producers and rich men. She falls for Stan Emery, who commits suicide and leaves Ellen pregnant with

his child. She then conveniently marries Jimmy Herf. But they divorce. Jimmy is a news reporter. In this role he sees urban corruption and collects bits of news stories. We see Ellen's distance, her loss of humanity in a "metal green evening dress" and hear of her "dollself" and loss of authenticity (*MT* 261).

Jimmy Herf becomes disillusioned with his news work and with his profession's uses of language. Reporters are "parasites on the drama of life," he asserts (*MT* 320). News reporting has become dehumanizing work in which he feels like "a traveling dictograph" and "an automatic writing machine" (*MT* 344). With Jimmy Herf's disillusionment, the novel carries a critique of the public press and journalism. In contrast with the quick, ephemeral words of journalism are "the old words" of immigrants, American ideals, and something that lives above technology and machines. Jimmy Herf symbolizes America as he questions values and the fate of America. The foundational formulations of 1776 are what he deems important, not superficial materialism. Amid the skyscrapers, Jimmy seeks to reclaim "the old world. /"Typewriters rain confetti in his ears." He says, "If only I had faith in words" (*MT* 365-66). He imagines finding a way to get out of the city machine to become whole again. As Dos Passos creates a narrative voice that tells Jimmy Herf's story, he introduces other fragmented individuals. He uses cubism to recognize simultaneity in time and the variety of city life: something not static but always in motion.

In the novel's first section, Steamroller, we witness the human confrontation with deterministic forces. Ellen is obviously ambitious. She travels with Oglethorpe to Atlantic City for a honeymoon. She discovers that he is bisexual. They change trains at Manhattan Transfer: a railway station in New Jersey, where trains run on electric power. Ellen's associates see right through her ambitions. To get ahead "she'd marry a trolley car" says an actress of Ellen (*MT* 156). Her goal is to be "glamorous."

Jimmy Herf's story and Ellen's story are brought together across time shifts and cuts as the novel brings us other disturbing characters. Broken people meet a broken textual landscape. Bud Korpenning from Cooperstown, for example, appears in the first five chapters. He goes to New York to be "at the centre of things" (4). He is exploited and cheated and lives in a flophouse, unable to sleep. A Bowery bum tells him to get out of the city while he can (*MT* 122). But he was the victim of domestic abuse. He walks over the Brooklyn Bridge, "a spider work of cables" (*MT* 124). This is a callous city and his death comes from this.

While some readers saw pessimism in the novel, others found abundant energy. In his introduction to *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Alfred Kazin commented on how Dos Passos's prose rhythms and images had captured the rhythm and energy of Twentieth Century America. In this sense, he recognized one of the key features of Dos Passos's fiction: to express the voice of the people had become central to the work of John Dos Passos. He once described his project as one of an effort to take in his times, across the broad range of life (vii). He wished to close the distance between high culture and popular culture. In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos attempted to make his novel's action objective while experimenting with fragmented structures. As a painter, Dos Passos was keenly aware of innovations in visual art during his time. He wished to apply this to fiction. He was involved with experimental theatre for several years and critic Edmund Wilson remarked that this had much to do with shaping the style of Dos Passos in his U.S.A. trilogy (Looking Back). The new art of film caught Dos Passos' interest. In 1928, he visited the Soviet Union to look at the Moscow theatre and the work of dramatist V.E. Meyerhold. He became interested in Sergei Eisenstein's technique of montage and synthesizing and became aware of Vertov's concept, the kino-eye. In his U.S.A. trilogy "Camera Eye" becomes the viewer, much like one who is watching a film (Fourteenth 386). Dos Passos was an intermedial artist: one who combines artistic techniques across a variety of media.

Attention to Dos Passos, the artist, is sometimes overshadowed by comment about Dos Passos's politics. The political perspective of Dos Passos shifted across his long career. In the 1920s he was a liberal voice in fiction and experimental theatre for "industrial and white-collar working classes" (Carr 1984: 20). Later, Dos Passos was a conservative. In the 1920s, he was a writer who was interested in socialism, although he remained independent of the Communist Party and eventually became suspicious of it. He set *Manhattan Transfer* in the thriving city of working people and new immigrants. His theme was human freedom and authenticity. His works announced the human struggle against institutions which de-humanized people. In the mid-1920s, Dos Passos participated in developing set designs for the stage. At the same time that *Manhattan Transfer* was being published, an article by Dos Passos, "Is the Realistic Theatre Obsolete" appeared in *Vanity Fair*, suggesting alternatives to Broadway theatre. For *The New Masses*, Dos Passos wrote "Toward a Revolutionary Theatre" (December 1927), in which he discussed the limits

of iconoclasm in political theatre, and "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" (1928). He gained exposure to the music of Igor Stravinsky while assisting with set construction for a production. He was fascinated with Daighilev's choreography of dancers. This awareness of the arts of music and dance is not often discussed in Dos Passos criticism, which tends to devote attention to painting. As Donald Pizer points out, most studies focus upon a single modernist strain such as film or visual art (2013: 34). However, Dos Passos was an intermedial artist who drew upon various art forms and upon the new technologies of film, radio, and the phonograph.

Rhythm and sound are conspicuous in *Manhattan Transfer*. In the novel we discover an art that is abstract and sensuous. *Manhattan Transfer* offers a verbal dance that moves amid an intercutting of images and voices and sounds. A Bakhtinian heteroglossia is in evidence in this play of voices throughout Dos Passos's novel. The city jostles life; it blares forth sound; it dances. During this time of modernist experimentation, poetry and painting dissolved representation content and brought colours, sound, motion, in a movement toward abstraction. Dos Passos participates in this movement.

He also brings tensions to this many voiced, often disrupted text, offering a verbal parallel to harmonically unresolved music. Stravinsky once asserted that music is most interesting when it encounters tensions, dissonance, and harmonic conflict. This is Dos Passos's city. It is a symphony embodying disorder. Stravinsky gave his audience sonic terror, musical ambiguity in which the tension between music and noise was an affront to their expectations. Stravinsky's music was provocative: breaking patterns, incorporating folk songs, threshing out harmony like he was putting chords through "a cubist machine," as Jonah Lehrer has put it (133). Likewise, Dos Passos broke with convention, as he had earlier done with his manipulation of point of view and challenge to myths of victory in *Three Soldiers*.

In his fiction, John Dos Passos placed fiction and history in dynamic connection. He worked through an individual's perspective to comment on history's changes. The media of his day - newspapers, advertisements, radio, and film - became central to this project. In 1925, *Manhattan Transfer* made a start in this direction. However, it was in the 1930s and after, in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, that Dos Passos's new style came into its own. "Newsreel" scatters fragments of headlines, news stories, tabloid announcements and pop songs across the page. "Camera Eye" provides slices of life, angles of

vision. The result is a montage of items that might be likened to our evening news: a collection of images, sound bites, and news stories.

The first novel of the trilogy, *42nd Parallel* looks at the years before World War I and American culture at the beginning of the war period. Women had recently won the right to vote, yet, in Dos Passos's view they were still under the control of cultural forces that hearkened back to the Victorian era of the late nineteenth century. In his character Ellen Thatcher in *Manhattan Transfer*, sex appeal was a form of power, something she could use to manipulate her way toward the kind of success she dreamed of. Ellen substituted a notion of sex and power for real relationships. Her dreams were ones of shallow materialism seeking respectability. Yet, the alternative was obscurity and vulnerability to the large forces of a male-dominated world. Dos Passos argued that the modern world made mechanical beings of people. In the mad rush along the road of modern life civility seemed to break down.

In *42nd Parallel*, "Mac" McCreary, a printer, enters the politics of unions and the labour movement. Mac is working man, who might suggest today's middle-class worker waving an Occupy Wall Street sign. Monopoly capitalism is emerging and Mac feels troubled by it. Mac is also a Fenian, an Irish nationalist, a man with an immigrant background looking back at his heritage. However, his feisty spirit of reform faces harsh forces of nature and culture that limit him. He has sought the promise of an American dream but soon retreats from it and from participation in the labour unions.

In contrast with working class men like McCreary and with the middle class are Wall Street tycoons like J. Ward Moorehouse. He has gained success in manipulating sales images. In his view, the First World War is America's "great opportunity" for economic advancement (*42nd Parallel* 237). Dos Passos portrays Moorehouse as a seeker of power and wealth who cares much about profits and little about the patriotism of the young men who have fought overseas. He represents a betrayal of the principles of America's founding fathers. He reflects the politician who seeks power rather than liberty, justice, and freedom for people he is supposed to represent. Dos Passos's critique goes further, as the story unfolds Moorehouse's affairs. Material success is seductive for Janey and Eleanor. Janey is a secretary in a Washington law firm, who becomes the executive assistant to Moorehouse. Eleanor is an interior designer who

seeks taste, culture and prestige; she is quite opportunistic, and she exploits her relationship with Moorehouse.

The roots of this social critique can be found in Dos Passos's early novels, where his fiction objected to a mechanistic culture that undercut authenticity and vitality in human beings. He equated this with the dehumanization that he had perceived in the First World War. The proletarian lives of Jimmy Herf, Bud Korpening, and thousands of other people appeared to be held down by this mechanization and by pretentious and self-serving individuals who held the means of production. Dos Passos asserted that this created alienation and fragmentation. Jimmy Herf's complaints about the newspaper he works for echoes Dos Passos's own concerns about the theatre becoming an entertainment machine more than a social organ of cultural expression, critique, and community. Berthold Brecht had challenged such conventionality in the theatre, insisting that the stage be made available for ideas. A similar concern would later be articulated by Arthur Miller. While Dos Passos makes use of snippets of popular songs in *Manhattan Transfer*, the novel suggests a breakdown of musical culture, which parallels the criticism of capitalism in the cultural observations of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. For Dos Passos, art got lost in this situation.

Jimmy Herf becomes increasingly detached from the work that he produces. He is among Dos Passos's characters who are caught in a system that exploits their work. From this arises the city. They face a world in which someone like Ellen becomes false and loses all authenticity in order to get what she wants. They become socially determined and conditioned characters who are not free. In the third part of the novel American flags, representing freedom, fly from windows over Fifth Avenue. "Dollars whine on the radio, all the cables tap out dollars… In the subway their eyes pop as they spell out APOCALYPSE, typhus, cholera, shrapnel, insurrection…" (*MT* 271). Jimmy says, "Well, there's the Statue of Liberty" (*MT* 275). One may wonder where liberty is amid chains of economic and social oppression. Dos Passos protests a condition that is antithetical to American principles and the hopes of America's founding fathers. The politically minded artist protests through modernist style. Yet, the theme is one that Dos Passos developed in novels and essays that led to *Manhattan Transfer* and that continued afterwards. In "A Humble Protest", he wrote: "Has not the world today somehow got itself enslaved by this immense machine, the industrial system?" (1916: 5)

When he observed the textile mills strike in Paterson and Passaic New Jersey in 1926, John Dos Passos was uneasy to be a "privileged outsider," says his biographer Townsend Ludington (48). He wrote in *New Masses*, June 1926, about the struggle of the workers. That concern filtered into his subsequent novels in which his experimental techniques grew in force. Through techniques drawn from modern visual art, film, dance, music, and design, John Dos Passos built drama into his narratives. In this work we see John Dos Passos's unique way of constructing stories. However, by looking at his experimental fiction we can also see tendencies in modernist practice as a whole.

In 1978, Dos Passos recalled this early period of his work: "Some of the poets who went along with the cubism of the painters of the school of Paris had talked about simultaneity. There was something about Rimbaud's poetry that tended to stand up off the page…" (What Makes a Novelist 31). Then he expressed what he believed was the fashion in which the modern artist ought to present his perspective to the world: "The artist must record the fleeting world the way the motion picture film has recorded it" (What Makes a Novelist 31). The new technique was built upon his sense of the motion of modern society and his deep working familiarity with modern art. This multi-faceted intermedial synthesis was John Dos Passos's creative contribution. It is not for his politics, his shifting views across the years, for which he ought to be remembered but for his art, his social panoramas, and his commitment to upholding human dignity.

References

Beach, J. W. 1960. *American Fiction, 1920-1940*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1960.
Broun, H. 1922. *The Bookman*. Vol. 4 (August 1922): 648.
Broun, H. 1988/1997. "A Group of Books worth Reading" *The Bookman*, (December 1921), *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine. London: Routledge.
Canby, H. S. 1921. "Human Nature under Fire," *New York Evening Post Literary Review* (October 1921).
Carr, V. S. 1984. *John Dos Passos: A Life*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
Carver, C. "The Newspaper and Other Sources of Manhattan Transfer," *Studies in American Fiction* 3 169-79.
Clark, M. 1987. *Dos Passos' Early Fiction, 1912-1938*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses.
Cowley, M. 1949. "Dos Passos and His Critics," *New Republic* 20 (1949): 21-23.

Cummings, E.E. 1999. *The Enormous Room* (1922) New York: Penguin, 1999.
Davis, R. G. 1962. *John Dos Passos*. American Writers 20. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Dawson, Conigsby. 1921. *New York Times Book Review* 27 (1921).
Denny, H. N. 1921. "One Soldier on Three Soldiers," *New York Times Book Review* 28 (1921).
Dos Passos, J. 1923. *Streets of the Night*, New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1916. "A Humble Protest," *Harvard Monthly* 62 (June 1916): 115-120.
Dos Passos, J. 1916. "Against American Literature," *New Republic* 8 (October 14, 1916): 269-271.
Dos Passos, J. 1917. *One Man's Initiation*. New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1919 *Three Soldiers*. New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1922. *A Pushcart at the Curb*. New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1923. *Rosinante, On the Road Again*. New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1923. *The Garbage Man: A Parable of Singing* (*The Moon is a Gong*).
Dos Passos, J. 1925. "Is the Realistic Theatre Obsolete?" *Vanity Fair* 24 (May 1925): 64, 114.
Dos Passos, J. 1926. "300 New York Agitators Reach Passaic," *New Masses* (June 1926): 8.
Dos Passos, J. 1927 "Toward a Revolutionary Theatre," *New Masses* (December 1927).
Dos Passos, J. 1929 "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" *New Masses* (August 1929).
Dos Passos, J. 1930. *The 42nd Parallel*. New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1934. "The Business of a Novelist," Book Review of *The Shadow Before* by William Rollins, Jr. in *The New Republic* 78, No.1009 (April 4, 1934).
Dos Passos, J. 1937. "What Makes a Novelist," New York: George Doran.
Dos Passos, J. 1973. *Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*. Ed. Townsend Ludington. Boston: Gambit.
Dos Passos, J. 1988. *Major Non-Fiction Prose*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Dos Passos, J. 1992 *Manhattan Transfer*, New York: George Doran, 1925 rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Foster, G. 1986 "John Dos Passos Use of Film Technique in *Manhattan Transfer* and *The 42nd Parallel*," *Film/Literature Quarterly* Vol.14, Is. 3 (September 1, 1986):186-194.
Fussell, P. 1977. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gelfant, B. 1961. "The Search for Identity in the Novels of John Dos Passos." *PMLA* 76.1 (1961): 133-49.
Hall, N. S. 1921. "John Dos Passos Lies!" *Foreign Service*, Vol. 10 (November 1921): 11-12.

Hicks, G. 1935. *The Great Tradition*. New York: Macmillan.
Kazin, A. 1969. Introduction to *Manhattan Transfer*. New York: New American Library.
Kubrick, S. (dir.). 1957. *Paths of Glory*, MGM.
Lawrence, D.H. 1927. "The Calendar of Modern Letters" (April 1927): 70-72.
Lewis, S. 1925. "Manhattan at Last," *Saturday Review* (December 1925).
Ludington, T. 1980. *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
Maine, B. 1988/ 1997. *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge.
Nanney, L. 1998. *John Dos Passos Revisited*. New York: Twayne.
Pizer, D. 2013. *Toward a Modernist Style*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
Sanders, D. J. Dos Passos. 1969. *The Paris Review* Interview 44. *The Art of Fiction* (Spring 1969).
Stein, G. 1998. "Memories of Picasso." *Writings, 1932-1946*, Vol. 2. New York: Library of America.
Stuart, H. L. 1925 "Manhattan Transfer," *New York Times Book Review* 61 (November 29, 1925).
Trilling, L. 1950. *The Liberal Imagination*. New York: Viking.
Wagner, L. W. 1979. *Dos Passos: Artist as American*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Watson, J. S. (W.C. Blum). 1921. Review of *Three Soldiers*. *The Dial* (October 1921).